Coronā Devī has Entered the Chat: South Asian Goddesses Associated with Covid-19, Ritual Practice, and Online Media Discourse

by © Thomas Seibel

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Abstract

Between June 2020 and September 2021, news reports from India detailing ritual practice devoted to goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus were published by both domestic and international media houses. This thesis analyzes discourses located within English-language media reports and online comments about these deities, associated practices, and devotees. It seeks to address the following questions: 1) How are questions of 'authority' and 'authenticity' vis-à-vis Hinduism discursively constructed? 2) How are discourses of 'superstition' differentially mobilized against groups and actors belonging to marginalized communities? 3) How do participants' reported narratives and ritual practices reflect these concerns? Online criticism of ritual participants is found to be situated within two broad and antagonistic discourses: Hindu nationalist discourses concerned with defending 'true' Hinduism from outside critique and secular rationalist discourses. Meanwhile, participant narratives situate practices both within preexisting traditions of goddesses associated with disease and as responses to novel challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, themes of economic insecurity, relationships between religion and science, and expressions of collective concern are reflected by both critics and participants in various ways. Finally, the notable absence and structural exclusion of ritualists from online participatory discourse challenges naïve assumptions regarding democratic access to online religious expression.

General summary

This thesis examines new Hindu goddesses and rituals related to Covid-19 in India. It considers how online news reports present them and how online commenters talk about them. Many reports and comments characterize the devotees and practices as "superstitious" for different reasons. In doing so, they also connect these practices with various stereotypes about different social groups according to gender, class, religion, and education. In part, there is an effort to discount these practices, arguing that they are not genuine expressions of religion. However, this thesis also looks at what devotees say about the coronavirus-related goddesses and rituals, which reveals that rituals and goddesses are seen to be part of long-standing traditions of South Asian goddesses associated with disease. It also reveals that the devotees share many of the same concerns with their critics about money, illness, and safety of their loved ones.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Chapter 1. Introduction: Coronavirus-related Goddess Rituals in South Asia

1.1 Introduction

Despite technological advances in transportation and communication over recent decades, there is perhaps nothing else quite like a global pandemic to remind us of both about how interconnected the world is and how isolating life can feel when our habitual ways of being together are disrupted. Forms of interconnection brought into relief by the pandemic include those between people and groups, at times revealing and perpetuating social divisions of various forms. They also include relations with nonhuman entities like animals, in cases of zoonotic transmission; invisible organisms, like viruses and bacteria; institutions like governments, centers for epidemiology, and interest groups, both local and international in scope; and various forms of divinity, like gods, goddesses, and demons. Hertzman et al. (2023) draw from and expand upon Richardson's (2020) concept of "pandemicity" – which he defines as "the linking of humanity through contagion" (Richardson 2020, 2) – to explore many of the relationships forged and reformulated in the "Covidian age" (Hertzman et al. 2023, 1). They explain that "the social relationship of contagion across humankind and other species…affect/infect not only humans and nonhuman animals but also a wide range of other-than-human beings that participate in the cosmos" (Hertzman et al. 2023, 1). This thesis engages with one such set of relations.

Between June 2020 and September 2021, news reports from various regions in India, detailing ritual practice devoted to goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus, were published by both domestic and international media houses. These Covid-19-related goddesses, their devotees, their associated ritual practices, and their representations in media and online commentary form the subject matter of this thesis. This thesis analyzes discourses found

within English-language media reports and online commentary, seeking to address the following questions: 1) How are questions of 'authority' and 'authenticity' vis-à-vis Hinduism discursively constructed? 2) How are discourses of 'superstition' differentially mobilized against groups and actors belonging to marginalized communities? And 3) How do participants' narratives and ritual activities presented in news reports reflect these concerns?

Online media, both journalistic and social, made a global pandemic visible in ways never experienced. The COVID-19 pandemic is the first in which social media and 24-hour journalism conveyed developments of viral transmission and scenes of horror in real time (Kaur and Ramaswamy 2020). The online debate over news stories, videos, and images, occurred, like much online discourse, "with no retrospective certainty as to what the outcome might be" (Arnold 2020, 572). Additional to the representations of suffering and the plight of millions of people in India, media reports also made visible various cultural responses to the pandemic, including folk remedies and religious practices for both prophylaxis and treatment. Some forms of alternative medicine in India sensationalized by the media include recommendations from members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on the use of *gaumutra* (cow urine) and *gobar* (cow dung) as effective disinfectants (Bamzai 2020), or, following the logic of the 'doctrine of signatures,' the consumption of seeds from the hallucinogenic *datura* plant, due to its visual resemblance with artistic renditions of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (*The Hindu,* April 7, 2020).[1] Of course, US President Trump's own endorsement of disinfectant injections and anti-malaria medications, or Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's suggestions regarding the therapeutic properties of vodka and tractors (Chopra 2020) demonstrate that "there is

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[1] Datura flowers are offered by devotees at many Śiva temples and appears in the 3-4th century CE ayurvedic text, *Suśrutasaṃhitā.*

nothing particularly South Asian" (Arnold 2020, 573) about alternative and seemingly bizarre responses to this novel threat.

At the level of institutional politics, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi framed the lockdown in religious terms, invoking classical Hindu epics. Addressing the country on March 24, 2020, while announcing a planned three-week lockdown, he referenced the *Rāmāyana*, explaining that the "lockdown means a *lakshman rekha*[2] has been drawn outside your doors. If you put even one foot out, coronavirus will enter your homes" (*NDTV,* March 24, 2020).[3] The following day, he invoked the *Mahābhārata,* reassuring the country that "Victory in the Mahabharata war came in 18 days. Against COVID, it will take 21 days" (George, *New Indian Express*, June 20, 2021). Connections between Hinduism, nationalism, and early public health responses are also visible in the production and circulation of online viral images early in the pandemic. Kaur and Ramaswamy (2020) survey and present several popular depictions of Bhārat Mātā (Mother India), which reimagine the SARS-CoV-2 virus as a demonic force to be vanquished by a capable nationalist and religious figure, who dons a stethoscope, syringe, and various other modern medical implements. With these images, Kaur and Ramaswamy argue, both the virus and goddess are cast as "political actors, both visually reconfigured to wage a modern viral warfare to safeguard health and the economic well-being of the nation" (Kaur and Ramaswamy 2020, 78). This casting of the relationships between divinity, nation, and disease is one of many creative responses to the Covid-19 pandemic to emerge from South Asia.

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[2] Lakshman is the brother of Lord Rama, the hero of the *Rāmāyana*. The '*Lakshman Rekha'* refers to the protective boundary that Lakshman drew on the ground to protect the goddess Sita from enemies (Shome 2021, 322).
[3] It is also worth noting that Ramanand Sagar's immensely popular television series, *Ramayan*, was re-broadcast on India's public broadcasting station, *Prasar Bharati,* beginning on March 28, 2020 (*Outlook,* March 27, 2020). Airing one episode at 9am and another at 9pm every day, viewership levels set a world record with 7.7 crore (77 million) people tuning in on April 16, 2020 (Chaubey, *NDTV,* May 1, 2020).

Though COVID-19 is new disease, illness, social instability, scapegoating, marginalization, and both religious and nationalist responses to epidemic disease are not. The worship of deities associated with disease and calamity is not entirely new in Indian religious traditions. Throughout history, communities have sought solace and protection from afflictions through the veneration of specific deities. However, the emergence of specific goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus as focal points of ritual worship during the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique set of case studies in understanding the ways in which religious beliefs intersect with contemporary societal challenges. This master's thesis investigates the implications of the ritual worship of coronavirus-related goddesses as they are situated within the Indian cultural, religious, and political landscape. The analysis that follows reveals coronavirus-related goddesses to be diverse and multifaceted deities, and their representations in online media as sites of political, religious, epistemic, and ontological contestation. Media discourses largely construct coronavirus-related goddess rituals as forms of antiscientific superstition, denying them the status of 'authentic' expressions of Hindu practice, justifying forms of discipline against their devotees, and encouraging ridicule. Furthermore, these forms of subjugation are mobilized asymmetrically against members of marginalized communities, including women, gender minorities, and the lower classes. Meanwhile, the reported narratives and ritual activities of coronavirus-related goddess devotees, while perhaps tacitly assuming the legitimacy of their rituals, reflect thoughtful and creative responses to various challenges related both to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and contemporary Indian society.

1.2 Theory and methodology

For this thesis, I draw broadly from post-structuralist perspectives regarding the discursive conditioning of social reality and relational approaches to the study of ritual. Craig Martin defines discourse as "words, spoken or written, strung together to form phrases, slogans, sentences, monologues, conversations, paragraphs, missives, tracts, manifestos, speeches, books, and so forth" (2022, 6). Additional to language, Bruce Lincoln (1989) considers myth, ritual, and classification as "specific modes of discourse" (3). Social reality is contingent on continuous change and historically specific conditions. Discourses serve several functions as part of a constitutive process amidst these changing conditions. Discourses also create conditions which enable possibilities for knowledge claims about objects, subjects, groups, and patterns, by identifying and drawing attention to them amidst many possible choices. Additionally, they make possible empirical claims about the world by creating conditions for these claims to be 'true' or 'false.' In doing so, they define rules inherent to the discourse that govern how such claims can be made. Discourses enable conditions for affective experiences of and responses to objects, subjects, groups, and patterns by promoting positive or negative feelings through the distribution and modulation of sympathies and antipathies. Finally, discourses can be instrumental in achieving various ends and may not reflect the actual beliefs of the person or group issuing a claim (Martin 2022, 6). According to Foucault, discourses are not only representational and should not be treated as merely:

> groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to the language (langue) and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe. (Foucault 2002, 54)

Beyond picking out the SARS-Cov-2 virus that causes the COVID-19 disease, what 'more' do discourses about Covid-19 do?

The ways that journalists, online commenters, and ritualists talk about coronavirus-related goddesses, their devotees, and their associated ritual practices reflect vested social interests. One way in which discourse may be used to serve one set of interests over another is by force or the threat of force. Lincoln explains that "Together, discourse and force are chief means whereby social borders, hierarchies, institutional formations, and habituated patterns of behavior are both maintained and modified" (Lincoln 1989, 3). As we shall see, disciplinary measures enacted against some participants in coronavirus-related goddess rituals are an example of this process. However, force, understood as a mode of repression, should not be conflated with power, which, according to Foucault, is both one condition for the possibility of knowledge and "has a constitutive role in producing subjects" (Martin 2022, 256n.2). I consider both the repressive and constitutive dimensions of power in this study.

One way in which power as a condition for knowledge is expressed is in the presentation of history. Juli Gittinger describes how "a particular presentation of history plays a central role in the case for 'authentic Hinduism,' as it plays a role in the idea of a Hindu community" (Gittinger 2019, 30). Hindu nationalist discourses, which put forward a historical narrative about (Hindu) India as timeless, pacifist, and largely homogenous, mobilize a discourse of 'authenticity' which, among other effects, suppresses nondominant histories, practices, and groups. However, as Foucault explains, "historical descriptions are necessarily ordered by the present state of knowledge, they increase with every transformation and never cease, in turn, to break with themselves" (Foucault 2002, 5). In the analysis that follows, I argue that discourses which construct coronavirus-related goddess rituals and devotees as 'superstitious'

function to delegitimize potential and actual authenticity claims that situate the practices in pre-existing Hindu traditions of goddesses associated with disease.

Power's constitutive role in producing subjectivities may be apprehended in ritual practice itself. In part, rituals can be considered a form of embodied discourse. Lincoln (1989) considers ritual as a specific "mode" of discourse, which can be employed for the "construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of society itself" (1989, 3).[4] Rituals pertaining to illness and epidemic disease are no exception. Additional to what people say about their experiences with illness (pathographies), illness also implies action. Drawing from the ritual theory outlined within the *Pūrvamīmāṃsā,* a third century BCE ritual manual, Axel Michaels (2006) considers Hindu ritual as "a special mode of action" (312). The effects of disease may be attributed to, or involve, the activities of a virus, another non-human actor like a demon or deity, or – as many of the statements of ritual participants considered in this chapter – both. Action is also implied through the expressions of how individuals and communities perform and relate to a specific disease. Ritual responses to disease can express beliefs, values, and relationships.[5] From the perspective of action, additional to the statements that people make regarding their reasons for performing specific rituals, they may be understood as enacting conceptions of reality rather than (necessarily) telling stories. Houseman explains that, in ritual, the "'particular realities' people enact in rituals are relationships: an ongoing reciprocal involvement between subjects implying, for all parties concerned, the attendant qualities of agency, interaction, intentionality, affect and accountability" (Houseman 2006, 2). Relatedly, and significant to the analysis that follows, in

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[4] For an interesting discussion regarding the discursive meaning of ritual see Michaels (2016, 265-92).
[5] I am grateful to Barry Stephenson for suggesting this perspective.

any given ritual, the meanings attributed to it and the motives for performing it can differ "without this having any great effect on the execution of the ritual" (Michaels 2016, 280).[6]

As actions also imply the possibility of subjects experiencing an action's processes and results, ritual action implies ritual experience. As Mary Douglas explains:

> ritual focusses the attention by framing; it enlivens the memory and links the present with the relevant past. In all this it aids perception. Or rather, it changes perception because it changes the selective principles... But in fact ritual does not play this secondary role. It can come first in formulating experience. It can permit knowledge of what would otherwise not be known at all. It does not merely externalise experience, bringing it out into the light of day, but it modifies experience in so expressing it. This is true of language. There are some things we cannot experience without ritual. Events which come in regular sequences acquire a meaning from relation with others in the sequence. Without the full sequence individual elements become lost, imperceivable. (Douglas 1984, 65)

Srinivasan (2019) conceptualizes "religious experience" as one which is "constituted historically, and belongs to an order or 'reality' [other] than that of 'truth'" (Srinivasan 2019, 2n.2). Here, she follows Foucault's analysis of sexuality, who conceives of "experience" as having the ability to cause experiencers to "recognize themselves as subjects" (Foucault 1990, 4). Thus, rituals that enact social realities and have the potential to enable participants to have experiences of and recognize their own subjectivities also implicitly have the possibility to challenge, resist, or modify discursive processes that attempt to construct them as subjects to different conceptions of reality. The construction of devotees of coronavirus-related goddesses as 'superstitious' subjects or 'blind devotees' by people claiming political or religious authority may be challenged by their recognition as subjects to the threatening, chaotic, and violent effects of epidemic disease on one hand, and the protective blessings of the goddess on the

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[6] Haberman (2014) provides several examples from the Purāṇas in which people become "accidental ritualists" by unwittingly, yet successfully, performing rituals. To Haberman, their respective salvations or transformations reveal that "putting the body in the physical groove of ritual action is lifted up among the possible transformative elements" (2014, 154). He explains that this is because "regardless of what one thinks, it is what one *does* that determines the success of ritual performance" (Haberman 2014, 162).

other. Like discourse, however, ritual experience is "accessible to very diverse fields of knowledge and linked to a system of rules and constraints" and "understood as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture" (Foucault 1990, 4). Recalling that, for Foucault, subjectivity is constituted by the operation of power rather than preceding its effects (Martin 2019, 118), ritual may therefore enable participants to recognize themselves as subjects vis-à-vis forms of power that might otherwise be difficult to perceive.

To address my research questions, I analyze media content and discourse from 55 news releases and associated comment sections pertaining to ritual practices of goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus, including 43 online print news stories and 12 news reports in video format (See Appendix 1). The media releases are from regional publications within India (e.g., *The Madras Courier*), news sources published across India (e.g., *The Times of India*), and international publications (e.g., *South China Morning Post, Al Jazeera*). News reports were obtained through searches on Google, Duck Duck Go (a search engine which uses sources and search algorithms alternative to Google), and YouTube using relevant and associated keywords (e.g., "Corona Devi," "Corona Mai," "Corona Mata," "Corona Goddess News India"). I used various methods, such as the use of a VPN, multiple browsers, and multiple search engines, to mitigate the "filter bubble" effect (see Gittinger 2019, 65). I believe to have reached saturation for each location when novel news sources duplicated verbatim the data from previous searches, rendering them redundant (see Kapoor et al. 2022). I chose the date range of June 2020 to September 2021 for two reasons. For the beginning of the range, no news reports of coronavirus-related goddess worship appeared before June 2020, corresponding with the Indian government's lifting of the lockdown at the federal level. For the end date, I set a period

of data gathering to end in November of 2021 due to necessary time constraints for writing this thesis. I found no new news reports published between September 2021 and November 2021.

I employ qualitative methods of document analysis (e.g., Bowen 2009, Davie and Wyatt 2021) and (critical) discourse analysis (e.g., Hjelm 2011, Wodak 2011) to analyze the gathered materials. I specifically follow the methods for discourse analysis outlined by Craig Martin (2022). I provide a detailed breakdown of this process in chapter 2. Discourse is both shaped by society and is constitutive of it; it frames and constructs objects of knowledge, belief systems, social identities, and relationships between individuals and groups within society. Relevant aspects of social reality and social relationships are selected and constructed through discourse according to the interests of social actors. Discourse analysis therefore identifies actors' methods and strategies, interpreting what social actors may be attempting to achieve through discourse (Hjelm 2011, 139). Critical discourse analysis identifies the ways in which power and ideology mobilize meaning in the service of constructing, maintaining, and transforming power structures and processes of domination. Alternative viewpoints and constructions can therefore be suppressed through the process of mobilizing meaning in the service of power (Hjelm 2011, 141). From this perspective, what is omitted from a text is as important as what is included in it and must account for the social and political context in the process of interpretation. Casteism, classism, exclusion, and other forms of marginalization and subjugation are produced and reproduced through discourse through explicit statements, latent assumptions, and both intentional and unintentional omission (Wodak 2011, 39-45).

From the data delimited above, I draw on reported statements from ritual participants, descriptions of ritual practice and materials, iconographic descriptions, both as reported and what I can gather from any accompanying photos or videos. I analyze the discourses of ritual

participants within the media reports and how ritual participants and practices are discursively represented in both media reports and popular journalism. The news reports are considered in the social and historical context in which they were produced. This includes an attempt to account for the influence of Hindu nationalist politics on the Indian media and representations of class and caste relations, gender dynamics, and, of course, the local, national, and global conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic in India.

There are limitations to my method of relying on documents for this study. One limitation pertains to the various forms of censorship and reprimand of media reports perceived as critical of the current Indian government during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jaffrelot 2021). While this cannot be avoided it will be accounted for and discussed through critical discourse analysis. A second limitation is that news articles, videos, and popular journalism are themselves partial, and should not be assumed to be completely precise or accurate recordings of the events (Bowen 2009). While one preferred way to address this limitation would be through ethnographic research, owing to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, such a project was not possible and is therefore beyond the scope of this thesis. However, by employing a mixed-methodological approach of triangulating the data with other sources, more robust, thorough, and nuanced analysis and interpretations can result (Bowen 2009). This includes situating reports within historical and present social, political, and material contexts pertaining to the relationships between dominant and marginalized identities, as well as historicizing ritual practices in the context of traditions of goddesses associated with disease. Following the examples set by scholars such as Ferrari (2015a) and Srinivasan (2014), particularizing and historicizing the study of goddesses associated with disease highlights significant aspects of their devotional traditions, including their associations with marginalized groups, that are

overlooked by popular generalizing narratives that construct them as 'disease goddesses'. A third limitation of this approach is that the data selected is limited to the English language. I have done this for two reasons. First, while I have made my best efforts at translating Hindi comments associated with the English-language news reports (see below), to attempt the translation and interpretation of dozens of news reports is beyond my linguistic abilities in Hindi or other vernacular languages. Second, the scope of this thesis required limiting the data in a non-arbitrary way to allow for meaningful analysis.

Finally, for this thesis I acknowledge my positionality as an outsider, both to India and to Hinduism. I also recognize, however, that concepts like 'insider' and 'outsider' are also imperfect as they do not reflect the fluidity of identity in the contemporary world. Additionally, I do not want to further the processes of othering, which I identify in chapter 2 of this thesis, by constructing reified categories of 'outsider' and 'insider'. As Axel Michaels notes, "Everyone is director and audience at the same time, everyone is a hearer and teller of myths" (Michaels 2004, 202). I attempt to present my analysis in this thesis in a respectful way from a secular religious studies perspective while recognizing that I bring my own biases, perspectives, and limitations, making these explicit when necessary.

1.3 Literature review

Literature surrounding coronavirus-related goddesses specifically is scant, owing to their recent emergence. This thesis seeks to address a gap in the literature by providing a detailed analysis of media discourses, online commentary, and narratives of participants in coronavirus-related goddess rituals. Megha Yadav (2022) situates coronavirus-related goddesses in historical perspective, articulating their connections to other goddesses associated with disease. Along with Tulasi Srinivas (2020) and Ravinder Kaur and Sumathi

Ramaswamy (2020), Yadav also situates the emergence of these goddesses with developments in online presentations of goddesses, depicted in digital art forms in non-liturgical contexts. These four scholars articulate various connections between these artistic renderings of goddesses, reimagined in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, with biomedical and nationalist themes. Relatedly, scholars such as Asif (2020), Chakraborty (2021), and many of the scholars featured in Hertzman et al.'s (2023) excellent edited volume discuss various ways that pre-existing social disparities have been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Asia and beyond.

Scholarly literature of goddesses associated with disease is understandably vast compared to that of coronavirus-related goddesses specifically. I focus primarily on literature pertaining to Śītalā and Māriyammaṉ as they are the goddesses referred to most frequently in the media reports. Writing at the end of the 19th century, William Crooke (1896) surveys India's "godlings of disease" (123) in *The Popular Religion and Folk-Lore of Northern India.* He describes various deities and their associated diseases and rites. This text serves as an example of orientalist and colonial perspectives on goddesses associated with disease and, as such, warrants critical reflection. It also provides insight into some of the ways that early academic discourse about goddesses associated with disease was structured and has since been challenged by later scholars. For example, Crooke refers to Śītalā as the "Goddess of Small-pox" (126), an epithet that has persisted in English-language literature but has no textual or oral basis in Sanskrit or vernacular languages. This characterization of Śītalā has contributed to the formation of a phenomenon of what Fabrizio Ferrari (2015a) calls the "smallpox myth" (*xx*), in which Śītalā has been identified with her relationship with smallpox in popular and academic discourse. Ferrari argues that this portrayal of Śītalā, often also as a capricious and

wrathful goddess of disease, neglects the perspectives of both historical and living devotional traditions that see her as a loving goddess associated with hygiene, both human and agricultural fertility, a protector of children and a goddess who brings balance to states of disorder. One source for the portrayal of Śītalā as a capricious goddess of smallpox are the *Śītalāmaṅgalkāvyas* (ŚMKs). Ferrari argues that the ŚMKs were written or commissioned by upper-class Bengalis as entertaining caricatures of folk traditions. Nicholas (2003) notes how prior to the eighteenth century CE, when the printing press made cheap reproduction of these plays and poems possible, Śītalā was a relatively minor goddess in western Bengal. Wadley (1980) presents a balanced reading of the ŚMKs in conversation with other forms of devotional literature which tempers any reading of the ŚMKs that dismisses their devotional value. Elements of the Śītalā of the ŚMKs have become incorporated in Śītalā ritual and festival culture (Ferrari 2015a), including in ritual response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Dasgupta 2021). As such, studies of the Śītalā of the *Śītalāmaṅgalkāvyas*, such as Dimock (1986), Nicholas (2003), and Stewart (2018), are instructive for understanding popular representations of Śītalā specifically and goddesses associated with disease in general.

Similarly, scholars attending to Māriyammaṉ's literary and devotional traditions also note significant associations which surpass those of epidemic disease. Perundevi Srinivasan's (2000, 2019) work demonstrates various iconic and figurative correlations between Māriyammaṉ, epidemic disease, agricultural processes, seasonal change, and fertility. Srinivasan (2019) explicitly challenges symbolic and functionalist interpretations of devotional traditions that reduce them to the alleviation of fear or the experience of poverty, for

example.[7] From Srinivasan's perspective, Margaret Egnor's (1984) symbolic analysis of tuberculosis as a symbol for both goddess and poverty and Isabelle Nabokov's (2000) functionalist analysis of Māriyammaṉ's mythology serving to help negotiate changes in identity may be viewed as reductive. However, if read in a nonreductive manner, these dimensions of Māriyammaṉ's contemporary practices may be understood as drawing from pre-existing semantic fields which inform ritual praxis. As I will attempt to show, goddesses associated with coronavirus have associations and ritual features that extend far beyond the narrow and reductionist attribution of being 'goddesses of coronavirus'; they are complex and multilayered deities who relate to various concerns and challenges faced by their devotees.

The present research engages with literature regarding changing traditions of goddesses associated with disease through its analysis of specific conditions created by the Covid-19 pandemic in India. As mentioned, though perhaps considered reductionist in some ways, Margaret Egnor's (1984) study of Māriyammaṉ's fate after the smallpox's eradication from India challenged persistent academic preconceptions that identified the goddess with the disease while neglecting her many other associations. Harman's (2003, 2012) studies investigate what he calls the "taming" of Māriyammaṉ's attributes at Samayapuram and Melmaruvattur in the twentieth century context of middle-class religious communities in urban Tamil Nadu. This dimension of inquiry also relates to Joanne Waghorne's (2001)

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[7] Perundevi Srinivasan (2019) notes that the Sanskrit term, '*mārī*', can mean 'pestilence,' 'disease,' and 'death'. Additionally, in contemporary Tamil literature the term '*mari*' can also share these connotations, though classical Tamil texts do not. There, rather, the term is frequently used to denote 'rain'. Further, '*Ammai',* she informs us, means both 'pustules' and 'pearls,' as well as 'mother' and 'goddess'. Pustules and pearls can both refer to the painful, disfiguring pox that are the hallmark of smallpox infection. 'Pearls,' however, additionally mean 'rain drops', 'pulses', 'grains'. In her brilliant analysis of Tamil poetry, Srinivasan argues these themes are related through a field of iconic or figurative correlations, which contribute to an "immediacy of perception" (Srinivasan 2019, 8) for Māriyammaṉ's devotees. As such, the temporal co-incidences of seasonal rains, newly seeded crops sprouting in the agricultural fields surrounding villages, and the seasonal waning of small-pox infections all contribute to the understandings of Māriyammaṉ as a nurturing goddess of fertility who showers the world with her grace and blesses individuals by appearing from within them.

influential discussion regarding processes of the "gentrification" of goddess traditions in contemporary South Asia.

Regarding ritual change and Covid-19, Kapoor et al. (2022) undertake a discourse-analytic study of four types of ritual revision during the Covid-19 pandemic. Tracking online representations through news, video, and associated online comments of ritual revision, they analyze modifications to Durga Puja, devotional songs (*bhajans)*, ritual lighting of lamps (*diyas)*, and fire rituals (*havans)* throughout the pandemic. Their research highlights various strategies, actors, and dynamics of modification of ritual elements tracing continuity and change. Kapoor et al. identify how the roles of online media and actors on social media intersect with the increased time spent online during lockdowns, contributing to the increased effectiveness of these methods for promoting ritual revision. This thesis contributes to the study of ritual revision "during unsettled times" (Kapoor et al. 2022, 277) while problematizing some of their conclusions. While Kapoor et al. observe that media can play a role in legitimizing ritual innovation, this thesis demonstrates that media can also play a role in delegitimizing or demonizing certain forms of ritual during a crisis. For example, this thesis questions the conditions under which some forms of ritual revision, such as the mobile *havans* sponsored by middle class or BJP affiliated groups (Kapoor et al. 2022, 289) may be received and presented with approval while those performed by lower class groups receive disapproval, as is the case with many of the media reports about coronavirus-related ritual practice.

Broadly speaking, this thesis also engages with literature about ritual change in South Asia. The dynamic and growing study of online expressions of Hinduism engages with technologically mediated changes in ritual, devotional, and exegetical practices. Heinz Scheifinger (2008), Vinay Lal (1999), and Juli Gittinger (2019) approach the study of online

expressions of Hinduism from perspectives of changing practices, historiographies, and discourse, respectively. Related to goddesses associated with disease, Ferrari (2015a) includes a chapter analyzing online forms of Śītalā *bhakti* in which he notes a growing iconographic identification with Durgā and Vaiṣṇo Devī (160-8). In Brian Pennington and Amy Allocco's (2018) edited volume, *Ritual Innovation: Strategic Interventions in South Asian Religion*, ritual change is presented as a strategic practice aimed at a variety of ends, including the legitimization, expression, transformation, and contestation of religious dynamics in response to changing or established social conditions. Tulasi Srinivas' (2018) study considers creativity in ritual change and 'wonder' as a category of inquiry, suggesting that resistance to various forms of subjugation through world-building may take various and unexpected forms.

This thesis also engages with literature detailing complex encounters between public health initiatives, governmental responses, biomedical science, and goddesses associated with disease. Srinivasan (2014) traces the genealogy of Māriyammaṉ devotional practices in public health discourses and colonial ethnography in Tamil Nadu during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Her findings complicate the binary opposition frequently constructed in both popular and academic discourse between the "particular" and "peculiar" practices associated with Māriyammaṉ and the "universalizing discourse of science" (64). She details complex sets of relationships between the colonial government, missionaries, ethnographers, village ritual practice, and upper caste religious traditions, which resist a simple interpretation casting imperial domination and missionary activities, which were often at odds, against diverse indigenous religious practices. This dynamic is specifically relevant to the present study with respect to similarities between Hindu nationalist political and secular rationalist discursive response to coronavirus-related goddesses and their ritual practices. Additionally, with

Nicholas (1981), who explains that acceptance of or resistance to colonial vaccination campaigns varied widely in western Bengal, and Arnold (1993), who cautions against reductionist readings of local resistance to public health campaigns in nineteenth century colonial India in general, Srinivasan (2014) also explains that resistance to public health initiatives in Tamil Nadu varied by community for many reasons, which at times included strategic resistance to caste discrimination, Christian proselytism, and colonial oppression. Arnold's (2020) commentary on the early Covid-19 situation in India serves to caution against overly optimistic readings of resistance against social and governmental pressures on marginalized communities to effect lasting change.

The present study also relates to literature on the intersections of biomedical science discourses, secularism, and religious authority in contemporary South Asia. Banu Subramaniam (2019) details how Hindu nationalist movements increasingly align themselves with scientific and biomedical discourses, creatively reimagining and strategically reframing both scientific and religious history in the process. Relatedly, Heifetz (2018) argues that, in the context of a prominent Hindu revivalist movement, charismatic religious authority is successfully supplanted by scientific authority during a change in leadership, suggesting affective congruence between the two paradigms. Both scholars' works suggest a growing alignment between certain interpretations of both Hinduism and science. Connected to this, Ronojoy Sen (2019) details the ways in which the Supreme Court of India has also increasingly interpreted constitutional tenets of secularism to accord with certain forms of 'orthodox' Hinduism at the expense of popular forms of Hindu practice and other religions. Finally, in their introduction to the excellent edited volume on the subject, Sax and Basu (2015) explore the ways in which modern secular states seek to expunge ritual elements from medicine and

law, practices which are deeply embedded in local forms of governance, justice, and healing. Relatedly, this thesis engages with these themes through the analysis of both nationalist and rationalist discourses critical of coronavirus-related goddess rituals, conceived here as forms of popular Hinduism.

Finally, this thesis engages with literature pertaining to South Asian rituals related to health and social justice. Historically situating Śītalā in western Bengal, Nicholas (1981) documents her rise in popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, suggesting that by the early twentieth century, relationships between famine, disease, and colonial activities were seen by ordinary Bengalis as interrelated phenomena. Speaking contemporarily, Ferrari's (2015a and 2015a) insights regarding Śītalā's mobilization by her devotees in correcting imbalances in matters relating to both health and social injustices are instructive for the interpretation of ritual responses to contemporary changes. Though this thesis does not discuss the health-related outcomes of these asymmetries as it relates to how some of these relations intersect with religious practices, this analysis contributes to conversations in critical medical anthropology about social determinants of health that take seriously the structuring dynamics of both the "pathologies of power" (Farmer 2003) of global capitalism and cultural domains of ritual and identity (Sax 2004).

1.4 Notes on Names, Diacritics, Spelling, Capitalization, and Translation

In this thesis I use terms the "goddesses associated with coronavirus", "Covid-19 related goddesses" and other similar terms to refer to the goddesses collectively. I do this for three reasons. First, as I attempt to demonstrate in this thesis, these goddesses have many associations beyond the narrow reductionist identification between goddess and virus. Like Ferrari's (2015a) argument against referring to Śītalā as the 'smallpox goddess', calling a

goddess the 'Coronavirus goddess' or the 'goddess of Covid-19', unless used in this way in English by a specific ritual participant, risks reducing their complex and multilayered characters to one dimension of their developing devotional traditions. Second, I feel like choosing to use a singular name like 'the goddess associated with corona' or one of the regional names, like 'Coronā Mātā' or 'Coronā Devī', risks attributing a singular identity to what, in most cases surveyed here, appear to be distinct expressions with significant variation. Though this thesis does cast a wide net at times in discussing them collectively I want to emphasize that I do not consider them to be identical for the purposes of analysis. Third, choosing one of the regional names like 'Coronā Māī,' for example, to discuss them collectively would require favouring one name over others. The exception to this is in the title of the thesis where I chose 'Coronā Devī' for stylistic reasons and because it is the name most frequently used in the news reports.

The goddesses are called different names by ritual participants and journalists in the reports considered below: 'Corona Mai' in Jharkhand (Ranjan, *New Indian Express,* June 5, 2020), 'Corona Devi' in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal (*Times Now News,* June 7, 2020) and Maharashtra (Pandey, *Times Now News,* September 3, 2020), 'Corona Devi' and 'Corona Maa' in Assam (Nath, *India Today,* June 7, 2020), 'Corona Mata' in Uttar Pradesh (*The Indian Express,* June 13, 2021) and Chhattisgarh (Mallick, *The Free Press Journal,* May 14, 2021), and 'Coronamma' in Karnataka (Bhutia, May 28, 2021). At times these may reflect local traditions and patterns of nomenclature and at others they may reflect a decision on the part of the journalists, translators, or editors of the news outlet. None of the media reports use diacritics in their representation of these names. When I quote news reports, I, of course, reproduce them as they are written. However, when I refer to a specific goddess by name, following Yadav (2022),

I use diacritics according to the conventions of transliteration. For place names with multiple spellings in the literature, I provide clarification in a footnote.

I refrain from using the names of ritual participants and commenters in order to protect their identities. For ritual participants, I generally relay the description they are attributed in the news reports. For commenters engaged in interlocutory exchanges, I replace their online handle with [1], [2], [3], etc., using the @ symbol to indicate who is speaking to whom. The names of journalists and quoted authors remain as published in the originals.

As COVID-19 is an acronym, rendering it in all majuscule letters is technically correct. However, following Hertzman et al. (2023), for this thesis I choose to use a colloquial spelling of 'Covid-19' to enhance readability (See Hertzman et al. 2023, 33n.2). This has also become an accepted spelling according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, March 2023). When I use 'Covid-19' to refer to either the disease or the pandemic in general I make this clear. I use the term 'SARS-CoV-2 virus' when referring to the novel coronavirus specifically.

Regarding language and translation, Gittinger (2019) notes that online discourse in the digital public sphere in India makes use of English as a "bridge language" between Indo-Aryan and Dravidian vernacular languages and as such remains the most frequently used language in the online public sphere (2019, 26). There are political dimensions to language choices in discourse, both online and offline. Both Hindi and English, the predominant languages in the comment sections reviewed for this thesis, exclude large segments of the population who speak other languages. Gittinger also suggests that Hindi may be viewed as more 'authentic' for online discourse about Hinduism because of its close association with Sanskrit, noting that Hindi is often used by commenters aligned with Hindutva views to establish authority and position themselves as insiders (2019, 26n.10). All the translations of Hindi comments are my

own and I take full responsibility for any errors. I include the original text in footnotes to allow the reader to easily check the author's untranslated comments. I am grateful for the assistance of Mr. Vineet Kumar for the translation of some videos. Mr. Kumar is a resident of Bihar and a native Hindi speaker. Though he is not a professional translator, Mr. Kumar holds a graduate degree from a Canadian university and is fluent in English, Magahi, and Hindi. I trust his translation abilities and I take full responsibility for any errors in my interpretation of the suggestions he has provided. I indicate any videos which were translated with Mr. Kumar's assistance in footnotes.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 presents social, political, and media contexts relevant to the Covid-19 pandemic in India. A discussion of social contexts includes the migrant crisis created by the Indian government's decision to institute a country-wide lockdown with virtually no notice. This decision disproportionately affected members of the lower social classes, caste-oppressed communities, and gender minorities. Social responses, which constructed Muslims and migrant workers as scapegoats, also contributed to the challenges faced by already marginalized groups. I continue by presenting an overview of the Indian political landscape, which is characterized by growing Hindu nationalism. The influence of this ideological perspective on both informal and institutional politics has further exacerbated social divisions and hardships faced by marginalized communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. I then discuss how Hindu nationalism has also contributed to a notable decline in the independence of news media in India. This decline has occurred through various forms of coercion. The social, political, and media contexts are significant for situating the media reports about coronavirus-related goddesses for understanding constructions of difference and the

mobilization of discourses related to 'superstition' discussed in later chapters. Finally, I present a summary of the media reports pertaining to coronavirus-related goddesses and associated ritual practices, organized chronologically and by region. Figure 1, a timeline of significant Covid-19 events in India, may be found on page 54.

Chapter 3 begins the discourse analysis of media reports and associated comment sections of coronavirus-related goddesses and ritual practices. This chapter analyzes various ways in which both 'sameness' and 'difference' is constructed. Sameness is constructed through the identification of some rituals and participants as 'Hindu'. I engage in further discussion of media constructions regarding the legitimacy of coronavirus-related goddess rituals in chapter 4. The discussion then turns towards constructions of difference, which are broadly structured according to various forms of regional and religious identity. Difference according to regional identity is constructed through differences between South and North India, by state, and by country. This construction appears in two broad forms: either through concerns about the way coronavirus-related goddess practices reflect commenters' own identities or how they are used to disparage those of others. Difference according to religious identity predictably reflects communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. Difference is also constructed through categories of 'atheist' identities. I note that some commenters use as self-descriptions, perhaps reflecting secular rationalist sympathies, while others use the term as a negative ascription for other religious expressions. Finally, religious difference is also constructed within Hinduism itself, with notable commentary regarding the legitimacy or illegitimacy of ritual practices and beliefs, at times explicitly espousing Hindu nationalist sentiments.

Chapter 4 continues the discourse analysis of the comment sections and media reports about coronavirus-related goddess worship through the specific analysis of discourses pertaining to 'superstition' and 'blind devotion'. I begin with an analysis of the usage of the Hindi term *'andh bhakt',* noting polysemy which draws on its usage as its literal translation, meaning "blind devotee", and the political usage as a popular sobriquet used against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and people who hold Hindu nationalist views in general. I then consider how the frequent characterization of practices and devotees as 'superstitious' is inflected according to caste, class, education, and gender in ways that exacerbate previous dynamics of social marginalization. The analysis then turns to the ways that discourses of superstition are differentially mobilized by both Hindu nationalists and secular rationalists to situate coronavirus-related goddess rituals in opposition to science and biomedicine. This opposition, in the context of the Covid-19 epidemic, is used to justify various disciplinary responses against devotees. Finally, I consider the ways in which legitimacy, conceived in terms of the authority of ritual practitioners and the authenticity of the practices, is constructed through the media reports.

Finally, chapter 5 turns towards the narratives and practices of coronavirus-related goddess devotees. The first part of this chapter begins with an analysis of the relationships between coronavirus-related goddess rituals and pre-existing traditions. I consider direct references to other goddesses associated with disease before analyzing the dimensions of iconography and symbolism, which are suggestive of associations with pre-existing traditions and techniques. I consider this discussion by engaging with questions about whether and how coronavirus-related goddesses may be considered as 'new' by ritual practitioners, situating these responses in contexts of new traditions of goddesses associated with disease. Finally, I

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consider the role of dreams as sources of epistemic authority in the narratives of ritual participants. The latter part of this chapter considers the ritual practices themselves, considering participant narratives regarding reasons for undertaking coronavirus-related goddess rituals. Analysis of participant statements reveal several perspectives pertaining to the relationships between coronavirus-related goddesses, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These relationships can be summarized as follows: 1) identification with the virus (i.e., the goddess *is* the virus and therefore has an intrinsic ability to enter or leave the human body, cause social disruption associated with the pandemic, etc.), 2) offering protection from the virus, 3) having the ability to attenuate or control the virus,[8] 4) having the ability to destroy the virus, and 5) causing Covid-19 because of her "anger" and requiring pacification. Notably, evidence that coronavirus-related goddesses are invoked to play a healing role in any biomedical sense is conspicuously absent from all surveyed media reports. In other words, there is no evidence that people sick with Covid-19 sought healing for the disease from coronavirus-related goddesses. I then turn to a discussion of ritual from functionalist perspectives suggested by the media reports before engaging in an analysis of the rituals from a relational approach to ritual practice. Finally, I consider dimensions of ritual related to relationships between participants, community, illness, social justice, and gender.

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[8] This is arguably the view closest to any intention of cure or healing in the biomedical sense (e.g., attenuation as common to public health discourses about vaccines). I am grateful to Patricia Dold for this insight.

Chapter 2. The Virulence of Exclusion: Contexts of Covid-19 in India

2.1 Introduction

Media content analysis suggests that pre-existing prejudices associated with religion, ethnicity, and sexuality have contributed to further discrimination of marginalized populations in India during the pandemic (Joshi and Swarnakar 2021). This has, as Arnold (2020) anticipated, forced "social divisions more starkly into the open, transforming fissures into fault lines" (572). Some of the people participating in ritual worship of goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus belong to various marginalized populations, including women, third gender groups, and caste-oppressed groups. The ritual practices appear in a media context increasingly influenced by nationalist politics.

In this chapter, I provide context for the emergence of coronavirus-based goddesses in the news reports. First, I explore social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in India. Pre-existing inequalities that members of oppressed caste, class, gender, and religious communities faced were exacerbated by government inaction and oversight. The lockdown precipitated an unprecedented crisis for migrant workers in India, which compounded hardships already presented by the risk of Covid-19 infection. I then present dimensions of India's political context which contributed to these social dynamics. India's political landscape is increasingly characterized by Hindutva nationalist politics and ideologies. Hindu nationalist politics, at both the institutional and para-institutional levels contribute to Islamophobic, patriarchal, casteist, and anti-poor dynamics in Indian society in both overt and subtle ways. One of these spheres in which these politics have considerable influence is in the news media, both in traditional and online forms. I therefore present dimensions of the media contexts which condition the media reports of Covid-19-related goddesses. The decline of journalistic

independence, coupled with online and physical threats against journalists contribute to an environment of fear and restricted press freedoms. In the realm of social media, cyber activist groups affiliated with Hindutva institutions attempt to dominate online discussions about Hinduism, politics, religion, and gender through bullying, intimidation, and harassment.

I then briefly turn to the ways in which online media has conditioned the dissemination of information about coronavirus-related goddesses and enabled discourse in the public sphere through social media and comment sections. Finally, I present a summary of the news reports of Covid-19-related goddess worship. This summary is intended to convey both the similarities and heterogeneity of these practices, along with a sense of the wide geographic distribution of the places where these practices have occurred. The Covid-19 pandemic in India exposed and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities of various marginalized populations, provided an arena for the enactment of Hindu nationalist ideologies, and further contributed to an already restricted news media environment. In these conditions appear the news reports of goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus, which will be the subject of analysis for the two chapters that follow. Throughout this chapter, please refer to Figure 1 for a timeline of events significant to the global Covid-19 story, the course of the pandemic in India, and the emergent forms of ritual practice associated with Covid-19 analyzed in this study.

2.2 Social impacts of Covid-19 in India

The pandemic exacerbated difficult conditions experienced by members of the Indian lower classes. Migrant workers in India regularly face precariousness and uncertainty in their day-to-day lives. India's informal economy is estimated to include 139 million internal migrants (Sharma 2017), many of whom travel hundreds or thousands of kilometers from their home districts to work in large metropolitan centers in a variety of sectors as cleaners, day-

labourers, and factory workers, among other professions (Ellis-Petersen and Chaurasia 2022). They often face harsh or dangerous working conditions, earn very little money, and send whatever they can save back to their families in their home villages (Ganguly 2020).

On March 24, 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a country-wide lockdown, which required most businesses, including shops, factories, and restaurants, to close for at least three weeks. Although implemented to prevent the spread of Covid-19, lockdown measures imposed hardships on migrant workers in the cities. People of lower classes, lower castes, and other religious minority groups faced additional risks beyond those associated with contracting Covid-19 (Chakraborty 2020). Suddenly unemployed, hundreds of thousands of people were at risk of experiencing violence, starvation, and humiliation. Reports from this time describe police beating groups of migrants with *lathis* (batons) for violating government Covid-19 policies prohibiting gatherings (Shome 2021). Similarly, other accounts reported that groups of migrants had been forcefully sprayed with disinfectant as they attempted to return to their home states (Chakraborty 2020). Already forced to contend with the precariousness of sudden unemployment, these acts of state-imposed discipline exemplify the additional dangers faced by internal migrant workers at this time.

All public transportation – including buses, planes, and trains – was suspended for the lockdown, forcing those wishing to leave the cities to travel on foot (Chakraborty 2020). Tens of thousands of men, women, and children walked, sometimes for hundreds of kilometers, often going for long periods without food or water (Jagannathan and Rai 2022). This led to several deaths (Shome 2021). To avoid the authorities, some groups travelled at night along railway tracks, as there were no passenger trains running. In one particularly horrifying incident, 20 Ādivāsī steel factory workers travelling back to their home state of Madhya

Pradesh from Maharashtra fell asleep on the tracks and were killed by a freight train in the early hours of the morning (Jagannathan and Rai 2022). These deaths were a direct result of government oversight in the implementation of the lockdown.

Roy (2020) and Shome (2021) note the systemic exclusion of lower classes through the lockdown measures; the government announced the lockdown only four hours prior to its scheduled beginning and made no prior plans to ensure that migrant workers would have a way to return home. Additionally, other pandemic protection measures, such as social distancing, masking, the use of hand sanitizer, and sheltering at home, were not possible for many poor people in India. Low-income individuals were, therefore, repeatedly excluded from the societal vision and program for reducing the virus' effects (Shome 2021). As author and essayist Arundhati Roy explains, "lockdown and social distancing cannot be applicable in India, if we think of the tens of millions living in the slums" (in Bezzi, June 11, 2020). Government efforts to protect citizens heeded the advice of emerging scientific understandings and public health officials' recommendations. However, the government's largely biocentric response to the pandemic did not account for the social context of contemporary India, in which "glaring inequalities...[imply] that more populations than not, fall outside the figure of 'human' that underlies scientific and administrative efforts to protect 'humans' from the virus" (Shome 2021, 320). In other words, due to their living conditions, a large proportion of the Indian population could not conform to the lockdown measures implemented by the government.

While the government attempted to mitigate some of these inequalities, it did so in a haphazard and ineffective manner. On March 26, 2020, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a Covid-19 relief package involving food rations, direct cash transfers, and tax breaks for small business (Choudhury 2020). Direct cash assistance was orchestrated through

the Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana,[9] a government financial inclusion programme, which made it efficient and expedient to administer but also made it inaccessible for many people, especially poor women, of whom it is estimated only half have the requisite Jan-Dhan bank accounts (Bardhan 2020). When buses were finally organized in April and May of 2020 – more than a month after the lockdown was initially announced – it was done at the initiative of individual states, with little to no organization or oversight from the Central Government (Bhatia et al. 2020, Bhowmick 2020).

Researchers have noted social stigmatization against 'unskilled' labourers during the pandemic. This compounded the hardships they faced on the journey home due to the perception that they are carriers of the virus (Joshi and Swarnakar 2021). Perceptions of superiority by the middle and upper classes contributed to the labeling lower classes as "bad citizens" for their inability to follow pandemic protocols, such as social distancing (Chakraborty 2020, 335). Coupled with sweeping labour reforms hastily introduced in September 2020, Jagannathan and Rai argue that "the state pursued a cultural project of hate to generate consent for its class project of inequality on the prejudices of the middle class and others who identified with the cultural majority" (2022, 433).

Migrant workers in India are largely comprised of Dalits (Scheduled Caste), Indigenous groups (Ādivāsīs or Scheduled Tribes) and lower-class Muslims (Shome 2021). As such, during the Covid-19 pandemic, religion and class intersected with both caste and communal politics to further exacerbate inequalities. Several scholars have documented the racism and violence faced by Muslims in India throughout the pandemic (e.g., Asif 2020, Kaur and Ramaswamy

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[9] (PMJDY) – the Prime Minister's People's Wealth Scheme. Jaffrelot (2021, 120-22) argues that this program, while marketed by the PM as a pro-poor initiative, does little to provide concrete material benefits.

2020, Roy in Bezzi 2020). Early in the pandemic, Muslims were blamed for spreading the virus when members of an Islamic religious congregation known as Tablighi Jamaat gathered in Delhi between March 11 and March 13, 2020. Many participants had come from abroad and the government had granted permission for the event to take place (Jagannathan and Rai 2022, 439). Tablighis were labeled as "human bombs" (Roy in Bezzi 2020), had their visas cancelled by the Ministry of Home Affairs, and many were arrested and charged with violations under the Epidemic Act (1987), the Foreigner's Act (1946), and the Disaster Management Act (2005) (Jagannathan and Rai 2022). Videos of beatings and attacks against Muslims circulated virally online, along with the social media hashtag, #Coronajihad,[10] suggesting that members of the Muslim community were intentionally infecting Hindus (Asif 2020). Entire television segments dedicated to "COVID jihad" aired at this time (Roy in Bezzi 2020), and mainstream television news programs used depictions of skullcaps (*topis*), which are associated with Islam, as visual backgrounds when presenting national and regional Covid-19 statistics (Dutt 2022).

In an August 2020 decision pertaining to the arrests of 35 Tablighis, the Bombay High Court wrote that "a political government tries to find the scapegoat when there is a pandemic or calamity and the circumstances show that there is a probability that these foreigners were chosen to make them scapegoats" (Thapar and Wahidi, August 24, 2020). Social ostracization of Muslims due to perceptions of them as disease carriers is evident in accusations of community members spitting in milk that they sell (Joshi and Swarnakar 2021) and led to boycotting Muslim-owned business or denying healthcare to members of the Muslim community (Roy in Bezzi 2020).

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[10] The "Corona Jihad" trope plays on pre-existing Islamophobic rhetoric that dates to the mid 2000s, in which Muslim men are accused of committing "Love Jihad" by seducing and converting young Hindu women to Islam (See Jaffrelot 2021, 195-202).

Similar scapegoating was also present for members of India's caste-oppressed communities.[11] According to the 2011 Census of India there are over 200 million Dalits or Scheduled Castes (SC) living in India, comprising 16.6 percent of the population. Approximately three quarters live in rural areas though a trend of increased urbanization has been noted (*International Dalit Solidarity Network* 2013). Nearly half of the Dalit population lives in four states: Uttar Pradesh (20.5%), West Bengal (10.7%), Bihar (8.2%), and Tamil Nadu (7.2%) (Sivakumar 2013). Historian Malavika Binny notes that a "very large majority of migrants were from the Dalit community," who, upon returning to their home villages, "had to face the double stigma of having returned from pandemic-stricken cities and also of caste" (2022, 8). Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, made comments in late May 2020, suggesting that migrant workers returning to Uttar Pradesh from Delhi and Mumbai were infected with Covid-19 and were either Dalits or belonged to "backwards castes" (NDTV, May 26, 2020). Rhetoric like this has exacerbated the hardships they faced in their travels home, as fears about infection precluded assistance from communities along the way, some of whom denied entry to outsiders (Ganguly 2020, Ellis-Petersen and Chaurasia 2020). Binny argues that public health directives on social distancing and handwashing have been co-opted by proponents of caste-discrimination, producing a "reinvention of untouchability" during the pandemic (2022, 7-8).

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[11] The caste system in India is a system of social hierarchy and domination which delineates four social classes or *varnas* – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras – in descending hierarchical order. Prior to British colonialism, which largely fixed these identities in place, there was greater possibility for social mobility within the castes (Chakraborty 2020: 338n.1). This description is an overly simplistic distillation of a highly complex system of social identity, which also includes *jāti* (birth group), *gotra* (family lineage) and *grāma* (village of origin) (Rodrigues 2006, 60). Outside of the *varna* system are Dalits (formerly called 'untouchables'), which are officially part of the 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) classification, Ādivāsīs, Indigenous inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent, referred to officially as Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC). It should be noted, however, that these official classifications remain contested terms.

Women and third gender communities also experienced increased vulnerability during the Covid-19 pandemic. Transgender communities regularly face medical negligence, stigma of disease, suicides, and transphobia both in India and in many parts of the world (Battacharya 2022). In India specifically, third gender communities, including Hijṛā or Kinnar communities, were affected by the lockdown as much of their traditional livelihood depends upon community engagement or performance (Sankam 2021). Working-class members of these communities often make their livelihoods through public performances, begging (*challa)* on trains or at crossroads, and blessing (*badhai)* new-born babies and newlywed couples. These methods of earning wages were abruptly prohibited by lockdown restrictions (Battacharya 2022). Transgender people were also stigmatized as carriers of Covid-19 (Joshi and Swarnakar 2021). Members of LGBTQ communities in India regularly face discrimination when they seek healthcare, which can result in delaying or avoiding seeking treatment (Sankam 2021). Negotiations between NGOs and the government resulted in a small, one-time payment of 1500 rupees for transgender individuals from the National Institute of Social Defence (NISD). Many did not access this because they have neither an *Aadhaar*[12] card nor bank accounts. Others did not want to disclose *Aadhaar* number and bank details to the state, for reasons pertaining to state surveillance of citizenship status, gender identity, or both (Battacharya 2022).

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[12] *Aadhaar* cards refer to a 12-digit identification number, unique to everyone, based on biometric data. They are assigned to Indian citizens, non-resident Indians (NRI), and resident foreign nationals who meet certain criteria. While previously voluntary, it is now mandatory to access various social welfare benefits (Battacharya 2022, 2458n.10). However, many internal migrants and those working in the informal economy do not have these cards and are not registered in the state's digital database (Shome 2021). Additionally, massive demonstrations erupted to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in 2019 and early 2020. Many people from marginalized groups, including Muslims and transgender people were excluded from the NRC, which is linked to the *Aadhaar* system. Therefore, it is unsurprising that in this context people might be reluctant to involve themselves with this instrument of the state, even to receive government benefits (Battacharya 2022).

In step with global trends, women in India faced an increased risk of domestic violence during the lockdown (Pattojoshi et al. 2021). Lower-class and caste-oppressed women faced unemployment and financial uncertainty and were at increased risk of physical and sexual abuse. Additionally, they were stigmatized by upper classes due to the difficulties associated with physical distancing in cramped living conditions. A lack of menstrual products, contraceptives, and access to abortion during the lockdown, which led to unwanted pregnancies, exacerbated an already difficult situation for some women (Chakraborty 2020). While many migrant workers are indeed women, many other low-class women whose husbands are workers became fully responsible for childcare responsibilities at home in their husbands' absence. They therefore also faced additional financial uncertainty during the lockdown. With respect to many aspects of social inequality in India, the "pandemic has functioned as a window to some of the world's most precarious conditions that typically remain hidden from our eyes" (Shome 2021, 319). However, though the migrant crisis was made highly visible in local and international news media, Chakraborty argues that low-class women are largely "invisible victims of the socio, political, economic, and pathological implications of the virus...[who] remained invisible from such counter public discourses" (2020, 333-34). Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately presented additional challenges for various marginalized social groups.

2.3 Political Contexts

The current political context in India, at both institutional and extra-institutional levels, is influenced by a form of ethnic nationalism called 'Hindutva'. Hindutva ("Hinduness") is premised on the assertion that India is a Hindu nation (*Hindu rashtra*). In contemporary politics, it therefore rejects or reformulates the guarantees enshrined in the constitution

shortly after Independence. One constitutional guarantee that Hindutva ideology rejects is a form of secularism that recognizes no official religion and protects freedom of conscience and worship for all faiths. In the nineteenth century, Hindu nationalism developed partly in response to the presence of Europeans in India and the proselytism of Christian missionaries. The relationships between the development of Hindu nationalist ideologies and the colonial context are complex. They involve dialectical and mutually influential sets of negotiations and historical contingencies, within and between religious, political, and legal spheres. Both European and South Asian institutions and actors participated in these dynamics, which continue to have significant impact in the present (see Viswanathan 2005, 25-41). To present a consolidated version of Hinduism[13] that rejected disparaging depictions of Hindu traditions leveled by European colonists, movements like the Arya Samaj, founded in 1875, began a socio-religious project of reforming, reviving, and homogenizing traditions to overcome what Jaffrelot calls a "majoritarian inferiority complex" (Jaffrelot 2021, 11-12).

Hindutva political ideology emerged in the early twentieth century from this context and increasingly positioned 'the Hindu' in contrast to 'the Other' within India, who are identified primarily with Muslims but also Christians and secularists. V.D. Savarkar's 1923 book, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*?, presented the first explicitly political treatise of Hindutva as ethnic nationalism within the Indian subcontinent, explicitly identifying Muslims as a threat to national unity. M.S. Golwalkar's 1939 book, *We,* or *Our Nationhood Defined*, also identified

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[13] The term 'Hinduism' is contested on several grounds. Viswanathan (2005) provides an excellent analysis of colonialism, Orientalism, modernity, national identity, historiography, western academic study of 'world' religions, and jurisprudence that form a complex and mutually influential relationship with contemporary discourses that attempt to define or deconstruct the term. Contributing to this line of inquiry, Juli Gittinger (2019) argues that online Hindutva discourses attempt to "clearly but narrowly define 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' in such ways that discursively reify ethno-nationalist tropes" (1).

Christians and political activists, who were working towards a form of state secularism to enshrine religious pluralism, as further threats to the Hindutva project (Jaffrelot 2021).

Hindutva is championed by a bewildering number of related organizations, several of which now extend throughout the country and around the world (Gittinger 2019). The oldest and arguably the most influential is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) founded in 1925 by K.B. Hedgewar, a follower of Savarkar. It has branches and training centres (*shakha)* in many communities throughout India and engages in a variety of activities committed to the project of transforming India into a *Hindu rashtra*. Various related organizations have emerged from or become closely aligned with the RSS. These are known collectively as the Sangh Parivar (the RSS family). Included here are the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization focused on religious matters, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a national political party, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidarthi Parishad (ABVP), a student organization, the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, a worker's organization, as well as numerous other organizations and state-level political parties devoted to matters related to specific regions, professions, populations, propaganda and media, education, economics, and other specific issues. The RSS, the VHP, and the BJP are largely considered the most significant, powerful, and influential institutions of Hindutva (Gittinger 2019). Relatively recent additions to the Sangh Parivar include the youth wing of the VHP, the Bajrang Dal and young women's wing, the Durga Vahini. Additionally, affiliated vigilante organizations that do not strictly fall under the auspices of the Sangh Parivar but are recruited for specific purposes, including online harassment are now sometimes included in the analysis of RSS activities (Jaffrelot 2021). The Bajrang Dal gained notoriety for their participation in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh in 1992. More recently, under the pretense of 'cow protection' (*gau raksha*) they engage in surveillance,

harassment, extortion, and, at times, murder of Muslims and caste-oppressed people involved in the transportation of cows. This assumed role of moral policing also extends to Muslims suspected of luring Hindu girls and young women for conversion through marriage (Jaffrelot 2021).

The most direct and overt institutional expression of the Hindutva ideology relevant to the present study is the BJP, the current ruling national political party in India. Created in 1980, partly due to infighting between factions within the Hindutva movement, the BJP was conceived as more moderate mainstream political front for the Sangh Parivar's extreme ethnic nationalist ideology. Modi's election in 2014, was precipitated by periods of radicalism in the 1990s. One of the flashpoints of this period was the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, an event which the BJP denied orchestrating, though media leaks suggest otherwise. Underwhelming election performances for the BJP in the 1990s motivated a pivot to a strategy of coalition-seeking, growing populism, and moderation (Jaffrelot 2021). In part, this strategy included balancing, on the one hand, the socially conservative and upper-caste interests of the RSS's vision with the vote banks required to form majority government identified in caste-oppressed and minority populations, on the other.

The RSS's overarching mission does not seek institutional political power per se but rather gradual and total reform of both society as a whole and the minds of each individual Hindu according to its views of social organization, ethnic history, and a political and social base united against perceived external threats. The immediate aims and methods employed by the RSS, aligned with Hedgewar and Golwalkar's views, differ from groups like the Bajrang Dal and other vigilante organizations. These groups are influenced by Savarkar's call for rapid political change using violent methods if necessary (Jaffrelot 2021). The social vision of the RSS

itself contains elements which are, in an important sense, antagonistic: the assertion of Hindu unity is paramount for their project of ethnic nationalism while the social vision they assert is fractured along the hierarchical organization of caste. Indeed, as Viswanathan notes, elements of this division exist in post-independent institutional and legal frameworks, citing as an example the retention of colonial judges' reliance "on the textual interpretations offered by Hindu pandits" (2005, 31), which overwhelmingly represented upper-caste, Sanskritic ideals, in which locally variant customs and nuances were largely ignored. The RSS was created and continues to be headed by upper-caste members who, despite recruiting from caste-oppressed and marginalized communities, adhere to traditional Brahmanical values of society organized hierarchically along caste lines (Jaffrelot 2021).

Developments in Hindutva political strategy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries involve an increasingly populist agenda, bringing members of the Hindu proletariat into its fold through organizations like the Bajrang Dal. This "plebianization-cum-lumpenization of the Sangh Parivar" (Jaffrelot 2021, 248), which recruits disempowered and unemployed (mostly male) youth for a variety of activities, is modeled by Narendra Modi himself. His, now almost mythical, humble beginnings as a *chaiwalla* (teaseller) coupled with his meteoric rise in political stature position him as a model for such populations. He is "at once a pure product of the RSS *and* a man of lower caste" (Jaffrelot 2021, 150), thereby confounding the historical divide within the Sangh Parivar between upper and lower castes and other minorities. However, while much of the rhetoric of contemporary BJP politics appears pro-poor, there is reason to question how much the lower classes benefit from these populist politics. According to Jaffrelot's analysis of three initiatives – The Swachh Bharat

Abhiyan[14] (Clean India Mission), Jan-Dhan Yojana (People's Wealth Scheme) and the Ujjwala

Yojana (Brightness Scheme) – promoting a sense of 'dignity' for the poor has supplanted

redistribution programs, in effect providing the illusion of helping the poor while stripping

away social security benefits (see Jaffrelot 2021, 113-134). He argues that the

> general view of the SBA [Swachh Bharat Abhiyan] as a successful endeavor shows that
> Narendra Modi, as early as 2014, was able to initiate vast programs in the name of the
> poor that would increase his popularity across social milieus without distributing money
> to the poor in question. Two other *yojanas* (schemes) [the Jan-Dhan Yojana and the
> Ujjwala Yojana] would fit the same pattern. (Jaffrelot 2021, 120)

This general pattern – populist rhetoric through which claims of aiding the lower classes and

marginalized communities – in the form of "politics of dignity" is observable in Prime Minister

Modi's monthly radio show, *Mann Ki Baat* (*Words from the Heart*). Here, themes of nationalism,

poverty, dreams, hope, traditions, and pride are discussed through the accessible medium of

the radio, to convey a sense of unity and dignity (Jaffrelot 2021).

The sense of unity required for the project of ethnic and religious nationalism embodied

by Hindutva ideologies is sought not only through political solidarity, but also through a

homogenizing project towards a sense of unified religious, cultural, and ethnic belonging. As

Viswanathan points out, prior to both British and Mughal rule in South Asia, textual traditions

of various Hindu sects include instructions for recruiting and converting members of other

sects. One significant difference, she notes, is the introduction of the political tool of the

nation state, introduced through British colonialism (Viswanathan 2003, 29). This development

invites both the possibility of cultural and religious hegemony enforced and enacted through

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[14] The motivations behind this particular scheme to clean up India can be further analyzed. As Jaffrelot observes, "Indian society at large…is concerned with cleanliness, an issue that is amplified by the general sensitivity to purity (the main building block of the caste system) and to hygiene (as many diseases are linked to poor sanitation)," while noting that during the first *Mann Ki Baat* broadcast, Modi "asked people to pledge to remove dirt from their lives" (2021, 117). In an alternative reading, then, the scheme is not so much designed *for* the poor as it is *about* or even *against* them.

state and para-state apparatuses, as well as the vulnerabilities and anxieties of national integrity in a globalized world. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai identifies minorities within a nation state as "the major site for displacing the anxieties of many states about their own minority or marginality (real or imagined) in a world of a few megastates, of unruly economic flows, and compromised sovereignties" (Appadurai 2006, 43). The most direct targets of Hindutva are, of course, Muslims in contemporary discourse and politics. But, not to minimize the undeniably unconscionable treatment of Muslims by the contemporary Indian state, one need not even look outside of Hinduism itself to locate such reminders: local and vernacular traditions, including those of tribal peoples and Dalits, threaten the homogeneity and unity towards which Hindu nationalist ideology intends. As Gittinger notes, these groups are "seen as unstable categories that do not fall into Hinduism's *varna* (caste) system and therefore pose a problem of potential defection to other religions (and therefore nations)" (2019, 6-7), while at the same time a "visible battle in the electronic public sphere to assert claims of authenticity with regard to Hinduism" (2019, 3) is being waged.

2.4 Media Contexts

The data for this thesis are news articles and videos about detailing novel coronavirus-related goddesses and ritual worship. Understanding the media context in which the news articles are situated will help guide their interpretation and analysis. News media in India is in a state of decline owing to several factors. Journalist Bharka Dutt details her first-hand experience of the collapse of television news in India over her 32-year career. She cites factors like "Broken revenue models, ballooning costs, shrinking budgets for travel and some twisted idea that shouty, contrarian guests make for great viewing," (Dutt 2022, 10) as contributing to this perceived decline. Additionally, she notes a culture of competition, in which stories that

cover "calamity and chaos and riots and revolts" are perceived as "soft" relative to those which cover politicians' publicity events or invite celebrities into the studio (Dutt 2022, 10. Dutt argues that these conditions "have made us [journalists] increasingly lazy, stale, unimaginative and without empathy...disconnected from our audiences and made our journalism more about celebrities and less about people" (2022, 10-11). Journalists and media houses influenced by the Sangh Parivar are part of a growing pattern in which mainstream media increasingly serve as conduits for Hindutva propaganda. This occurs in several ways, including paid campaigns against political opposition, leveraging communal divisions, polarizing voters, and accusing journalists, artists, and intellectuals critical of Hindu nationalism of being anti-national (Jaffrelot 2021).

Both the influence of Hindutva discourses in Indian news media and the actions of vigilante actors against journalists critical of the government contribute to the contemporary South Asian media context. This influence has contributed to the decline of media independence in India during Prime Minister Modi's time in office.[15] Numerous incidents of online and physical harassment and intimidation of journalists carried out by trolls associated with groups supporting Hindutva ideology have been documented (Jaffrelot 2021). These incidents include trolling journalists, specifically women, with threats of violence and sexual violence (labeled as "presstitutes" online); additionally, secularists (frequently called "sickularists"), Muslims, Dalits, other minorities, and liberals (Jaffrelot 2021) were often attacked. Though these activities are generally undertaken by vigilante individuals and groups presenting as unconnected with the BJP government, Jaffrelot argues that there is an

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[15] In the 2022 report, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked India at 150 out of 180 countries in the annual Press Freedom Index (RSF 2023), down from 136 in 2014 (RSF 2015).

increased porosity between them, suggested by the fact that top BJP officials and sitting MPs, including Modi, follow social media accounts associated with this violence (Jaffrelot 2021). While merely following accounts that engage in harassment of journalists and other citizens is not evidence of complicity, when considered along with other evidence involving the blurring of the boundaries between institutions like the BJP, the Sangh Parivar, police, and violent vigilante groups, this lends support for Jaffrelot's thesis of the existence of a parallel state operating within contemporary Indian political and media spheres (see Jaffrelot 2021, 230-51).

Direct state intervention targeting journalists and news organizations perceived as critical of the government has increased during Modi's tenure. When Modi was sworn into office in 2014, Prakash Javadekar, the minister of information and broadcasting stated that media should not cross the line[16] in reportage critical of the government, and instead aid the government "to do good work…in the name of transparency" (in Jaffrelot 2021, 299). State intervention against journalists and news organizations has taken various forms: withholding state advertisement revenue, raiding corporate headquarters on dubious grounds, and temporarily banning TV stations. It has also included pressuring media houses to fire committed journalists, harassment of journalists by police, and other forms of retaliation for coverage perceived as critical towards the government or its policies. These threats, in various forms have also led to journalist self-censorship (see Jaffrelot 2021, 299-303).

The pattern of restricting press freedoms has continued during the Covid-19 pandemic, amidst increased danger faced by journalists.[17] It is Dutt's opinion that many Hindi and

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[16] The actual term he used - "Lakshman *rekha*," refers to an episode in the Ramayana and was invoked again six years later by Prime Minister Modi in his 2020 announcement of the Covid-19 lockdown (Shome 2021, 322).
[17] As of June 2021, at least 519 Indian journalists have been killed by Covid-19, more than one third of the global total, almost three-quarters of whom are believed to have contracted Covid-19 while reporting in the field (RSF 2021).

regional-language publications, like *Dainik Bhaskar, Sandesh, and Gujarat Samachar,* provided

better coverage of Covid-19 deaths than some mainstream national outlets. These media

houses were also subject to intimidation, including the July 2021 tax raid of *Dainik Bhaskar*

offices and Dutt's own experience of smear campaigns from "right-wing-leaning propaganda

sites" (Dutt 2022, 174) in response to her independent reporting throughout the pandemic.[18]

Reportage covering the impact of Covid-19 and related policies on marginalized groups has

received pushback in the form of arrests and other legal mechanisms. One such example

includes the case of *Scroll.in* Executive Editor, Supriya Sharma, who had an FIR (first

information report) filed against her for investigating the ways in which Dalits have suffered

disproportionately negative effects of lockdown policies in villages near Varanasi, Modi's

electoral district (Jaffrelot 2021). Furthermore, the BJP government has used the allegation of

disinformation as a pretense for requesting Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to censor social

media posts about the Covid-19 crisis and the government's response, including those of

journalists (RSF 2021).

Covid-19 media coverage in rural areas faced challenges associated with lockdown

measures, such as a lack of infrastructure, including accommodations[19] and public

transportation. Additionally, oxygen shortages, a lack of hospital beds, the risk of sexual

violence against female reporters, and high Covid-19 transmission rates in rural areas,

especially during the second wave, contributed to increased risk for rural field reportage. Most

rural coverage of the pandemic was undertaken by local news organizations or independent

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[18] Dutt previously faced intimidation and threats against her family for her reporting (*Scroll.in,* June 18, 2018).
[19] For example, Dutt notes that she and her team had to resort to sleeping in their car at times on their 120-day, 30,000-kilometer journalistic sojourn during the lockdown (2022, 13).

reporters as national and international media field reporting in rural areas was relatively sparse (RSF 2021).

Mainstream media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic in India exhibits discursive bias in the ways that the activities of certain populations were reported over others. While the Tablighi Jamaat gathering was met with the reprobation outlined above, a year later when Kumbh Mela - a major Hindu festival which attracted more than six million pilgrims - was held in Haridwar, media criticism "was muted, even perfunctory" (Dutt 2022, 117). Curiously, the representation of lower castes in the media during the pandemic is also conspicuously muted. Malavika Binny notes an "*invisibilization* of the caste status of the migrant," in which the caste status of migrant workers is rarely if ever mentioned in news reports, which favour the terms 'migrant workers' and 'slum dwellers' (2022, 8). She argues that this lack of discussion of the caste composition of migrants is "a reflection of the upper caste composition of the media houses" in India (Binny 2022, 8). Media coverage of ritual practice associated with emergent coronavirus-based goddesses reflects dimensions of these complexities. As we shall see, some mainstream news media engaged in rhetorical strategies like those leveled against the Tablighis in their coverage of coronavirus-based ritual practice while others present decidedly more neutral reportage. Additionally, very few references to caste-status are made, a point which will also be discussed further.

2.5 Coronā Devī and the Arts of Online Media[20]

The news reports considered for this analysis are further conditioned by and situated within the context of rapid and accessible online digital media. New forms of media have long

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[20] This title is in reference to Ralph Nicholas' (2003) chapter titled, "Śītalā and the Art of Printing: The Transmission and Propagation of the Myth of the Goddess of Smallpox in Rural West Bengal."

been involved in the dissemination and circulation of new ideas. This includes those pertaining to religion and ritual. Juli Gittinger likens Martin Luther's (perhaps fictional) posting of the *95 Theses* on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg to the online sharing of religious information on the internet: the rapid dissemination of his message across Germany and Europe was aided by the printing press, a relatively new technology at the time (2019, 29n.12). In many ways, online communication has amplified the effects that the printed word has had, and continues to have, on the dissemination of religious ideas. Digital media allows for even wider, faster, and cheaper circulation than printed text (Gittinger 2019). Indeed, several news sources refer to the ways that stories about ritual practice dedicated to goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus have "gone viral" or that some participants were inspired to begin the rituals by something they saw online (Abraham 2020; Das 2020; Jaswal 2021; *The Bridge Chronical,* June 7, 2020). Despite significant differences, the effects of mass-produced printing on local traditions can be instructive for understanding dynamics pertaining to online discourse surrounding goddesses associated with Covid-19.

In a chapter titled, "Śītalā and the Art of Printing: The Transmission and Propagation of the Myth of the Goddess of Smallpox in Rural West Bengal," Ralph Nicholas (2003) explores the ways in which the availability of mass-produced, cheaply printed texts influenced popular conceptions of the goddess and became an important mode of myth propagation, alongside traditional oral and manuscript traditions. His argument centres on a genre of Bengali literature known as *maṅgal-kāvya*, a vernacular literature of verse and narrative. His discussion is based upon both ethnographic fieldwork in rural Bengal and literary analysis of versions of *maṅgal-kāvyas* devoted to Śītalā (*Śītalāmaṅgakkāvya* [ŚMK]), available in bookstalls in West Bengal in the later part of the mid twentieth century. He notes a great degree of heterogeneity

between the artistic renditions by performance groups (*śayāl gān dal*) compared to the

relatively standardized versions he encountered that "appear to bear the same relationship to

the originals as do Reader's Digest condensed books" (Nicholas 2003, 211). In other words,

based on his observations, Nicholas argues that the relative speed and ease with which

standardized versions of ŚMKs were disseminated due to mass printing contributed to

homogenization of the mythology.

I draw on Nicholas here for two reasons. First, the result of this homogenization and

popularization due to widely available printed versions of the ŚMKs has affected the discourse

on goddesses associated with disease, both in academic scholarship and in popular discourse of

"disease goddesses." Ferrari (2015a) persuasively argues this in a chapter called, "The smallpox

myth and the creation of the goddess of smallpox". Here, he contends that a vengeful,

capricious, and flattened caricature of Śītalā has supplanted a richly nuanced set of living

devotional traditions in the popular imagination. In part, this caricature can be observed in the

popular discourse – and to a limited extent in scholarly material – around goddesses associated

with the novel coronavirus. Second, and perhaps more significantly, a certain form of

homogenization can be observed through the construction of the 'Corona goddess.'

2.6 Summary of News Reports by Region[21]

It is within these social, political, and media contexts that the news reports of goddesses

associated with the novel coronavirus emerged. Here, I present brief summaries of the news

reports used for analysis in this thesis. The report summaries are arranged both geographically

by state and mostly chronologically. In the cases of multiple reports providing essentially the

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[21] This is a summary of the news reports pertaining to goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus considered for this analysis.

same information, the first report published took priority, though all duplicates are listed in the bibliography. A complete list of the news reports analyzed for this study is presented in Appendix 1. The primary purpose of these summaries is to provide a sense of the diverse and heterogeneous places, people, and ritual elements within the reports. Furthermore, these summaries also serve to highlight some of the recurrent themes and other similarities that appear in these various places and times. Both dimensions are, in a sense, made more easily visible when journalist, participant, and online commentaries are omitted. In depth discourse analysis, which includes these commentaries regarding traditions, contested narratives of authority and authenticity, and ritual significance will be addressed in the following chapters.

West Bengal

The first English-language news report of ritual practice associated with a 'new' female Hindu deity was from West Bengal on June 3, 2020 (Das 2020). Women gathered near a crematorium in Raiganj, North Dinajpur district, to perform Coronā Devī *pūjā.* Having hired a priest, they made offerings of sweets, flowers, and other materials which were buried after the ritual. The women performed the ritual after fasting for a day. The report asserts that the participants had learned of the rituals from the internet, believing that this would be an effective method of ridding the world of the virus. *The Hindu* reported that women from Asansol's Nichupura Basti performed Coronā Devī *pūjā* beside Chinnamasta pond, singing songs and mantras, and offering incense, fruit, vegetables, ghee, flowers, and jaggery (Samanta 2020). They, too, buried the offerings in the ground at the ritual's completion. Some women stated that the novel coronavirus was created by Śītalā Devī and that they would worship Coronā Devī every Monday and Friday until she was satisfied.

<u>Jharkhand</u>

The New Indian Express, June 5, describes ritual practice associated with "Corona Mai" from Namkom and Tatisilwai in Ranchi district, Bagbeda in Jamshedpur district, Dompara and Jharia in Dhanbad district, and some places in Giridih district. More than a dozen "transgenders"[22] gathered in Dhanbad, chanting religious songs, and appealing to others to worship Corona Mai to please her and make her leave. One participant describes how Coronā Māī appeared to her in a dream. In Gharwa, 250 women gathered in Bodra village, on the banks of the Baanki river, to perform "symbolic 'Chhath' puja". Women brought bank passbooks and *Aadhaar* cards, hoping that the rituals would result in money transferred to their accounts (Ranjan 2020). *News 18* reported on June 8 that women in Ranchi, Jamshedpur, and Dhanbad used *sindoor,* flowers, *laddoos,* and pots filled with water for Coronā Māī *pūjā,* which they performed under a tree. One participant associated two cyclones, one in West Bengal and one in Maharashtra, with the wrath of Goddess Coronavirus' anger (*News 18,* June 8, 2020).[23]

The Telegraph reported on June 6 that Corona Mai worship was undertaken to appease the goddess' anger in Bokaro and Giridih. The *pūjā*s described involve offering sweets, incense sticks, flowers, and cloves. The items are buried in a small hole, "as they believe the virus is thus buried underground and will not return to infect their families" (*The Telegraph*, June 6, 2020). The author notes chants of "jai Corona mai" (victory to Coronā Māī) and "Corona Mata ki jai" (Coronā Mātā's victory) (*The Telegraph,* June 6, 2020). In Rana Pratap Nagar, Chas township, a group of women explained that Friday was the proper day for the *pūjā.*

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[22] Recognizing the legitimate differences between varieties of English, this is the language used in the text and I preserve it here.

[23] This participant may be referring here to Cyclone Amphan, which made landfall in West Bengal on May 20, 2020, and Cyclone Nisarga, which made landfall in Maharashtra on June 3, 2020.

Bihar

Ritual practice devoted to "Corona Devi" was reported in the neighbouring states of Bihar by *The Bridge Chronical* on June 7 in Nalanda, Gopalganj, Saran, Vaishali, Muzaffarpur, and Buxor district. Ritual elements include a proximity to water or immersion in water, the use of incense, digging seven pits filled with jaggery or jaggery syrup, cloves, cardamom, flowers, *laddoo*s (a form of sweet), sesame seeds, and *poha* (flattened rice). One woman said she learned of the *pūjā* from watching a video online, while another said she had a dream which inspired the practices (*The Bridge* Chronical, June 7, 2020). *News 18,* June 8, reported that for three days, women at the Sarveshwarnath Temple in Brahmapura, Muzzaffarpur were performing Corona Devi *pūjā* (*News 18,* June 8, 2020).

Assam

Also on June 7, *India Today* reported that "a large section of people in Assam" were worshiping the Covid-19 virus as a goddess (Nath 2020). In Biswanath Chariali, women performed Coronā Devī *pūjā* beside a river. Ritual worship was also reported in Dalgaon in Darrang district and Guwahati. *India Times* reported that in addition to riverbanks, temples and the feet of large trees have been selected as places for Corona Devi worship. Anecdotally, videos of the rituals have "gone viral" on social media (Abraham 2020).

Uttar Pradesh (I)

News 18, June 8, reported that village women in Tumkuhiraj, Kasia, Hata, Captanganj, and Khadda township in Kushinagar district were worshiping Coronā Māī. They dug a small hole in a field and filled it with water. Each woman offered nine cloves and nine *laddoos* (*News 18,* June 8, 2020).

The Hindu, June 12, reported that a man from Kaddakal, Kerala had installed a Corona Devi shrine in his home. The goddess was fashioned to look like the SARS-CoV-2 virus. He is reported to be conducting *pūjā*s for the safety, protection, and wellbeing of frontline healthcare workers. He also suggested a political dimension to his practices: a protest against politicized re-openings of temples amidst high case numbers. He thereby wished to set an example for others that meaningful worship could be undertaken in one's own home (*The Hindu,* June 12, 2020).

Maharashtra

On September 3, *Times Now News* reported that members of the Pardhi community (a hunting community listed as a Scheduled Tribe), in Barshi town, Solapur district of Maharashtra had constructed a temple dedicated to Coronā Mātā or Coronā Devī. It was reported that they offered a hen and a goat in sacrifice to help end the pandemic. The temple is described as a small, raised platform upon which were placed framed pictures. It was also reported that at least one woman had also begun worshiping Coronā Devī in her home for her family's protection from the goddess' anger (*Times Now News,* September 3, 2020). *The Free Press Journal,* September 3, reported that Coronā Devī appeared to a woman in her dreams "and told her that she wishes to stay in the community" (*Free Press Journal,* September 3, 2020). The report also states that town residents believe no one was infected due to the goddess' protection.

Chhattisgarh

After news of Covid-19-related goddess worship disappeared from the news cycle for more than eight months, *The Free Press Journal* reported on May 14, 2021, that approximately

150 women in Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh were fasting and praying to Coronā Mātā. The prayers took place in a Kālī temple despite an ongoing lockdown in the region (*The Free Press Journal,* May 14, 2021).

Tamil Nadu

The Indian Express, May 18, reported that priests at the Kamatchipuri Adheenam temple in Coimbatore had consecrated a 1.5-meter-tall Corona Devi idol made of black stone. The temple was planning to organize a *Maha Yagam* (a type of Vedic ritual), involving special *pūjā* dedicated to the deity for 48 days. The manager of the temple, Anand Bharathi, explained that the practice of consecrating deities for protection from disease has a long tradition, citing a nearby Plague Māriyamman̠ temple as an example (Koushik 2021). *Al Jazeera,* May 27, reported that two idols had been set up at the Katmatchipuri Adheenam temple, with the second made of sandalwood. The priests leave food and other offerings, say prayers, and bathe the idols *(abhiṣeka)* with turmeric water and milk. The manager of the temple explained that the intention behind the daily prayers was to lessen the impacts of the disease (*Al Jazeera,* May 27, 2021).

Karnataka

Asia Net News reported on May 22, 2021, that villagers in Chamaranjanagar district had begun worshipping Coronā Devī. Practices included sprinkling cow dung water, drawing *rangoli* at the entrance of houses, offering plain rice, prayers, and *neem* leaf smoke (*Asia Net News,* May 22, 2021). *Indian Express,* May 25, reports that a former *gram panchayat* (village council) president (*sarpanch*) had consecrated a "Corona Maramma" in Madhuvanahalli village (*Indian Express,* May 25, 2021).

Times of India, June 11, 2021, reported that an open-air temple (*than*) dedicated to Coronā Mātā was constructed beneath a *neem* tree in Shuklapur village, in the Pratapgarh district of Uttar Pradesh. Hundreds of villagers had begun offering prayers to the mask-wearing deity, asking for protection from Covid-19. The priest explained that "Chechak Mata" (a goddess associated with smallpox and chickenpox) helped to cure smallpox (*Times of India,* June 11, 2021). *Ārtī* was performed two times a day and devotees were instructed to maintain social distancing and mask-wearing protocols, while also only offering yellow flowers and other offerings (Dixit, 2021). *Deccan Herald,* June 12, reported that the temple had been demolished and police had arrested one person in connection to its construction (Pandey 2021). *India Today,* June 13, reported that the temple was demolished on June 11, five days after it was constructed (*India Today*, June 13, 2021). Villagers allege that police destroyed the temple, while police stated that it was constructed on disputed land and one of the landowners had destroyed it (*India Today,* June 13, 2021). *The Hindu,* October 9, reported that the Supreme Court of India had dismissed a case brought forth by people associated with the temple, stating that the land was disputed and a complaint pertaining to its demolition was an "abuse of process," and the petitioner was fined ₹5,000 (*The Hindu,* October 9, 2021).

2.7 Conclusion

The social, political, and media contexts presented here provide a complex, multifaceted, yet necessarily simplified overview of some of the background conditions surrounding the emergence of deities associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Section 2.6 provides a summary of the news reports detailing the ritual performances considered in the following chapters. These reports reveal a large degree of heterogeneity in names, methods of worship, origin

stories, demeanor, iconography, and other details. Significant to the discussion that follows, this heterogeneity presents a challenge to the homogenizing tendencies present in certain social and political conditions of contemporary Indian society. Additionally, there is a dimension of homogenization or consolidation in the literature which is not unproblematically supported by the data. That is, literature that discusses a "Corona goddess" in reference to these diverse examples ought to be questioned for its erasure of significant differences between them. The pandemic, which drew attention to the vulnerabilities of the contemporary human condition in a global perspective, also created social and political conditions that revealed vulnerabilities of populations neglected by the central government's policies. Thus, despite the differences between ritual expressions, there is also a dimension of shared experience – the cataclysmic forces of the Covid-19 pandemic – which link them. In chapter 3, my discussion focusses on some of the ways in which difference between various social groups and actors is discursively constructed within media reports and comment sections. These constructions both confirm and add nuance to the complex social relations inscribed therein. In chapter 4, I focus specifically on the ways in which this difference is mobilized to delegitimize the ritual practice and participants of coronavirus-related goddess worship. This occurs in part through discourses related to 'superstition', employed by both Hindutva-influenced actors and secular rationalists for different ends. Chapter 5 turns towards analysis of the narratives of ritual participants and the details of ritual practices as they appear in news reports, relating these practices with pre-existing traditions of goddesses associated with disease.

Figure 1 – Timeline of Significant Covid-19 Events in India

2019

Patients with atypical illness reported in............ **Dec 12**
Hubei Province, China

2020

First recorded death (China).................................**Jan 11**

WHO names Coronavirus Disease 2019.................**Feb 11**
(COVID-19), caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus

Tablighi Jamaat gathering New Delhi............. **Mar 10-13**

PM announces 21-day national................ **Mar 24 (8 PM)**
lockdown to begin in 4 hours

Peak of First Wave of Covid-19 in India..............**Apr-Jun**

Busses organized by states to help stranded...**Apr-May**
migrant labourers

20 sleeping *Ādivāsī* migrant workers killed by......**May 8**
freight train in Aurangabad

Government announces that lockdown will.......**May 30**
be lifted gradually

Reports of Coronavirus rituals in West..............**Jun 3-14**
Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Assam, Uttar
Pradesh, and Kerala published

Mumbai High Court decides 35 Tablighis likely........**Aug**
scapegoated by government

Lok Sabha (Parliament, lower house) passes......**Sept 22**
labour reforms, criticized for eroding workers
rights.

Jan 7 ....Novel coronavirus identified as cause

Jan 30 ....First recorded case in India

Mar 10 ....First official Covid-19 death in India

Mar 22 ...PM Modi institutes 14-hour 'People's Curfew'

Mar 25 (12 AM) ....Lockdown begins

Apr 5 ....PM Modi asks citizens to light *diyas* or bang
thalis for medical workers

May 1...First *Shramik* special trains begin transporting
migrant labourers

May 25 ......CM of UP states that returning workers are
infected with Covid-19, belong to Dalit or
"backwards caste" communities

Jun 8 ...."Unlock 1.0" begins

Jul 1-30 ....Period of "Unlock 2.0"

Sept 3 ....Maharashtra news reports of goddesses
associated with Covid-19 published

Nov-Dec.....Beginning of Second Wave (Delta Variant)

2021

PM Modi announces to World Economic............. **Jan 28**
Forum that India has beaten Covid-19

Maha Shivratri and beginning of Kumbh Mela.....**Mar 11**

Chattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka.......**May 14-25**
news reports published

News reports from UP about construction   **Jun 11-17**
of Corona Devi temple; temple destroyed

Jan 16....India begins Covid-19 vaccination campaign

Mar-Jun........Peak of Second Wave of Covid-19 (Delta
Variant) in India

Apr 14 ...943,452 pilgrims bathe in Ganga for *Baisakhi
shahi snan* at Kumbh Mela

Apr 17 ......Union Health Minister notes sharp increase
in cases and deaths; PM Modi campaigns to
large crowd in Asansol, West Bengal

Late 2021 ....Third Wave (Omicron) begins; Indian
Medical Association reports that 1,700
doctors have died of Covid-19

Chapter 3. "Ye hai digital India"[24]: Constructions of 'Sameness' and 'Difference'

3.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I discussed social, political, and media contexts leading up to

and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in India. With these contexts in mind, I will analyze

media discourses surrounding the emergence of coronavirus-related goddesses in Indian news.

J. Z. Smith explains:

> The world is not given; it is not simply "there". We constitute it by acts of interpretation.
> We constitute it by activities of speech and memory and judgement. It is by an act of
> human will, through projects of language and history, through words and memory, that
> we fabricate the world and ourselves. But there is a double sense to the word fabrication.
> It means both to build and to lie. (Smith 2013, 125)

Interpretations of events, objects, and subjects in the world do not merely describe the world

but also play a role in constituting it. The double meaning of "fabrication", as both "building"

and "lying," hints at how discourse is both creative and subject to contestation by groups with

competing interests (Smith 2013, 125).

Discourses serve several functions as part of a constitutive process. They create

conditions which enable possibilities for knowledge claims about objects, subjects, groups, and

patterns, by identifying and drawing attention to these referents amidst many available

choices. Discourses also make possible empirical claims about the world by creating conditions

for these claims to be 'true' or 'false'. In doing so, they also define rules inherent to the

discourse that govern how such claims can be made. Discourses enable conditions for affective

experiences of and responses to objects, subjects, groups, and patterns by promoting positive

or negative feelings through the distribution and modulation of sympathies and antipathies.

Finally, discourses can be instrumental in achieving various ends and may not reflect the

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[24] "This is digital India" (Commenter, *ABP News*, June 5, 2020).

actual beliefs of the person or group issuing a claim (Martin 2022). One method of critical

discourse analysis outlined by Craig Martin (2022) aims to determine the ways in which a

discourse "arguably encourages, justifies, or legitimates social domination" (170). It involves,

1) selecting relevant discourses; 2) noting distributions of sameness and difference within the

discourse; 3) identifying how any systematic or patterned evaluations of positive and negative

associations between objects and subjects within the discourse; (4) identifying the how these

associations attempt to assign sympathies and antipathies that these associations encourage;

(5) identifying what empirical claims are made possible by this discourse; (6) any rights, duties,

or political dimensions ascribed by the discourse; and (7) noting the extent to which the

discourse arguably encourages, justifies, or legitimates social domination (Martin 2022, 170). I

use this method to analyze the central discourses of 'authority' and 'authenticity' as they

relate to online representations of ritual practice devoted to coronavirus-related goddesses.

Constructions of difference are related to processes of 'othering'. Social groups, whether

cultures, religions, or nation-states, acquire strong senses of identity partly through the way

they are contrasted with other groups. With respect to India, Diana Dimitrova explains that

"we could assert that India's sense of itself – its identity – was formed not only by the internal

processes that gradually molded the country into a distinct type of society, but also through

India's sense of difference from other worlds – how it came to represent itself in relation to

these 'others'" (Dimitrova 2014, 6). The ways in which both difference and constructions of the

'other' are enacted are related to power. Those who are in power or believe they are superior

to another group construct the 'other' as inferior, different, marginal, and subjugated; this

enacts or attempts to enact a relationship of domination over those constructed as 'other'

(Dimitrova 2014, 8). The related production of knowledge regarding the 'truth' about in-groups

and 'others' as they relate to questions of authority are related to power dynamics in the Foucauldian sense (Gittinger 2019, 29). Those who claim authority are positioned to both construct the identities and produce knowledge about themselves and others. Thus, through negative associations, affective persuasion, and political or social subjugation, constructions of difference can be used to justify, encourage, or legitimize social domination.

I will use an imaginary discourse regarding cats' superiority over dogs as an example to illustrate this process. In this scenario, distribution of difference could include noting that dogs and cats have different grooming habits, different social habits, different cognitive abilities, and differences in fine motor skills. A construction of sameness could centre on the way that cats are like adult humans, like 'us', because they are both social and enjoy solitude. If, in this imaginary discourse, cats are consistently regarded as cleaner, more independent, smarter, and more agile while dogs are presented as dirty, needy, less intelligent, and relatively clumsy, a pattern of negative associations ascribed to dogs and positive ones to cats could be identified. Finally, if the discourse attempts to persuade us affectively, that is, make us *feel* goodwill towards cats and ill will towards dogs, an affective distribution and modulation of sympathies and antipathies can be noted. An empirical claim might suggest that, because dogs are more aggressive but not as intelligent as cats, they bite people more frequently than cats do. We may be persuaded to believe, then, that cats deserve our trust, that we have a duty to treat cats better than dogs and may even be encouraged to give preferential treatment to cats over dogs for these reasons. Though this example is imperfect, contrived, and likely polarizing, it helps to illustrate some of the ways in which discourses can be constructed. Analysis, therefore, involves identifying these dynamics where they exist.

I follow this process over the next two chapters in my analysis of discourses pertaining to coronavirus-related goddesses. The data for this analysis is collected from news media reports and comment sections reporting on coronavirus-related goddess worship in India. I pose two questions of the news media and associated comments: 1) According to this data, what constitutes 'authentic' Hinduism? 2) According to whose authority are the authenticity of these practices adjudicated? Juli Gittinger identifies issues of authority and authenticity as central to online discourse pertaining to Hinduism. She argues that "issues of authority and authenticity – that is, who can speak on behalf of Hinduism, the valuation of insider/outsider perspectives, and the presumption that an 'orthodox' or historically consonant tradition can be identified as authentic – have been established as the heart of how Hinduism is represented online" (2019, 32). The relationship between authenticity and authority is characterized in part by processes of mutual legitimation: practices are seen as "authentic" if they are legitimized by a recognized or perceived source of authority and voices are received as "authoritative" if they are an "authentic" member of the culture for which they speak (73).

Hindu nationalist discourses present forms of Hinduism that serve their political ends. If these mutually reinforcing discourses of authority and authenticity – legitimating discourses – are at the heart of online presentations of Hinduism, one might expect to find forms of them in online media reports and associated comment sections regarding coronavirus-related goddesses and associated ritual practice. Online discourses of emergent ritual practices are ideal for conducting discourse analysis about contested ascriptions of authoritative and authentic forms of Hinduism. News stories and comments about novel coronavirus-related ritual practice make good objects of analysis because it is conceivable that these emergent

practices could be included as 'authentic' in capacious definitions of 'Hinduism' while being contested by more restrictive definitions.

The distinction between insider and outsider is rendered complex by multiple voices claiming insider positionality. In recent years, social media has enabled many more perspectives to participate in debates about Hinduism online. Gittinger argues that the "project of branding a 'global' Hinduism becomes more difficult (and perhaps more urgent) for Hindu nationalist organizations when social media allows multiple perspectives and gives voice to those who might openly challenge them" (2019, 90). I will show that this project is made explicit at times in the comment sections of news reports. Over the next two chapters I will argue that Hindutva and Hindutva-adjacent ideologies are also present in many of the news reports themselves, although in more subtle or veiled forms.

Some forms of Hindu nationalist discourse described in the previous chapter involve heated ideological debate over who has the authority to speak for Hinduism and what constitutes 'authentic' Hinduism. They also involve online and offline harassment of journalists. Neither of these forms are prevalent in the English-language news sources considered for the present study. However, comment sections, especially those of video news segments hosted on YouTube, do include explicit ideological debates regarding what constitutes 'true' Hinduism. I did not find any evidence of threats or harassment against journalists in the comment sections or on social media. Reasons for this could include the following factors: 1) that many of the written articles are either not attributed to a specific author or are written by male authors;[25] 2) that only 14 out of 56 sources have active comment

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[25] Gittinger found that female journalists bare the brunt of threats of violence (2019, 150).

sections or feature Twitter replies, which provide forums for such discourse to develop;[26] 3)

that such discourse did occur but on social media accounts unaffiliated with the media house

platforms; or 4) that journalists did receive messages of this nature but this was not made

public.[27]

Initial analysis of the data reveals significant discursive dimensions which align with,

expand, and complicate some of Gittinger's observations. Statements that explicitly identify

coronavirus-related goddesses, their ritual practices, and their devotees as "Hindu" are scant

in media reports. There are at least three possible reasons for this dearth relevant to the

present study: 1) aspects of the ritual practices devoted to coronavirus-related goddesses are

widely recognizable as Hindu in form (e.g., in contrast to recognizably 'Muslim' or 'Christian'

forms; 2) that such discourse is ambiguous and/or sensitive due to communal or caste

dynamics and therefore potentially subject to censorship, editorial revision, or constitutional

protections;[28] and 3) that this potential ambiguity and sensitivity is linguistically coded

through other terms. These possibilities are not mutually exclusive. In this chapter I argue that

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[26] Additionally, many news websites have community guidelines which are more restrictive than those of Twitter or YouTube. For example, *The Hindu* includes this statement at the bottom of their stories: "Comments have to be in English, and in full sentences. They cannot be abusive or personal. Please abide by our community guidelines for posting your comments" (October 9, 2021). Following the link to the community guidelines, among other conditions we are told that, "Any unlawful, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, vulgar, obscene, profane, hateful, racially, ethnically, or otherwise objectionable material of any kind, including, but not limited to, any material which encourages conduct that would constitute a criminal offense, give rise to civil liability, or otherwise violate any applicable local, state, national or international law" may be grounds for removal (*The Hindu,* "Terms of Use", 2023).

[27] I conducted non-exhaustive searches on Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook, surveyed journalists' articles on the same platforms, and checked available Twitter accounts associated with journalists and media houses in English or Hindi. However, the volume of data became too extensive for this thesis.

[28] Hate speech, broadly defined, is regulated in India through several different legal instruments. These include several sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) including Sedition (IPC Sect 124A), Criminal Defamation (IPC, Sect 499, 500), Hurting Religious Sentiments (IPC, Sect 295A, 298), Hate Speech (IPC Sect 153A, 505(1c), 505(2)), Criminal Intimidation (IPC Sect 503), Public Tranquility (IPC, Sect 505 (1b)). Additionally, there are special protections for Dalits, Tribal groups, and other scheduled castes in *The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act* (Sect 3.1). For an excellent discussion on the breadth and limitations of these instruments, as well as their potential for abuse, see Gittinger (2019, 113-21).

this dimension of linguistic coding is enacted to a degree through the set of related terms: 'superstition' and 'blind belief' (*andhviśvās*), 'blind faith' and 'blind devotion' (*andhbhakti*), and 'blind devotee' (*andhbhakt*).[29]

This set of terms (and their related adjectives and grammatical inflections) appears thirty-nine times in the written news media. The terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' appear only twenty-five times. Of these, twenty occur with reference to existing 'Hindu' traditions, including discussions of goddesses associated with disease like Śītalā and Māriyamma̱n. In only four of the remaining instances are these terms used in reference to the rituals devoted to goddesses associated with coronavirus or the ritual participants. This distribution differs from those found on social media and in comment sections. Here, elements from the set of terms related to 'superstition' appear eighty-eight times while 'Hindu' or 'Hinduism' appear 130 times. Relatedly, the terms 'Muslim,' appears only once in the news media ('Islam' and 'Islamic' do not appear at all) while these terms appear eighty-four times in comment sections.

The differences between journalism and online comments are conditioned by at least two factors. First, the anonymity afforded to online commenters could increase the incivility of their discourse.[30] Given the restrictive media environment explored in the last chapter, journalists have both their careers and, at times, safety at stake. Anonymous online commenters do not share these same risks. Second, most comments are found in the sections

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[29] The Hindi term, *andh bhakt*, literally translates to "blind believer" or "blind devotee," while *andhbhakti* means blind devotion. The Hindi term, *andhviśvās*, which appears in some of the comments on the English-language news stories, is borrowed from Sanskrit, and is composed of *andha* (blind) + *viśvāsa* (trust/belief) (Monier-Williams 1851). In recent popular usage on the internet, the terms *bhakt, andh bhakt*, or *Modi Bhakt* have become shorthand for political devotees of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

[30] Juli Gittinger, following Arthur Sanatana, notes that anonymous online commenters are "significantly more likely to register their opinion with an uncivil comment than non-anonymous commenters" (Sanatana in Gittinger 2019, 96). Additionally, however, she notes that she was not surprised to find that many comments in favour of Hindu nationalist ideas were nevertheless civil and attempted to present reasoned arguments.

of news videos hosted on YouTube. The online print news articles surveyed contained forty-one associated comments while the news videos hosted on YouTube had a total of 1,241 comments. YouTube's Community Guidelines include a policy for hate speech and harassment. Comments or content which promote violence or hatred based on caste, ethnicity, nationality, gender identity and expression, religion, and other attributes are prohibited. For comments, this system is largely self-moderated, relying on users to report those that they deem fit this definition (*Community Guidelines*, YouTube). It is conceivable that in addition to the difference in sheer volume of comments, and the resulting represented perspectives, the comment sections hosted by the media houses themselves are more rigorously moderated than those of YouTube.

While discourses of authenticity and authority with respect to Hinduism do occur in both media reports and comments – some of which explicitly convey Hindutva ideas – they do not occur in a vacuum either. Rhetoric which aligns with Hindu nationalist ideologies appears alongside – and often in response to – rhetoric which takes critical aim at Hinduism writ large. The general rhetorical strategy of these attacks involves identifying elements of the ritual practices of coronavirus-related goddesses, characterizing them in a negative light, and extending this generalization to all of Hinduism. Thus, in many instances, as I will show, the discourses of authenticity and authority are in conversation with, in reaction to, and in anticipation of these criticisms. Therefore, to contextualize the analysis of discourse pertaining to goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus, I must also examine discourses which use negative characterizations of coronavirus-related goddess worship to criticize and, at times, attack Hinduism.

Much of the data analyzed in this chapter is drawn from comment sections of news articles and videos. Gittinger characterizes social media and comment sections as a "public, two-way sphere of communication" that forms the "real battleground" upon which "Hindu nationalism and its followers actively and aggressively promote and defend [the] Hindutva ideal" (2019, 95). Following Gittinger's approach, I present comments as they originally appear, unedited for grammar, spelling, typos, capitalization, and punctuation (2019, 110 n.6). The exception to this is when I have translated a comment from Hindi, in which case the translation appears in the body of the text and the original is included as a footnote, or for longer excerpts, in an indicated appendix. The names or internet handles of comment authors have been removed.

In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which constructions of 'sameness' and 'difference' are constructed in discourses surrounding coronavirus-related goddesses, their ritual worship, and those who worship them. I demonstrate how constructions of difference attributed to these agents are mobilized in discourses of difference along geographic, national, and religious lines. With respect to religion, I am interested in how difference is constructed between Hinduism and other religions. Though examples of this exist from authors claiming membership within Christianity and Sikhism, most constructions of inter-religious difference occur between Hinduism and Islam. Constructions of difference centering on atheism occur less frequently than discussions about Hinduism and Islam but more frequently than those centered on other religions. Finally, I demonstrate how this difference precipitates movement in which differential constructions of 'true' Hinduism – culminating in explicit Hindu nationalist references – are contrasted with the 'superstitious' ritual practices devoted to coronavirus-related goddesses. In chapter 4, I focus specifically on the ways in which a

discourse of 'superstition' is mobilized to undermine the authority and authenticity of these practices, and how this process of delegitimization is reflected according to gender, class, caste, and other social markers of identity.

3.2 Constructions of Sameness

As mentioned, discourses about coronavirus-related goddesses and associated ritual practices, which situate them unambiguously within Hindu traditions, are infrequent in media reports. Significantly, only one media report published in India refers to specific people as 'Hindu'. The term is almost exclusively used in reference to the male priests in the South Indian Corona Devi temples in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu and Kadakkal, Kerela. The priests at the Coimbatore temple are referred to as "Hindu priests" in the description video produced by *New Indian Express* (May 28, 2021). The Keralan priest implicitly describes Coronā Devī as a Hindu goddess and counts himself among "us" Hindus, stating that "according to Hindu mythology, God is omnipresent, and even exists in the virus. Worshipping a virus as devi is not an alien custom for us" (*The Hindu,* June 13, 2020). Another article, published in the U.S., titled "Indian Hindus turn to honoring 'corona goddess' to quell pandemic" (Dore, *Religion News Service,* June 22, 2021), features the Keralan priest and this general gloss of other groups engaged in ritual practice: "Across India, people are worshipping female divine forms of the coronavirus [...]". The title ascribes Hindu identity to the ritual practitioners, but the term is absent in the body of the text, where "people" are engaged in worship activities. Elsewhere, a distinction is made between a group of women from West Bengal and the Keralan priest: "unlike the women who have a small outdoor shrine, the Kerala man is following Hindu traditions, which promote seeing god in every molecule around us" (Akinyoade, *The Guardian* (Lagos), July 23, 2020). The male priest, who conducts pujas in a makeshift temple in his home, is characterized as

following Hindu traditions. In contrast, the women, who conduct theirs outdoors, are not. This suggests an additional foundation – gender – upon which discourses of 'authority' and 'authenticity' are constructed and through which difference is distributed. I will return to this point in the following chapter. This brief survey exhausts the explicit attributions of membership as 'Hindu' for ritual participants in the media reports. Other ways through which authority and authenticity of coronavirus-related goddess worship are constructed in media reports will be discussed in chapter 4.

3.3 Constructions of Difference

Two broad ways that difference is constructed in discourses within online media about goddess-related ritual practice correspond with regional and religious identities. These forms of difference appear primarily within the comment sections of news stories and videos.

3.3.1 Constructions of Difference According to Geography, State, and Country

Geographical differences are delineated at regional, state, national, and international levels. One way this occurs at the regional level involves perceived differences between North and South India. The following examples, taken from comment sections, illustrate this:

- North India always lol. (Commenter, *India Today,* June 8, 2021)

- I am highly disappointed because this news is coming from south india. We all know south indian peoples are highly educated. (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)

- [1] If Trump can become a GOD, why not Corona?[31] I feel proud of our society ! (OK for cowbelt, Never expected this in T.N)

  [2] Trust me this is a real shocker for us

  [3] Tamil culture is well know for hero-worship and fallen people. They build temples for actress like Kushboo and Nidhi Agarwal too

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[31] A temple devoted to Donald Trump is discussed in chapter 4.

[4] And Amitabh bachchan and nathuram godse temples.[32] (Commenters, *The Print*, May 21, 2021)

- After North South also affected by tragic side of our religion [wink emoji]. (Commenters, *The Print*, May 21, 2021)

These differences carry negative valences towards the ritual practices for goddesses associated with the coronavirus. Here, people in South India are constructed as "highly educated", the presence of these practices in the South is described as a "real shocker"; and this "tragic" side of Hinduism is said to have "affected" South India.

Identity difference is also constructed through debates about the state of origin of the ritual participants. In the following excerpts, the authors attempt to distance themselves from the practitioners by suggesting that they originate from a different state:

- [1] although its happening in assam or not i cannot verify that but if it is so then also let me tell you these are not assamese indeginous peoples we are not so dumbs or illiterates assam is full of educated peoples   but these are all biharis   or bihari migrants coming to assam

  [2] no assami migrants coming in bihar. (Commenters, *India Today,* June 8, 2020)

- these r all assami people dont in clude biharis. (Commenter, *India Today,* June 8, 2020)

- Don't blame whole Tamil Nadu. It's just andhbhakt are doing this. They are spoiling India's image. It first started in U.P., Bihar, Rajestan, Haryana. (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)

Identity through state citizenship is also invoked through pre-existing negative stereotypes. In the following example, the author merely mentions the state initials as an explanation for the perhaps otherwise incomprehensible activities: "After all UP...that's all" (Commenter, *Times of India*, June 11, 2021)*.* Additional to these ascriptions of 'otherness', state focus is also present in some authors' self-consciousness about their states of origin:

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[32] Amitabh Bachchan is a public figure well known for his work as an actor. Nathuram Godse was a Hindu nationalist who murdered Mahatma Gandhi.

- I had to fought with my elders explaining them is insane stop doing this. And offcourse I am from Bihar. #coronamai #COVID19India #superstitious #bhakts. (Commenter, *Times Now News,* June 7, 2020)

- These type of illiterate people are responsible for the making of Fun of Bihari [angry emojis]. (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)

- Due to the poor thinking of such people, the whole of Bihar is infamous. (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)[33]

Finally, identity difference according to state citizenship is invoked to correct what the author

perceives as self-righteousness with respect to charges of "religious foolishness" in online

discourse:

> I just curiously want to ask questions to random Tamil Nadu people about this incident who keeps on spamming in comments that religious foolishness, religious mania is absent in Tamil Nadu and often mocks North, East and West Indian people telling them Cow belt, Urine, Gobar bhakts when they lose an argument. (Commenter, *The Print,* May 21, 2021)

Self-consciousness is also perceivable at the national level. Here, some commenters express

concerns about India's reputation.

- This channel is effecting the dignity of Indians. (Commenter, *India Today,* June 8, 2020)

- Thanks for tarnishing India's reputation. (Commenter, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)[34]

- To what pit is this country going? It hurts. (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)[35]

- [1] Foreigners smile when they see us... [sad emojis] God directs their intellect and wisdom...to those who do so...God have mercy upon them...May Jesus bless India [Indian flag emoji]

  [2] Yes bro. Hindus don't have any specific god. Whenever they get any harm, they make their own god. (Commenters, *The Print,* May 21, 2021)

- People are tarnishing the name of India in the entire world. (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)[36]

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[33] My translation. Original text: "ऐसे लोगो की घटिया सोच के कारण पूरा बिहार बदनाम होता है।"
[34] My translation. Original text: "Thanks india ka muh kala karne ke liye hai".
[35] My translation. Original text: "Desh kis gart me ja raha hai dukh hota hai".
[36] My translation. Original text: "India ka name pure world mai badnaam kar rahe hai je log".

Some of these examples do not specify whose perspective might view India's reputation as tarnished. This imagined 'other' could be neighbouring countries or the international community. Due to the conditions of colonialism and the "West's" position of dominance in postcoloniality, it is conceivable that the "West" could be the subject for whom concern about India's reputation is centered (Dimitrova 2014, 6). In the last example, it is in the eyes of the "entire world".

Relatedly, a discourse of progress informs some comments. In these, ritual practices dedicated to coronavirus-related goddesses are framed as holding India back:

- If the country remained here, the country could not move forward. (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)[37]

- We have seriously decided that ki hum kabhi nahi sudhrenge [we will never improve]. Hey Bhagwan!! [facepalm emoji] #CoronaDevi. (Commenter, *One India,* May 21, 2021)

A national dimension is also reflected in discourses of national security, in which the goddess' efficacy is briefly entertained only to be dismissed:

Create a few border goddesses as well, so that our soldiers do not become martyrs. Get rid of superstition, it won't save us from the coronavirus. It will only save vacation time for the children. (Commenter, *Kanak News*, June 12, 2021)

Kaur and Ramaswamy (2020) note a connection drawn between nationalism, militarization, and the novel coronavirus. They argue that framing of the challenge presented by the novel coronavirus in India using militaristic language and metaphors has constructed a social vision of the virus in which it emerges "as a *full* political actor that *immediated* [*sic*] a possible script for military action against the enemy." This, they argue, is a symptom of dynamics through which "global health concerns…fully merged with the imperatives of geopolitical dynamics and nationalist politics" (84, italics in original). Additional to the resonance this language has

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[37] My translation. Original text: "Desh main ye raha to desh aage nahi ja paye gaa".

with heavy-handed governance, language involving metaphors of 'battles' and 'fights' may also be read as expressions of a sense of vulnerability that people faced when threatened by a new virus and the associated social disruption, a point to which I will return.

On an international level, some comments associate the coronavirus-related goddesses with China, equating the goddess's origin with the novel coronavirus:

- China has given birth to this new god. Who are you making fun of? (Commenter, *Kanak New,* June 12, 2021)[38]

- But this goddess must be Chinese right [silly face emoji]. (Commenter, *Kanak News*, June 12, 2021)[39]

- corona devi imported from china. (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)

In these examples, the coronavirus-related goddesses are ascribed a Chinese origin, rhetorically distancing India from the origins of goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus. This characterization also echoes Sinophobic discourses and depictions of China and Chinese people as dangerous 'others', a discourse that emerged in India early in the Covid-19 pandemic (see Asif 2020). The general rhetorical strategy of constructing differences between various social groups by associating them with negatively characterized ritual practices or goddesses is employed in these examples relating to geographic difference. With the examples centering on both China and India's international reputation, these relations are, in some sense, 'external', in that they are about India's relationship with identities outside of itself. In contrast, in those examples centering on regional and state identities, the processes of constructing difference are 'internal' to India. A similar set of relations can be identified with respect to religious identity.

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[38] My translation. Original text: "Ye naya bhagwan ko china ne payeda kiya hai kisaka majak urate ho yr".
[39] My translation. Original text: "लेकिन ये माता तो चीनी होगी ना".

3.3.2 Constructions of Difference According to Religion

News articles and comment sections pertaining to coronavirus-related goddess rituals contain discourses explicitly relating to religious identity. Dimitrova reminds us that, in analyzing processes which construct some groups as "other", "we should not overlook...the proliferation of similar 'endogamous' discourses also within cultures, with regard to different religious, ethnic and sexual minorities within that culture, like Hindus and Muslims, *dalits* (formerly called 'untouchables') and upper-caste Hindus in India" (Dimitrova 2014, 7). I will now turn my analysis towards these discourses. I note here that, unless a commenter identifies themselves as belonging to a particular religion, I generally refrain from speculating about the subject positions of individual authors except where language is used which suggests either self-regarded insider or outsider membership.

Difference with respect to Hinduism is constructed in a variety of ways. Many comments about Hinduism identify ritual practices associated with the novel coronavirus as 'Hindu'. The general rhetorical strategy involves characterizing these practices negatively and extending these characterizations towards Hindus and Hinduism. In the following examples, the ritual practices are framed as 'foolish' and 'defamatory' towards Hindus and Hindu practices:

- This is the most hilarious results of man made hindu methodology. Even after bjp emperor, many foolish have been automatically provoked and feeling free to show their foolishness with great proud. (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)

- [Laughing emojis] For these reasons Hindus are being defamed. (Commenter, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)[40]

- Hahaha corona devi new God for cow people….. (Commenter, *India Today,* June 8, 2021)

- very very congratulations to all indian hindus for getting the birth of new God CORONA-MATA to you. And do early announcement to all the world that "we won't need

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[40] My translation. Original text: "a sabu karan pai Hindu badanam".

vaccination, we got mother of all vaccination i.e "CORONA-MATA GOD" to protect from COVID-19". (Commenter, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)

- Why should any other defame are Hindu but they itself are making fool of hindusim [laughing emoji]. (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)

These examples, authored from what appear to be outsider positions vis-à-vis Hinduism, denigrate and mock Hindus and Hinduism for ritual practices and goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus, invoking negative stereotypes and associations. Significantly, as an example of 'sameness' inflected negatively, similar comments are also authored from insider positions. In the following exchange, the first interlocutor conveys a sense that Hindus somehow deserve the insults and humiliation that this news coverage invites:

- [1] And then people say we are cursed with insults. Why do such things that invite insults?   [Laughing emojis] If only diseases could be cured by worshiping Corona, we wouldn't have had 4 million cases today. It's ridiculous, man, utter foolishness.

  [2] Brother, that's why education is necessary, otherwise people will start considering everything as God's miracle. (Commenters, *India Today,* June 8, 2021)[41]

- These hypocrites have defamed our Hindu religion. (Commenters, *Kanak news,* June 12, 2021)[42]

Another comment author, writing from an insider position, laments the ways in which participants in rituals associated with a coronavirus-related goddess have "ruined" Hinduism. The author provides their own subjective definition of Hinduism, which stands apart from "all this nonsense":

It's the people who have ruined Hinduism by doing all this. For me the definition of hindu is - enjoy and celebrate its beautiful festivals rather than doing all this nonsense. (Commenter, *India Today*, June 8, 2020)

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[41] My translation. Original: [1] "Aur fir kehte log hame gaali dete hai. Ese kaam hi kyo karna jis se log gaali de [Laughing emojis]. Agar corona ki puja se bimari thik hoti na aaj 40lakh case na hote. Hadd hai yaar bewakoofi ki"
[2] "Bhai isliye padai jaruri hai wrna aise hi log bhagwan god manne lagege sab chiz ko."
[42] My translation. Original text: "aise pakhandiyo ne hi hamare hindu dharma ko badnaam kiya h".

Opinions about 'true' Hinduism take on a political dimension when they conflict with the

secular democratic politics enshrined in India's constitution. The following exchange

highlights this perceived antagonism:

> [1] This is not Hinduism.
> [2] So? don't they have right to worship what they want?
> [1] According to democracy they have according to Hinduism they don't. (Commenters, *Indian Express*, June 13, 2021)

Here, "democracy" (perhaps also read as "secularism") conflicts with "Hinduism". I will return

to the dynamics in which Hinduism is variously differentiated from the practices of novel

coronavirus-related goddess worship shortly.

The rhetorical strategy of negatively evaluating these practices as 'evidence' for negative

generalizations of Hinduism also finds expression through attacks centered on polytheism:

- All Hindu gods and goddesses have similar origins of Imagination and Fear, glad people are realizing now atleast! (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)

- Another newly born god added to Hindu history without proof and facts [3 laughing emojis]. (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)

- no offense but, No wonder, how there are 130 crores, devi devtas in Hinduism because they make GOD to anyone. (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)

- [1] What is it, friend? You people make anything powerful you see and turn it into a god. 33 crore gods.

  [2] Yeah man, this is how Hindu people are. They turn anything they perceive as powerful into a god. (Commenters, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)[43]

- That's why Hinduism becomes a polytheistic religion from a monotheistic religion. (Commenter, *The Print*, May 21, 2021)

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[43] My translation. Original text: [1] "Kya hai yaar jis chiz ko b powerful Dekha tum logoun nein us ko God bna liyaaa. 33 Crore Bhagwaan." [2] "Are yaar Hindu log Aisi Hoti Hai Yaar Jisko powerful Dikhta Hai usko Bhagwan banaa leta hai".

Gittinger (2019) notes that descriptions of Hinduism as a polytheistic religion are frequent in online discourse and organizations like the Hindu American Foundation actively work against this broad characterization. She characterizes their complaint as fair, writing that "Hinduism is indeed frequently described as polytheistic, without any of the nuances or explanations of the diversity of the tradition – and many expressions which are monotheistic" (Gittinger 2019, 89). Similarly, discourses regarding "idol worship" are also present in many of the examples considered here. One commenter, critical of the language chosen by the author of a news story,[44] writes:

> You REALLY ought to change the caption on the photo... That is an "image" of the Corona Goddess...NOT an "idol".... "Idol" has a negative/pejorative meaning/connotation and if you are a "News" Service, you should NOT...NEVER-EVER...show that sort of Bias.... What were you THINKING???!!! (Commenter, *Religion News Service,* June 22, 2021)

Gittinger explains that "idol-worship is a frequent mischaracterization that comes from ignorance and failure to properly understand the ontology of a *puja* ritual" (Gittinger 2019, 89). These examples about polytheism and "idol worship" invoke colonial discourses about Hinduism, in which polytheistic expressions are deemed inferior to monotheistic religions like Christianity and Islam. Gauri Viswanathan notes a "split" between popular and philosophical forms of Hinduism in pre-Independence India. She writes that,

> In India, one consequence of the progressive, cosmopolitan Enlightenment project is to argue that only those elements of native culture that accord with natural reason are authentically Indian and hence that all other native South Asian cultural practices are monstrous and inappropriate for a modern civil society. A Vedāntic concept of Hinduism was already in the making, as an abstract, theistic philosophical system came to represent Hinduism, while all other popular practices were denounced as idolatrous. The splitting of Hinduism into popular and intellectual systems contributed to a parallel splitting of anti-colonial responses into those for whom popular beliefs and "superstitions" were an essential part of Hindu identity and those for whom Hinduism

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[44] Significantly, this is the only comment critical of the use of this word and appears in the comment section of a news article published outside of India. The terms "idol" and "idolatry" appear fifty-five times in the print news and comments and thirty-eight times in the video comments.

was purged of some of its casteist, polytheistic, and ritualistic features. (Viswanathan 2003, 35)

The role that the label of 'superstition' plays in discourses about novel coronavirus-related goddess worship will be discussed in chapter 4.

Difference is also constructed with respect to the identity of 'atheist'. Some commenters self-identify as atheist, distinguishing themselves from ritual participants. One writes, "This makes me so proud to be an Atheist [laughing emoji]" (Commenter, *The Print,* May 21, 2021). Another connects their pride with specific relation to Islam, writing "All gods have similar origin. Including Allah. I'm proud to be an Atheist" (Commenter, *Indian Express,* June 13, 2021). Another curiously interprets the worship of a coronavirus-related goddess as evidence *for* atheism; writing from an unspecified religious position, the author asserts, "So basically you guys are atheist" (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020). Yet another equates polytheists and atheists, writing "God has affirmed without evasion that the unbelievers in Him, the polytheists, their punishment will be the eternal fire of hell. My friend, save yourself before it is too late" (Commenter, *India Today,* May 20, 2021). Finally, the following exchange dialogically relates the virtues of personal religious study, atheism, and a theistic interpretation of science:

- [1] Dont follow what ppl do. Follow what religious books says...only thn u'll understand about creater

  [2] @1 if you read Quran in English you'll become an Atheist before you finish it. Guaranteed.

  [3] @2 I read it my live and guess what You have 0 knowledge about Islam. Pop your questions don't be scared you hidden hindu/christian etc [laughing emoji] "A shallow knowledge of science makes you an athiest and a deep knowledge of science makes you religious"...(Commenters, *India Today,* May 20, 2021)

Interestingly, while differences are highlighted through the identity of 'atheist', discussions related to secularism are notably absent in the comment sections. Jaffrelot notes how

Hindutva advocates regularly delegitimize secularists, calling them "sickularists" on social

media (2021, 165). Similarly, Gittinger notes the regularity with which right-wing Hindu

nationalism frames the threat against "authentic" Hinduism "from the West, from 'sickular

libtards,' and from Muslims/immigrants" (2019, 172-3). In chapter 4, I discuss the presence of

Indian rationalist discourse. A more thorough discussion of the absence of discourse on

secularism is beyond the scope of this present study.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many comments and exchanges occur with reference to the

differences between Hinduism and Islam. Several portray Islam as superior to Hinduism:

- And they have the audacity to say Hinduism is better than monotheistic Islam [laughing
  emoji]. Funny thing is that they humanized a virus [laughing emojis]. Now we can
  understand how their other gods or goddesses were formed [laughing emojis].
  (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)

- [1] Ya Allah thank you for giving me hidayat [instruction, guidance] - ex hindu

  [2] hindus are rapidly reverting to Islam in India so are Sikhs and budhs, Christians are
  clearly reverting [heart emoji, crying emoji, heart emoji]. (Commenter, *India Today*, May
  20, 2021)

Constructions of difference and superiority also frequently cast the practices of 'idol worship'

as "false" and undertaken for ulterior motives. For example,

All the idols worshipped in India have been created just for the sake of earning money,
whether they are idols of Lord Rama or Hanuman, it's all false. Come towards Allah, who
is the Lord of all and is worthy of worship. (Commenter, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)[45]

Here, the author implies that this ulterior motive is money and suggests that Islam is superior,

because Allah is "worthy" and not "false". Here, the author implies that the ulterior motive of

idol creation is money and suggests that Islam does not engage in this unscrupulous practice.

The assumed ulterior motives for the purpose of earning money will be discussed in chapter 4.

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[45] My translation. Original text: "Indian ki jitni murti poja hai asay hi ejad ki hui hein sird kmai kay lia chahay wo
raam ki morti hein chahay hnuman ki sub jhoot hai aao aik Allah ki tarf jo sub ka rub bhgwan hai or wohi poja k laiq
hai".

Reasoned discussions, which challenge depictions that are deemed inaccurate employ various strategies. In this example, the respondent argues that not only Hindus but members of other religions are also engaging in creative and speculative theology in response to the pandemic:

> [1] Hindu religion [laughing emoji] Just like that, idols of Lord Rama are made and stories are created
>
> [2] No, brother, people of other religions are also making foolish statements. Some Muslims are saying that Allah sent this pandemic for the infidels, but even Muslims are being affected by the coronavirus. Similar things are happening in all religions. (Commenter, *India Today,* June 8, 2020)[46]

Significantly, however, many comments and exchanges result in a 'splitting', similar to that described by Viswanathan above. Consider the following exchange:

> [1] In India, 33 crore[47] gods are created just like that [laughing emojis]
>
> [2] I say to you, come towards Allah, all these gods are lies. It's just a way to earn money.
>
> [3] Get lost in your free time.
>
> [2] @3 come towards Allah. Worship He who is truly worthy of worship. Leave idol worship, it can neither benefit you or cause you harm.
>
> [3] @2 You're foolish, sir. First learn about the Sanatan (Hindu) religion. Even Hindus do not worship idols. These are misguided people who engage in idol worship. Just like the wrong belief that committing a crime will lead to getting better rewards which exists in some Muslim families, similarly, new gods are emerging in Hinduism.
>
> [2] @3 My dear brother, worshiping idols of any kind is wrong. If Muslims engage in such practices, then they are not true Muslims. The true path is the worship of Allah alone. As Muslim brothers, we desire that those who worship idols also come onto the straight

---

[46] My translation of: [1] "Hindu dharam [laughing emoji] aise hi ram ki v murat bana di gyi h or kahaniya;" [2] "Nhi bhai aise toh aur religion ke log bhi bakchodi kar rahe hai muslim log bol rahe hai allah ne ye kafir ke liye bheja hai corona par muslim ko bhi ho raha hai sab religion mein aisa hi ho raha hai kuch".

[47] Thirty-three crore is 330 million. Though at times taken literally, this is generally regarded as a figurative number representing innumerable forms, aspects, and manifestations of the divine in Hindu mythology. Significant debate exists regarding the interpretation of this number, both in scholarship and in the comment sections of news videos. One example of this hinges on the interpretation of the word, "*koti*": "[1] This is how we got 33 crore devi devta. [2] It's 33 koti. Koti is a sanskriti word which means forms. Koti word is also used as crore. It got messed" (Commenters, *The Print*, May 21, 2021).

path. You are my brother, and I worship Allah. By taking an oath in the name of Allah, I say that I love you, and that is why I am discussing this matter with you. Whether someone worships idols or not, it doesn't matter to me. I love Allah and you, and that is why I am conveying this message of truth to you. (Commenters, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)[48]

Both Islam and 'true' Hinduism in this exchange are differentiated from religious forms which "worship idols". The author's idea of 'true' Hinduism excludes "idol worship", a practice he ascribes to the ritual participants featured in the video. It also invokes the notion of *Sanatan dharma*, a vision of Hinduism as timeless, universal, and, in practice, one that often excludes certain forms of Hindu practice.

One rhetorical strategy, which Gittinger notes is frequently employed in Hindu nationalist discourse online, involves quoting religious scripture to establish authority of the author's perspective.[49] Several comment authors make use of extended quotes drawn from various religious texts to strengthen their argument regarding what constitutes 'true' Hinduism. They also draw on their positions as insiders to the religion to lend authority to their perspectives. Consider the following example:

The reality is that there is only 1 God. Concept of God in Hinduism:

- "God is only one without a second" (Chandogya Upanishad 6:2:1)

- "Of Almighty God, there are no parents they have got no lord. Almighty God has no true father, he has no true mother, he has no true superior." (Swethaswethara Upanishad 6:9)

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[48] My translation. See appendix 2.1 for the original text.

[49] Importantly, several commenters also quote from other religious texts such as the Bible and the Qur'an to lend authority to various statements about the pandemic and novel coronavirus-related goddess worship. Due to constraints on space and considering that the focus here is on the construction of authority in Hinduism, I do not include examples of these here. However, it is notable, though perhaps not surprising, that this practice exists. I include one example here to illustrate this point: "If ye invoke them, they will not listen to your call, and if they were to listen, they cannot answer your (prayer). On the Day of Judgment they will reject your 'Partnership'. and none, (O man!) can tell thee (the Truth) like the One Who is acquainted with all things. [Quran - (Faatir 35:14)]" (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020).

- "They enter darkness those who worship natural things.They sink deeper in darkness those who worship sambhuti (created things)" (Yajurved 40:9)

- "God Supreme or Supreme Spirit has no 'Pratima' (idol) or material shape" (Yajurved chapter 32 verse 3)

- "Those whose intelligence has been stolen by material desires they worship demigods i.e. idols." (Bhagavad Gita 7:20)

- "The ignorant believe that un-manifest Para Brahma (One God) incarnates or takes manifestations, because they do not completely understand My highest, immutable, incomparable, and transcendental existence." (Bhagavad Gita 7:24)

We need to stand against such fake propaganda .That's why other people mock us . Worshiping such idols is not spirituality & No hindu consider it right in any way .so stop this. (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021. External citations in original)

The author of this series of posts positions himself as an insider through the word "us".

Authority for a monotheistic interpretation of Hinduism is constructed through the extensive quotation from four different religious texts. Perspectives which assume polytheistic, yet restricted forms of Hinduism also exist. In these, certain gods or types of deities are deemed acceptable and are revered:

- Gods are only from the Vedas, which are old Hindu texts. These people are making it a Devi as they think it will go by this. Gods in Hinduism have some powers and many historic stories. This is just a time pass made for attention. (Commenter, *Indian Express*, June 13, 2021)

- What a shame... Now you forget Krishna, Shiva, Rama, Narayana, Vishnu and you started worshipping corona devi. ???????????? No limit to absurdity... (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)

- In Hinduism, it is believed that you should worship one god or 10 gods, but I personally believe in only one god...I can also tell you that not all gods come like that from anywhere. The god like that you will find only in the Vedas. Corona Devi is not a god; if her idol comes to my house, I will hit it with a slipper. (Commenter, *Indian Express*, June 13, 2021)

- Hinduism strictly prohibits these actions. Yajurveda chapter 40 verse 9 "they enter darkness those who worship natural things(sun, moon, air, water, stone , etc). They sink deeper in darkness those who worship sambhuti (created things like chairs, cars, idols, etc)" Bhagavad Gita Chapter 7 verse 20 "Those whose intelligence has been stolen by

material desires, they worship demigods(idols)". (Commenter, *Indian Express*, June 13, 2021)

Differences in content notwithstanding, the rhetorical strategy employed by these examples is the same. Features of the ritual practices devoted to goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus are differentiated, or 'othered', from forms of Hinduism that the authors claim as 'true'. This 'truth' is legitimized by the authority claimed by the authors as insiders, who use religious scripture to support these claims. Gittinger notes:

> a tendency for such "authorities" to speak on behalf of all Hindus, and claim that there is such a thing as an authentic, i.e., orthodox, Hinduism that is recognizable by features such as the prioritization of the Gita and Vedas, caste as a natural social system, devotion to one of the mainstream deities such as Shiva or Vishnu (and/or their immediate family or avatars), formal rituals such as *puja* and *homa*, and avowing that Hinduism is a timeless, universal truth: *sanatana dharma.* (Gittinger 2019, 29)

The constructions of the authority and authenticity of the authors' perspectives involve a simultaneous movement to *delegitimize* the ritual practices devoted to coronavirus-related goddesses as *inauthentic* and the participants as *unauthoritative.* Interestingly, challenges to the authority and authenticity of these practices are not only waged from an insider perspective. In the following example the author, perhaps an outsider to Hindu traditions or perhaps belonging to an iconoclastic tradition within, suggested by their use of the terms"they" and "their" and reference to "the real only God", questions from where these rituals are informed:

> from which of their scripture they came to know that how to perform this rituals or they are doing as their mind is instructing them? They are only idol worshipers. They have no relation with the real only God. (Commenter, *India Today,* June 8, 2020)

Similarly, questions regarding the textual basis and perceived inconsistencies are also raised from perhaps a similar subject position:

> Yajur Veda – chapter- 32: - God Supreme or Supreme Spirit has no 'Pratima' (idol) or material shape. Can any hindu answer? (Commenter, *India Today,* May 20, 2021)

One wonders whether any of these authors would accept evidence that goddesses associated with disease do indeed have a textual tradition and an even older iconographic history dating back centuries.

Significantly, among all the news stories and comments reviewed, only one exchange appears to explicitly espouse Hindu nationalist ideals:

[1] Do you know that India is a country with the highest number of blind devotees in the world? [Laughing emojis]

[2] Andhbakt means someone who blindly worships their god. But you guys changed its meaning and brought politics into it. I agree it's foolishness, but these uneducated people in the village are being deceived, and you should file a case against the person who built this temple based on their faith.

[3] @2 How can you say they are uneducated?

[2] @3 Brother, Jai Shree Ram [2 flag emojis]. I would say it, but I don't believe in this blind faith. I am a true sanatani Hindu, but not blind.

Brother, I also support the BJP and I am a devout Hindu, but should we not file a case against these Corona Devi people who are deceiving innocent people for money?

Brother, I just want to establish a Hindu nation (hindu rashtra). (Commenters, *Kanak news,* June 12, 2021)[50]

Here, references to the positionality of one interlocutor as a "sanatani Hindu", who wants to establish a "hindu rashtra", signal a clear example of Hindutva ideology informing their critique of ritual practices devoted to novel coronavirus-related goddesses. This form of 'true' Hinduism is firmly established as different than the "blind faith" (*andhvishvas*) they perceive characterizes ritual worship of a goddess associated with the novel coronavirus.

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[50] My translation. The original text can be found in Appendix 2.2.

3.4 Conclusion

These examples demonstrate a multitude of ways that difference is established through news coverage and associated commentary about goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus. The discussions taking place in the online public sphere of comment sections reflect a multitude of perspectives. Both historical and contemporary forms of Hindutva use rhetorical processes of intra-group homogenization, which seeks to minimize difference within Hinduism, and intergroup polarization, which seeks to maximize difference between Hindus and other cultural and religious groups (Das and Whitham 2021). Gittinger notes that the presentation and management of Hinduism online serve diverse agendas, including but not limited to religious and ethnic nationalism. To this she writes that,

> In the case of Hindu nationalism, the efforts to homogenize Hinduism is a response to colonial critiques that the native religion (like its population) was too disparate, too unorganized...Hindu nationalism ultimately seeks to make India a Hindu nation, and it does this by making a case for the obvious superiority and universality intrinsic to Hinduism – a case which is presented to convince Hindus around the world. (Gittinger 2019, 81)

These processes appear in the above comments to some degree. Though, far from being dominated by a monolithic discourse promoting Hindu nationalism, the examples constructing differences presented above are indicative of a wide variety of concerns. Some of these concerns are shared by many people facing uncertainties about health, money, international reputation, and politics, both in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and otherwise. Though Hindu nationalist themes are present they are not the only ones. As I will show in the following chapter, discourses invoking the terms '*andhbhakt'* and '*andhviśvās*' are used in critical ways against both ritual participants and supporters of Hindutva themes. The role of Indian rationalist groups' participation in this discourse will also be discussed. In chapter 5, analysis of participant narratives will demonstrate further discursive diversity. However,

themes which resonate with Hindutva concerns – for example, discourses pertaining to 'true' Hinduism – nevertheless do appear and structure many of the discourses surrounding novel coronavirus-related goddess worship. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to specific ways that the authority and authenticity of coronavirus-related goddess worship are delegitimized through the prevalent discourse of 'superstition,' and how this delegitimization is, in turn, distributed among marginalized social groups.

Chapter 4. 'Superstition', 'Blind Devotion', and Strategies of Delegitimization

4.1 Introduction

One of the most prominent ways through which difference regarding novel coronavirus-related goddesses and practice is discursively constructed in media reports and online discourse is through a set of labels related to 'blind belief' and 'blind faith'. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these include 'superstition' and 'blind belief' (*andhviśvās*) on one hand, and 'blind faith,' 'blind devotion' (*andhbhakti*), and the related term 'blind devotee' (*andhbhakt*), on the other. These terms are deployed by journalists, experts, bureaucrats, rationalists, pandits, politicians, and comment authors in the media reports and associated comment sections pertaining to coronavirus-related ritual practice.

In this chapter I explore two broad ideological positions from which these labels are deployed: Hindu nationalism and Indian rationalism. Regarding the first, Jaffrelot (2019) describes social and religious reform movements developed in reaction to European colonists and missionaries in India, to which modern Hindu nationalism can trace its roots. He writes that,

> To resist [missionaries'] proselytism and denigration of Hinduism (accused of idolatry, superstition, and inhumanity due to its treatment of women and lower castes), Hindu reformers in the nineteenth century invented a golden age for their religion to which such criticism could not apply, as they attributed a sober (almost Protestant) mode of worship and egalitarian values to their ancestors. (Jaffrelot 2019, 11)

Relatedly, writing in the context of Ādivāsī communities in central India, Peggy Froerer (2010) elaborates relevant contours of the discourse of 'superstition':

> the sort of 'backwardness' with which the RSS is concerned locally refers largely to those practices that are labelled as 'superstition' (*andhviswas*) by RSS activists and that underpin traditional Adivasi cosmology and worship: namely the propitiation of village and forest deities instead of 'big gods' (Ram, Krishna, Shiva); the use of alcohol and blood offerings instead of 'vegetarian' offerings (incense, rice flowers); and the use of local healers and traditional healing practices instead of medical doctors during times of

illness. Such customs, described by locals as *dehati rivaj* (rural custom) and by RSS proponents and other outsiders as '*jangli* Hinduism', are contrasted to the practices found within mainstream, *sahari* (city) Hinduism. It is the eradication of *andhviswas*, which is opposed to 'proper' Hindu practices, that underpins and, in the view of their opponents, justifies the 'civilizing missions' in which the RSS is engaged (Froerer 2010, 130).

Discourses of 'superstition' for Hindu nationalists, therefore, are related to conditions of postcoloniality, historiography, 'progress' and 'modernity', and the rural/urban divide.

One group of critics involved in the discourse of superstition not yet discussed in this thesis are "antisuperstition" or Indian rationalist organizations. One such organization features explicitly in a news report about novel coronavirus-related goddess worship in the state of Maharashtra. The *Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti* (Maharashtra Committee for the Eradication of Superstition, ANiS/MANS)[51] is a rationalist organization with hundreds of chapters across the state (Quack 2015). Similar organizations operate across India more broadly (Binder 2019). The Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA)'s website (*www.fira.org.in*) lists thirty-six member organizations, many of which have multiple chapters across their home states and beyond. Among these organizations, religious practices deemed as 'superstitious' are viewed as harmful, unscientific, and barriers to national progress. They see themselves as "promoters of the modernization progress...[who] actively try to work towards the disenchantment of India" (Quack 2015, 139). The rationalist movement in India is a diverse collection of organizations and individuals who self-identify as atheists, humanists, and rationalists (Binder 2019). Atheist groups and individuals "are sometimes accused, especially by Hindu nationalists, of being merely the avant-garde of a Christian/Western conspiracy to destroy Hinduism", despite some insisting that they are opposed to all religions

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[51] The name of this organization is sometimes also spelled as "Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti" and abbreviated as MANS. I refer to it in the abbreviated form of ANiS/MANS in this thesis.

(Binder 2019, 294). ANiS/MANS, in contrast, have claimed that they are not against all forms of

religion but only those they deem as exploitative in form (Quack 2015, 145). Nevertheless,

these organizations have drawn criticism from Hindu nationalist groups.

A particular focus of this conflict in Maharashtra has been the *Maharashtra Prevention and*

Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act,

2013,[52] which was previously known as the "antisuperstition bill" or "anti-back magic bill". It

was drafted by rationalists, some of whom were affiliated with ANiS/MANS, in Maharashtra in

the 1990s and was adopted by state legislature in 2013 (Quack 2015, 153). The Antisuperstition

Bill describes its purpose as such:

> An Act to bring social awakening and awareness in the society and to create a healthy
> and safe social environment with a view to protect the common people in the society
> against the evil and sinister practices thriving on ignorance, and to combat and eradicate
> human sacrifice and other inhuman, evil, sinister and aghori practices propagated in the
> name of so called supernatural or magical powers or evil spirits commonly known as
> black magic by conmen with sinister motive of exploiting the common people in the
> society and thereby destroying the very social fibre of the society; and for matters
> connected therewith or incidental thereto. (Antisuperstition Act 2013)[53]

Opposition to this bill took on violent contours when Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, the former head

of the ANiS/MANS, was murdered in a drive-by shooting, days before the Act came into effect.

Hindu nationalists were initially suspected of Dabholkar's assassination (Quack 2015). To date,

five people linked to a Hindu nationalist group called the *Sanatan Sanstha* have been arrested

(*Express News Service,* April 13, 2023). As Jaffrelot notes, "for obscurantists (whether they belong

to a religious sect or ethnonationalist movement), rationalists are key targets because they are

viewed as blasphemers and pose a threat to their belief system by exposing the myths in which

they believe" (2021, 175).

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[52] Hereafter referred to as the "Antisuperstition Act".
[53] This perspective may contribute to some commenters' view of coronavirus-related goddesses as malevolent, which I discuss in the following chapter.

Two rationalist organizations are mentioned in the print news reports. ANiS/MANS was involved in the public response to coronavirus-related goddess worship among the Pardhi community in Maharashtra. ANiS/MANS is here described as "an organisation that works in the field of uprooting superstitions and blind faith" (Pandey, September 3, 2020). The current President of ANiS/MANS is also quoted in a news report about coronavirus-related goddess worship in Chhattisgarh, saying: "Only, maintenance of Covid protocol can save lives. Government must launch an awareness campaign otherwise it may deteriorate the situation" (Mallick, May 14, 2021). The second organization, Kolkata-based Science and Rationalist Association of India, responded to coronavirus-related goddess worship in West Bengal. A Central Committee member of this organization is quoted, saying: "We have repeatedly approached the organizers trying to make them realize that such superstitious activities can never stop the pandemic but most of them refuse to budge from their blind faith" (Das, June 3, 2020). Notably, there are no self-identifying rationalists in the comment sections of print or video news sources. However, some self-identified atheists do appear therein (see chapter 3).

In this chapter, I analyze the ways that the sets of terms related to 'superstition' and 'blind devotion' are deployed for strategies of delegitimization in ways that reflect Hindu nationalist and secular rationalist themes. I begin with analysis of the polysemous term, '*andh bhakt*', to demonstrate the divergence of these views. I proceed to analyze the ways in which discourses of 'superstition' and 'blind devotion' are inflected according to caste, class, education, and gender in both Hindu nationalist and scientific rationalist discourses. I then turn to the analysis of discourses of 'superstition' in relation to those of 'science', where I reveal significant points of diversion and synergy between the nationalist and rationalist positions. Finally, I attend to the ways in which these discourses justify and promote forms of

discipline against ritual practitioners, many of whom belong to marginalized social groups. For this I draw on critical commentary from online commenters to support my arguments and to demonstrate the awareness these dynamics in the online public sphere.

4.2 The "'Andh Bhakt' Syndrome"[54]

The subset of terms related to '*andhbakt*' are used to negatively describe beliefs, practices, people, and communities. Understood literally, the terms evoke ideas of ignorance, gullibility, and nescience; they are used to delegitimize the people, practices and beliefs characterized as such. This set of terms deserves special attention due to a double meaning observable in many online comments. The Hindi term '*andhbhakt*' literally translates to "blind devotee". Notably, this term is not used in news media and appears exclusively in comment sections. Examples of this usage appear in several comments about coronavirus-related goddess worship in Uttar Pradesh:

- this is called blind devotion [*andhbhakti*]. (Commenter, *ABP News*, June 5, 2020)[55]
- Yes, this is a country of blind devotees [*andhbhakte*]. (Commenter, *ABP News*, June 5, 2020)[56]
- Brother, this is not superstition [*andhvishwas*], it is devotion [*bhakti*]. (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)[57]

The first two examples use the term '*andhbhakt*' negatively to refer to blind devotion. The third example, however, uses the term "*bhakti*" positively in contrast with 'superstition' or 'blind faith' (*andhvishwas*); superstition or blind faith is here differentiated from religious devotion that the comment's author deems legitimate.

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[54] Mahapatra (2023), referring to the phenomenon of ardent followers of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

[55] My translation. Original text: "इसे कहते हैं अंधभक्ति".

[56] My translation. Original text: "हाँ तो ये अंधभक्तो की देश है".

[57] My Translation. Original text: "Bhai koi andhvishwas nahi hai ye bhakti hai".

Significantly, the term 'andhbhakt' has gained popularity in recent years as a derisive

sobriquet for "staunch supporters of PM Modi in particular and the BJP, in general," used to

express "intense dislike" by his opponents (Mahapatra 2023).[58] The expression is also

sometimes shortened to simply *"bhakt"* in online discourse, denoting people with reverence

for Modi. Jaffrelot notes that the words *bhakts* use to describe Modi's power, "often belong,

indeed, to the realm of supernatural forces" (Jaffrelot 2019, 462). This term is used

unequivocally in this sense in the following exchange of comments, referring to a news story

about coronavirus-related goddess worship in Uttar Pradesh:

> [1] Andh bhakt idiots
>
> [2] And their cm Ajay bisht was advising kerala to follow up model. Nobody has a working brain in entire bhakts states.
>
> [3] UP election nearing. Ajay bisht will build a corona temple and feku will build a bisht statue. Bhakts will be pleased (Commenters, *Times of India,* June 11, 2021).

This example links the term '*andh bhakt'* with two prominent Hindu nationalist figures. Ajay

Bisht, perhaps more popularly known as Yogi Adityanath, is the Chief Minister of Uttar

Pradesh and a member of the BJP with hardline Hindutva views (Jaffrelot 2019). "Feku" refers

to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.[59] This association is reiterated when one commenter refers

to the Prime Minister himself as an '*andh bhakt,'* asking rhetorically, "what can poor people do

when the prime minister of the country is a blind devotee (*andh bhakt)*?" (Commenter, *ABP*

News, June 5, 2020).[60] Another even suggests government conspiracy when referring to

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[58] In a curious inversion of the present analysis, Mahapatra (2023) describes the "'Andh Bhakt' syndrome" as "an old disease."

[59] This term is a slang neologism, a clear definition of which is difficult to find. In the context of news articles in which it is used, it refers to someone who makes bold, boastful, and false claims, and is frequently used as an insult against Prime Minister Modi and his style of governance ("Feku federalism") (e.g., Kaushik 2014; O'Brien 2018; *Economic Times,* June 12, 2016). Nair (2015) provides further support for this reference to Modi. Its usage as an insulting sobriquet for PM Modi makes sense in the present context.

[60] My translation. Original text: "Jab desh ke pm hi andh bhakt hai to bechare gareeb aadmi Kya kare".

coronavirus-related goddess worship as "a superstition (*andhviśvās*) spread by the government itself" (Commenter, *ABP News*, June 5, 2020).[61] Further, the 'blind devotion' of Modi supporters is highlighted by one commenter, who posits that "If Modi ji had done this puja, then the whole country and the media, too, would have engaged in devotion" (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020).[62]

The use of the term '*andhbhakt*' is also contested in two different ways. Returning to an exchange about building a Hindu Rashtra, the respondent attempts to correct or clarify the initiator's use of the term:

[1] Do you know that India is a country with the highest number of blind devotees (*andhbhakt*) in the world? [Laughing emojis]

[2] Andhbakt means someone who blindly worships their god. But you guys changed its meaning and brought politics into it. I agree it's foolishness, but these uneducated people in the village are being deceived, and you should file a case against the person who built this temple based on their faith. (Commenters, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)[63]

Here, the respondent takes issue with the way the term has become politicized. They emphasize the original meaning, calling the practice "foolishness" and the practitioners "uneducated". In the following excerpt, the term is contested in an obverse fashion:

[1] Not a surprise given that BJP won that constituency in the last election. Andh bakths..! :(

[2] Comparing this innocent ppl with bakths is ur mentality....they have every right to pray to God...like u have....wat is wrong in it for u (Commenters, *The Print,* May 21, 2021).

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[61] My translation. Original text: "सरकार के द्वारा ही फैलाई गया है अंधविश्वास है".

[62] My translation. Original text: "Agar yahi puja modi ji karte to pura desh bhakti karne me lagiata or midia bhi".

[63] My translation. Original text: "[1] क्या आप जानते हैं विश्व में भारत एक ऐसा देश है जहां सबसे अधिक अंधभक्त हैं [laughing emojis] [2] Andhbakt ka meaning hai jo apne bhagwan se Prem karta hai par Tum logo nai uska meaning change kar dia politics mai le aye mana ki ye bewkoofi hai par gaon ke anpad logo thuga ja raha hai aur dusri baat Hinduism sabse Purana religion hai aur ye kaam karna unki aastha par thesh hai iss mandir ke banane Wale ke upar case Karo".

The respondent in this exchange rejects the initial commenter's use of the term to describe the "innocent" ritual practitioners. They interpret the term '*andh bhakt'* negatively in the political sense and defend the practitioners from this charge.

The polysemy of the term '*andhbhakt'* raises several important questions. In some cases, the term appears to be used in a derogatory way against only the participants involved in ritual practice associated with coronavirus-related goddesses. In these uses, the perceived ignorance of the participants and practices are highlighted. In others, the term is clearly invoked negatively against supporters of the BJP and ritual participants. One question this raises, by way of a hermeneutics of suspicion, is whether the comments in which the term is deployed in the literal sense are waged by supporters of Modi and the BJP as a way of reverting its meaning to the older, literal sense. From the available data we cannot know. The usage of this term raises another question regarding its deployment in the political sense. The focus of the commenters' ire could primarily be the ritualists and practices themselves by way of a culturally available negative expression, which has gained heft in recent years because of the political associations it has acquired. This is supported by other comments that equate the participants with followers of Modi, such as "these people are 100 percent Modi supporters" (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020).[64] A second possibility is that the target of this association could be followers of Modi, who they insult by way of negative characterizations of coronavirus-related ritual practice. This possibility follows the general rhetorical strategy discussed in the previous chapter and further contextualizes efforts made by commenters holding Hindu nationalist views to construct difference between 'true' Hinduism and the coronavirus-related practices. Further, critics of Hindu nationalism, too, engage in a strategy

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[64] My translation. Original text: "ye log 100 percent modi supporter honge".

of delegitimization waged against participants engaging in ritual practice of coronavirus related goddesses.

4.3 Discourses of Superstition

4.3.1 Caste and Tribal Status

Despite few references to caste or tribal status of ritual participants made in the news reports or comment sections, those which do appear are related to charges of 'superstition'. The only direct references in the media reports refer to ritual practice undertaken by members of the Pardhi community, a tribal group in Maharashtra. Here, news of Pardhi community members engaged in ritual practice dedicated to a Covid-19-related goddess prompted the involvement of ANiS/MANS (Pandey 2020). Reports that members of the community had sacrificed chickens and goats prompted police intervention (Bhat 2020). The only other direct reference to caste appears in exchanges regarding its existence within Hinduism in general, not with specific reference to ritual participants. Several reasons for the dearth of references to caste or tribal status are possible. First, as previously mentioned, federal acts, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, regulate media portrayals of caste-oppressed groups. Second, Binny (2022) has noted that caste-oppressed communities, like Dalits, "seem to be suffering from hyper-invisibility with a conscious invisibilization of the caste identities of the victims of the pandemic over both electronic and social media" (10). Third, relatedly, Hindu nationalist discourse often considers highlighting issues of caste as "dissentious and inflammatory – counterproductive to the homogenized ideal of a 'Hindu nation'" (Gittinger 2019, 99). Thus, for Hindu nationalists, public discussion of caste and/or any perceived caste-based religious differences in relation to "High Hinduism" (Quack 2015, 157) is potentially viewed as counterproductive to the project of

constructing a unified Hindu nation. Rationalist groups, on the other hand, generally view caste as another form of religious exploitation, "often labeled as India's 'biggest superstition'" (Quack 2015, 142-3). Of course, the possibility that caste is not viewed as a relevant issue by the media and commenters also exists.

4.3.2 Class

Critical comments according to class are more common than references to caste or tribal status. Class is discussed indirectly in at least two ways. The first involves noting the cost of undertaking *pūjā* for women identified as "dailywagers": "At the pooja, there were women in their early twenties, as well as those as old as 75. Many of them were dailywagers, and spent around ₹500 on buying the material for rituals alone" (Samanta, June 10, 2020). An interpretation of this statement is it implies that, for women on limited income, spending a relatively large sum of money to undertake the rituals is wasteful or foolish. Similarly, one commenter suggests that practices such as these are the cause of poverty, writing "Finally, I have found the cause of poverty in the UP Bihar [laughing emojis]" (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020).

The second and more common way that class is discussed is through a discourse of pretense or ulterior motives. This type of discourse suggests that material gain is the underlying motive for conducting coronavirus-related goddess rituals. Ritual practice dedicated to a Covid-19-related goddess is framed by one commenter as "a conspiracy of low(-class) people" (Commenter, *Indian Express,* June 13, 2021).[65] Several examples illustrate the suspicion that ritual practices devoted to coronavirus-related goddesses are being performed for material gain:

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[65] My translation. Original text: "Ye sab sajis hai nich logo ka".

- Pandemic entrepreneurs monetizing faith... (Commenter, *The Print*, May 21, 2021)

- This idea of yours can end your unemployment. (Commenter, *ABP News*, June 5, 2020)[66]

- Do not fall into this superstition. A huge business will thrive, and we will keep getting entangled in it, even after the end of the coronavirus. Temples will be built in the name of the Corona Goddess. Donations will be made in the name of the Corona, and so on. (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)[67]

- In the name of #CORONAMAI (माई) the #अंधभक्ति [*andhbhakti*] has started off. Next milestone building a mandir, no offense – but that is what happens always, and then you keep on earning for lifetime. (Commenter, *Times Now News*, June 7, 2020)

The discourses of 'pretense' or 'ulterior motives' are ways of delegitimizing the practices of coronavirus-related goddess worship. They imply that they are not 'true' religious practices because their 'real' purpose is to earn money, thereby undermining their authenticity by displacing or obscuring other possible religious purposes. They also align with one of the stated themes of the Antisuperstition Act, regarding "protecting the common people" from "exploitation" (*Antisuperstition Act 2013*). Additionally, they align specifically with one of ANiS/MANS's claims that various practices ought to be understood as "'pretense...usually situated in the context of direct instrumental gains for the imposter" (Quack 2015, 149). This is framed as the first of four main objectives listed on their website: "To oppose and agitate against harmful superstitions and rituals which misguide and exploit" (*ANiS/MANS,* n.d.). Critical commentary from this perspective implies that some people organizing rituals do so to exploit others within their community. This directly contradicts explicit statements made by some ritual participants which indicate that they are not accepting money for conducting

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[66] My translation. Original text: "आपका यह विचार आपकी बेरोजगारी खत्म कर सकता है".

[67] My translation. Original text: "इस अन्धविश्वास में मत पड़े ये आगे चल कर बहुत बड़ा व्यापार बनेगा और इसमें हम क्र आप उलझ कर रह जायेंगे कोरोना के ख़त्म होने के बाद भी..कोरोना माता के नाम से मंदिर का निर्माण होगा...कोरोना दान दिया जाएगा इत्यादि इत्यादि..".

Covid-19-related goddess *pūjā*s or evidence that the rituals were organized in an *ad hoc* manner by community members in response to the crisis. This is not to deny the temple and ritual economies that exist in historical and contemporary religious practices in South Asia and beyond or even that there are people who exploit others in the name of religion. It is, however, to resist the reduction of *all* forms of new ritual practice to an assumed economic dimension, while ignoring evidence of the multiple alternate dimensions and functions for the reported ritual events. These points are discussed further in the following chapter.

Some comments related to the discourse of ulterior motives humorously note the resourcefulness of ritual participants during difficult times, musing about emulating the ritualists themselves:

- Looking for investors. Planning to do "Go Corona Go" campaign from my street to make #COVID19 run away from India. (Commenter, *iDiva,* May 20th, 2021)

- Hahaha, learn from these people for employment during a crisis. (Commenter, *The Print*, May 21, 2021)[68]

While these types of comments could be regarded as merely playful, if somewhat dismissive, examples of internet humour, they may also indicate a dimension of shared experience regarding economic insecurity experienced by many people in India during the Covid-19 pandemic. One commenter notes this collective economic insecurity, suggesting that "We need economy temple also" (Commenter, *The Print*, May 21, 2021). Notably, this is not the first time that a ritual innovation related to the Covid-19 pandemic was related to the national economy. In March 2020, an effigy of "Coronāsur" was burned in Mumbai as part of *Holikā Dahan*. Here, the SARS-CoV-2 virus was imagined as an evil demon and carried a placard with text that read "*ārthikmandī,*" which means "economic recession" (Yadav 2022, 6). Coronāsur was also

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[68] My translation. Original text: "Hahaha आपदा में रोजगार इन्हीं लोगों से सीखों".

immolated in the 2021 *Holi* celebrations in Mumbai (*Business Today,* March 9, 2021). Megha

Yadav argues that the reference to national economic concerns in Coronāsur's ritual

iconography

> clearly indicates the awareness of the current circumstances among the makers of the idol. It is also interesting to note here that by giving this attribute to the demon, the responsibility of maintaining the economic stability has been taken away from the governing authorities and has been symbolically placed on the head of divine/demonic authority. This responsibility-shift reflects a broader, long-standing, systemic religious attempt to ward off a perceived evil in order to survive a period of medical and economic crisis. (Yadav 2019, 6)

The following month, Prime Minister Modi met with state Chief Ministers to announce a

renewed focus on the economy in addition to preserving lives, explaining that "Our mantra

earlier was 'jaan hai to jahaan hai' [only if there is life there will be livelihood] but now is 'jaan

bhi, jahaan bhi,' [both life and livelihood]" (Bhaskar et al., April 11, 2020). Poetic musings

regarding the efficacy *Holikā Dahan* rituals aside, Modi's shift in emphasis indicates the

pervasiveness of the awareness of India's economic insecurity in the early months of the

Covid-19 pandemic.

4.3.3 Education

Several comments relate to the perceived level of education and intelligence among

ritual participants. This discourse attributes the central reason for coronavirus-related

goddess worship to a lack of education and intelligence among participants in Covid-19-related

goddess rituals:

- Need better education. Its ignorance that causes superstition. Its a way people can make sense of the world. (Commenter, *India Today*, June 8, 2021)

- That's why it is said that people need employment and education, which are severely lacking in Bihar. (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)[69]

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[69] My translation. Original text: "Isliye kahte he logo ko rojgar aur education ki jarurat he jiski bahut kami he bihar me"

- Less education result. (Commenter, *ABP News*, June 5, 2020)

- IQ < 19. (Commenter, *Economic Times,* May 22, 2021)

- [1] India needs education.. even more than religion.

  [2] Education? Oh it has been over a year and education still has not eradicated the virus. Eeeeduuuuccaaatioonn indeed

  [3] Indeed. Even more than food.

  [4] This is not religion. (Commenters, *Indian Express*, June 13, 2021)

By extension, these comments may also attribute 'superstition' in general to a lack of education. The following comment makes an explicit connection between inherited practices and a lack of education, stating that,

> every one is laughing but what we don't know is that our ancestors did the same and coz of lack of knowledge and education people during that time took it seriously and pass it down to their next generation and it was exaggerated alot and brain washed from toddler age. (Commenter, *The Print,* May 21, 2021)

Some comments frame the discourse in a way that centres citizens' lack of education in terms critical of various levels of government:

> It's a shame on the name of Bihar Government's Information System. If they couldn't provide good education at least provide useful information for protection to extremely uneducated and backward region of Bihar!Shame of You Nitish! (Commenter, India Today, June 8, 2021)

Other comments make direct correlations between coronavirus-related goddess worship, the lack of education, and the ruling BJP or RSS:

- Most illiterate people in India is the reason of my party success too. (Commenter, Times of India, June 11, 2021)

- This is why Kerala says RSS terrorists have no intelligence,information and education [laughing emojis] (Commenter, *India Today*, June 8, 2021)

Both rationalist organizations and Hindu nationalists view education as crucially important for their aims, though generally for different reasons. For Hindu nationalists under the direction of the RSS, these changes have been largely in line with presenting a Hindu supremacist version of Indian history. Jaffrelot (2021) details numerous and sweeping changes to primary and secondary school textbooks since 2014. These changes have included presenting Hindu mythology as history, downplaying the influences and achievements of the Mughals and other Indian Muslims, and even removing references to national Independence figures like Nehru and Gandhi (169-73). Recently, under the guise of lightening the workload for students during the Covid-19 pandemic, government-run public schools were instructed by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) that they were no longer required to teach on topics of democratic rights, citizenship, and secularism (Jaffrelot 2021, 174). Indian rationalist organizations view education as a necessary dimension of eliminating superstition and religious exploitation in India. ANiS/MANS, for example, places emphasis on promoting a "scientific outlook", travelling the state in "science vans" and giving presentations at schools and in villages (Quack 2015).

4.3.4 Gender

Gendered discourse can be identified in news reports pertaining to goddess worship associated with the novel coronavirus. An important gendered dimension of village goddess worship will be discussed in the following chapter's closer examination of the rituals. The term 'women' appears eighty-six times in the print news reports and the term 'woman' appears thirteen times. Among reports where gender is mentioned, these occur in thirteen regarding women exclusively, two about women and transgender people, and two about women and men. The term 'transgender' appears seven times in two news reports. The term 'man' appears

eight times and the term 'men' appears three times in three reports[70] in which gender is mentioned, though eleven reports center on male priests and their practices. Gender is not mentioned in twenty-six reports. With this distribution, the disproportionate number of references to feminine or trans identity suggests that gender is a significant marker of difference.

A dimension of gender is observable in many comments regarding the gender of the goddesses themselves. Many question or contest the deities' gender:

- So finally Corona found its gender also! And found a few followers! Bless them Corona Devi! Stay with them but leave us! #gocoronago #CoronaSecondWave #CoronaDevi #Corona #COVID19 #Corona. (Commenter, *iDiva*, May 20, 2021)

- The fact that corona is represented by a devi(female)and not a dev(male) is disturbing [laughing emoji]. (Commenter, *The Print*, May 21, 2021)

- How they are sure if it's not corona 'DEVA'. (Commenter, *The Print,* 2021)

- I mean, how did they realize Corona's gender?! Lol. (Commenter, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)

- First find out whether coronavirus is a goddess [devī] or a god [devtā]. (Commenter, *Kanak News*, June 12, 2021)[71]

- How was the gender check done? (Commenter, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)[72]

- So finally found corona its gender also! And found a few followers! Bless them Corona Devi! Stay with them but leave us! #gocoronago #CoronaSecondWave #CoronaDevi #Corona #COVID19 #Corona. (Commenter, *iDiva*, May 20, 2021)

The concern and curiosity centering on gender suggests that some commenters are unfamiliar with traditions of goddesses associated with disease. More significant, however, is the sexism that many of these comments exhibit. The mocking tone associated with several comments,

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[70] One report refers to "women, in some places accompanied by men too" (News 18, June 8, 2020).

[71] My translation. Original text: "पहले यह तो पता कर लो कोरोना वायरस देवी है या देवता।"

[72] My translation. Original text: "Gender check kaisay hua".

conveyed by laughing emojis and comments of "lol", suggests that a goddess (rather than a male god) is "disturbing", and the possible insinuation of genital examinations through "gender checks" indicate commenters' negative, and thereby misogynistic and possibly transphobic,[73] associations with feminine gender expressions. Further, a gendered dimension is evident in the use of language associated with femininity and motherhood and again, with a possibly mocking tone. For example, one news report describes the "superstition" which has "given birth to a new deity, 'Corona mai'" (*Telegraph*, June 6, 2020). Here, superstition is accorded a traditionally defining maternal quality – giving birth, firmly establishing a discursive homology between 'women' and 'superstition'.

The label of 'superstition' is applied asymmetrically according to the gender of the ritual participants in news reports. As mentioned previously, only the male[74] priests in Tamil Nadu and Kerala are specifically referred to as 'Hindu' in the surveyed media reports. Additionally, their activities are also not described as 'superstitious' in any of the media reports that feature them.[75] The language used in news reports[76] to describe the activities at Kamatchipuri Adheenam temple in Tamil Nadu, convey a sense of authority and authenticity. The ritual participants at the temple are referred to as "temple authorities" (Dore, June 22, 2021) and "mutt officials" (*Deccan Herald,* May 21, 2021), titles that convey institutional legitimacy. They are described as conducting a "Mahayagam" (*Economic Times,* May 22, 2021), which Yadav

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[73] "Gender checks" are commonly deployed against transgender people. I am grateful to Joseph Wickenhauser for this insight.

[74] The Keralan priest is referred to as a man. Both the temple manager and the "spiritual master" (Bhutia 2021) are addressed with masculine pronouns. The other priests and temple officials at Kamatchipuri Adheenam are neither referred to as men nor addressed in the interviews.

[75] However, we are told that the Keralan priest "has drawn flak on social media" for his activities (*Indian Express,* June 14, 2020).

[76] The comment sections of articles and videos associated with the Keralan priest and the male priests at Kamatchipuri Adheenam in Tamil Nadu do, however, include critical commentary framed in terms of 'superstition'. Many of these comments, already included above, invoke the term '*andh bhakts*' pejoratively in its political usage, referring to followers of PM Modi.

(2022) identifies as a *yajña*, a "formal Vedic sacrifice" (6). This reference identifying the priests'

activities with Vedic sacrifice attributes additional authority and legitimacy.[77] Such respectful

wording stands in stark contrast with the language used to describe groups of women,

transgender people, and tribal groups who are engaged in "shocking" incidents (Pandey,

September 3, 2020), "bizarre preventative practices" (*Times Now News,* June 7, 2020), and of

course, "strange superstitions" (Das, June 3, 2020).

Significantly, this distribution closely aligns with distinctions between rural and urban

sites of practice. It also aligns with distinctions between collective or community-based

practices on one hand, and individual or exclusive, institutional practices on the other. Many

of the described ritual events featuring women or members of third gender communities occur

in groups and usually outdoors. The media reports note women "gathered in large numbers"

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[77] Despite the favourable portrayal in news media of this institutionalized form of Coronā Devī worship at Kamatchipuri Adheenam, not all reporting views it as such. A curious description of the activities, published on a Hindu nationalist website illustrates heterogeneity within the Hindutva movement with respect to this event. *Sanatan Prabhat* ("Eternal Morning") is a Hindu nationalist publication. It is affiliated with the previously mentioned *Sanatan Sanstha* organization. Its website, *sanatanprabhat.org*, states the slogan, "To establish the 'Hindu Rashtra'", firmly situating it as a Hindutva organization. On May 23, 2021, it published a story describing the Coronā Devī ritual practices at the Kamatchipuri Adheenam temple, which resemble several other news reports about these practices save for two points highlighted in large blue font. The first, at the beginning of the article reads, "As Hindus do not have education on Dharma, they engage in such adharmik actions. Education on Dharma will be imparted to Hindus and they will also be taught to perform spiritual practice in the forthcoming Hindu Rashtra!" (Sanatan Prabhat, May 23, 2021). Here, the practices devoted to the goddess associated with Covid-19, are described as "adharmik," suggesting that the publication views them as unaligned with 'true' Hinduism. Additionally, the emphasis on the need for educating Hindus, who "do not have education on Dharma," adds a further dimension to the discourse of education discussed above. The second highlighted point, printed in parentheses below a photo of the temple's two Corona Devi *mūrtīs*, reads "(The intention underlying display of this image is not to hurt religious sentiments of Hindus, but make them comprehend the denigration – Editor, Dainik Sanatan Prabhat)" (*Sanatan Prabhat*, May 23, 2021). The concern with hurting "religious sentiments of Hindus" due to the "denigration" that this practice represents uses the language of Sections 295A and 298 of the Indian Penal Code, which prohibits "Hurting Religious Sentiments" (See Gittinger 2019, 114-5). The rejection of these practices by this specific Hindutva publication, however, is further complicated by the apparent relationship between the head priest of the Kamatchipuri Adheenam temple, Gnanaguru Saktha Sri Sivalineswara Swamigal, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The most recent meeting between the two figures occurred at a controversial, symbolic, and highly publicized ceremony marking the inauguration of the new Indian parliament building. During this ceremony, the *Sengol*, a gold-plated silver scepter, was presented to PM Modi by the heads of Adhinams from Tamil Nadu (ANI News, May 27, 2023). Further discussion of this relationship is, regrettably, beyond the scope of this thesis.

in fields and around trees (*News18,* June 8, 2020). It is reported that collective "chants of 'jai Corona mai' [Victory to Coronā Māī] and 'Corona mata ki jai' [Corona Mātā's victory] echoed in some open fields" (*Telegraph,* June 6, 2020). In many places, women gathered on river banks to perform the pujas: "a group of women took a dip in the Ganga and offered prayers at the river bank" (*Bridge Chronicle,* June 7, 2020); "More than 250 women gathered on the banks of Baanki River...to perform a symbolic 'Chaath Puja'" (*Times Now News,* June 7, 2020); "a small pooja was arranged on the banks of Chinnamasta pond in the area. Women from various age groups gathered at 8 am – the rituals went on till 9 am" (*The Hindu,* June 10, 2020). From these examples, the communal dimension of the women-led practices stands in distinct contrast from those led by men. At the Kamatchipuri Adheenam temple in Tamil Nadu, which is an established Shaiva temple, the newly constructed Coronā Devī shrine is located in a covered enclosure. The rituals conducted therein are exclusive; "only priests and mutt officials will be allowed inside the Corona Devi temple in view of the pandemic and to maintain social distancing norms and the place will be strictly out of bounds for the public" (*Economic Times*, May 22, 2021). At the home of the Keralan priest – "just one devotee" (*The Hindu, June 13,* 2020) – the temple is indoors, and he is the only participant.[78] There are no reports of exclusivity in women-led and conducted ritual.[79]

Hindu nationalist perspectives on gender differ from those of Indian rationalists. While a full discussion of these differences is beyond the scope of this thesis, one significant difference is worth noting. Hindutva perspectives on gender can be described as "conservative" and

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[78] "Though there is no darshan, Corona Devi's prasadam will be available to devotees via mail" (*The Hindu*, June 13, 2020).

[79] *Times Now News*, September 3, 2020, reports that "a local TV channel had also reported that a woman established the worship of Corona Devi inside her house, hoping to pray to the 'deity' to spare her family from its wrath" (Pandey 2020). From this, however, it is not clear whether the woman also participated in the community rituals.

"patriarchal" (Jaffrelot 2021, 250). Kinnvall (2019) demonstrates that since Modi's election as Prime Minister, "Brahminical-patriarchal ideas of the Hindu right have been intensified through recent liberal policies and violently enforced through rituals of patriotism" (2019, 295). Hindutva politics, therefore, aims at restoring and maintaining a 'traditional' social order in which women are subjugated to men. Rigid conceptions of Hinduism coupled with the "masculinization of politics" (Kinnvall 2019, 288) contribute to the gendered attribution of 'superstition' to women. For Indian rationalists, gender plays a bivalent organizing role in that women are viewed as both the victims and perpetrators of superstition. Quack notes that according to some, "women, already considered as oppressed due to the 'patriarchal' Hindu culture and religion, suffer most as a result of the 'exorcism rituals' that the godmen perform on them" (2015, 146). Their concern for women under oppressive patriarchal conditions is coupled, however, with a focus on women as the main proponents of superstition, too. According to an article titled "Women and Superstition" on the ANiS/MANS website, "There is no denying the fact that women are the worst victims of superstition in our country. At the same time they are the main agents who propagate superstitions most" (*ANiS/MANS,* n.d.). In another article, titled "Rites, Rituals and Festivals", the unnamed author, speaks to the "Other Worldly" outlook that characterizes the "Indian mind" due to a "weak psyche and intellectual inertia"; the author emphatically states that the society must "overcome this weakness and inertia and start thinking afresh about our customs and rituals and especially those rituals and religious observances forced upon our women to keep them chained within the four walls of the home" (*ANiS/MANS,* n.d.). Curiously, as with coronavirus-related goddess worship, rituals conducted by women that occur outside the home are also not acceptable under certain conditions. Thus, both Hindu nationalists and Indian rationalists participate in gendered

attributions of 'superstition' to women, a pattern that is reproduced in discourses surrounding coronavirus-related ritual practice.

4.3.5 The 'Epidemic' of Superstition

Charges of 'superstition' or '*andhviśvās*' are deployed against participants and practices devoted to coronavirus-related goddesses in various ways. One commenter distinguishes between these practices and legitimate belief, asking "believe in supernatural power god....but what is this superstition? (Commenter, *India Today,* May 2021). Another commenter uses the term to describe "our people", presumably referring to people living in India: "Our people live in superstition/blind belief [*andhvisvas*]" (Commenter, *ABP News*, June 5, 2020).[80] The term is also often used to delegitimize ritual practices devoted to coronavirus-related goddesses. For example, one commenter simply writes "hahaha only superstitious" (Commenter, *India Today,* June 8, 2021), referring to Coronā Devī practices in Tamil Nadu. This general strategy attempts to undermine any claims of authenticity, authority, and ritual efficacy associated with these practices.

Significantly, the set of terms related to 'superstition' are also rhetorically deployed in ways that construct the people and practices so labeled as having qualities of disease. Two examples from video comment sections exemplify this association:

- Brother, if there is any cure for blind devotees [*andhbhakton*], let me know (Commenter, *ABP News*, June 5, 2020).[81]

- THERE IS NO CURE FOR BLIND FAITH/SUPERSTITION (ANDHVISHWAS) AND BLIND DEVOTEES. (ANDHBHAKTO) (Commenter, *India Today*, May 20, 2021)[82]

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[80] My translation. Original text: "Apne yaha k log andhvisvas m jeete h".
[81] My translation. Original text: "भाई, अंधभक्तों का कोई इलाज़ हो तो ज़रूर बताना".
[82] My translation. Original text: "ANDHVISHWAS OR ANDHBHAKTO KA KOI ILAAZ NAHI".

These examples negatively imply that the ritual participants and their beliefs are like a disease that needs to be "cured". This discourse, which pathologizes participants and practices of coronavirus-related goddess worship as 'superstitious', is also present in the news media reports. Like the SARS-CoV-2 virus, "superstition…has affected rural and urban areas alike" (*The Telegraph,* June 6, 2020). Another article describes how "misinformation and superstitions are rampant" in a particular Karnataka village (*Asia Net News,* May 22, 2021). Similarly, in reference to Pardhi and other tribal groups, "superstitions abound among certain communities" (Pandey, *Times Now News,* September 3, 2020). In one Hindi-language news broadcast, images of women partaking in ritual are underlined with text that translates to, "The virus of superstition (*andhviśvās*) reached UP from Bihar!"[83] The newscaster explains that they are showing these images "so that the epidemic of superstition and rumours doesn't take a toll on the lives of the public". After providing some statistics on the number of hospitalizations and deaths in India, Bihar, and UP, he continues: "Faster than Corona though, superstition and rumours are spreading as an epidemic. This could prove dangerous for the country". Curiously, he urges people to raise awareness and urge governments to "immediately take solid steps", not to bolster access to healthcare facilities in rural areas as one might expect, but to "stop rumours circulating through mobile phones and social media and cure the epidemic of superstition" (*ABP News,* June 5, 2020).[84]

The discourse of superstition is thus one of perceived risk. It posits that the "epidemic of superstition" puts both country and the lives of its citizens at unnecessary risk. In its lack of concern for the health, safety, and social effects of the pandemic on the ritual practitioners

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[83] My translation. Original text: "अंधविश्वास का वायरस बिहार से पंहुचा यूपी"
[84] Thanks to Mr. Vineet Kumar for his translation of the speech in this video. The video is available to watch in full at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkkqsRnanfo.

featured therein, such discourse both moralizes and excludes ritual practitioners from being counted among those who matter. Mary Douglas (1992), in her exploration of risk, argues that "As soon as immorality is associated with infectious disease the syndrome of social exclusion is buttressed with accusations of causing insidious harm" (84). Difference, so constructed, contributes to yet another dimension of the processes of discursive 'othering', of which ritual participants are the targets. It constructs an 'us' that is threatened by an infected 'them', who are mostly poor, rural, women. Dimitrova notes how varying levels of "otherness" and exclusion can occur on multiple levels, including caste, class, and gender (Dimitrova 2014, 4), a pattern that is reproduced in the risk evaluations and discourses of 'superstition' pertaining to coronavirus-related goddess worship. Ritual worship of coronavirus-related goddesses is discursively set in opposition with science and biomedicine in media reports and comments. Consider the way this opposition between the ritual practices and science is subtly framed in this excerpt from the early stages of the pandemic:

> When the entire world is fighting against the novel coronavirus and the scientists are working to develop Covid-19 vaccine medicines, a large section of people in Assam have now started worshiping the deadly new virus as a 'Goddess' (Nath, *India Today,* June 7, 2020).

One possible reading of this passage pits the "entire world" – which supports a scientific resolution to the Covid-19 pandemic – against people in Assam partaking in worship of "the deadly new virus". In a sense, the ritualists are considered as 'other' due to their perceived allegiance with the 'enemy' with whom modern science is engaged in a "fight", again invoking metaphor with combative and militaristic undertones discussed above. The binary between science and ritual practice associated with the novel coronavirus is illustrated in comments as well, with one person declaring, "I am going to burn all medical books and scientific research

and simply follow #CoronaDevi. Let's try this alternate medicine" (Commenter, *iDiva*, May 20th, 2021).

The discourse of superstition is also paired with appeals to and contrasted with the authorities of science and biomedicine. The opinions of various experts – engineers, rationalists, and doctors – are invoked to add authority to the constructed opposition between 'superstition' and 'science'. An engineer from Mumbai is quoted, saying "Healing temples only have a placebo effect on people fostered by superstitions and traditions.[85] Therapies should be rooted in modern science and medicine, not mumbo-jumbo" (Lal, *SCMP,* May 30, 2021). Pandit Vinay Pathak of Muzaffarpur, identified as a rationalist, calls one ritual in Bihar a superstition, emphasizing "medical treatment to curb the infection;" Dr. Tribuvan Narayan Singh, a civil surgeon from Gopalganj echoes this view, calling ritual practices associated with Covid-19 "complete superstition" suggesting that "Corona is an epidemic and its medical treatment is necessary" (*The Bridge Chronicle,* June 7, 2020). In reference to coronavirus-related goddess rituals, civil surgeon, Dr. A. K. Pathak, said "Such worship is pure superstition and residents should not be involved." Additionally, Dr. Aninda Mandal, a doctor in charge of the infection control committee of Bokaro General Hospital in Jarkhand, is quoted saying, "Ignorance is bliss to the psychological stress of corona. But opinion is the medium between knowledge and ignorance. Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity" (*The Telegraph,* June 6, 2020). This contrasts significantly with devotees' various beliefs regarding ritual practice devoted to coronavirus-related goddesses, which are discussed in chapter 5.

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[85] According to the available data, none of the ritual participants purported to be engaging in these practices for 'healing' in a strict biomedical sense. Rather, common themes of 'protection,' 'support,' 'making a statement,' and appeasing an 'angry' goddess were invoked as reasons for undertaking ritual practice dedicated to coronavirus-related goddesses. I engage with the specific beliefs about coronavirus-related goddesses in chapter 5.

The biomedical focus is also present in the acute attention paid to public health

directives like social distancing and mask-wearing by some journalists and comment authors.

For example, comparing two descriptions of the same outdoor temple in Uttar Pradesh reveals

significant differences in characterization. The first describes how villagers are,

> highlighting the importance of Covid-19 protocol like the use of masks and social
> distancing while offering prayers at the temple. An idol, named 'Corona Mata', has also
> been placed in the open temple. The idol too wears a mask...devotees are not allowed to
> touch the idol. (Dixit, *Times of India,* June 11, 2021)

In the second example, before briefly mentioning the goddess' facemask, the unnamed author

writes that "all Covid protocols have gone for a toss as people continue to crowd inside the

temple to offer prayers and receive *prasad* from the priest" (*Indian Express,* June 13, 2021).

Though the reporters may have attended on different days and seen different behaviours, the

differences in description remain notable, including how it might be possible for people to

crowd inside an open-air temple consisting of a single wall.[86] A similar dynamic of moralization

regarding masks, social distancing, and vaccination is observable in another example:

> The reality that continues to elude the villagers is that Covid-appropriate behaviour
> and awareness – not blind belief – can break the chain of the Coronavirus pandemic.
> Note: Asianet News humbly requests everyone to wear masks, maintain social
> distancing and get vaccinated as soon as eligible. Together we can and will break the
> chain #ANCares #IndiaFightsCorona (*Asia Net News,* May 22, 2021).

Juxtaposed with the two hashtags that end this excerpt, India's fight against Covid-19 is linked

with the television network's expression of concern and in contrast to the potentially implied

uncaring disposition of the villagers. A final example, which describes "more than a dozen

spots" in a township of Jharkhand where "women have been performing puja in small groups

in the open", we are told that "there was no sign of social distancing or protection using

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[86] A photograph of the temple can be viewed at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/up-hundreds-pray-at-corona-mata-temple-to-ward-off-deadly-virus/articleshow/83439747.cms.

masks" (*Telegraph,* June 6, 2020). The attention paid to mask-wearing and social distancing is perhaps indicative of the symbolic meanings that these easily observable behaviours acquired over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic in India. To this, however, Qiaoan (2020) reminds us that the "symbolic meaning of masks, instead of being historically and/or culturally given, is reinforced due to messages from authorities – governments, media and health experts, in the name of science and value" (2020, 337). In the examples surveyed here, the symbolic value that these material and behavioural markers represent is mobilized as a marker of negative difference when their absence is publicly noted.

Contemporary Hindu nationalist perspectives of the relationship between science and religion illuminate dimensions of the discourse of 'superstition.' Banu Subramaniam (2019) describes the increasingly central role that scientific and medical discourses play in Hindu nationalist politics. This appears in part through biopolitical expressions of domination and processes of historical revisionism. Hindu nationalism uses the language and discourses of natural and biomedical sciences to justify various forms of domination. A syncretism between religious nationalist politics and biology contributes to a form of 'biopolitics' – a Foucauldian term that describes the ways in which political power not only governs but constitutes life and death – with distinct genealogies and expressions of life and time in the South Asian context (31). When applied to nationalist politics, this "bionationalism" is expressed as "the transformation of traditional ethnic nationalism, primarily of blood and group affiliation, into a biopolitical construct grounded in the biological and scientific" (Subramaniam 2019, 10). In the Indian context, Hindu nationalist discourses and ideologies become "scientized through biopolitical claims about gender, race, caste, and sexuality," (Subramaniam 2019, 10) justifying dynamics of domination using the language of the natural sciences. This is particularly evident

in the way science and history are reformulated in Hindu nationalist discourses. Imaginative

and creative narratives draw from Hindu mythology and contemporary natural sciences to

present a revised history of India and scientific innovation that serve to disrupt the presumed

antagonistic binaries between science and religion, ancient and modern, sacred and profane.

In some examples of creative interpretation, nuclear power, plastic surgery, and impressive

feats of aerospace engineering are read into ancient and authoritative texts like the Vedas, the

Rāmāyaṇa, and the *Mahābhārata*.[87] Subramaniam refers to the resulting construction as an

"archaic modernity" (2019, 7). Subramaniam demonstrates how these dynamics operated

during the Covid-19 pandemic:

> The supremacy of an ancient Hindu civilization is a potent backdrop to events unfolding
> on the ground during the pandemic. The government does not cede the ground of
> expertise solely to epidemiologists or medical experts; rather we see that the
> government plays a central role in mediating science and medicine through the claims of
> Vedic science and medicine. It is this melding of the past and present that so
> characterizes the unfolding of science and expertise in India. (Subramaniam 2021, 3)

The historical revisionism in which some promoters of Hindutva engage allows for a

presentation of a (Hindu) India which is at once ancient and advanced, timeless, and cutting-

edge, and where science and specific expressions of religion (e.g., Hinduism as *Sanatana*

dharma) are framed as part of the natural order. This order, of course, could be threatened and

disrupted by 'superstitious' practices which challenge these historical constructions and

threaten the unity of Hindu society forwarded by Hindutva ideologies.

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[87] One often-cited excerpt from a speech delivered by Prime Minister Modi in 2014 at a Mumbai hospital to a
group of doctors exemplifies this pattern: "We all read about Karna in the Mahabharata. If we think a little more,
we realize that the Mahabharata says Karna was not born from his mother's womb. This means that genetic
science was present at the time. That is why Karna could be born outside his mother's womb...We worship Lord
Ganesha. There must have been some plastic surgeon at that time who got an elephant's head on the body of a
human being and began the practice of plastic surgery" (Narendra Modi in Jaffrelot 2019, 175).

The relationship between science and history constructed in Hindu nationalist discourses form part of a broader set of dynamics relating to the presentation of history in general. Gittinger (2019) does not mince words when she argues that "*the historical presentation of India and its people is one of the most fundamental and manipulative aspects of Hindu nationalist ideology*" (2019:42, italics in original). Hindutva historical revisionism contributes to discourses of Hindu supremacy. It features centrally in a vision of India's former glory, which contemporary Hindutva ideologies and movements intend to restore (Subramaniam 2019). Furthermore, this presentation of history promotes a modulation and, at times, an erasure of diversity and heterogeneity of multiple traditions originating from India itself, including mainstream traditional systems of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH) (see Subramaniam 2021).

Relatedly, a discourse of 'newness' operates at times to variously distinguish goddesses associated with Covid-19 from Hinduism, and characterizes the goddesses as new in ways that denigrate Hinduism, and/or undermine the authority of the participants. One comment identifies ritual practices as a distinct religion, writing "this will be a new religion called #Coronaism" (Commenter, *iDiva*, May 20, 2021). Many comments describe the coronavirus-related goddesses as new, negatively associating Hinduism or Hindus in the process:

- Another newly born god added to Hindu history without proof and fact [laughing emojis]. (Commenter, *India Today,* May 20, 2021)

- Hahaha [laughing emojis] ur new god. (Commenter, *India Today*, June 8, 2021)

- Hahaha corona devi new God for cow people….. (Commenter, *India Today*, June 8, 2021)

- New God invent by Hindu. the corona mata [laughing emojis]. (Commenter, *Kanak News*, June 12, 2021)

The discourse of newness is combined with the discourse of ulterior motives in the following two examples:

- In times of crisis, even pandits like you can seize an opportunity, haha!... Introducing a new product to run your business according to the latest trends. (Commenter, *India today*, May 20, 2021)

- New God #CoronaDevi has been unveiled in the market. (Commenter, *One India*, May 21, 2021)[88]

These examples portray goddesses and ritual practices related to Covid-19 as new, ahistorically disregarding centuries-old traditions of goddess worship in times of disease. These commenters attempt to undermine the legitimacy of these practices precisely because they are deemed as new, that is 'not ancient', and commodified by exploitative actors. Thus, in one sense, compared to 'authentic' Hinduism, which is ancient and scientific, 'new' expressions of religiosity are inauthentic, merely superstitious, and invented for profit.

The carefully-crafted binary forwarded by Hindu nationalism – 'Hindu' science versus superstition – differs from the organizing principles most commonly employed by Indian rationalist groups, which generally mobilize a familiar binary that sets science in opposition with religion. Indian rationalist organizations view history in evolutionary terms, charting a progressive path "from a magico-religious outlook to a scientific and rational worldview, thereby opposing tradition and modernity" (Quack 2015, 139). They work to promote processes of modernization through education and other efforts of "secular disenchantment" (Binder 2019, 284). This contrasts with the efforts of Hindu nationalists presented above, which work simultaneously to make 'Hinduism' more scientific and make science more 'Hindu'. Writing for the ANiS/MANS website, Anther Sawant explains one of the challenges that rationalists face:

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[88] My translation. Original text: "मार्केट में नए भगवान #CoronaDevi का अनावरण हुआ है।"

> Ignorance may be curbed by proper education emphasizing scientific outlook. However, if the education itself is rooted in teaching traditionalism, blind faith in written and spoken words, and conservativism, it produces die hard believers. Such "educated" individuals are worse than the illiterate and ignorant. Having been brought up to believe what others have said or say, they not only lose their capacity to think independently but remain opposed to anything new which they have not read or heard during their educative period. (Sawant, "Challenges before Rationalists", *ANiS/MANS*)

Though Hindu nationalism and Indian rationalism are opposed in many ways, points of

congruence do nevertheless exist. In an article published on their website titled, "Rumours

About Us", the organization provides a detailed answer to the question, "Does ANiS/MANS

oppose only the Hindu religion?" (ANiS/MANS, n.d.). Surprisingly, appearing among a list of

Hindu social reformers critical of superstition, including heroes of caste-oppressed

communities, Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar, is also "Vir Damodar Vinayak Savarkar", one

of the founding Hindu nationalist thinkers and activists discussed above. Writing with a tone

of admiration, the unnamed author describes him as "one of the heroes of the independence

movement and more importantly from our point of view, eulogized by his followers as the

'Ruler of Hindu Hearts'". The article explains that,

> The exposition of the thorough pitiless scrutiny of religious books that he [Savarkar] undertook, illustrates the long tradition of Hindu social reformers who endeavoured to eradicate superstitions. The progressive Hindu re formative sects like the Prarthana Samaj, maintained that there is only one God and one needs no ritual and or sanction of the religious books to pray to him... (*ANiS/MANS,* "Rumours about us")

Later in the article, the author continues, situating the work of ANiS in relation to Savarkar's

thought:

> ANiS has vowed to help the majority of Hindus to become self reliant, free thinking, morally strong, modern human beings having a scientific temperament who will be able to compete with the rest of humans living in different parts of our world. Is this good or bad for the Hindus? And by the way since we believe in 'equality for all' irrespective of religion, cast [*sic*] or gender there are many non Hindu people from other religions who associate with us and who also want to emulate us to improve and reform their own religions and rid themselves of blind beliefs. It is a win win proposal for all humanity, so

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shed your apprehensions and join us if you 'really' 'care' for the welfare of the majority of Hindus. (*ANiS/MANS,* "Rumours about us")

Of course, there could be several reasons for ANiS/MANS's alignment with Savarkar's perspective regarding superstion. ANiS/MANS could be highlighting some of the ways that contemporary Hindutva views differ from these early writings with respect to views on religion and education. They could also be strategically demonstrating similarities that both groups share with the hopes of preventing any further attacks, like the fatal one against Dr. Dabholkar. Furthermore, ANiS/MANS could be legitimately inspired by these perspectives in their work regarding the eradication of superstition in India. Regardless, these excerpts help to illustrate some of the ways in which dimensions of both Hindu nationalist and Indian rationalist movements synergize vis-à-vis their understandings of and position towards 'superstition'. According to Quack, both groups "criticize beliefs and practices they consider superstitious and harmful, especially among 'tribal,' 'backward,' and 'illiterate' groups" (Quack 2015, 157). Where the two groups differ is in determining how and where the lines between legitimate religious belief and superstition ought to be drawn.[89] In the context of coronavirus-related goddess worship in India, both groups engage in discourses that construct certain subjects as 'superstitious' and who therefore require discipline and/or intervention.

4.3.6 Disciplinary Response

Ritual worship of goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus has been met with threats or acts of government, police, or vigilante disciplinary action. Some official responses have been formulated in terms of advocating for strict adherence to Covid-19 guidelines and awareness campaigns aimed at combatting superstition. Reacting to Coronā Devī *pūjā*s,

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[89] For an interesting discussion about how the Indian Supreme Court negotiates the distinction between sacred and secular practices, see Sen (2019).

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Assamese officials from the state Health Department, police, Social Welfare Department, and local NGOs have intensified awareness programs against "superstitious beliefs" associated with the Covid-19 pandemic (*News 18,* June 8, 2020). Regarding ritual activity dedicated to coronavirus-related goddesses in Jharkhand, "an administrative officer said the guidelines issued by the government should be followed strictly. He also stressed the importance of avoiding spreading such baseless rumours on social media" (*The Telegraph,* June 6, 2020). In some cases, appeals to authorities for disciplinary action were lodged by community members against ritual participants. We are told that, in Uttar Pradesh, "some local people have appealed to the district administration to stop such activities which spread superstition and misinformation" (*News 18*, June 8, 2020). One commenter argues that abuse against ritual participants is justified, writing that "if you do such work, people will abuse you" (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020).[90]

In some cases, police involvement has led to arrests of ritual participants and the demolition of temples of coronavirus-related goddesses. According to a government official in Uttar Pradesh, upon learning of a Coronā Mātā temple, "stern action" will be taken against ritual participants and anyone "found to be spreading misleading information about Covid-19" (Pandey, June 13, 2021).[91] This threat proved to carry weight: the Coronā Mātā temple was demolished after only five days. One person was arrested, and the Supreme Court dismissed a

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[90] My translation. Original text: "Ese kaam karo ge to log gaali hi denge".
[91] There are conflicting reports and allegations regarding who was responsible for the destruction of the temple. Villagers allege that it was police or government administration who demolished it, while the police allege that the temple was constructed on disputed land and one of the parties involved in this dispute was responsible. For media coverage of this incident see Dixit, *Times of India,* June 11, 2021; Pandey, *Deccan Herald,* June 12, 2021; *Reuters,* June 12, 2021; *The Indian Express,* June 13, 2021; *The Hindu,* September 10, 2021). For a Marxist analysis of this incident, see Harshvardhan and Goswami, *Madras Courier,* June 22, 2021. It is worth noting that the Chief Minister of UP, Yogi Adityanath, has earned the sobriquet, "Bulldozer baba," for his use of the machine as both a tool and symbol of heavy-handed governance (Narayan, *The Print,* June 17, 2022).

Public Interest Litigation (PIL) forwarded by one of the people involved in the construction. A Coronā Marāmmā temple was also razed by the administration of a district in Karnataka. A former *gram panchayat* (local political leader) was arrested and received a warning after admitting that she had participated out of "ignorance"; an official involved in the removal of the temple said that they did so because "it was illegal and was done based on superstitious beliefs" (Devaiah BP, May 25, 2021). Notably, the reasons given here – that the temple was destroyed both because it was illegal due to lockdown prohibitions and that its construction was motivated by superstition – indicate that superstition is a contributing factor for the discipline. Finally, at coronavirus-related rituals organized at a temple dedicated to the deity Gogulamma Thalli in Andhra Pradesh, "police rushed to the spot as soon as they heard about the gathering and dispersed the crowd"; the organiser was arrested and charged under the Disaster Management Act and "relevant sections of the IPC (Indian Penal Code)" (Pandey, *India Today,* May 24, 2021). Thus, state-sanctioned disciplinary responses were enacted against devotees in many occurrences of coronavirus-related goddess worship.

4.4 Construction of Authority in Media Reports

This chapter has thus far been concerned with the various ways that the authority of ritual participants and the authenticity of coronavirus-related goddess worship is undermined through discourses relating to superstition. Before concluding, I present some of the ways through which legitimacy of ritual practices devoted to these goddesses and their devotees are constructed in some media reports. This discussion anticipates the analysis of participants' narratives that follows in chapter 5. Cultural authority can be established, contested, and negotiated in a variety of ways, both online and offline. Juli Gittinger (2019) outlines both conventional and medium-specific legitimizing strategies for online representations of

Hinduism. Conventional legitimizing strategies include the use of academic research, religious scripture, and the subject position of the speaker, while online medium-specific strategies include: 1) qualitative features of presentation, 2) quantitative features of repetition, and 3) relational features of affiliation. She notes that online Hindu nationalist discourse avails both conventional strategies as well as medium specific ones, through websites that appear professionally designed (presentation), information appearing in multiple places (repetition), and the use of web domains, such as *.edu* or *.gov,* to indicate real or perceived relationships with institutional authorities (affiliation) (29). In this section I argue that in many cases, through the medium of online news articles, similar legitimizing strategies are employed to establish the authority of ritual practices devoted to goddesses associated with coronavirus.

Dimensions relating to Gittinger's categories of 'presentation', 'repetition', and 'affiliation' are present in the media reports. 'Presentation' is reflected in the professional design of all the news websites surveyed. They are laid out in a similar manner to other national and international media, which include various headings and subheadings, denoting topical categories like 'News,' 'Sports,' 'Economy,' 'Entertainment,' 'Lifestyle,' or regional categories like 'Local,' 'Mumbai,' 'National,' 'India,' 'Asia', or 'World.' Thus, for example, following the June 11, 2021, story about 'Corona Mata' rituals in UP, a reader will also find a story published the same day about a new Chief Justice being appointed to the Allahabad high court, an increase in liquor sales in government stores in Prayagraj, and a new Train Collision Avoidance System instituted by Indian Railways (Dixit, June 11, 2021). These stories are laid out in similar formats, accompanied by photos or a video clip, which a sense of equivalency in terms of journalistic authority. Furthermore, the use of hyperlinks expands the contexts with

which various elements of the news stories are associated, contributing to the appearance of

news stories as situated within complex relational networks (Gittinger 2019, 59).

'Repetition' is observable in at least three forms: through the multiple instances of novel

coronavirus-associated goddess worship, through the verbatim republication of articles or

sections of text across multiple news platforms,[92] and through referencing prior appearances

of coronavirus-associated ritual practice in the content. The following selection of references

will help to illustrate the use of repetition in narrative processes within some news reports:

- ...this isn't the first time people have resorted to shrines and other religious beliefs to ward off the deadly virus. Last year, a temple priest from Kadakkal in Kerala had also stationed an idol in front of his residence to save people from the outbreak. This seems a well-entrenched religious practice for decades now. (Chatterjee, May 20, 2021)

- This is the second temple dedicated to "Corona Devi' in South India. The first was at Kadakkal in Kollam district, Kerala. (*Economic Times,* May 22, 2021)

- There have been stray incidents during the first wave last year of groups, especially women, gathering to pray to a new goddess in different states; one priest even established a small Corona Devi temple in Kerala. But with the severity of the second wave and its greater spread in rural areas, this has become far more common over the last month. There have been reports of invocations of a new goddess in states like Uttar Pradesh; of prayers to a Coronamma in villages in Karnataka; large gatherings in Andhra Pradesh to appease a goddess named Gogulamma; processions to pray to a disease deity called Baliyadev; and one former gram panchayat member in Chamarajnagar district in Karnataka even established a shrine for Corona Mata only to find it razed by unenthused officials. Even in Bengaluru, Chief Minister BS Yediyuruppa was spotted offering prayers to Annamma Devi, a goddess who is believed to protect people from disease. (Bhutia, May 28, 2021).

- This is not the first temple dedicated to 'Corona Mata' to have been set up in the country. Earlier, similar temples have come up in Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore and Karnataka's Madhuvanhalli village. (*Indian Express,* June 13, 2021)

- Across India, people are worshipping female divine forms of the coronavirus, variously called "corona devi," or by other forms of respect such as "corona mata" (corona mother) or "corona mai." Incidents of idol worship or rituals to a coronavirus-inspired female deity have been reported from the southernmost states of Karnataka and Tamil

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[92] Some articles and sections indicate that they are syndicated or have contributions from other sources, such as the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) or Reuters, for example.

Nadu to Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Bihar in the north and Assam in the east, all apparently springing up organically and unrelatedly. (Dore, June 22, 2021).

Authority is constructed not only through repetition, but with reference to distribution situated in time (e.g., "last year," "earlier," "during the first wave"), narrated with reference to cardinal order (e.g., "first time," "second temple"), and distributed geographically (e.g., "across India," references to specific districts, cities, and states). Through these references, narrative histories of coronavirus-associated goddesses are discursively constructed. Finally, 'affiliation' can be observed through the associations with the media houses that publish the news stories. While most of the English-language news reports of coronavirus-related ritual practice do not establish affiliation through domain names (most are *.com* or *.in*, contrasting with Gittinger's observation of Hindutva organizations' use of *.edu* and *.gov*), most are published by well-known regional or national news media outlets, thereby lending affiliation through their brand statuses with varying degrees of consumer trust.

Regarding conventional forms of authority, four news pieces quote academics providing their expert opinion regarding Coronavirus-related ritual practice. A functionalist interpretation for ritual response to the pandemic is offered by B. N. Singh, a Professor of Sociology at Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Bihar University:

Whenever there is any trouble upon us, we all take refuge in God. On many occasions, faith takes the form of superstition. We are in the same situation. People have reposed faith in superstition to escape the corona epidemic. (*The Bridge Chronicle,* June 7, 2020)

Significantly, this interpretation does not disparage the practice as "superstition", but rather locates it as an expression of faith. For R. P. Mitra, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Delhi, visiting temples and appealing to deities for support are part of "the response template for traditional Asian societies" in epidemics:

> "These temples offer succour to their believers in times of fear, uncertainty and suffering created by deadly diseases," he said. "It can be called a supernatural complex. Devotees can desire to seek divine favours and still have faith in medical science as the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive", Mitra said, adding that in orthodox Asian societies the health of an individual is rarely seen in isolation but rather as part of a wider ecology, religion and the cosmos. "Be it traditional Chinese medicine or ancient therapies practised across countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal or India, religious beliefs have always been factored into traditional medicine," he said. (Lal, May 30, 2021)

In addition to relating coronavirus-related goddess worship to traditions within Asian religious contexts beyond India, Mitra conveys a stance espoused by some research participants explored in the following chapter: that religious faith and biomedical science need not be set in opposition with one another when understood in a wider social and spiritual context. This challenges the opposition between religious and scientific responses to the Covid-19 pandemic specifically, in addition to a range of shared environmental, epidemiological, and sociopolitical challenges. Harvinder Singh Bhatti, a retired professor of sociology at Punjabi University, Patiala, offers commentary regarding Śītalā's growth in trans-regional popularity (compared to other goddesses associated with disease) during smallpox epidemics. He also discusses Śītalā's origins, stating that she, "did not appear in the original Hindu pantheon. She probably originated as a folk deity who gradually became assimilated with Hinduism" (Bhutia, *Open,* May 28, 2021). Significantly, this perspective indicates a diachronic fluidity that many Hindu deities experience and factor in their acceptance by mainstream Hindu traditions. Finally, a statement from Dr. Pankaj Jain, head of Indic studies at FLAME University in Pune, highlights both another cross-cultural functionalist interpretation and the lack of central authority in Hinduism as arbiter regarding the authenticity of new deities. He explains that

> Since there is no one central authority to decide when and how to add new deities to the Hindu pantheon, it happens on its own whenever and wherever the need arises from the society... Goddess worshipping is an ancient tradition in Hinduism in India, Shinto in

Japan and many other indigenous traditions worldwide. When people feel the need for motherly love and care, they turn to goddess worshipping. (Dore, June 22, 2021)

Like Mitra, Jain's excerpt links goddess worshipping to another Asian religious tradition, extending this practice to Indigenous traditions around the world. It also de-privileges the authority of orthodox interpretations of Hinduism by suggesting that Hindu traditions involving worship of goddesses associated with disease predate Covid-19 and reflect a practice shared by many traditions beyond Hinduism, too. Of these four articles written by Indian journalists, two publications are located outside of India – *Religion News Service* (US) and *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong).[93] Significantly, none of the major national publications reviewed for this study cite experts lending legitimacy to the practices. Thus, through repetition, presentation, affiliation and, in some cases, the appeal to experts, several media reports contribute to the construction of both authority and authenticity of coronavirus-related goddess worship.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have analyzed the ways in which the authority and authenticity of coronavirus-related goddess rituals in India during the Covid-19 pandemic are both undermined and supported. I began with an analysis of discourses of 'superstition' and 'blind devotion' and how they are employed in strategies of delegitimization of ritual practices and

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[93] The two Indian publications include *The Bridge Chronical* and *Open* magazine. *The Bridge Chronical* is a Pune-based digital news website that appears to cater to an urban middle-class audience, publishing news stories about the economy and politics but also mental health, LGBTQ issues, and dating. The website appears to be either on publication hiatus or defunct, with the most recent article published January 2023. This story published here was syndicated by Indo-Asian News Service (IANS). *Open* magazine is a Delhi-based publication that has offices in several Indian cities. It was recently criticized for their disproportionate coverage of Modi and for furthering a pro-Hindutva narrative (Tiwari 2019). Additionally, *Cobrapost* journalist, Pushap Sharma (posing as one Acharya Atal), revealed that members of *Open's* advertising department were willing to accept money in exchange for publishing pro-Hindutva content aimed at exploiting communal tensions in the lead-up to the 2019 general elections. Other media houses who allegedly agreed to similar conditions include the *Times of India, Hindustan Times, New Indian Express,* and *ABP News 18,* among others (Jaffrelot 2021, 305). The transcript and video can be found at https://cobrapost.com/blog/%20Open%20Magazine/1050.

devotees. The polysemy of the term '*andh bhakt'* and its negative deployment by both Hindu nationalists and Indian rationalists against participants in coronavirus-related goddess worship reveals both tension and overlap between these two broad ideological positions. I then analyzed how charges of 'superstition' and 'blind devotion' are inflected according to caste, class, education, and gender. I then considered the ways in which the discourse of superstition relates with scientific discourses; in the context of Hindu nationalism, scientific discourse and ethno-political ideology have become increasingly intertwined, resulting in a binary between 'superstition' and 'science,' while in the context of Indian rationalism, the binary remains closer to the familiar 'western' modernist distinction between 'science' and 'religion'. Yet, the authoritative discourses forwarded by Hindu nationalism and secular rationalism synergistically overlap in the discourse of superstition as it is applied to practices and devotees of coronavirus-related goddesses. This has resulted in disciplinary responses at the community and state level. The negative valences ascribed by the discourses of 'superstition' and 'blind devotion,' which are applied to historically marginalized groups, suggests of yet another way in which the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing dynamics of social marginalization. And yet, in some news reports, processes of legitimization, which construct the authority and authenticity of coronavirus-related goddess rituals and devotees, can also be observed.

Chapter 5. Goddesses Associated with Coronavirus: Authority, Tradition, and Ritual

5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to present the narratives and dimensions of practices of participants in coronavirus-related goddess rituals, as reported in the media. First, though direct quotations from ritual participants pale in quantitative comparison with those of journalists, online commenters, and various quoted authorities like government officials, pandits, rationalists, and professors,[94] what is reported provides valuable insight into the motivations for undertaking ritual practice, relationships with Covid-19 and pre-existing goddesses associated with disease. The narratives also provide insight for the relationships between coronavirus-related rituals and the social, political, and historical contexts in which they are situated. These contexts condition the coronavirus-related rituals and, as I will suggest, the rituals are, in part, responses to contextual realities. Second, as none of the online comments are claimed to be written by ritual participants, similar dialogue that characterizes comment sections and social media responses is not available for analysis; therefore, further elaboration of some of the possible relationships and contexts aims in part to address this asymmetry. Lastly, since the analysis in this thesis has primarily focused on negative discourses about coronavirus-related rituals and participants, I have reserved this final discussion to center on participants' narratives.

Online discourse presents both challenges and possibilities vis-à-vis representations of marginalized voices. As Juli Gittinger observes:

> the proliferation of the internet and its accessibility allows for the possibility for authorities within religious institutions to be challenged, circumvented, or undermined

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[94] Quantitatively, the volume of words in direct quotations from ritual participants (1,558 words) comprises less than 7% of all words published in the written news reports (22,916 words). If we include comments from media reports (24,304 words), of which none are claimed to be written by ritual participants, this figure shrinks to 3% of the total number of words surveyed (47,220 words).

in that they no longer exclusively control symbols, information, or dialogue within the community...such representations in media can displace power and provoke shifts in the authority of religious institutions. (Gittinger 2019, 28-9)

Yet, despite the revolutionary potential of representations that challenge reified authorities, the online presentation of Hinduism also presents new forms of control, manipulation, and other forms of unintentional and intentional distortion. The presentation of participant narratives is one such site of possible distortion. Aditya Malik reminds us that "it is critically important to understand not only the intricate content of oral narratives but also their form, structure, delivery in performance and ritual, as well as who is telling them, for whom, and why they are being told" (Malik 2016a, 179). The data considered for this thesis are constrained by medium-specific limitations of online, English-language journalism. For example, many, if not all quotes from participants are likely translated from Hindi or various Indian vernacular languages; moreover, they are also selected by journalists and editors. Due to this and other limitations (e.g., word count constraints, censorship) of media journalism, they provide neither a comprehensive nor entirely reliable source of information. Additionally, the news reports provide little insight into the relationships between journalists and ritual participants. Several scenarios are conceivable: 1) that journalists learned of these practices in a given community impersonally or indirectly from mass texts, messages in a local WhatsApp group, or some other method of digital communication; 2) that journalists received a personal tip about coronavirus-related ritual practices from non-participants within the community; or 3) that journalists were requested by participants to report about the ritual practices. Of course, knowing this context for any report could strengthen the analysis of both the event and the corresponding media coverage of a particular ritual event. However, as this information is unavailable in all cases, I can only offer some possibilities to consider. If, in a particular

scenario, one of the first two possibilities applies to a given news report, we do not know the intentions of those who consented to be interviewed, photographed, or filmed. In instances where media coverage was requested, the suggestion that media exposure has a dimension of legitimating authority is even further strengthened.

Additional to the limitations of the journalistic medium, the absence of comments by participants precludes their dialogic participation in the online public sphere. Relatedly, Gittinger asks, "Are there local knowledge systems which are eliminated, marginalized, or subsumed on the Web? Or are those variations of Hindu tradition not even making it to the keyboard?" (2019, 28). Anthropologist Kathinka Frøystad notes an important dimension of an uneven digital divide that emerged during the Covid-19 lockdown in India. Approximately 500 million people had some form of online connection when the pandemic began, more than half of the population did not (Frøystad 2021).[95] To this discrepancy I would also suggest that linguistic differences may contribute to ritual participants' absence in the participatory forums of comment sections on English-language news reports. It is possible that ritual participants have engaged in online commentary on Hindi- or other vernacular-language news sites not surveyed in this thesis.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the narratives of coronavirus-related ritual participants conveyed within the news reports can be instructive in several ways. First, relating to questions of authority and authenticity, narratives that situate coronavirus-related goddesses in relation with pre-existing traditions of ritual response to disease implicitly, and

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[95] While wealthier temples could offer digital streaming of *pūjā*s, enabling them to continue collecting donations and employing temple workers, many poorer temples were either unable to or were not frequented by people with access to the internet. Thus, this "uneven digital divide", while asymmetrically limiting access to religious services during the pandemic, also contributed to material economic disparities. See Frøystad (2021).

in some cases explicitly, make claims of their legitimacy. So situated, they may therefore be read as challenges to delegitimizing discourses. Aditya Malik reminds us that,

> there is no "privileged" or singular view from which to judge and define what Hinduism is, even though the perspectives of both scholars as well as members of diverse Hindu communities may seek to appropriate the meaning and scope of the religion, thereby producing skewed, monolithic conceptions. (Malik 2016a, 183)

Following Malik's insight, one question that I explore in this chapter is, how do participant narratives surrounding Coronavirus-related ritual practice resist or counteract discourses that advance monolithic conceptions of the variety Malik identifies? Part of my analysis identifies and attempts to increase the visibility of associations with dimensions of Hindu traditions with which coronavirus-related goddesses and rituals share affinities. However, equally important to genealogical analysis are the points of discontinuity, disruption, and change which are also revealed. As we shall see, many coronavirus-related goddesses and ritual dimensions do share affinities with pre-existing goddesses associated with disease, like Śītalā and Māriyammaṉ. Nevertheless, the presence of these affinities should not, I argue, be read as simple identification with the pre-existing goddesses, unless explicitly indicated by ritual participants. Dilip Das explains that "the tracing of descent is not a search for the origin but the uncovering of affinities between practices that appear to be diverse and dispersed, of identifying their points of emergence" (Das 2019, 194). Foucault, describing the method of genealogical analysis he developed following Nietzsche, writes that "The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined as consistent with itself" (Foucault 1977, 147). Although I argue that resistance to the homogenizing and marginalizing tendencies of certain political and ideological projects considered in the previous chapter are present in the narratives and practices of ritual

participants, I am also cautious not to commit the error of reifying and homogenizing dynamic and diverse practices. The historical specificity of the Covid-19 pandemic in India presents specific conditions to which ritual practices of coronavirus-related goddesses provide varied responses.

In the first part of this chapter, I focus on the relationships between coronavirus-related goddesses and pre-existing traditions of goddesses associated with disease. I first consider the direct references made by ritual participants to these relationships. I then analyze plausible implicit relationships that appear in iconography, symbolism, ritual elements, and dreams, considered as sources of epistemic authority. In the second part, I turn towards ritual practice. I first consider *pūjā* as an available ritual form of which many coronavirus-rituals make use. I then consider narratives of participants regarding the stated reasons for performing ritual worship of coronavirus-related goddesses, identifying diverse and recurring themes. Penultimately, I consider some functionalist dimensions of coronavirus-related goddess practice, including the alleviation of fear, generation of collective solidarity, and structuring of disorder. Finally, I discuss coronavirus from a relational perspective as conceived by Michael Houseman (2006). I apply these insights to the ways in which coronavirus-related goddess rituals respond to marginalization according to class, gender, and inequitable access to healthcare, situating them within the critical dimensions of pre-existing traditions of goddesses associated with disease.

5.2 Relationships with Pre-existing Traditions

Coronavirus-related goddess worship draws on pre-existing modes of worship, divine figures, symbols, metaphors, and social relationships in diverse and creative expressions. While the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the Covid-19 disease and pandemic are new, goddess worship associated with various facets of epidemic disease and social disharmony is not. Hertzman et al. (2023) note how many communities in Asia have "mobilized diverse cultural tropes, narratives, and artifacts, including their repertoires of gods and demons, to make sense of the Covid pandemic" (1). Journalist Lhendup Bhutia, referring to coronavirus-related goddesses, notes that in some places, "the virus is being propitiated as a new manifestation of an existing goddess of disease; and in others, being worshipped as an entirely new goddess" (*Open,* May 28, 2021). The following sections describe dimensions of pre-existing traditions of goddesses associated with disease and other Hindu traditions through direct reference, iconography and symbolism, ritual forms, and epistemic techniques in online sources' representations of participants' perspectives and practices.

5.2.1 Direct References to Other Goddesses Associated with Disease

Several participants refer to pre-existing traditions of goddesses associated with disease directly, relating these traditions with their own ritual practices of coronavirus-related goddess worship in various ways. Māriyamma͟n, Śītalā, and Chechak Mātā are specifically invoked to provide context and legitimacy to the coronavirus-related goddess practices.[96] Journalist Sanchari Samanta explains how, according to Coronā Māī devotees in West Bengal,

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[96] Some journalists also offer their own context, drawing readers' attention to other deities associated with disease: Annama Devi, Hariti, Parnashavari, Erukamma, and Ajima (Bhutia 2021); Ola Bibi or Olai Chandi (associated with cholera), Mutyalamma, Pochamma, Peddamma, Nukalamma, Ankalamma (village deities associated with disease in Andhra Pradesh), Ghentu-debata (associated with skin diseases), and Raktabati (associated with blood infections) (Roychowdhury 2020).

"the Coronavirus is a creation of Shitala Devi, whom some cultures consider the goddess of relief. They pray to her to be cured of diseases such as smallpox and measles" (Samanta, June 10, 2020). That the novel coronavirus is seen as a "creation" of Śītalā suggests an intimate, though not identificatory, relationship with the pre-existing goddess. A priest at the Coronā Mātā temple in UP explains,

> We have earlier heard the name of 'Chechak Mata' (smallpox mother) who cured the disease. Similarly we have set up Corona Mata mandir with the belief that Mata would solve all the difficulties. We collected funds for the villagers...When plague and other deadly diseases like smallpox spread across villages and towns and killed many people years back, people also worshipped Chechak Mata. (In Dixit, *Times of India,* June 11, 2021)

Here, Chechak Mātā is invoked, situating Coronā Mātā in a pre-existing tradition of a goddess associated with disease. In other cases, the goddesses are not directly named but diseases to which a ritual response involving a deity are invoked for context. For example, elsewhere, the manager at the Kamatchipuri Adheenam temple notes, "We have had similar temples for smallpox, chickenpox and plague in the past" (*Al Jazeera,* May 27, 2021). Similarly, the Keralan priest explains that, "In Kerala, you have a deity for smallpox, another contagious disease, who finds place in some temples" (*The Hindu,* June 13, 2020). Here, an unnamed deity (perhaps Vāsurimālā, a popular Keralan goddess associated with smallpox) is invoked. These direct references situate coronavirus-related goddess worship in relationship with various recognized pre-existing traditions. The references suggest pre-existing goddesses as sources of inspiration for conducting the rituals and may contribute to framing coronavirus-related goddesses as authentic by linking them with tradition.

5.2.2 Iconography and Symbolism

Like many Hindu ritual and devotional traditions, those dedicated to goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus include both iconic and aniconic expressions. Historian

Megha Yadav observes that the iconographies of coronavirus-related goddesses closely follow the progression of more well-known Hindu goddesses. She writes that the iconography "begins in aniconic forms only to emerge shortly thereafter with iconic forms inspired by but not limited to the traditional iconography of traditional goddesses such as Durgā" (Yadav 2022, 10). From the available news reports, aniconic ritual practice is described in several places in north India. In West Bengal, when asked about Coronā Devī's appearance, women explained that "She is formless. She can be the wind that rattles their tile-roofed houses at night, the sun, the water in the pond nearby" (Samanta, *The Hindu,* June 10, 2020). Numerous ritual elements present in aniconic forms of coronavirus-related goddess worship can be identified which may suggest connections with pre-existing traditions of goddesses associated with disease. However, because the media reports include sparse detail, it would be inappropriate to draw definitive conclusions. As Axel Michaels reminds us:

> whether the act of 'pouring water' is performed to clean or consecrate a statue is not to be decided solely on the basis of these external, formal criteria, but also depends on modal criteria relating to individual or collective intentions and symbolically condensed meaning. (2016, 35)

Symbols are ambiguous and can have multiple meanings at individual and community levels. Here, I focus on north Indian coronavirus-related rituals because most of the reports describing aniconic forms of ritual practice occur in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Assam.

5.2.3 Aniconic Forms

Many north Indian coronavirus-related goddess rituals occur near bodies of water.[97]
Reports describe women gathering at ghats, rivers, and ponds, in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh,

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[97] In South India, water also features in different ways. In Karnataka, villagers mix cow dung with water to sprinkle around houses (*Asia Net News*, May 22, 2021). At the Kamatchipuri Adheenam, Coronā Devī figures are bathed in turmeric water and milk, both 'cooling' substances (*Al Jazeera*, May 27, 2021).

Jharkhand, and Assam. Several reports also mention water being offered in pots and holes dug in the ground into which water is offered, along with other ritual items like cloves, cardamom, *sindoor*, and flowers, and sweets like *laddoos* and *jaggary.* We also hear of devotees carrying pots of water to the outskirts of the village to conduct twice-daily *pūjā*s in Uttar Pradesh (Mishra 2021). Journalist Mukesh Ranjan describes a large group of women in Jharkhand who gathered on the banks of the Baanki river to perform "symbolic 'Chhath' puja in order to please 'Corona Mai' and get rid of hardships they are facing for the last two months" (Ranjan, *New Indian Express,* June 5, 2020). *Chaṭhpūjā* is normally undertaken by women. Among other practices, it involves spending extended periods of time in a pond or river. One of the reasons this *pūjā* is performed is to keep disease away (Ferrari 2015a, 13).[98] Significantly, the cooling properties of water and other ritual elements feature in numerous healing and devotional traditions relevant to this study.

Śītalā is a preeminent north Indian goddess associated with disease. Her name means "the Cool One", and she is intrinsically cool by nature; she is "born of cooled ashes and is heated only when angry or when heated by others. Even then she seeks coolness. And she retains her own inner nature of coolness by burning the sins of her devotees, thus expending

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[98] This journalist's naming of the ritual the women performed is interesting. *Chaṭhpūjā* is normally undertaken during the months of Kartika (October-November) and Chaitra (March-April), with the former being more important (Singh 1992, 33). Though the date on which this *pūjā* was undertaken is unknown, the article was published on June 5, 2020, and it is possible that it coincided with the *Chaitra* ritual, that the local ritual was delayed due to the lockdowns, or that it was performed as an ad hoc event. The *pūja* is dedicated to Sūrya (the Sun), involves ritual fasts (*vrata*), and has been associated with Śītalā (Ferrari 2015a, 13). Significantly, it is also in part undertaken for the goddess Chhathi or Ṣaṣṭhī, meaning "six," which is associated with the sixth part of Prakṛti after she was divided from Puruṣa in the Brahmavaivarta Purana (Badikilaya 2019, 74) and with the Kartika Chhath Puja taking place on the sixth day after Dīvālī. The accepted Sanskrit name for this goddess is Ṣaṣṭhī, though she is also referred to by other vernacular names and spellings such as Chathi, Shet, or Shete (Samuel 2005, 279n.2). She is associated with the protection of children. Wadley (1980) submits that Ṣaṣṭhī is the source for Śītalā's association with the protection of children outside of West Bengal (35).

her own heat" (Wadley 1980, 57).[99] Śītalā is also offered cool water and uncooked or stale food (Ferrari 2015a, 36n.28). She is associated with lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, rain, and the alleviation of fevers. Among other iconographic attributes, she carries a vessel full of water (Wadley 1980, 35). A Śītalā temple near Patna, Bihar, has a well whose water is never drunk but is venerated during the hot summer months (Jash 1982, 192). In some versions of her *vrata* (ritual fasts), devotees are instructed to bathe with cold water and offer sweets and pulse cakes (Wadley 1980, 40).

A recurring reference to the number seven (and sometimes nine) is likely significant. In several news reports, we are told that seven holes are dug, into which multiples of seven cloves, *laddoos,* and other ritual elements are offered. For example, it was reported that "Seven pits were made and after lighting incense, jaggery and sesame along with 'laddoos' and flowers were buried in the ground" (*Bridge Chronicle*, June 7, 2020). Ferrari notes that when Śītalā is worshiped in an aniconic form, she often appears in groups of seven goddesses who are called by different names. They are sometimes called the seven sisters (*sāt bhagiṇī*), seven ladies (*sāt bibi*), seven virgins (*sāt kanya*), seven mothers (*sāt mā*) or seven Caṇḍīs (*sāt caṇḍī*). Heptads of goddesses associated with disease and the protection of children are common in north India. They may be worshiped in various forms, including round stones, pitchers or pots of water, icons resembling heads, coconuts, or wooden posts. Occasionally they are accompanied by two attendant guardian deities, Bhairava and Caṇḍīs, bringing their number to nine (see Ferrari 2015a, 42-52).[100]

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[99] Māriyammaṉ also shares associations with the cooling properties of rain and water (see footnote 7 above). Because the examples explored here are from North India, the traditional domain of Śītalā, I primarily focus my analysis for this section on her.

[100] Freed and Freed note seven goddesses associated with both disease and the protection of children in their field notes: *Śītalā* (associated with smallpox), *Masani Mātā* (cremation grounds (*masan*), emaciation), *Khamera Mātā* (measles), *Khasra Mātā* (itches, scabies, and other exanthemata), *Marsal Mātā* (mumps), *Phul ki Mātā* ("The

References to ritual practice dedicated to coronavirus-related goddesses occurring near

large trees – and beside *nīm* trees (margosa, *azadirachta indica*) in particular – are also

potentially significant. Regarding the role of wooden posts in a festival ritual for Māriyammaṉ,

Beck observes "the importance of cosmic pillars (and trees) in broader Hindu mythology.

Whatever or whoever sits on a post or pillar is symbolically lifted toward the sun and toward

the source of rain water" (Beck 2014, 40), which implies a connection between trees and

sources of both heat and cooling rains. Women conducted rituals under unspecified trees in

Jharkhand (*News 18*, June 8, 2020) and Assam (Abraham 2020). In Bihar, women also worshipped

Coronā Mā under a banyan tree, a tree which bears numerous associations with fertility,

healing, and mythic significance (Lal 2021). Smoke from *nīm* leaves is involved in ritual

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Flower Mother," boils and large skin eruptions), and *Kanti Mātā* (typhoid). They also include discussion of *Chaurahewali Mātā* ("The Crossroads Mother"), who is not included in villagers' lists of the Seven Sisters of disease, but who is propitiated for general welfare of children and any illness (1998, 124-5). Ferrari (2015a) notes that variations in number and names of goddesses comprising similar heptads in north India are "countless" (43). Other notable examples include the *Sat Apsaras* of Maharashtra, benevolent water nymphs who promote fertility (Harper 1989, 34), and a composite female deity from Rajasthan singularly named *Sātobahin,* who provides women with both an example and the means of negotiating complex and multiple identities as both mothers and sisters, wives and daughters (Lambert 1994, 23). In addition to the Seven Sisters of Disease, Freed and Freed (1998) note the significance of the number seven in the festival for (usually) married women for the protection of children known locally as Sili Sat (Cold Seventh) or Shitala ki Saptami (Shitala's Seventh) (122-36), and the recurrence of the number seven in stories recounted during another women's festival called Karva Chauth (Pitcher Fourth), locally dedicated to the long lives of husbands but elsewhere also relating to the relational tensions women experience in married life (63-70). Mr. Vineet Kumar, a resident of Bihar, who graciously provided translation help and insight pertaining to the handful of Hindi-language news videos that I have included in my analysis, independently suggests that the numbers seven and nine represented by the *laddoos* in one news video are representative of the local heptad of goddesses (*sapta mai* or *sapta dev*), who are sometimes accompanied by *Bhairo* and the *cheriya*. These suggestions largely align with Ferrari's (2015a) observations. Kumar also notes that women in one video sing, "take away the heads, O Maiya"; he hypothesizes that the *laddoos* could also therefore be votive offerings to the goddess, symbolising human heads (Kumar, personal communication, October 26, 2022; for video see *APB News,* June 5th, 2020). In more mainstream manifestations, we find the *Saptamātṛkās*, a collection of seven goddesses (though, they sometimes number more, and are also at times and in different places and contexts referred to as the *Aṣṭamātṛkās* when they number eight), which likely drew from folk traditions in their development between the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, had become relatively consolidated and sanctioned by orthodox Hinduism by the 5th century CE (Harper 1989: 73). David Kinsley suggests that "it is quite likely that the *Mātṛkās* of the Hindu literary tradition beginning with the *Mahābhārata"* may be identified with local and village goddesses associated with disease and "who are so central to the religious life of most Hindu villagers" (Kinsley 1997, 160).

practice devoted to a coronavirus-related goddess in Karnataka (*Asia Net News*, May 22, 2021) and the Coronā Mātā temple in Uttar Pradesh was established under a *nīm* tree (*Indian Express,* June 13, 2021)*. Nīm* is regarded as having healing properties in many Indian folk healing systems. It is considered cooling and is used in the worship of Śītalā with regularity. In the treatment of smallpox, Wadley (1980) notes that the "*nim* (margosa) tree is thought to be intrinsically cooling and using its branches and leaves to cool patients – and hence the goddess – is common" (Wadley 1980, 56). *Nīm* branches came to signify the presence of smallpox in a household and in this way also aided in the eradication of smallpox in South Asia (Ferrari 2015a, 58). Wadley relays a translation of a song from Nagpur District, Maharashtra in which Śītalā, coolness, and the *nīm* tree are associated:

> Cow's urine; a branch of a *nīm* tree,
> Bayya, fan (my child) gently, Oh Mother Mata.
> Mother Mata's house is under a *nīm* tree,
> Please make the shade cool, Oh Mother Mata. (Wadley 1980, 57)

Though not conclusive, the presence of *nīm* trees in coronavirus-related rituals could be indicative of a relationship with the healing traditions of Śītalā or other folk goddesses associated with disease.

Finally, in several reports, the ritual items are then buried in the ground. One Coronā Māī devotee in Jharkhand explains that "By offering puja we can bury the virus in the ground. If the goddess blesses us, we will come to no harm" (*Telegraph,* June 6, 2020). Ferrari (2015a) notes how discussions of healing rituals in the *Atharvavedasaṃhitā* (c. 1000-800 BCE) describes rituals for dispelling harmful deities and demons:

> Demons are feared, but also equated to the gods...for their capacity to heal...Since they cannot be destroyed, they are transferred into the bodies of animals, into water, under the ground, or into the bodies of competitors, enemies, or faraway people. (Ferrari 2015a, *xxi*).

Burying does not appear to be a well-documented practice associated with Śītalā.[101] However, we may analyze this practice from another perspective regarding the act of dispelling a malevolent non-human being. One journalist explains that all ritual items "are buried in the hole, as they [the devotees] believe the virus is thus buried underground and will not return to infect their families" (*Telegraph,* June 6, 2020). Ferrari (2015a) notes an important difference between the Śītalā who features in living devotional traditions in north India and the goddess portrayed in the *Śītalāmaṅgalkāvyas* (ŚMKs), a collection of literary works produced in nineteenth century Bengal which, he argues, presents a version of Śītalā that departs significantly from devotional traditions.

The Śītalā of living devotional traditions is overwhelmingly viewed as an auspicious and benevolent deity. She is not usually seen as the deification of smallpox but rather as a remover of many forms of illness, specifically through her thermal qualities of coolness. Her powers also extend beyond the healing of illness as "she controls and heals from imbalances that express themselves through unnatural states of hotness (e.g. disease, misfortune and environmental catastrophes)" (Ferrari 2015a, 4). The Śītalā of the ŚMKs is seen as capricious and violent; in this representation "the more Śītalā is distant, the more likely humans and gods are to avoid contagion. This is the reverse of ritual praxis, when Śītalā is invited to stay, her awakening guarantees protection" (Ferrari 2015a, 124). This suggests several possibilities which may be relevant for the interpretation of coronavirus-related goddess worship. In the examples presented above, various understandings of the desirability of the presence of coronavirus-related goddesses can be observed – in some devotees are attempting to persuade

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[101] In a festival ritual dedicated to Māriyammaṉ in Tamil Nadu, Beck (2014) observes that, following a local myth, Māriyammaṉ's demon lover is beheaded; this is ritually enacted through the sacrifice of a goat, whose head is buried in a nearby hole specifically dug for the ritual (Beck 2014, 40).

her to leave and, in others, it is the virus that is dispelled through burial while the goddess'

blessings or protection are requested. The data does not provide enough information to draw

definitive conclusions and a detailed analysis of each of the local traditions is well beyond the

scope of this thesis. However, differences regarding how the presence of the goddess is

conceived by devotees as either desirable or undesirable are significant and noteworthy.

5.2.4 Iconic Forms

Iconic presentations of goddesses associated with Covid-19 vary. In Maharashtra, a

modest temple consisting of a raised platform with "a few picture frames...atop a stone base,

making it appear like a small temple" is described (Pandey, *Times Now News,* September 3,

2020). No details regarding the pictures are provided. A video from a village in Karnataka

shows Coronā Devī at the centre of a *pūjā.* She has three eyes on a flat, yellow stone (*pratima*),

and is surrounded by yellow and white flowers (*Asia Net News,* May 22, 2021). In Tamil Nadu, at

the Kamatchipuri Adheenam, two *mūrti*s have been established. One is made of sandalwood (*Al

Jazeera*, May 27, 2021) and the other of black granite (*News 18*, May 20, 2021). The larger *mūrti*

sits upon a yellow base. She has a fair complexion and flowing black hair. She wears a red skirt

with gold trim and a garland of skulls (*kapālamālā*). She has two yellow hands: in her right she

carries a *triśūl;* her left palm is flat, facing towards the camera and her fingers are pointing

down in *varadamudrā,* a gesture signifying the granting of boons. In front of her sits the black

granite *mūrti*, whose features are difficult to distinguish. Both are set in front of a *havan,*

striped yellow and red.[102] These colours are reproduced in the markings on the stone idol's

forehead, with a smaller red circle surrounded by a larger yellow one. In some images, three

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[102] Beck (1969) discusses the significance of yellow and red in temperature associations prevalent in South Indian ritual. While red is associated with heat and is the colour of "fertility, vigour, and the life processes in general" (559), yellow is associated with cooling processes and substances like turmeric.

cephalomorphic figures with disfigured faces, drooping eyes, disheveled hair, and fangs, rest at their feet, while in others what appears to be a cracked coconut can be seen (Koushik, *Indian Express,* May 19, 2021). No information is provided regarding the significance of these heads. One commenter offers their interpretation, writing: "I think 3 heads represent 3 different variants" (commenter, *The Print,* May 21, 2021). In Shuklapur, UP, the "Coronā Mātā *mandir*" is constructed in the shade of a *nīm* tree. The goddess is wearing a red sari with gold trim, a green facemask, and a white headpiece resembling a crown.[103] She stands against a bright yellow wall.[104] Instructions hand-painted in red Devanagari script read: "Please offer only yellow-coloured flowers, fruits, cloth, metal, sweets, *ghanta* [bell] or other things…" (*Kanak News,* June 12, 2021).[105] Journalist Kapil Dixit reports that, in addition to seeking Coronā Mātā's protection from Covid-19, "they are also highlighting the importance of COVID-19 protocol like the use of masks and social distancing while offering prayers at the temple" (Dixit, *Times of India,* June 11, 2021), connecting this goddess with the theme of 'creating awareness'. Relatedly, Ferrari argues that, despite the popularization of her epithet as the "smallpox goddess" Śītalā is perhaps better conceived as a "goddess of hygiene" (2015a, 23).[106]

Yadav suggests that, though images share similarities due to borrowing from pre-existing iconographies, the differences between the goddess images in Tamil Nadu and Uttar

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[103] Śītalā wears a crown in standard iconography (Ferrari 2015a, 75).

[104] Harper (1989) observes that a North Indian goddess associated with disease, *Basanti*, is also called the "Yellow Goddess" (35). Relatedly, 'vasant' means the spring season, and "*vasanta rog", the '*spring fever' is frequently associated with smallpox. In the ŚMKs, Śītalā is called Vasanta Rāy (Queen of the Spring) (Ferrari 2015a, 3).

[105] "कृपया पीले रंग का ही फूल, फल, वस्त्र, धातु, मिठाई, घंटा, अथवा अन्य चोजों चदायों…". Thank you to Mr. Vineet Kumar with his help in translating the Hindi in this video.

[106] Ferrari (2015a) writes that "The worship of Śītalā is not just functional to protection. It has served for centuries to learning and disseminating basic hygienic norms for the wellbeing of the household" (1). Some hygienic norms associated with Śītalā include household sweeping, constraints regarding washing the clothing of sick individuals, prophylaxis through variolation, and techniques to reduce fevers. Additionally, after the eradication of smallpox in India in the mid 1970s, both rituals devoted to Śītalā (*Śītalāpūjā*) and many associated hygienic practices persisted (Ferrari 2015a, 140).

Pradesh are due to "the spontaneous variations inherent to the goddess and her cult" and the specific "cultural context in which her images are produced" (Yadav 2022, 8). However, evidence of individual creativity also exists. For example, the iconography of Coronā Devī in the home of the Keralan priest is highly unusual in form: created from 'thermocol' (like Styrofoam) and sitting upon a "*pallival*", she takes the form of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, spherical in shape and covered in red protein spikes (*The Hindu,* June 13, 2020).[107] She is accompanied by images of Krishna, Shiva, and Kali (Dore 2021), situating her in relation to established Hindu deities.

This discussion of some iconographic and symbolic dimensions of coronavirus-related goddesses suggests the plausibility of implicit relationships with the traditions of Śītalā and Māriyamman̲ in some cases. Moreover, like Śītalā and Māriyamman̲ and their respective relationships with epidemic disease, coronavirus-related goddess worship could be related to social dimensions of the Covid-19 pandemic which extend beyond a biologically reductive view of Covid-19 infection. Indeed, evidence exists that ritual activities are partially in response to larger social dynamics of inequality and asymmetrical distributions of wealth, healthcare, and risk. I will return to this discussion shortly.

5.2.5 Novel Goddesses?

Regarding news reports on coronavirus related goddess rituals from rural areas of Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar, Frøystad notes that the

> offerings consisted of flowers, sweets, vermillion powder, jaggery, incense sticks, cardamom seeds, and cloves. Though Śītalā/Mariamman traditionally require blood sacrifice, the women's preference for Brahmanically pure (*sattvik*) offerings indicates that they were either partially Sanskritized or conscious of appearing on public television" (2021, 7 n.1).

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[107] A photo of this Coronā Devī may be seen at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/just-one-devotee-for-corona-devi/article31816062.ece

Frøystad's astute observation about processes of Sanskritization and public perception regarding animal sacrifice (*balidān*) is plausible. Ferrari observes similar processes occurring in ritual practices devoted to Śītalā, noting the

> downgrading of ancestral ritual and devotional practices (e.g. animal sacrifice, possession and austerities) is an indicator of a process that, in the long run, has determined a considerable shift in the way devotees respond to, and represent, Śītalā. Worship is being adapted to global ethical discourses and the dominant *vaiṣṇava bhakti*. Vernacular ritual know-how is being eroded, and the intense physical devotion that still features in scheduled celebrations...is increasingly criticized. (Ferrari 2015a, 160)[108]

Such dynamics are observable in at least one instance of coronavirus-related goddess rituals, in which ritual sacrifice involving a chicken and a goat in Maharashtra was met with swift responses from police and NGOs and was labeled as a "shocking incident" (Pandey, *Times Now News,* September 3, 2020).[109] To Frøystad's observation that the absence of *tamasic* offerings like alcohol and meat may be due to participants' consciousness of the media, we may also add the possibility that such offerings were in fact present, though journalists chose not to report on them. Given the constraints on ethnographic research during the Covid-19 pandemic, we cannot know what was not reported. Nevertheless, Frøystad's observations also raise another question for which we can turn to the media reports: do ritual participants regard any

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[108] However, it should also be noted that Śītalā also has long-standing associations with royalty and high status, suggesting a complex set of dynamics pertaining to social status (Ferrari 2015a, 3). Patricia Dold (2004) notes a similar set of dynamics at Kamakhya, a temple and pilgrimage site in Assam: "Though the boundaries and precise nature of the little and great traditions are highly debatable, it is clear that there were and are attempts on the part of the great tradition to Sanskritize local belief and practice; to incorporate and reinterpret local traditions with an authoritative, self-identified orthodoxy. But the so-called little traditions are more than mere passive objects of such manipulations. They also appropriate transformed elements of what they perceive to be the orthodoxy. As well, local traditions themselves forged links to pan-Indian religious structures – to texts, to Sanskrit as a sacred language, to priestly or brahmanic status – to legitimate themselves and to claim a place in a larger tradition to carry authority and power" (Dold 2004, 90).

[109] Additionally, it is possible that expressions of *bhar*, a form of invited 'possession', and *daṇḍavat* (a form of ritual procession) occurred but were not reported. Regarding *daṇḍavat,* Sen (2021) observes that Śītalā devotees performed this ritual for the Covid-19 pandemic in West Bengal.

coronavirus-related goddesses and associated rituals as new or distinct? And if so, in what senses?

These questions are addressed in several statements provided by ritual participants. The temple manager at Kamatchipuri Adheenam in Tamil Nadu, situates Coronā Devī and her associated practices as both new and related to older traditions. Referring to a nearby Plague Māriyammaṉ temple, he explains:

> When people were suffering from the plague and other deadly diseases a few centuries ago, they had started worshipping the god, who they believed could only help them during the difficult times. Later, the place where they worshipped the god was turned into a temple. Similarly we have created and consecrated Corona Devi – a black stone idol that is about 1.5ft long. We strongly believe that the goddess will protect people from COVID-19. (Temple Manager, in Chatterjee, *iDiva,* May 20, 2021)

Here, Plague Māriyammaṉ is invoked to justify the 'creation' – a term suggesting novelty – and consecration of Coronā Devī; this framing implies that, according to the temple manager, she is a new deity who has been established according to traditional custom.

Explicit references to any of the coronavirus-related goddesses as 'new' are scant in direct quotations from ritual participants. The Keralan priest provides an exception, explaining that Coronā Devī is "a new addition to the pantheon of 33 crore [330 million] Hindu gods" (*The Hindu,* June 13, 2020). Though the individual identity of this goddess is new, he frames her appearance with reference to Hindu mythology: "According to Hindu mythology, God is omnipresent, and even exists in the virus. Worshipping a virus as devi is not an alien custom for us" (*The Hindu,* June 13, 2020). Finally, anticipating critics' objections to his ritual activities, he assures that "It is no attempt to mock anyone and all pujas will be done with utmost dedication" (*The Hindu,* June 13, 2020). The priest's awareness that some people may take offence to his activities, and his commitment to undertaking the rituals with respect, is noteworthy in the context of contemporary religious politics in India. Finally, a devotee at the

Coronā Mātā mandir in Shuklapur village, Uttar Pradesh, describes how Coronā Mātā came to

be established in their village:

> We were sitting together in the morning. And casually we started talking about how so much havoc there is from corona in our country. What should we do? How to resolve it? For this, we thought, okay, let's get a *mūrti* of Coronā Mātāji made and bring it to establish it here. Who knows? Maybe through this, through the *āśīrvād* (blessings, divine grace) of Coronā Mātā, the residents of our village, or anybody else, all get a little relief. (*Kanak News*, June 12, 2021)

Although not directly commenting on whether Coronā Māta is a new goddess, her description

explaining how the idea arose to construct her *mandir* illuminates one of the many ways in

which a new temple can be established, that is, by community members to address problems

that arise within the community. When asked by the reporter how the *pūjā-pāṭh* (*pūjā*

including devotional recitation) is performed, she continues:

> We bathe in the morning and after bathing, we come here. There is *jal* (water) here. Then, after, we wash our hands and feet well with it. We come here and burn *dhoop* (incense), *battī* and all for the Mātā and offer prasad to her. Everyone does *ārtī* together, like *pūjā*s done for every god and goddess. Similarly, her *pūjā* is done in a common matter. There is no separate way to do her *pūjā*. It's obvious that everyone is outcry [*sic*], everyone is afflicted with horror; kids, the elderly – there is fear in everyone, imprisoned at home. This way we thought that we should establish Mātā in our village. Who knows? Maybe it will make her happy and her *āśīrvād* will remain over our village. (*Kanak News*, June 12, 2021)[110]

This devotee's description of Coronā Mātā *pūjā*s as "common" and not performed in a

"separate way" highlights one way in which pre-existing ritual forms can be adapted to new

situations. Michaels, drawing from the *Pūrvamīmāṃsā* theory of ritual, argues that rituals

"preserve what is old, which cannot be touched. In this way acquired knowledge and abilities

are also preserved without their usefulness forever having to be legitimated anew; they can be

more or less summoned on demand and are available as techniques in whatever new context

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[110] I am indebted to Mr. Vineet Kumar for his help with this translation from Hindi.

might call for them" (Michaels 2016, 318). Applied to the new context of the Covid-19 pandemic, ritual techniques that long predate the novel coronavirus are mobilized by devotees in Shuklapur, drawing from inherited knowledge to help navigate and resolve the challenges presented by the pandemic.

5.2.6 The Tradition of New Traditions

New traditions in Hinduism can be conceived in two ways: 'invention' and 'reinvention'; the former can refer to processes in which new deities are created while the latter involves pre-existing deities coming to serve roles with which they were previously not associated.[111] Reinvention, also sometimes called innovation or change when applied to ritual, occupies an important place in Hindu tradition. Axel Michaels (2016) notes that, in Hindu ritual tradition,

> The new is an integral part of rituals…The Pūrvamīmāṃsā even called the new unseen result of ritual *apūrva*[112] – "the unpreceded" … However, it is also a fact that new parts in rituals are often denied or played down. Sanskrit ritual handbooks generally do not mention such alterations. One often hears the argument that rituals are there right from the beginning…and that they have always been alike, neglecting the fact of many modifications and innovations. (Michaels 2016, 24)

Michaels' suggestion that both the recognition of new elements and their denial are part of Hindu ritual tradition is a striking perspective in the context of coronavirus-related ritual practice and associated criticism. This is especially significant when considering tensions between discourses that situate 'true' Hinduism – often identified with Sanskritic authority – and forms of 'folk' or 'popular' Hinduism, to which coronavirus-related ritual practices may be characterized as belonging.

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[111] A volume edited by Sree Padma (2014), *Inventing and Reinventing the Goddess: Contemporary Iterations of Hindu Deities on the Move,* provides an excellent selection of case studies related to these processes.
[112] Michaels notes that *apūrva* usually refers specifically to "the unseen result or efficacy of sacrifice" (Michaels 2016, 229n2).

Regarding Hindu deities, the 'invention' of new goddesses has notably occurred in other

instances of new epidemic diseases.[113] The 1896 plague epidemic in India prompted the

emergence of plague-related goddesses including Bombai Mai in Gaya, and both Plague-Ammā

and Urammā in South India. Significantly, though goddesses associated with diseases like

smallpox and cholera existed in these communities, plague was perceived differently. Dilip

Das, following Arnold, argues that before plague "could be assimilated into the existing disease

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[113] Conditions for the emergence of 'new' deities include not only the impact of new diseases but also popular culture, politics, and quotidian experiences of risk. A film released in 1975, titled *Jai Santoshi Maa* (*Victory to the Mother of Satisfaction!*), introduced *Santoṣī Mā*, into popular consciousness. Soon after, a widespread devotional practice emerged (Pintchman 2018, 28). In one community, she went from having no presence to becoming extremely popular in the span of 20 years, gaining a following of devotees who would fast every Friday out of devotion to her (Freed and Freed 1998, 141-4). In another community, Stanley Kurtz reports that many older devotees he interviewed confirmed that she was not worshipped in their community in their childhoods, "when asked about Santoshi Ma's novelty, informants rebelled at the question's implication that a new goddess is also an artificial or humanly created goddess … [implying that] God is omnipresent and eternal. Because God is thus, to speak of a particular form of the divine, like Santoshi Ma, as something new makes no sense. Santoshi Ma is simply part of the everpresent Deity" (Kurtz 1992, 2). This example demonstrates the persisting theme of divinity's paradoxical, though theologically consistent, expression through unity and multiplicity discussed earlier. Temples are also regularly built in dedication to or deification of historical figures, both living and deceased. In 1974 a temple dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi was built in Sambalpur, Odisha by Dalit MLA Abhimanyu Kumar, who considered him the "God of Dalits" (*Hindustan Times*, October 2, 2019). Temples dedicated to political figures like former president of the Indian National Congress Sonia Gandhi (*New Indian Express,* December 15, 2013), current Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi (*The Hindu,* February 12, 2015), and former U.S. President Donald Trump (*New York Times,* October 15, 2020), have featured in the news in recent years. At Belur Math, a temple built upon the place where Swami Vivekananda was cremated, opened in 1924; it features a marble relief of his likeness on the first floor and a marble image of Om – a sacred symbol denoting numerous facets of divinity - on the second (*belurmath.org,* n.d.). Similarly, in the sense of processes of deifying abstract concepts – in this case, nationalism, geography, and religion – Bhārat Mātā is the deification of India herself. Temples dedicated to her can be found in Varanasi (constructed in 1936), where she takes the form of a marble relief map of India, and in Haridwar (constructed in 1986), where she is depicted holding a pot of water, a sheaf of grain, and standing on the map of India (Eck 2012, 100-2). Eck also notes that, despite the multi-religious, cosmopolitan intentions proclaimed during the inauguration of her temple in Varanasi, an event at which M.K. Gandhi spoke, in the latter half of the twentieth century this symbol has become increasingly appropriated by Hindu nationalism. This imagery, with the more benign depiction of the goddess replaced by Durga riding her lion, can be found at the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) headquarters in New Delhi, as well as in other RSS and Hindutva-associated political literature (Eck 2012, 102). Finally, seemingly mundane objects and urban infrastructure have also enjoyed deification in recent history. A temple located on NH 50 highway between Pali and Jodhpur in Rajasthan is home to a 350cc Royal Enfield motorcycle worshipped as "Bullet Baba" by travelers experiencing car trouble or praying for safety on the roads. The temple was built after a man known as Om Banna was killed in a traffic accident in 1992. The motorcycle was removed from the site by police only to reappear the next day. Morning and evening rites are performed, including drumming, chanting, and the sprinkling of alcohol as offerings (*Indian Express,* August 14, 2016).

cults, the harsh sanitary measures instituted by the colonial health authorities caused more panic than the disease itself" (Das 2019, 198-9). This insinuates that, perhaps, goddesses associated with plague that emerged at this time, did so in response to both the new disease *and* the severe public health measures introduced to combat the epidemic, a point to which I will return in the context of coronavirus-related goddesses.

Another, more recent example, related to a viral epidemic begins on World AIDS Day, 1997, when the inauguration of the AIDS-Ammā temple in a Karnataka village occurred. She was initially created for pedagogical purposes by high school science teacher, N. Girish, with the intent to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS, including modes of transmission and the protective properties of prophylaxis (Portnoy 2000, 83). At first, AIDS-Ammā enjoyed regular *puja*s and community processions conducted by Girish himself. Eventually however, she also became an attraction for people beyond the community. This included a group of HIV positive pilgrims from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu who, "offered puja, revealed their serostatus to the goddess, seeking her protection, and experienced relief from fear," (Das 2019, 191-3). This suggests that, at least for some devotees, AIDS-Ammā acquired significance beyond Girish's intended instrumental purpose of raising awareness. This is perhaps in part due to the recognizable devotional form of goddesses associated with disease in general, and specifically Māriyamman̲ with whom she shares affinities (Das 2019). Finally, an example from a temple in Bangalore, in which a deity formerly associated with disease being 'reinvented' after the threat of epidemic disease passes, completes this discussion. Situated at an intersection renowned for its high incidence of car accidents, a temple dedicated to "Traffic Circle Amman" is frequented by drivers seeking to receive blessings for safe travel (Srinivas, *The Conversation,* June 5, 2020). Previously dedicated to a form of Māriyamman̲, whom devotees worshiped here in times of

cholera outbreak, this temple and presiding deity, although relatively 'new', demonstrate another example of Māriyammaṉ's ability (and that of Hindu gods in general) to adapt to the needs of changing historical conditions. Traditions of goddesses associated with disease may represent "an imaginative resolution of collective crisis, is amenable to adaptations, transpositions and re-articulations...less a rule to be followed than an effect to be achieved or an outcome realized" (Das 2019, 199-201). When the effect has been achieved and the threat is no longer present, new adaptations and re-articulations are possible. So considered, coronavirus-related goddesses, whether characterized as 'new' or 'old' reflect similar adaptational dynamics.

5.2.7 Dreams as Sources of Epistemic Authority

Dreams can relate significant individual experiences to social conditions, historical processes, and religious traditions. Several ritual participants attribute inspiration for beginning Corona Devi ritual practice to being visited by her or another divine messenger. For example, a woman in Solapur, Maharashtra claimed that, "she [Coronā Devī] had come in her dreams and told her that she wishes to stay in the locality. Now, the residents of the town claim that no one was infected with the virus because the devi 'protects' them and keeps them safe" (Bhat, *Free Press Journal*, September 3, 2020). Similarly, journalist Bobbins Abraham notes that a woman in Muzzaffarpur, Bihar "associates the worship [of Coronā Devī] with a dream she had" (Abraham, *India Times,* June 8, 2020). The manager of Kamatchipuri Adheenam temple in Coimbatore explains that, "people are affected by Covid-19. So, our Guruji informed us in our dream to do something like [consecrate the temple and offer pujas] to save people" (Koushik, *Indian Express,* May 19, 2021). Another ritual participant from Dhanbad, Bihar, describes how,

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> Corona Mai, who had come in my dreams in the form of a cow and gradually turned into a lady saying that if people in India would start worshipping her, she will go from where she has come. Therefore, we performed puja here today to ward off coronavirus from this Country (in Ranjan, *New Indian Express,* June 5, 2020).

Finally, in a tongue-in-cheek video posted online during the second wave, actresses Rupali Ganguly and Ekta Saraiya from the popular TV show, *Anupamaa*, appeal to "Ma Corona Devi" to "release this now from your fury,"[114] likening the pandemic to a "bad dream" (*Pink Villa,* June 30, 2021).

Dreams can serve various roles processes of inspiration, justification, and legitimization in many religious traditions, including those associated with the novel coronavirus. Anthropologist Robin Sherif argues that

> by situating dreamers in direct encounters with spiritual entities, dreaming supplies a vital phenomenological dimension to religious participation. Numinous oneiric encounters are translated into public stories, are submitted to collective interpretation, and often color decisions and action in the waking world. They thereby not only fortify religious identity but also "make history". (Sheriff 2021, 35)

Dreams can lend authority to narratives regarding the emergence of new deities in part by framing inspiration as divinely directed, thereby challenging accusations of 'merely human' origins. Dreams feature in many Hindu textual sources as powerful symbols pertaining to the ever-ineliminable possibility that reality is not what it seems. Dreams also provide characters in narratives with opportunities experiencing things to which they – as kings or caste-oppressed people, as members of different gender groups, as gods or mortals – might not otherwise have access. They can also reflect the anxieties of particular social groups, such as the recurrent motif, found in a variety of Hindu texts, of the "nightmare of becoming a Pariah or a woman" (Doniger 2009, 503). In a sense, dreams may thereby serve as an epistemological

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[114] My translation. Original text: "Apne prakop se ab iss mukti do".

bridge between radically different subject positions and are regularly recognized in various contexts as sources of both knowledge and perspective. As such, dreams can reflect or inspire various forms of personal and social transformations and can impel into action those individuals and groups who recognize their authority. Doniger explains that,

> tales of dreams suggest, for instance, that dreaming and waking partake of the same reality, which is both spiritual and physical…That they do so is the point of myths of shared dreams…we cannot tell whether we are awake or asleep during our experience of many sorts of transformation, nor can we judge which half of the dream/waking experience is more real…the dreamer cannot be certain that he has awakened from the last of a series of dreams within dreams…the dreamer who believes that he is in the last frame of his own dream may still be forced to consider the possibility that he is part of someone else's dream. (Doniger 1984, 3-4)

Dreams are associated with undertaking various kinds of action. For example, the north Indian goddess Bahucarā Mātā, a patroness of the Hijṛā community, regularly appears in the dreams of some men experiencing impotence, encouraging them to undergo ritual castration, dress like women, and become Hijṛās (Dinnell 2019, 135).

Dreams also figure prominently in both founding narratives and ritual procedures of various temples. In local traditions at Purī, Mangalā Devī gives instructions to the head Daita (a local tribal group) through dream-visions for the selection of the proper tree out of which new temple images of Jagannātha, Balarāma, and Subhadrā are to be carved. These ritual procedures of *Narvakalevara* ("New Embodiment" of the deities), occurs every twelve or thirteen years (Eck 2012, 393-4). According to one temple legend, Krishna appeared to King Indradyumma in a dream to build the Jagannātha temple in Puri (Doniger 2009, 55). A narrative associated with the Mīṉāṭci[115] temple and the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu details

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[115] This is a transliteration of the Tamil name, which is often anglicized as *Meenakshi* or rendered in Sanskrit as *Mīṇākṣi.*

how both were built after Lord Śiva instructed Pandayan king, Kulasekaran, to do so in a dream (Uma 2015, 17-18).

Ferrari notes several instances in which dreams feature in devotional traditions associated with Śītalā. It is common for devotees to experience dream visions (*svapnadarśana*) or divine commands through dreams (*svapnādeś*), which can include the location of specific stones (*patthar pratimā* or *shilā*) and instructions to build a new temple or to be installed in a pre-existing one, after they are prepared to receive the goddess (Ferrari 2015a, 42). At the Śrī Mātā Śītalā Devī Mandir in Gurgaon, near New Delhi, two different narratives detailing dream visions associated with Śītalā – through both Masānī Mā, who is identified variously as Śītalā's younger sister, her antecedent, and Śītalā herself , and Kṛpī, Droṇa's wife in the Mahābhārata, who is also identified here as a manifestation of Śītalā – feature characters who receive *svapnādeś* to locate her *pratimā*s at the bottom of the temple pond and in turn also receive healing powers (Ferrari 2015a, 46-8). According to local narratives at the Baṛī Śītalā Mandir ("temple of the old Śītalā", also known as Śītalā Dhām, the "abode of Śītalā") in Adalpura, Uttar Pradesh, the location of Śītalā's *pratimā* at the bottom of the Ganga was revealed to a boatman through a dream. The next day the boatman retrieved the stone from the river basin using his fishing nets and housed the *pratimā* in a small shrine on the riverbank until other devotees received *svapnādeś,* instructing them to build a proper temple in exchange for "protection, good health, and fortune" (Ferrari 2015a, 114-15). Thus, dreams are part of diverse Hindu traditions as divinely sanctioned methods of receiving knowledge and instructions for action. As such, dreams can carry epistemic authority, at times highly valued for their direct connection with the divine.

5.3 Ritual Practice

Ritual participants in coronavirus-related goddess worship draw from the pre-existing ritual form of the *pūjā.* Nearly all the media reports refer to the coronavirus-related rituals as *pūjā*s. The term, *pūjā* means "(devotional) worship, adoration, respect, homage" (Michaels 2016, 248). *Pūja* can take different forms, vary according to local and social traditions, involve varying ritual materials, and are performed by laypeople and priests of all genders. *Pūjā*s can occur in diverse places, including temples, the home, and even online. *Pūjā* is often part of a larger sequence of activities, which may include singing of hymns, making fire offerings and other sacrifices, or processions (Fuller 1992, 63). Michaels notes that, "Since there are not unambiguous rules for the performance of the *pūjā*, its agency and the forms are extremely open" (2016, 249). Through *pūjā,* a relationship between devotee and deity is established and *pūjā*s are often performed for specific purposes. One type of relationship that is established between deity and devotee is a relationship of exchange. In material form, this includes giving of gifts (*dāna*) and receiving of *prasāda.* In addition to material exchange, and especially pertaining to worship involving iconic forms, the exchange relationship is also present in the concept of *darśana. Darśana* is the mutual exchange of sight between devotee and deity: "it is not only the worshiper who sees the deity, but the deity sees the worshiper as well" (Eck 1998, 6-7). There exists both variation between traditions and scholarly debate about the nature of this relationship but in general there is agreement that a degree of intimacy is established though the exchange (see Michaels 2016, 251-3). In the following section, I will present and discuss ritual participants' varying perspectives vis-à-vis their relationships with coronavirus-related goddesses and their stated reasons for performing *pūjā*.

5.3.1 Participant Narratives

Analysis of participant statements reveal several perspectives pertaining to the relationships between coronavirus-related goddesses, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These relationships can be summarized as follows: 1) identification with the virus (i.e., the goddess *is* the virus and therefore has an intrinsic ability to enter or leave the human body, cause social disruption associated with the pandemic, etc.), 2) offering protection from the virus, 3) having the ability to attenuate or control the virus,[116] 4) having the ability to destroy the virus, and 5) causing Covid-19 because of her "anger" and requiring pacification. Notably, evidence that coronavirus-related goddesses are invoked to play a healing role in any biomedical sense is conspicuously absent from all surveyed media reports. In other words, there is no evidence that people sick with Covid-19 sought healing for the disease from coronavirus-related goddesses.

The relationships between the virus and the goddesses highlight two interrelated points. First, they speak to the related ontologies of both coronavirus-related goddesses and Covid-19/SARS-CoV-2; that is, they provide insight into how both the goddess and the virus, disease, or pandemic are conceived by ritual participants. Additionally, they imply ritual approaches that correspond to the respective natures of these relationships. Second, they are not mutually exclusive as is evident from several narrative statements that follow; differences in how these relationships are conceived exist between members of the same community and even by the same participant. These relationships can be connected to general characteristics of coronavirus-related goddesses as either benevolent, malevolent, or both (ambivalent). In the

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[116] This is arguably the view closest to any intention of cure or healing in the biomedical sense (e.g., attenuation as common to public health discourses about vaccines). I am grateful to Patricia Dold for this insight.

following examples, I identify themes which can further specify both the intentions of participants for organizing, conducting, or participating in ritual practice for coronavirus-related goddesses and participants' perceptions of the goddesses. Themes relating to the goddess identified as the virus (relationship 1) and the goddess causing Covid-19 due to her anger (relationship 5) include 'expulsion', 'persuasion to dispel', 'appeasement', and 'pacification'. Those relating to (2) offering protection, (3) having the ability to attenuate or control, and (4) having the ability to destroy include themes of 'protection', 'salvation', 'assistance', 'support for others', and 'destruction'. Two additional dimensions relating to social and political ends, and relationships between science, biomedicine, and tradition are also addressed. Themes relating to social or political ends, include 'protest', 'creating awareness', and 'support for others'. Themes related to tradition I label simply as 'tradition'. Themes relating to the perceived failure of science, biomedicine, and government are discussed in detail in a later section.

5.3.2 Reasons for Undertaking Ritual

Ritual participants provide various reasons for conducting rituals devoted to coronavirus-related goddesses through quoted statements in the media reports. Discussing the consecration of Coronā Devī *mūrtis* at the Kamatchipuri Adheenam temple in Tamil Nadu, one participant explains that the devotees "strongly believe that the goddess will protect people from COVID-19"; the manager of the temple adds that their *Guruji* explained that it would "save people" and a Swamy from the temple explains that they believe that "god will help the hapless" (Chatterjee, *iDiva*, May 20, 2021). Within this single news story, themes of 'salvation', 'assistance', and 'protection' are observed. In another report, the temple manager explains that they are "worshipping the virus in the form of a goddess and praying to her every day to

reduce the impacts of the disease" (*Al Jazeera,* May 27, 2021). Here, a theme of 'attenuation' can be identified – the goddess as the SARS-CoV-2 virus can lessen the impact of the Covid-19 disease. Significantly, he relates the practice of attenuation to older tradition, noting that, "In earlier times during contagions, when even doctors gave up hope, people used to turn to goddesses and home remedies...They believed the intensity (of an outbreak) was brought down with worship" (Dore, *Religion News Service,* June 22, 2021).

The Keralan priest also provides several reasons for conducting rituals dedicated to Coronā Devī. He explains, "I will conduct pujas in front of the goddess for the safety and well-being of all engaged in the battle against the pandemic...Pujas will be held in the names of all those helping others" (*The Hindu,* June 13, 2020). Elsewhere, he elaborates that "those helping others" include "healthcare professionals, police personnel and scientists, who are toiling to discover a vaccine" (Roychowdhury, *Indian Express,* June 22, 2020). Thus, one of his expressed intentions for conducting the rituals is to support frontline workers and those working to keep people safe. This could be referred to thematically as 'support for others'; in this particular case, he could also be referring to the attacks against healthcare workers and first responders that were common early in the pandemic (see Dutt 2022). Significantly, he also expresses other intentions for conducting the rituals, one with explicit political motive. He explains that the reason there will be no *darśan* is because "it is also a protest against the political propaganda behind the reopening of temples. People are now using gods for political gains, but now is no time for temple visits. Survival is all that matters now" (*The Hindu,* June 13, 2020). Thematically, this intention could be considered 'protest'. Relatedly, he explains that he also wants to set an example for others, noting that "This is my way of creating awareness" (*Indian Express*, June 14, 2020). He elaborates on this intention, saying that "The message I want to send

people is that you can stay at home and worship god. God exists everywhere" (Dore *Religion News Service,* June 22, 2021). Thematically, this additional intention could be considered as 'creating awareness'.

In Jharkhand, two transgender women provide their reasoning for conducting Coronā Māī rituals. The first explains that the goddess, who appeared to the devotee in a dream, instructed that "if people start worshipping her, she will go from where she has come. Therefore, we performed puja here today to ward off coronavirus from this Country" (Ranjan, *New Indian Express,* June 5, 2020). The second woman is paraphrased as saying that "there is no other way out to ward off this pandemic and hence, people should please 'Corona Mai' by worshipping her" (Ranjan 2020). From these two statements, two additional themes emerge: that of 'appeasement' and of 'persuasion to dispel'; both themes refer to participants' desires for the coronavirus-related goddess to return to her place of origin. Elsewhere in Jharkhand, one devotee explains that "We have taken shelter under goddess coronavirus. She will be pacified with worship" (*News 18,* June 8, 2020). This statement interestingly suggests the goddess' ambivalent nature: she offers protection and shelter while also requiring pacification and appeasement. Another female devotee from the same group also explains that "the country has witnessed two natural calamities in West Bengal and Maharashtra in the form of cyclones due to goddess coronavirus. Nothing has been done to pacify the goddess. She is taking big shape. We have worshipped to calm down goddess coronavirus' anger" (*News 18,* June 8, 2020).[117] Significantly, this devotee relates the goddess' anger to catastrophic

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[117] This participant may be referring here to Cyclone Amphan, which made landfall in West Bengal on May 20, 2020, and Cyclone Nisarga, which made landfall in Maharashtra on June 3rd, 2020.

meteorological events, attributing her realm of influence far beyond the narrow focus of biophysical disease.

Regarding the Coronā Mātā temple in Uttar Pradesh, one participant explains that they "collectively set up the temple with the belief that praying to the deity would definitely offer respite to people suffering from Covid-19" (*Indian Express,* June 13, 2021). Another proposes, subjunctively, that "Maybe with her blessings the villagers, our village, and everyone else get some relief" (*Reuters,* June 12, 2021). The theme of attenuation can be observed in both statements. Relatedly, another participant from the village explains that "after witnessing the coronavirus pandemic and its deadly impact which snatched the lives of thousands of people, we decided to set up Corona Mata mandir under a 'neem' tree with full belief that Mata would solve all the difficulties" (Dixit, *Times of India,* June 11, 2021). The theme of protection is observable in another participant's statement, explaining that they offer prayers to Coronā Mātā, hoping that "the shadow of Covid-19 should never fall on Shuklapur and adjoining villages" (Dixit 2021). Here, protection is dedicated with a focus on the village and the region, a characteristic common to many *grāmadevatā* associated with disease.[118] Finally, villagers are quoted, saying: "With setting up of the temple and installation of Corona Mata idol, we feel protected and believe that Mata's blessings would save us from the deadly disease forever" (Dixit 2021). Significantly, in addition to the belief that the goddess' blessings offer protection, references to the subjective feeling of protection offer another theme pertaining to 'affective relief' of ritual practice; in other words, for some, engaging in coronavirus-related goddess worship may be undertaken to help alleviate some of the feelings of stress, uncertainty, fear,

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[118] E.g., Referring to Bengali goddess related to disease who is worshiped by both Hindus and Muslims named Olādevī or Olābībī, Yadav (2022) notes how she represents and protects "the people of a localised area, and are not simply abstract symbols for an entire religion" (Yadav 2022, 5).

and vulnerability brought by the pandemic. Elsewhere in Uttar Pradesh, the village head, who is identified as a graduate, explains that "It's not superstition but faith that God will protect us by some miracle as we are all affected due to this. Besides we should wear masks and also follow social distancing" (Mishra, *India Today,* May 12, 2021). Finally, another devotee invokes the theme of past tradition, explaining that it is their "belief and faith that like in the past, these rituals saved us from epidemics. God will protect us from coronavirus pandemic as well" (Mishra 2021). This theme, while supportive of the authenticity of the rituals by drawing on authority of past tradition, may also be read in a pragmatic way: it worked before, and it will work now.

A Coronā Mā devotee in Bihar explains: "We are worshipping 'Corona Maa' so that our family members remain safe from the virus...The goddess will be pacified with worship and offerings only as she's an angry goddess, not a benign one. Hospitals are overflowing and the government doesn't care. So she is our only hope" (Lal, *SCMP,* May 20, 2021). Here, themes of pacification of the goddess, failure of the government, and collapse of the healthcare system are observed. Another theme that emerges is that of 'destruction': One Assamese woman explains that "We are performing puja of 'Corona Maa'. After the puja, wind will come and destroy the virus" (Nath, *India Today,* June 7, 2020). Here, it is perhaps implied that Coronā Mā somehow has the ability to control the wind, which, in turn, is capable of destroying the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In West Bengal, a devotee expresses hope "that Corona devi ensures that the virus leaves us forever...Our offerings and chants will win us some respite from the virus" (Samanta, *The Hindu,* June 10, 2020). Here, it is believed that the goddess can dispel the virus, thus providing respite for the villagers. In Chhattisgarh, once again support and protection for others is conveyed in the news report, which notes that "women were worshipping 'Corona

Mata' and a mass prayer was organized so that Covid-19 will spare their children and family members" (Mallick, *Free Press Journal,* May 14, 2021).

The variety of themes conveyed in the narratives of ritual participants indicate a diversity of motivations and intentions for undertaking ritual practice. They also suggest diverse values and relationships that are brought into relief as significant amidst the crises precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic in India.

5.3.3 Ritual Considerations

Rituals can effect observable social and psychological changes; they can help settle conflicts, usher changes in social status and identity, facilitate catharsis, alleviate personal and collective worries, define group boundaries, and bolster cooperation, among many other effects (Houseman 2006). However, the temptation to explain rituals through functionalist analysis alone is often frustrated by the multiple and conflicting exceptions that often arise. Axel Michaels explains that,

> The reasons humans submit themselves to ritual are manifold: solidarity, power, cowardice, agreement to its goals, and so forth. However, there is no convincing reason for the performance of rituals because there are always alternatives ... it is demanding, if not impossible, to justify all action individually or by introspection. (Michaels 2016, 309)

The numerous themes identified in participant narratives considered in the section above reflect some such reasons attributed to coronavirus-related goddess rituals. However, from the relational perspective, even when combined with symbolic analysis, accounting for the intended or real effects of ritual cannot fully account for the "distinctive organizational features of ritual" (Houseman 2006, 413). I will address some dimensions of organizational features in the context of ritual relationships shortly. Functionalist analysis, though incomplete, can be useful for analyzing the motivations of ritual participants and popular interpretations and reception of rituals. I will briefly consider some functionalist dimensions

of coronavirus-related goddess rituals through the themes of solidarity, structure amidst disorder, and the alleviation of fear.

The upheaval caused by the Covid-19 pandemic created conditions for various experiences of liminality (Bell 2021). Liminality, as a threshold between different states is often associated with ambiguity, malleability, and reflexivity (Stephenson 2015, 50). It is certainly conceivable that many people experienced the liminal "state between states" (Bell 2021, 80) through the separation imposed during Covid-19 lockdowns in India. Ritual practices, in part designed to re-integrate individuals and communities and restore collective order, may address some of the vertiginous effects of this separation and upheaval. Dimensions of social solidarity can be observed in coronavirus-related ritual practice in several ways. Stephenson summarizes Victor Turner's conception of *communitas* as "the experience in ritual of blurring or merging self and other, the production of oneness and integrative harmony" (Stephenson 2015, 40). In many of the women- and transgender-led rituals, dozens and even hundreds of people gathered to perform the rituals. Reports of people moving in procession towards *pūjā* sites, "chanting religious songs on the streets and appeal[ing] people to worship 'Corona Mai'" (Ranjan, *New Indian Express,* June 5, 2020), "chants of 'jai Corona mai' and 'Corona mata ki jai' echoed in some open fields" (*Telegraph,* June 6, 2020), and the collective singing of songs and mantras coupled with the request "that every woman join in" (Samanta, *The Hindu,* June 10, 2020) convey the public and participatory character of many of the ritual events. This collective, participatory dimension has even migrated to the online public sphere, where 'devotees' participate in these rituals from afar by commenting expressions of support and triumph of the goddess, such as "Jai Ho Corona Devi, the goddess who hails from India [prayer

emojis]" (Commenter, *ABP News,* June 5, 2020)[119] and "Jai Mā Corona! Jai ho Durga in this new

form! Jai ho to the various forms of Mā!" (Commenter, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021).[120]

Additionally, rituals undertaken for the wellbeing of others, articulated by numerous

participants, contribute to the plausibility that *communitas*, which can serve as a foil to the

social structure of normal times, could feature as a dimension in many of the coronavirus-

related rituals. Solidarity in the midst of the perceived abandonment by the Indian

government and the perceived failure of science and biomedicine will be discussed shortly.

    Relatedly, another functional dimension of ritual practice is its ability to provide

structure and order amidst chaos and disorder. Rituals can address the sudden disruption of

normal life by providing structure and regularity. Stephenson explains that the

"effervescence, solidarity, and *communitas* that at times accompany collective rites hold

disorder, entropy, and chaos at bay, establishing meaningful and purposeful interactions with

others" (2015, 47). Evidence of such ritual structuring is suggested by declarations that Coronā

Devī worship will be performed "every Monday and Friday till she becomes satisfied"

(Samanta, *The Hindu,* June 10, 2020), that daily *pūjā*s for Coronā Devī at Kamatchipuri

Adheenam will continue for 48 days (Bhutia, *Open,* May 28, 2021), and that devotees move in

procession "to the outskirts of the village twice a day when the sun rises and sets" (Mishra,

India Today, May 12, 2021). Coronavirus-related goddess rituals provide structure for

individuals and communities during times of uncertainty and upheaval caused by the Covid-19

pandemic.

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[119] My translation. Original text: "JAI HO CORONA DEVI....DEVI APP JAIYE BHARAT SE [prayer emojis]".
[120] My translation. Original text: "Jai maa corona jai ho durge teri is nye roop ki jai maa ke an roop".

Finally, coronavirus-related rituals are ascribed by journalists with the intention of alleviating fear. For example, we hear that the Keralan priest installed Coronā Devī in a shrine in his house "to ward off fear of the virus" (*Times of India,* June 15, 2020) and that the priests at the Kamatchi Adheenam temple in Tamil Nadu did so similarly to "lessen the fear of the virus" (*iDiva,* May 20, 2021). Interestingly, in none of the available media from either place do the participants give this reason for conducting the rituals. Nevertheless, from participants' narratives considered above, stated reasons about seeking protection may convey a similar sentiment. When hospitals are overflowing, oxygen and medicine shortages are prevalent (especially in rural areas), and no end to the pandemic is in sight, ritual provides people with hope and the sense that they are addressing the cause of distress; the cause may be understood as the SARS-CoV-2 virus but it may be interpreted, as the varied reasons for performing coronavirus-related goddess rituals suggest, as diverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and society's response to it. Significantly, many participant narratives do suggest that feelings of vulnerability are associated with what they perceive as failures on the part of government, science, and biomedicine. Some dimensions of both coronavirus-related rituals and the narratives of participants also suggest dimensions pertaining to gender and class. Together, these aspects reveal the existence of a critical dimension of the rituals for goddesses associated with coronavirus.

Relational approaches to the study of ritual, rather than focusing primarily on the effects, stated reasons, or implied symbolic meanings of ritual, consider ritual in terms of the particular relationships that they enact. Michael Houseman explains that ritual relationships "constitute lived-through experiences sustained by intentionally and emotionally laden events" (Houseman 2006, 414). Ritual relationships can exist between people but also between

non-human entities like viruses and goddesses. Houseman explains how in ritual, non-human entities "can acquire the attributes of agency, becoming virtual subjects with whom a 'relationship' may be possible, precisely to the degree that the participants' encounter with them is causally embedded in a network of interpersonal ties" (Houseman 2006, 415). Coronā Devī's anger, for example, exists in a network where there are people who feel that "hospitals are overflowing and the government doesn't care" (Lal, *SCMP,* May 30, 2021).

Returning to the themes drawn from participants' narratives about the various reasons for performing coronavirus-related goddess rituals demonstrates multiple, and sometimes conflicting, aims and motives, even by members of the same groups. A relational view suggests that this is because ritual, while providing a framework for enacting and exploring various relationships, leaves the precise conceptual meaning largely undefined. Houseman explains that "Ritual participants are thus engaged in concrete, prescribed performances whose exact meaning, in terms of everyday intentionalities and patterns of intercourse, remain nonetheless unclear" (Houseman 2006, 417). And yet it is precisely this indeterminacy which allows for the enactment of various networked relationships. Rituals produce contexts in which seemingly disparate things like *Aadhaar* cards, water, and the virus at the centre of a global pandemic (Ranjan 2020), for example, can be brought together in a highly integrated and coherent way *for those involved in the ritual* and "can not be fully accounted for in terms of ordinary intentionalities and patterns of relationships" (Houseman 2006, 416). Thus rituals, in drawing together seemingly disparate elements and exploring the relationships between them, also serve as vehicles for exploration and discovery. Ritual performances "serve as the experiential grounds for the irrefutable yet difficult-to-define 'truths' they are held to enact" (Houseman 2006, 418). Thus, participant narratives describing their reasons for undertaking

the rituals, with the various themes and disparate symbols, may in part be the result of having performed the rituals themselves. Houseman explains that the efficacy of rituals, from a relational perspective,

> may be understood as the emergence, subsequent to and beyond the ritual performance itself, of discourse and behaviour which, drawing upon the idiom this performance gives rise to and implicating the agencies designated in it, are predicated upon the relationships realized in the course of the ritual's execution. (Houseman 2006, 420)

Hertzman et al. (2023) use Richardson's (2020) concept of "pandemicity", to refer to "the social relationship of contagion across humankind and other species" (Hertzman et al. 2023, 1). Ritual relationships constructed and revealed through coronavirus-related goddess rituals highlight some of the ways in which pandemicity is perceived, experienced, and expressed. In the final section I consider the broadly conceived ritual relationships with science, women, and poverty mediated by coronavirus-related goddesses.

5.3.4 Ritual Relationships: Science, Biomedicine, and the Indian Government

Ritual participants directly and indirectly engage with questions regarding the status of science and biomedicine. At times they also anticipate the objections of critics discussed in the previous chapter. Rather than either rejecting these 'modern' methods of addressing epidemic disease or highlighting an antagonistic relationship between them and the coronavirus-related practices, many participants view science and ritual practice as complementary. The Keralan priest speaks explicitly to the relationship between science and his Corona Devi ritual practice, saying, "I believe in god, but I want society to undo their misconceptions around worship...I believe in science and medicine. Prayer alone will not help. But I pray to the goddess to give strength and support to scientists and frontline workers" (in Dore, *Religion News Service,* June 22, 2021). Another participant of a coronavirus-related goddess ritual in Uttar Pradesh, responding to a question about the primacy of faith or science, replied: "Science is always

above but it is our faith that God and natural power will protect us. Yes, we should all wear masks." (in Mishra, *India Today,* May 12, 2021). At the temple devoted to Coronā Mātā in Uttar Pradesh, a former head of the village notes that "in times of stress, people sought divine intervention despite the fact that the village had grown to trust modern medicine" (in Dore 2021). In these examples, participants believe in science and biomedicine as effective ways of addressing epidemic disease that are not at odds with ritual practice. They may be seen as a viable alternative when healthcare facilities are overwhelmed, and shortages of oxygen and medicine prevail.[121] The manager at Kamatchipuri Adheenam in Tamil Nadu explains that "Even doctors are unable to deal with the enormity of the situation. So we turn to faith and God as a last resort" (*Al-Jazeera*, May 27, 2021). Here, the theme of faith or religion as capable of addressing issues too enormous for science is observed through the particularization of 'science' and 'medicine' in the local delivery of healthcare.

Additional to the perceived failures of science and biomedicine, inequitably distributed healthcare is also addressed in some narratives and comments. While some news reports obliviously juxtapose stories of 'superstitious' coronavirus-related rituals with notes regarding shortages of oxygen and medicine, and overwhelmed hospitals (*Asia Net News,* May 22, 2021), commenters place this blame on the government. Commenting on an *India Today* article titled "Let down by science, UP villagers turn to faith to save themselves from Covid-19 wave," one person writes:

> Very wrong to say science has let them down, it is the incompetent Yogi Hindutva Government which let the people down. Health care facilities simply dont exists in the

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[121] Significantly, Ferrari (2015a) notes that Śītalā ritual specialists (*mālin*) in nineteenth century Bengal would often become involved in the treatment of a patient only when the biomedical treatment of smallpox was deemed to have failed. The *mālin*'s ritual practice is chiefly aimed at lowering the patient's temperature, inviting Śītalā by offering cold food and bathing both her *mūrtī* and the smallpox patient with cool water delivered by *nīm* branches (134).

villages of UP, the Jungle Raj Hindutva state. Don't blame science. In UP cows r looked after much better than Human beings. (Commenter, *India Today,* May 12, 2021)

In a letter to the editor, one respondent also points out the hypocrisy of blaming ritual participants for seeking solace in coronavirus-related goddess rituals when the healthcare system cannot provide them with medical care:

> Reeling from the pandemic, people everywhere are looking for a ray of hope. Many find it in a vaccine, others have to resort to faith. A temple in Coimbatore, which has set up idols of 'Corona devi', is an example. Devotees pray to this goddess to save them from the virus. People should be free to seek solace wherever they find it, but the fact that they now have to bank solely on faith points to a failure in governance. For instance, in spite of all the efforts of medical professionals, many Indians have not been able to get vaccinated. If people's faith in modern science is to be retained, the Centre must focus on building a stronger healthcare system. (Letter to the Editor, *Telegraph,* June 6, 2021)

A ritual participant in Bihar echoes these concerns, explaining that ritual practice devoted to 'Corona Maa' will keep "family members safe from the virus...The goddess will be pacified with worship and offerings only as she's an angry goddess, not a benign one. Hospitals are overflowing and the government doesn't care. So she is our only hope" (in Lal, *SCMP,* May 30, 2021). Hertzman et al. (2023) explain that

> COVID-19 interjects its own sovereign power within the religious and political field, in which competing assertions about the nature of the world are already circulating and competing. Documenting the negotiations of the different voices of authority in the public sphere as well as the individual level of everyday practice allows us to understand the ways that different epidemic and epistemic authorities become socially validated or demonized, politically empowered, represented, or delegitimized. (Hertzman et al. 2023, 20)

The examples above suggest that the discourses analyzed in the previous chapter, which construct ritual participants as 'superstitious blind devotees,' either willfully or naïvely ignore the implicit and explicit social and political issues to which these practices are, in part, critical responses. Thus, while both Hindu nationalists and rationalist organizations attempt to present an antagonistic dichotomy between science and the coronavirus-related goddess

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practices – conceived as 'superstition' – many ritual participants, though keenly aware of this perceived divide, explicitly note that they do not believe these to be in conflict. What is labeled as 'superstitious', in some cases, may in part contain an integrative and sophisticated critique of the government's inequitable distribution of healthcare resources.

5.3.5 Ritual Relationships: Illness, Social Justice, and Gender

Illness and disease relate with issues of both social justice and religion in various intersecting and overlapping ways. They can play a role in both transcending and solidifying communal boundaries; in one sense, equality is an inherent equality of disease as it "shows no prejudice" (Srinivasan 2019, 159) with respect to whom may be infected, a view echoed by Jean Luc Nancy in his early reference to SARS-CoV-2 as a "communovirus" (Nancy, *Verso,* March 20, 2020). In another sense, however, certain groups may be at greater risk than others due to compounding factors such as malnutrition or exposure patterns (Nicholas 1981). Śītalā, as a goddess of hygiene, shares a symbolic association with the occupations of low class and caste-oppressed women in her description as *vastraprakṣālikā,* "she who washes the clothes of Śiva-Maheśvara" (Ferrari 2015a, 23). Significantly, beliefs that Māriyamman̲ loves and protects people of oppressed socioeconomic and sociocultural groups has been associated with epidemiological data suggesting that members of upper class and caste groups were more susceptible to serious forms of smallpox. Margaret Egnor suggests that this could perhaps be due to their lack of built immunity through exposure compared to people living in crowded conditions whose occupations, like laundering and other sanitary work, involve close contact with potentially infecting materials (Egnor 1984, 33). Relatedly, Srinivasan's analysis of a song of benediction dedicated to Māriyamman̲ observes that "concern of the goddess for the hungry have-nots, here, the laborers of the land who are alienated from their labor, which makes her

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bestow the rice grains on them, is transposed into her grace and protection during the affliction" (2019, 12). This highlights relationships between economic oppression and illness, drawn together in ritual context through Māriyamma<u>n</u>.

Economic dimensions factor explicitly in two instances of coronavirus-related goddess worship. First, the Keralan priest anticipates accusations related to the discourse of ulterior motives discussed in the previous chapter. He explains that "Pujas will be held in the names of all those helping others. Those who want the prasadam can get in touch with me. I will not charge any money for the pujas and offerings" (in *The Hindu*, June 13, 2020). His decision not to charge any money may anticipate the critics discussed in the previous chapter who suggested money as an ulterior motive for his rituals; it may also suggest a ritual modification which recognizes the context of economic precarity faced by many people during the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, economic dimensions factor into rituals associated with coronavirus in another way for some women in Jharkhand. One media report describes how transgender people and "women brought their bank passbooks and *Aadhaar* cards to the place of worship with them expecting that money will be transferred to their bank accounts if they succeeded in pleasing the 'deity'" (Ranjan, *New Indian Express,* June 5, 2020). Recalling from chapter 2, *Aadhaar* cards are linked to various governmental social assistance schemes, including the Jan-Dhan Yojana financial inclusion program and the one-time payment of 1500 rupees for transgender individuals; these payments were often late or never arrived for many people (Bhattacharya 2020). This example suggests that economic concerns are among the varied expressions of coronavirus-related goddess worship. As noted in the previous chapter, this concern was also shared by many people in India during the Covid-19 pandemic, including

both critics of coronavirus-related goddess worship and the Prime Minister of the country.

These concerns also have precedents in traditions of goddesses associated with disease.

During Śītalā's explosive rise in popularity in western Bengal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, geopolitical factors contributed to the spread of smallpox and exacerbated famines. Nicholas (1981) notes how tumultuous conditions in eighteenth century western Bengal, caused in part by the decline of the Mughal empire and the increasingly frequent raids by colonial Maratha cavalry, displaced communities thereby contributing to the epidemic spread of smallpox. Furthermore, malnutrition due to food scarcity further contributed to smallpox mortality into the early twentieth century. Nicholas explains that,

> Famine, disease, and rapacious tax-collectors are seen as connected to one another – and, at a certain level, as naturalistically connected. That is, the links between low rainfall and low rice harvest, low rice harvest and increase in the proportion extracted as revenue, increase in revenue and dimunition [*sic*] in nutrition, reduced diet and increased disease are all clearly made by ordinary people in rural Bengal. (Nicholas 1981, 36)

Ferrari (2015b) draws a link between illness and injustice, noting that in some sense, both are forms of disorder and imbalance. He suggests that both sources of imbalance may be addressed through ritual dedicated to Śītalā or other goddesses, arguing that, acknowledging disease, injustice, and economic inequality through ritual "can empower symbols that open the dimension of myth...personal narratives of disease (pathographies) give meaning to the individual by making his/her history part of a shared meta-history" (51). He believes that contrary to some theories which suggest such expressions serve only as methods of temporary individual release, healing rituals "may function as a revolutionary tool of liberation, and a way to understand, express, and fight in culturally acceptable terms the hermeneutical circle of exclusion generated by the superstructure" (Ferrari 2015b, 59). As suggested, the expression of imbalance and the negotiation of this imbalance can be mediated through goddesses

associated with disease. Wendy Doniger (2009) provides one such example in a compelling vignette featuring Śītalā. Ādivāsī women in Gujarat in the nineteenth century were exploited by both colonialists and Indian oppressors and subject to various forms of violence and oppression. In what was essentially a boycott, Ādivāsī women successfully mobilized Śītalā to effect social and political change. In Doniger's view, Śītalā here became "a force for social reform and a vehicle for protest against their exploiters…the goddess possessed certain women and spoke through them, and the women then led demonstrations, courted imprisonment, and persuaded the men" (629). Śītalā, acting as a "virtual subject" (Houseman 2006, 415), mythologically informed the women who enacted ritual relationships which ultimately "made history possible" (Doniger 2009, 631).

Gender is present in two dimensions of coronavirus-related goddess worship: the gender of the deities and the genders of the ritual participants. Significantly, all the deities associated with coronavirus who appear in the media reports analyzed for the present study are feminine. Only one ritual participant makes direct reference to the deity's gender in the media reports. The former head of the village in Uttar Pradesh where a Coronā Mātā temple was established suggests a linguistic basis for her gender, suggesting that "Perhaps, because in the (local) language coronavirus was assigned a female gender, for people she became a goddess" (Dore, *Religion News Service,* June 22, 2021). Though exceptions do exist, deities associated with disease overwhelmingly tend to be female; a full discussion of this distribution is beyond the scope of this thesis.[122] However, a discussion of the relationships between

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[122] Some exceptions to this include Lord Śiva as Vaitheeswaran ("God of healing") at the Vaitheeswaran Temple in Tamil Nadu; as Shree Vaidyanatheshwara Swamy (God of Medicine) in Areyuru, Karnataka; and as Vaidyanath at the Pateleshwar Temple in Uttar Pradesh, where he, like Śītalā, is offered brooms by devotees (Lal 2021). Notably, Brahmanical goddesses, such as Kālī, Cāmuṇḍī, Kālarātrī, and Mātaṅgī, who are also associated with controlling disease or death, are not often included in discussions of goddesses associated with disease (Ferrari 2010).

women, fertility, children, and goddesses associated with disease will help to illustrate relevant dimensions to the gendered expression of coronavirus-related ritual practice. It is a truism that Hindu goddesses in general, even when childless, are regarded as "mothers"; titles such as *Mā, Mātā, Māī,* and *Mātṛkā,* which are often used in the North and *Āmman* in the South, can all have maternal associations beyond conventional naming of deities (Yadav 2022, 4). However, as Harman cautions, these are common as honorific titles rather than necessarily descriptive ones (2011, 185). The titles of goddesses associated with coronavirus largely conform to this convention: Coronā Māī, Coronā Mā, Coronā Mātā, CoronĀmmā; the exception is Coronā Devī in which the feminine term 'Devī' (goddess) is used.

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the gendered dimension of the application of the label of 'superstitious'. The majority of distinct coronavirus-related rituals described in the news reports were led by women. In parts of some Hindu traditions, women are viewed as inherently more "polluting" than men due the process of menstruation; this is by no means homogenous across traditions, however, and their connection with divine feminine power, *śakti,* is also a source of both sacred and social power itself (Fuller 1993, 20-4). In many Māriyammaṉ traditions, she is considered a goddess of fertility (Balasundaram 2014, 116) and some of her festivals relate to her menstruation (Srinivasan 2009, 323). Srinivasan (2019) details Māriyammaṉ's various iconic and ritual associations with agricultural fertility (see note 7). In addition to having associations with disease and death, another meaning of part of Māriyammaṉ's name, '*mari*', is "change" or "changed"; a recurrent theme in Māriyammaṉ's mythology involves a human woman who suffers an incident that irrevocably changes her life, which often includes a fall from virtuous high-caste status to become infected and pox-ridden, married to a low-caste husband, or widowed. She is subsequently deified and dies, struggling

against forces of patriarchy and is characterized by bouts of anger as a result (Harman 2011, 185-7). Another myth details Renuka, the Brahman wife of Jamadagmi Rishi, who is decapitated by her husband when he wrongly suspects her of adultery. Attempting to help, her son accidentally places her head on the body of an untouchable, becoming Māriyammaṉ, whose identity is forever 'split' (Flueckiger 2013, 76). Relatedly, Nabokov (2000) explains how Māriyammaṉ in this role serves as an example for widows learning to live with and accept their new identity:

> there is no going back, no husband to reunite with, no married woman status to resume, no whole self to recover. Like Māriamma, one is shattered or torn apart for ever. And like Māriamma, one must reassemble oneself, one must "change," adopting a new physical body, a new social identity, a new personal role, all of which will forever remain somewhat alienated and unincorporated. The widow must accept the inevitable and surrender to liminality. (Nabokov 2000, 113)

As goddess who is divided and changing, her stories are a rich semantic field for negotiating both change and conflicting dimensions of identity which result from injustice.

Śītalā, too, has prominent associations with both women and fertility. Though she has male devotees, Śītala is predominantly considered a women's goddess; they appeal to her for blessings regarding fertility, the health of their children, and in finding good husbands (Ferrari 2015a, 1). Women undertake ritual fasts (*vrata*) dedicated to Śītalā for the protection of their families. Women undertook ritual fasts for coronavirus related goddesses in Biswanath district of northern Assam (*News 18,* June 18, 2020), North Dinajpur district of West Bengal (Das 2020), and Rajnandgoan in Chhattisgarh (Mallick, *Free Press Journal,* May 14, 2021).

Additional to Śītalā's relationship with women, some evidence suggests that Hijṛās and other third gender communities may also share special relationships with Śītalā. Ferrari (2015a) notes that, though Hijṛās are heavily discriminated in many parts of India, they are frequently present for *balidān* (ritual offering of animal sacrifice) and special places are

reserved for them during some festivals in West Bengal (Ferrari 2015a, 108n.10).[123] A popular

folk theater performer from West Bengal, Chapal Rani (literally, Queen Chapal), is known for

performances of gender-crossing roles as Śītalā in operatic performances of the ŚMKs (Katyal

2001). News reports from Jharkhand (Ranjan 2020) and Bihar (*Times Now News,* June 7, 2020)

suggest the possibility of similar connections, specifically identifying transgender and Kinnar

(another third gender community) participants engaged in coronavirus-related goddess

worship.

Some reports of coronavirus-related goddess worship also reflect a relationship between

goddess worship, motherhood, and their children. This relationship is present in one news

report from Chhattisgarh, which explains that "Women were worshipping 'Corona Mata' and a

mass prayer was organized so that COVID-19 will spare their children and family members"

(Mallick 2021). Devotees in Patna, Bihar (Lal 2021), Namkom in Jharkhand (*News 18,* June 8,

2020), Solapur district in Maharashtra (Pandey 2020), and Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh (Mallick

2021) echo the view that their respective communities are worshipping coronavirus-related

goddesses for the safety of family members. The relationship between goddesses, mothers, and

children is reflected in pre-existing traditions in various ways. Arnold relays a sense of

children's vulnerability vis-à-vis smallpox from a nineteenth century colonial report, which

instructs that, "among agricultural and even wealthier classes never to count children as

permanent members of the family until they had been attacked and recovered from smallpox"

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[123] Though no examples of third gender participation in coronavirus-related rituals in South Indian communities appear in the news reports, similar examples exist in the literature pertaining to South Indian goddesses associated with disease. Joyce Flueckiger (2013) describes a week-long festival in Andhra Pradesh in which many men dress as women or the goddess, Gangamma, herself. In Melmaruvathur, Tamil Nadu, a man named Pankuru Atikalar, better known as the "Mother of Melmaruvathur" is recognized as an incarnation of Māriyamman; the associated movement, following the pronouncements of Atikalar as Māriyammaṉ, have disavowed caste as "irrelevant" (Harman 2003, 10-11).

(Arnold 1993, 117). Many birth rites related to childhood mortality. For example, *Chhathi* (sixth, or Mother Sixth), many diseases like tetanus and puerperal fever claim the lives of children in the first six days after birth. In West Bengal, while *Ṣaṣṭhi* is worshipped both to prevent post-natal deaths and feared for causing them, Śītalā, however, is a protector of children (Ferrari 2015a, 6). Relatedly, a north Indian women's festival dedicated to the welfare of children called *Sili Sat* (Cold Seventh), is dedicated to seven goddesses of disease, of whom Śītalā is often considered chief (Freed and Freed 1998, 122-23).

Finally, women may find an avenue of expression through engaging with the myths, rituals, and traditions of goddesses associated with disease. Ritual 'possession' is a common feature of both Māriyammaṉ and Śītalā devotional traditions; it can be a way for women who experience gender-based oppression to express their grievances in a socially acceptable way (Das 2019, 208). Lambert (1994) notes how the goddess Sātobahin can help women negotiate tensions between their roles as daughters, wives, sisters, and mothers (1994, 23). Stories and songs devoted to Śītalā "reflect the everyday suffering, or worries, blighting the life of a woman" (Ferrari 2015a, 28). Writing about Śītalā worship in West Bengal during the Covid-19 pandemic, Sen (2021) observes a direct connection between women's marginalization and ritual practice. She writes, "As they have been historically excluded from advanced healthcare in West Bengal, it is primarily marginalized populations, especially women – who are socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged in India's caste-based society – who worship Sitala" (Sen 2021, 79). None of the news reports include narratives of women describing gender relations as a reason for performing ritual worship of coronavirus-associated goddesses; however, the prevalence of women (and to some extent, transgender) devotees suggests that a dimension pertaining to asymmetrical distribution of pandemic-related hardships plausibly

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relates coronavirus-associated goddess worship with the exacerbation of conditions of gender marginalization during the Covid-19 pandemic in India.

5.4 Conclusion

Coronavirus-related goddesses and ritual practices are, like other goddesses associated with disease, complex and multifaceted deities. Their associations, though at times inclusive of straightforward identifications with the SARS-CoV-2 virus and Covid-19 disease-effects on the individual body, include far-reaching social and political concerns as well. Participant narratives and practices reveal diverse motivations and methods, which bring various social relationships into relief. Participants may assume authority for performing coronavirus-related goddess rituals, as such authority stems from their knowledge of established traditions, applied to the present circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps journalists did not ask questions regarding participants' views regarding their authority and authenticity, or perhaps they did not publish responses to these questions. Nevertheless, from the available data, participants' concerns largely appear to be concerned with interpreting the imbalances and disorder wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic according to prior epistemic traditions, and collectively addressing and resolving shared concerns by creatively applying traditional ritual techniques.

Chapter 6. Concluding Remarks

The English word, 'superstition', in its contemporary usage, usually refers to a belief characterized by irrationality and based in fear or ignorance. But it also has a collection of antiquated meanings referring to 'excess' (OED Online 2023). Perhaps the 'superstitions' of coronavirus-related goddess rituals can in part be understood as forms of 'excess': they may have capacity to overflow restrictive bounds of preconceived definitions and categories, resisting the homogenizing tendencies of Hindu nationalisms, the disenchanting dogmas of narrow secularisms, and other similarly 'flattening' processes put forward by global capitalisms and neo-colonialisms; they transgress the rules of discourse established by dominant powers, which speak as though they serve the interests of all citizens, especially those who are structurally marginalized, but who do not live up to these promises in the time of true crisis; they draw attention to relationships, structured both within and prior to those characterized by relations of "pandemicity", relationships that may be regarded as inconvenient or even threatening to some political projects, both ethnic nationalist and technocratic in character.

This thesis has shown how media reports and comments strategically delegitimize ritual practices devoted to goddesses associated with the novel coronavirus as 'superstitious'. Authority, when it is recognized, is distributed along gendered lines, at times recognizing the practices of male ritualists as 'Hindu' while denying such ascriptions to those practices conducted by women and other gender minorities. Furthermore, dimensions of class, education, and other social markers of difference also become targets for charges of 'superstition' in strategies that seek to delegitimize the activities of marginalized groups. Narratives of ritualists, by contrast, while situating their practices in traditions of South Asian

traditions of goddesses associated with disease, authoritatively enact responses to and

relationships pertinent to the Covid-19 pandemic through ritual. From the available data,

ritualists are more concerned with the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic than

they are in situating their practices as authentically 'Hindu'.

Related to questions of authority and authenticity, and underlying accusations of

'superstition' and 'blind devotion' are epistemic questions regarding the status and legitimacy

of various forms and techniques of knowledge. Foucault writes that

> the political and economic conditions of existence are not a veil or an obstacle for the
> subject of knowledge but the means by which subjects of knowledge are formed, and
> hence are truth relations. There cannot be particular types of subjects of knowledge,
> orders of truth, or domains of knowledge except on the basis of political conditions that
> are the very ground on which the subject, the domains of knowledge, and the relations
> with truth are formed. (Foucault 2000, 15)

These conditions, however, do not necessarily *determine* subjectivity but are ineradicable

dimensions of dynamic and historically situated processes. This thesis has suggested that

coronavirus-related goddess rituals, viewed from a relational perspective, may, in some cases,

elucidate dimensions of political, economic, and other social conditions. Foucault later

explains that his concern, and the task of discourse analysis in general, is not to distinguish

between "scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category; rather it

consists in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses that, in

themselves, are neither true nor false" (Foucault 2000, 119). I have attempted to show some of

the ways in which Hindu nationalist and secular rationalist discourses, which construct

coronavirus-related goddess rituals as 'superstitious', i.e., 'false', are themselves historically

conditioned. I have also attempted to show that, while sharing many connections with pre-

existing South Asian traditions of goddesses associated with disease, goddesses associated with

the novel coronavirus cannot be reduced to these traditions without ignoring the specific contexts out of which they emerged.

Analysis of the media reports covering coronavirus-related goddesses reveals them to be dynamic sites of complex social and political antagonisms, many of which predate and are reimagined in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In one sense, the goddesses and their devotees are mobilized as fulcrums for discursively constructing and perpetuating various forms of social division. Comment sections reproduce discourses, which construct difference and highlight social divisions which extend beyond the communities of coronavirus-related goddess devotees. Negatively-valenced constructions according to regional, religious, and political differences use media reports of coronavirus-related goddesses to further various divisive perspectives. Analysis also suggests that nuanced dimensions of ritual practice of coronavirus-related goddesses have gone largely unappreciated and unrepresented in public discourse. The structural exclusion from or, at least, carefully controlled participation in, public discourse of participants in coronavirus-related goddess practices reveals another variety of pandemic-related asymmetry. Popular journalism and academic scholarship that portray coronavirus-related goddesses do a disservice to groups engaging in new religious practices when they characterize or portray these practices with a narrow, often one-dimensional focus. By centering on some dimensions of coronavirus-related ritual practice while neglecting significant yet subtle nuances, reports of this nature can obscure other dimensions inscribed within them, including various forms of social critique. For example, even those reports which charitably suggest functionalist interpretations of coronavirus-related goddess worship, suggesting their instrumental value in alleviating fear, often stop short of elucidating significant implications that such suggestion entails.

Goddesses associated with coronavirus are complex and multilayered deities with diverse associations. Analysis of the narratives of ritual participants and dimensions of ritual practice suggests an expansive view of Hindu ritual practice in the face of social upheavals like global pandemics. This thesis has attempted to bring into relief some implicit relationships with historical and contemporary processes and to suggest possible interpretations and avenues for further research. Though working with limited and partial sources of data, I have nevertheless attempted to draw attention to aspects of ritual practices of goddesses associated with coronavirus, traces of which are present, though not discussed in the media reports. Like Śītalā, Māriyamma̱ṉ, or other goddesses associated with disease, reducing them to a singular "Goddess of Covid-19", neglects the myriad relationships that ritual practice devoted to them enact and risks unnecessarily homogenizing the local specificities of the conditions to which they are in part responses. Ferrari asks, "why should Hindu deities be called gods and goddesses *of* something?" (2015a, 171. Italics in original). Goddesses associated with coronavirus, like other Hindu deities and human beings, are capable of a wide range of associations and affective expressions. If they must be portrayed as "coronavirus goddesses", then this ought to be understood capaciously, accounting for the varied, dynamic, and expansive view of the Covid-19 pandemic – accounting for political, social, health, religious, etc., - dimensions of the pandemic in South Asia and the world that this entails.

This thesis has also highlighted dimensions of the role of science in contemporary South Asia, in both political and public discourses. The different yet, at times, synergistic mobilizations of science discourse by Hindu nationalist and secular rationalist organizations brought into relief through the discourses of superstition suggest the urgency for understanding how these dynamics relate with religious practices on the margins in ways that

may not reflect the concerns each group claim to be working to address. Paraphrasing philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend, Axel Michaels suggests that "today's science may well be the fairy tale we tell ourselves to avoid fear" (2004, 201). This may be so, but what about when the resources made available through scientifically informed responses to a global pandemic are structurally withheld from people, many of whom view science as non-contradictory with religious beliefs and ritual practices?

Further research in this area could include ethnographic fieldwork at sites considered in this thesis, specifically regarding coronavirus-related goddess rituals. Even after the acute threat of Covid-19 appears to have subsided, oral histories of the recent past could be illuminating. Broader inquiry into the ways in which Hindu nationalist and secular rationalist ideas shaped religious practices in diverse settings during the Covid-19 pandemic, including urban hospitals, for example, could help to understand the dynamics of these ideologies' relationships to forms of religious practice which diverge from mainstream and politically supported forms. Additionally, this research suggests that public health research in South Asia ought to take seriously the nuances of localized forms of religious practice, not only in the ways that they may complicate top-down approaches to epidemics and other calamities, but as expressions for promised yet undelivered services and needs.

This thesis contributes to the multidisciplinary field of religious studies in several ways. It contributes to the growing body of literature documenting and analyzing religious responses to the Covid-19 pandemic through its analysis of ritual dimensions of a set of South Asian practices. It also contributes to the study of ritual and religious change in a continuously changing world. The ways in which coronavirus-related goddess rituals draw on, yet distinguish themselves from, pre-existing traditions in various ways provides a case study that

complicates a false binary between ritual conservation and innovation. Intersections of religion, health crises, and community responses in South Asia, brought into relief by the study of media presentations of coronavirus-related goddess worship, suggest the need for expansive study of socio-religious phenomena. The community responses of ritual participants highlight resilience, creativity, and diversity in religious expression, both as social critique and as techniques for navigating and constructing meaning in the face of challenging circumstances.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.1 Primary Sources: Online News (Print)

No.	News Source	Article Title	State	Date (d/m/y)	Author/Editor
1	*Deccan Herald*	COVID-19: 'Corona Devi' pujas held in West Bengal's North Dinajpur district	West Bengal	03/06/20	Soumya Das
2	*New Indian Express*	Jharkhand: Transgenders, women perform puja to ward off coronavirus	Jharkhand/Bihar	05/06/20	Mukesh Ranjan
3	*Telegraph*	Fears fuel trend of 'Corona mai' worship	Jharkhand	06/06/20	No Author
4	*Times Now News*	Bizarre: Women in Bihar, Jharkhand, UP & West Bengal perform 'Corona Devi' puja to ward off coronavirus	Bihar, Jharkhand, UP & West Bengal	07/06/20	No Author
5	*Bridge Chronical*	Coronavirus India 'Corona Devi' emerges in Bihar	Bihar	07/06/20	IANS (Indo-Asian News Service)
6	*India Today*	Assam: Many perform 'Corona Devi Puja' to end coronavirus pandemic	Assam	07/06/20	Hemanta Kumar Nath
7	*India Times*	How To Be Safe During COVID-19? Just Pray To Corona Devi! At Least That Is What Some Are Doing	West Bengal, Bihar	08/06/20	Bobins Abraham
8	*News 18*	Coronavirus is Now a Deity in Many Indian Villages, Being Worshipped with Flowers and Sweets	UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam	08/06/20	No Author
9	*The Hindu*	How a goddess called Corona Devi came to be worshipped in West Bengal	West Bengal	10/06/20	Sanchari Samanta
10	*The Hindu*	Just one devotee for 'Corona Devi'	Kerala	12/06/20	No Author
11	*Indian Express*	'My own way of creating awareness': Man in Kerala worships 'Corona Devi'	Kerala	14/06/20	No Author
12	*Indian Express*	When fear leads to faith: The disease Gods of India	N/A	22/06/20	Adrija Roychowdhury
13	*Guardian (NG)*	People Are Now Praying To 'Goddess Corona' To Stop Pandemic	West Bengal	23/07/20	Akinwale Akinyoade
14	*Times Now News*	A hen and a goat sacrifice to ward off curse of Corona Mata: Police probe into Solapur's COVID-19 temple	Maharashtra	03/09/20	Kirti Pandey
15	*Free Press Journal*	With blessings from Corona Devi: Solapur's Pardhi community believes they	Maharashtra	03/09/20	Dipthi Bhat

		have divine protection amid pandemic			
16	*Hindustan Times*	Anupamaa actor Rupali Ganguly in quarantine after testing positive for coronavirus, says 'Sorry for letting you down'	N/A	02/04/21	No Author
17	*India Today*	Let down by science, UP villagers turn to faith to save themselves from Covid-19 wave	Uttar Pradesh	12/05/21	Ashutosh Mishra
18	*Free Press Journal*	Chhattisgarh: Women fast, organise mass prayers in Rajnandgaon to please 'Corona Mata'	Chhattisgarh	14/05/21	Avdhesh Mallick
19	*Indian Express*	Coimbatore temple consecrates 'Corona Devi' idol to protect people from pandemic	Tamil Nadu	19/05/21	Janardhan Koushik
20	*News 18*	Temple in Tamil Nadu Consecrates 'Corona Devi' Idol to Protect People from Pandemic	Tamil Nadu	20/05/21	No Author
21	*iDiva*	Netizens React To Coimbatore's Corona Devi Temple With 'Hum Kabhi Nahi Sudhrenge!'	Tamil Nadu	20/05/21	Anannya Chatterjee
22	*Deccan Herald*	Temple for 'Corona Devi' comes up in Tamil Nadu	Tamil Nadu	21/05/21	No Author
23	*One India*	Plague Mariamman: Coimbatore has 'Corona Devi' temple; Netizens reacts 'hum kabhi nahi sudhrenge'	Tamil Nadu	21/05/21	Simran Kashyap
24	*Asia Net News*	From cow dung water to smoke to rituals to get rid of Corona Devi, misinformation and superstitions are rampant in this Karnataka village.	Karnataka	22/05/21	No Author
25	*Economic Times (India Times)*	Coimbatore now has a temple for 'Corona Devi'	Tamil Nadu	22/05/21	No Author
26	*India Today*	Andhra locals sacrifice lockdown rules to appease angry goddess who brought Covid wave	Andhra Pradesh	24/05/21	Ashish Pandey
27	*Indian Express*	Karnataka: Madhuvanahalli village consecrates 'Corona Maramma'; district administration clears the area	Karnataka	25/05/21	Darshan Devaiah BP

28	*Al Jazeera*	'Corona Devi': Indian priests pray for mercy from COVID 'goddess'	Tamil Nadu	27/05/21	No Author
29	*Open – The Magazine*	Seeking Corona Devi	N/A	28/05/21	Lhendup G. Bhutia
30	*New Indian Express*	Corona Goddess: Temple dedicated for 'Corona Devi' in Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore	Tamil Nadu	28/05/21	No Author
31	*SCMP*	"'She's an angry goddess': India's coronavirus deities, disease-curing shrines offer hope to desperate devotees	N/A	30/05/21	Neeta Lal
32	*Telegraph*	[Letter] – Matter of faith: Corona devi	Tamil Nadu	02/06/21	Soumi Mahapatra
33	*Times of India*	UP: Hundreds pray at 'Corona Mata' temple to ward off deadly virus	Uttar Pradesh	11/06/21	Kapil Dixit
34	*Reuters*	Indian village prays to 'goddess corona' to rid them of the virus	Uttar Pradesh	12/06/21	No Author
35	*Deccan Herald*	'Corona Mata' temple in Uttar Pradesh demolished, one arrested	Uttar Pradesh	12/06/21	Sanjay Pandey
36	*Indian Express*	UP villagers set up 'Corona Mata' temple to seek divine blessings to ward off Covid-19	Uttar Pradesh	13/06/21	No Author
37	*India Today*	'Corona mata' temple built in UP village, demolished after five days	Uttar Pradesh	13/06/21	No Author
38	*Geo News*	Indian village prays to 'Corona Mata' to rid them of the virus	Uttar Pradesh	17/06/21	No Author
39	*New Indian Express*	Flabbergasted by incompetence	N/A	20/06/2021	T. J. S. George
40	*Religion News Service*	Indian Hindus turn to honoring 'corona goddess' to quell pandemic	Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, UP, Bihar, Jharkhand	22/06/21	Bhavya Dore
41	*Madras Courier*	Karl Marx & The Curious Case of Corona Mata	Uttar Pradesh	23/06/21	Harshvardhan & Ankur Goswami
42	*Pink Villa*	Anupamaa's Rupali Ganguly & Ekta Saraiya make an appeal to 'Ma Corona Devi': 'Bas karo ye Corona khatam karo'	N/A	30/06/21	No Author
43	*The Hindu*	Demolition of Corona Mata temple: SC dismisses PIL with ₹5,000 cost, says abuse of process	Uttar Pradesh	09/10/21	No Author

Appendix 1.2 Primary Sources: Online News (Videos)

No.	Title	Link	Date	Posted by
1	"'Corona Devi'" Superstition Reaches From Bihar To UP	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkkqsRnanfo	05/06/20	ABP News
2	India Battles COVID-19: People of Assam and Bihar Perform 'Corona Devi' Puja	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HkoNDuYahM&t=4s	08/06/20	*India Today*
3	Kerala priest invokes 'Corona Devi' in fight against Covid-19	https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/city/kochi/kerala-priest-invokes-corona-devi-in-fight-agnst-covid-19/videoshow/76388999.cms	15/06/20	*Times of India*
4	India Man makes 'Coronavirus goddess' shrine to pray for workers on pandemic front lines	https://www.scmp.com/video/asia/3093437/india-man-makes-coronavirus-goddess-shrine-pray-workers-pandemic-front-lines	16/06/20	*SCMP*
5	This Tamil Nadu Temple Got A Corona Devi Idol To Protect People From Covid	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIuY2GHlMpY	20/04/21	*India Today*
6	Coimbatore temple comes up with a 'Corona devi' idol to protect people from the pandemic	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYPjV1uxokM&t=19s	21/05/21	*The Print*
7	From cow dung water to smoke to rituals to get rid of Corona Devi, misinformation and superstitions are rampant in this Karnataka village.	https://newsable.asianetnews.com/video/india/from-dung-water-smoke-rituals-to-corona-devi-this-is-how-karnataka-village-is-fighting-covid-ycb-qtihmr	22/05/21	*Asia Net News*
8	Corona Goddess: Temple dedicated for 'Corona Devi' in Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore	https://www.newindianexpress.com/videos/videos-nation/2021/may/28/corona-goddess-temple-dedicated-for-corona-devi-in-tamil-nadus-coimbatore-109824.html	28/05/21	*New Indian Express*
9	'Corona Mata' Temple Comes Up Under A Neem Tree At A Village In Pratapgarh District.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQTj-9zQxdI	12/06/21	*Kanak News*
10	Corona Mata: This UP village has a temple to ward off Covid-19	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEyD8PTb250&t=15s	12/06/21	*Times of India*
11	Days after its inception, Corona Mata temple in UP demolished	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSFjhT_N04w	13/06/21	*The Indian Express*
12	Anupamaa's Rupali Ganguly & Ekta Saraiya make an appeal to 'Ma Corona Devi': 'Bas karo ye Corona khatam karo'	https://www.pinkvilla.com/tv/news-gossip/anupamaas-rupali-ganguly-ekta-saraiya-make-appeal-ma-corona-devi-bas-karo-ye-corona-khatam-karo-834878	30/06/21	*Pink Villa*

Appendix 2.1 Muslim-Hindu Exchange

[1] In India, 33 crore[124] gods are created just like that [laughing emojis]

[2] I say to you, come towards Allahm all these gods are lies. It's just a way to earn money

[3] Get lost in your free time

[2] ... @3 come towards Allah. Worship He who is truly worthy of worship. Leave idol worship, it can neither benefit you or cause you harm

[3] @2 You're foolish, sir. First learn about the Sanatan (Hindu) religion. Even Hindus do not worship idols. These are misguided people who engage in idol worship. Just like the wrong belief that committing a crime will lead to getting better rewards which exists in some Muslim families, similarly, new gods are emerging in Hinduism.

[2] @3 Dear brother, worshiping idols of any kind is wrong. If Muslims engage in such practices, then they are not true Muslims. The true path is the worship of Allah alone. As Muslim brothers, we desire that those who worship idols also come onto the straight path. You are my brother, and I worship Allah. By taking an oath in the name of Allah, I say that I love you, and that is why I am discussing this matter with you. Whether someone worships idols or not, it doesn't matter to me. I love Allah and you, and that is why I am conveying this message of truth to you.

[Original Text]

[1] India me 33 crore Bhagwan aise hi bana [laughing emojis]

[2] Mein tu kehta ho aao aik Allah ki tarf yea but bhagwan sub jhoot hai paisay kmanay ka tariqa hai

[3] nikal paili fursat may nikal

[2] ... @3 aao Allah ki tarf jo such mein poja k laiq hai morti ki poja chhod do yea na tumhein faida day sakti hai or na nuqsan

[3] @2 are paglait sahab. Paile sanatan(hindu) dharam ke bare may jaan lo. Hindu may bhi murti puja nahi hai. ye toh log bhatke hue hai jo murti pooja karte hai. Theek usi taraha jaise jurm karo bahatar hoor milege aisa galat family Muslims may hai, usi tarah aise naye naye bhagwan Hindu may nikal rahe hai. Jo ko dono galat hai. Nahi muslim may murti puja hai nahi hi asli sanatani murti puja manta hai

[2] @3 meray payare bhai morti poja kisi bi morti ki ho galat hai ager muslim is tarha kertay hein tu wo muslim nehi hein sucha rasta aik Allah ki ibadat hai sub morti poja kernay walay bi hum muslim k bhai hum chahtay hein k wo bi seedahy rastay pe aa jaein. tum meray bhai ho mein Allah ki ibadat kerta hon or us Allah ki qasam kha k kehta hon k mujhay aap se payar hai is liay yea baat ker raha hon nehi tu mujay kaya farq perta hai koi morti poja keray ya na keray Allah ko b aap se payar is liay yea suchai ka pegam aap tak pohunch raha

(Commenters, *Kanak News,* June 12, 2021)

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[124] Thirty-three crore is 330 million. Though at times taken literally, this is generally regarded as a figurative number representing innumerable forms, aspects, and manifestations of the divine in Hindu mythology.

Appendix 2.2 Hindutva Exchange

[1] Do you know that India is a country with the highest number of blind devotees in the world? [Laughing emojis]

[2] Andhbakt means someone who blindly worships their god. But you guys changed its meaning and brought politics into it. I agree it's foolishness, but these uneducated people in the village are being deceived, and you should file a case against the person who built this temple based on their faith.

[3 replying to 2] How can you say they are uneducated?

[2 replying to 3] Brother, Jai Shree Ram [2 flag emojis]. I would say it, but I don't believe in this blind faith. I am a true sanatani Hindu, but not blind.

Brother, I also support the BJP and I am a devout Hindu, but should we not file a case against these Corona Devi people who are deceiving innocent people for money?

Brother, I just want to establish a Hindu nation. (Commenters, Kanak news, June 12, 2021)

[Original Text]

[1] क्या आप जानते हैं विश्व में भारत एक ऐसा देश है जहां सबसे अधिक अंधभक्त हैं [laughing emojis]

[2] Andhbakt ka meaning hai jo apne bhagwan se Prem karta hai par Tum logo nai uska meaning change kar dia politics mai le aye mana ki ye bewkoofi hai par gaon ke anpad logo thuga ja raha hai aur dusri baat Hinduism sabse Purana religion hai aur ye kaam karna unki aastha par thesh hai iss mandir ke banane Wale ke upar case Karo

[3] @2 tum kaise kah sakte ho ki ye anpadh hain

[2] @3 Verma bhai jai shree ram [2 flag emojis]. Bolunga par iss andhvisvash Mai believe nahi karunga. Mai ek satya sanatani Hindu hu par andha nahi

bhai mai bhi bjp ka supporter hu aur sanatani bhi par kya Hume inn corona devi walo ko Case nahi karna chihye

 bhai mai bus Hindu rasthra Banana chata hu