

# ***Narratives of COVID-19 in South Asia***

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The interaction of religion and public policy being formulated to deal with coronavirus pandemic has been a challenging issue for South Asian policy-makers. Religious narratives are having a direct impact on pandemic politics and policy choices of the decision-makers. While religion, per se, does not challenge scientific responses to deal with the pandemic. It can be a source of peace and conflict (exploited by its stalwarts) at the same time. But in its institutionalized form, where it is followed by millions of people, and those propagating it, religious narratives tend to constrain and oppose rational public policy over pandemic. Here, the role of religious narrative becomes more ambivalent, leading to more harm. The present study explores how multiple religious narratives prevalent in South Asia influence state's response towards COVID-19? In deliberating this, various instances of interaction between religion and public policymaking amid COVID-19 times is analyzed.*

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## Introduction

*'Religion is an opium of masses.'* - Karl Marx

This celebrated dictum presented in 'Towards Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' in 1843 is still vastly emphasized by many scholars working on religious convictions. For Marx, religion is fundamentally not an independent institution rather a reflection or a creation of other cardinal underlying factors, mainly the economic relations within a community. With this, it also acts as a source of relief and solace largely for the oppressed classes of the given society. Here, the questions arise: Is this theory still viable after about 177 years? Does religion still hold a crucial place in contemporary 'secular' political and capitalist order? In reality, the religious narrative is still enjoying significant influence in social, political and economic arenas in large parts of the world. Therefore, it even greatly impacts the interpretations surrounding various natural events.

Coronavirus pandemic is directly colliding with religions, across the world. Rituals, developed and practiced, for thousands of years, are suddenly not being followed. Places of worships have been closed down. Meanwhile, lockdowns enforced by governments around the globe have coincided with religious festivals such as Easter, Ramadan and Passover. Inevitably, these religious celebrations have been disrupted. Yet, religious narratives and religious leaders played an outsized role in determining attitude of their followers towards implementing government guidelines in containing spread of COVID-19.

Given the central role, religious narratives play in daily lives of billions of people, coronavirus has come as an unprecedented challenge for those propagating religion. In these times of turbulence, people are turning to divine and holy for seeking guidance. While in ordinary times, faith-based groups and communities play a crucial role in bringing people together and also guiding them about issues they face in real life. In extra-ordinary times, such as the pandemic, role of religion-based organisations have

assumed added importance. Ordinary people look at religious leaders as mentors. In turn, religious leaders can be employed in relaying accurate information about the disease and the precautions necessary to prevent it.

At the same time, people are also questioning utility of religion of religious narrative in addressing the pandemic. As centrality of science has emerged as key driver of decision-making during pandemic, religious narratives continue to dictate governments. This has led to question being raised about if religion is a force for good or harm during the pandemic. Related to it, is the issue if, there are recurring themes cross-cutting various religions when dealing with pandemic. Largescale religious congregations are perfect hub for disease transmission. In some places, this has forced religious groups to be more innovative when practicing collective worship, where social distancing cannot be implemented. Few religious groups have moved their rituals online, while those resisting have gained media attention.

This article aims to explore the religious narratives and how they influence government decision-making and people during the pandemic. It will mainly focus on South Asian region, where diversity of religions makes it an ideal case in point. For instance, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism are three largest religions being followed by people across South Asia. While there are people following Christianity and other religions but in smaller numbers. In such a scenario, how religious narratives have interacted with government policies in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka is probed.

The study is divided into three inter-related parts. First part, sketches a theoretical discourse of religious narratives in general. Second part delves into responses and practices of religious leaders belonging to Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam during the pandemic. Parallel to this, influential pattern upon policy-makers in respective countries is highlighted. While exploring the role played by religious clergy,

challenges faced by the government are also highlighted. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for policy-makers in balancing demands of religious narratives with the challenges of policy-making in the region.

The present research paper relies on interpretative methodology. Religious texts and statements are interpreted with the focus on bringing out their essential messages. Meanwhile, a qualitative methodology is employed in analyzing interaction of religious narrative with government responses. This is based on usage of secondary sources.

### **Theoretical Discourse of Religious Narrative**

In modern age, religion means different things to different people. For most part, religion is organized around religious institutions, which espouse beliefs and rituals of worship. It also reflects narratives of each religion and how those narratives are understood by people, at large. Religion, thus, directly engages with what people do in their private lives, and also hold in common. In this way, religion comes to influence thinking and lives of people beyond their immediate followers. It brings with internal disagreements, personal and public interests, collective action, politics and identity. Consequently, when formulating public policy, religion is not politically neutral. It has huge implications in setting direction, and influencing conduct of public policy. Primarily, religion draws its power from religious narratives.

These are the themes that provide a systematic interpretation of God's role in universe and human civilization. According to Dr. Keith Suter, religious narratives are 'stories' about the creation of the universe, the human race through the activities of a god/gods. These narrative aids its followers to identify their lives purpose as well as a code of conduct to be followed as represented by 'ideal' figures in those stories.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, religious narratives can

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1 Keith Suter, "Narrative in System of Religion," *Global Directions*, n.d., accessed July 18, 2020.

<http://www.global-directions.com/articles/religion/narrativeinreligion.pdf>

distinguish itself from other narratives because of its 'ontological' and 'social' dimensions of their given narrative. In an 'ontological' perspective, these narratives are not only explanatory but also prescriptive that are internalized by each individual throughout their lives. They are constructed in such a manner that the events mentioned seem plausible but also can be molded through the ethical claims embedded in the narrative itself such as certain actions are criticized while others are praised. Similarly, the 'social' dimension takes these narratives as collective narratives that are established, preserved, and/or diffused by its members in a shared social process such as social movements, historical movements, etc. This provides the individuals with a guiding framework through which they comprehend and understand both the individual and collective experiences. Such social-ontological religious narratives at times even act as a catalyst for any social or political change in the society; primarily by three major factors. Firstly, they emphasize ways through which coherent narratives are reproduced which establishes and gradually, strengthens a shared collective identity of a certain social group. Secondly, religious narratives often describe stories of valiant action and moments which might prompt its readers to repeat those deeds often risky in case of political change. Thirdly, these narratives provide a 'utopian' dimension which essentially projects an appealing future vision that leads to activism by its followers. Here, the religious narrative presents its story which builds on past events but also takes into the present possibilities accurately with an alluring future. This motivates the individuals to remake the narrative they are currently living which resembles the narrative of the desire to live.<sup>2</sup>

Broadly, interactions between religion and public policy take place at three levels. First is institutional, wherein an organized manner religious leaders through their institutions engage public policy-makers, and then also influence

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2 Anna L. Peterson, "Religious Narratives and Political Protest," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 1 (1996): 27-44. Accessed July 18, 2020, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465244>.

society. Governments take religious institutional heads into confidence, engage with them, and also seek their counsel, when dealing with issues that relate to religious institutions or are indirectly relevant to religious affairs. Meanwhile, it is here, religious institutions and governments also collide in gaining access to financial details, implementing policies and influence public.

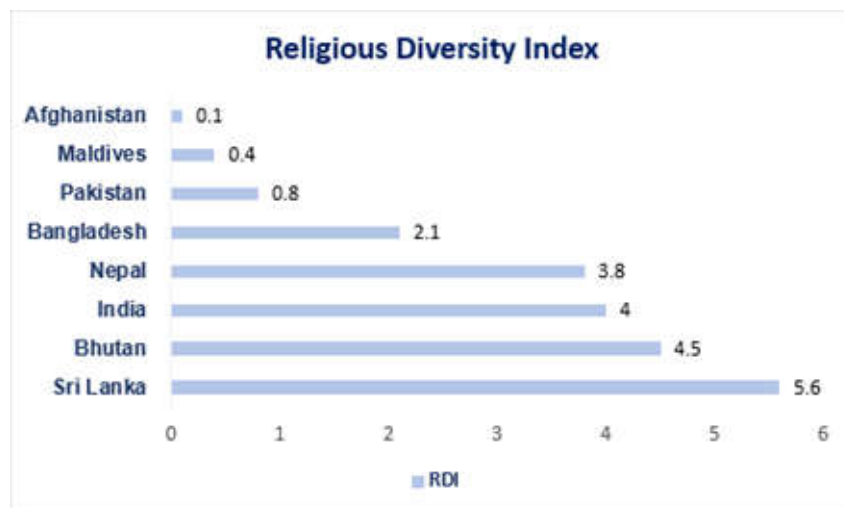
The second level of interaction is behavioural. This means, through influence of religious institutions, narratives and leaders, people can adopt a certain behaviour. When religious leaders or narrative argue against a certain course of action, and people follow them, it can come at the expense of large public welfare. For instance, when following religious narratives, people refuse to vote or withdraw from immunization for their children, it harms public life. In this way, the first and second levels of interactions are directly in conflict with each other. At the same time, there is a direct linkage between two levels. The smoothness with which interactions takes place at both levels determines sound outcomes of public policies governments wish to pursue.

The third level is more complicated. It is the competition of narratives between religious institutions and the governments. Since both sides are in the domain of influencing society and its behaviour. This makes interaction between religious institutions and government a competition for narratives, or philosophical competition. In the domain of ideas and thoughts, this competition is most intense. It is this arena where values of a nation, or its ethical code is discussed. Religion provides a set of values and moral code. But is it universal? Here, public debate gets heated. This is not only abstract competition, but it has real life implications. For instance, in Muslim world, extremism and counter-extremism narratives have competed for public imagination for over two decades now. Those swayed by extremism narrative engage in violent acts and harm others. Similarly, governments and public policy-makers push back through alternate narratives.

These levels are visible in how countries are dealing with public messaging related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The religious narratives are playing a big role in shaping responses of the ordinary people towards pandemic and government regulations. Hence, it is crucial to dissect what religious narratives are propagating across South Asia.

### Religious Narrative versus COVID–19 in South Asia

South Asia is home to eight countries namely, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives representing a vibrant mosaic of human diversity in all aspects. Across these countries, are the followers of different religions living side by side, speaking various languages and dialects but still deeply connected by entrenched cultural similarities. The region's cultural as well as political dynamics largely depicts their shared colonial histories, postcolonialism periods, multi-cultural populations as well as the rapidly increasing role of religion in their societies.<sup>3</sup>



SOURCE: Pew Research Data 2014.

3 Rowena Robinson, "The Politics of Religion and Faith in South Asia," *Society and Culture in South Asia* 3 no. 2(2017):vii-xx, accessed July 18, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2393861717706290>

Across the globe, Asia-Pacific sets itself as an example of religious diversity by leading the Religious Diversity Index of 9.2 in comparison with other parts of the world. South Asia is home to one of the most moderate religiously diverse states, Sri Lanka and two least diverse, Afghanistan and Maldives. Pakistan and Bangladesh are also considered as the least religiously diverse countries.<sup>4</sup>

South Asia's major religions: Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are depicted below:



This religious diversity has in a way paved a path for the politics of 'majority' and 'minority' religions to shape the

4 "Appendix 2: Religious Diversity Index Scores and Religious Adherents by Region and Country," Religious Diversity Index, *PEW Research Center* (Nov 4, 2014), accessed July 18, 2020. <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/04/Religious-Diversity-appendix-2.pdf>



notions regarding the nation, state, and citizenship. The formation of some modern states such as Pakistan and India are a clear manifestation of how religion has been shaping the politics of the region. All the states in South Asia are in this manner connected; a 'majority' religion in one country is a 'minority' religion in the other. Therefore, any policies and politics concerning minorities of one country tend to have reverberations across the boundaries.<sup>5</sup>

Such politics of religion also greatly influence the cultural and economic affairs of each country. This is large because people still in South Asia hold religion as an integral part of their regular lives. In case of Pakistan, it is a documented fact that more than 90 percent of people attribute religion as a significant element in their community. Western political scientists, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, profess that high patterns of religious commitment to evident 'existential insecurity' differences in the given region manifest differently. 'Existential insecurity' depicts the level of security and safety the people feel in their daily course of lives. In regions where individuals face constant fear of death may be due to hunger, war or disease, a sense of vulnerability emerges which drives them towards religion as a place of solace. This is quite evident in South Asian countries where religion provides emotional support to people and even explanations for unknown phenomena.<sup>6</sup>

### **Hinduism and its Narrative on COVID-19**

During the end of the Vedic period, Hinduism emerged and became a part of the subcontinent culture. For a long time, Hinduism and Buddhism both enjoyed the supremacy in the region but gradually Hinduism arose as the stronger one.

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5 Robinson, "The Politics of Religion and Faith in South Asia."

6 "Age Gap in Religion Around the World," *Demographic Study on Religion & Public Life*, Pew Research Center, (June, 2018), accessed July 18, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/why-do-levels-of-religious-observance-vary-by-age-and-country/>

Presently, Hinduism is the dominant religion of India as well as in Nepal.<sup>7</sup>

The Hindu sect is largely known for its prohibition of consuming cow's meat. This is because as per their scriptures, the cow is a sacred symbol of life that should be venerated and protected.<sup>8</sup> Such sacredness is reflected in the religious practices in response to the COVID pandemic as well. In India, The All India Hindu Union (Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha) hosted several 'Gau Mutra' (cow urine) parties as means of saving people from the virus. During these parties, people were served cow urine (to drink), made to take in vapors from the burning of cow dung as well as were offered sweets made of cow milk.<sup>9</sup> More so, the Hindutva group advised the people to burn gum resin (loban) set on cow dung with chants of 'Om Namah Shivay' as it will kill the 'negative' bacteria and spread positive energy in their homes. They believe that cow dung constitutes such powerful properties that individuals could even benefit by just putting a tilak on their foreheads.<sup>10</sup>

Following the Hindu scriptures greatly highlight the importance of reincarnation where the soul of a being will live many lives on Earth and some of those earlier lives might be in the form of animals. Their adherents strictly

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- 7 Benjamin E. Sawe, "Religious Composition of South Asian Countries," *World Atlas* (August 16, 2018), accessed July 19, 2020. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-composition-of-the-countries-of-south-asia.html>
  - 8 Kimberly Winston, "The Splainer: What Makes the Cow Sacred to Hindus?" *Washington Post*, November 5, 2015, accessed July 19, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/the-splainer-what-makes-the-cow-sacred-to-hindus/2015/11/05/acdde3e2-840c-11e5-8bd2-680fff868306\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/the-splainer-what-makes-the-cow-sacred-to-hindus/2015/11/05/acdde3e2-840c-11e5-8bd2-680fff868306_story.html)
  - 9 Puja Awasthi, "Cow Dung, Cow Urine and Yagya to Combat Coronavirus, says Hindutva Group Chief," *The Week*, February 4, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/02/04/cow-dung-cow-urine-and-yagya-to-combat-coronavirus-says-hindutva-group-chief.html>
  - 10 Puja Awasthi, "Eating of Chicken by Telangana Ministers Responsible for Spread of COVID-19," *The Week*, March 4, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020 <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/03/04/eating-of-chicken-by-telangana-ministers-responsible-for-spread-of-covid19.html>

follow this and attach immense importance and respect towards all forms of animals, not just cows. After the steady spread of coronavirus in India, the President of Hindu Mahasabha, Chakrapani Maharaj blamed the public eating of chicken by ministers of Telangana government as 'open dare to the force of virus'. On February 29, three ministers had eaten eggs and chicken to dissipate the fear with the said food products which were considered a cause of the spread of the said virus. This event was mainly organized because the poultry industry had seen a stark drop in its local demand. However, the act was seen as a genesis for the rapid increase in the COVID cases in the country. With such a basis, the Hindu Mahasaba Union advised that the spread of the virus could be prevented if the ministers seek forgiveness from the coronavirus and also, pledge to protect all living beings.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, COVID was viewed as an 'avatar' to punish the non-vegetarians and a way to protect the animals. The Swami Chakrapani further bolstered this view by drawing its analogy with one of their gods, Lord Narsingh, to teach the Chinese people a lesson for torturing the animals and a way to turn to vegetarianism. Moreover, he claimed that this deadly virus can only be eliminated if the Chinese President Xi Jinping, creates an 'idol of coronavirus' and seek atonement from it. With this, the Chinese community should even vow not to torture the innocent creatures so that the 'avatar' returns to its world.<sup>12</sup>

Moving forward, in South Asia, the given Hindu narrative and its religious practices have been used as means of force and rule in many of its states. In countries like India, which is a Hinduism bloc and where Muslims are in minority (though they are the second-largest community in the country) has seen much communal violence stemming from the given

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11 Awasthi, "Eating of Chicken by Telangana Ministers Responsible for Spread of COVID-19."

12 IANS, "Hindu Mahasabha Says Coronavirus an 'Angry Avatar' to punish Meat Eaters," *Livemint*, February 16, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/hindu-mahasabha-says-coronavirus-an-angry-avatar-to-punish-meat-eaters-11581864507316.html>

religious differences of each religion. This is primarily also because, in India, the religious narrative is largely linked with the idea of 'Hindu nationalism' or the rule of Hindus in its so-called 'secular democracy'. When the novel virus made its way to the country, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared several times on the television to address the general public. In his every speech, he quoted some text from the Hindu scriptures as well as ingeminated the Hindu's cultural code, conspicuously presenting his commitment to Hinduism but speaking to 'all brothers and sisters' of his nation.<sup>13</sup>

During this health pandemic, when the believers are turning towards religion as a means of solace, the current Indian nationalist government has been propagating the idea of a virus as a conspiracy by its Muslim community. The Tablighi Jamaat, the Muslim missionary movement was majorly accused of the spike in coronavirus in the country when a large number of cases were linked to their religious gathering at Markaz in New Delhi.<sup>14</sup> The group was lambasted by the mainstream media for its 'negligence' and hashtags like #CoronaJihad, #BanJahilJamaat (ban the vile gathering), and #Nizamuddin Idiots were trending on Twitter. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) further fuelled the current situation by calling the gathering as 'corona terrorism' and one central minister even termed it as the 'Talibani crime'.<sup>15</sup>

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13 Nirendra Dev, "Pandemic Cushions India's Modi for Hindu-nation Agenda," *UCA News*, June 3, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/pandemic-cushionsindias-modi-for-hindu-nation-agenda/88254>

14 Akash Bisht & Sadiq Naqvi, "How Tablighi Jamaat Event became India's Worst Coronavirus Vector," *Aljazeera*, April 7, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/tablighi-jamaat-event-india-worst-coronavirus-vector-200407052957511.html>

15 Nishita Jha & Pranav Dixit, "The Coronavirus in India: 200 Million Muslims Blamed for Spread of Covid-19 after 6 deaths tied to one Mosque," *Buzzfeed News*, April 3, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nishitajha/coronavirus-india-muslims-tablighi-jamaat>

The anti-Muslim rhetoric is so deep-seated that even during the ongoing global crisis, an Indian hospital, Ahmedabad Civil Hospital segregated the COVID patients based on their religion. It was reported that separate wards were established for Hindus and Muslims for the 'comfort for both communities' as per the state government order.<sup>16</sup> The COVID has added a new dimension to the festering divisions between the Indian Hindus and Muslims in a manner such as converting the Muslims into the new 'untouchables.'

### **Buddhism and its Narrative on COVID**

Buddhism is a religion based on the teachings of Siddharta Gautama. Despite his views illustrated a structure of virtues and principles more than a religion, it emerged as one of the major religions across the globe. The inception of Buddhism was on the Ganges plains which are in today's Indian state of Bihar and adjacent territories of Nepal. Here, the Gautama Buddha lived and died and left behind the Sangha (order) to continue his work. Buddhism was a minor faction until the Mauryan Emperor, Asoka in the 3rd Century BC converted and sent his missionaries to the Ceylon island which is now Sri Lanka and converted this island to Buddhism. In about 700 A.D., Buddhism followership started declining with the gradual revival of Hinduism in India. Eventually, the arrival of the Muslim dynasty in the 12th Century resulted in a complete collapse for Buddhism in the subcontinent. During this period, all the Buddhist monasteries were demolished, monks were massacred and many survivors fled to other neighbouring countries.<sup>17</sup>

With the novel COVID pandemic, the world is in a period of unprecedented uncertainty, vulnerability and distress. The

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16 "Indian Hospital Accused of Segregating Hindu and Muslim Coronavirus Patients," *Middle East Eye*, April 15, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-india-hospital-accused-segregating-muslim-and-hindu-patients>

17 "Buddhists in South Asia," *Encyclopedia.com*, Updated May 6, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/buddhists-south-asia>

given threat has pushed many people around the world into an existential crisis where mostly religion steps in. In some countries, the Buddhists are carrying out prayers as a way to combat the deadly virus killing millions of people globally. For example, when the first few COVID cases were confirmed in Sri Lanka the Buddhist clerics arranged a special lamp prayer at the Kelaniya Temple to bring consolation to its victims. Moreover, in Sri Lanka, the Buddhists also organized a week-long prayer where they recited the 'Rathana Suthraya' near the Tooth Temple (in Kandy). As per Gnanarathna, the head of the Buddhist Asgiriya sect, this Rathana suthraya holds immense value during such times as Lord Buddha recited it at the time of disease and famine in the Indian city of Visala.<sup>18</sup> Later on, the holy water that has been blessed with the week-long recitation of special prayers were sprinkled across the Indian Ocean island. This spiritual offensive was opted by the country's most sacred Buddhist temple to combat against the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in Bhutan where Buddhists are in the majority, several prayers and religious ceremonies were organized regularly to curb the given deadly virus. Although, being highly under-resourced and landlocked between two populous states, India and China, the latter where the epidemic first occurred, the country has almost remained unscathed. The Himalayan Kingdom largely believes that this is essentially due to their guardian deities who are protecting them from this threat.<sup>20</sup>

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18 "Sri Lankan Clerics hold Services for Coronavirus Victims," *UCA News*, February 3, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020

<https://www.ucanews.com/news/sri-lankan-clerics-hold-services-for-coronavirus-victims/87130>

19 AFP, "Blessings from the Sky! Sri Lanka Fights Coronavirus with Buddhist Holy Water Sprinkled from Helicopters," *News18*, March 27, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/world/blessings-from-the-sky-sri-lanka-fights-coronavirus-with-buddhist-holy-water-sprinkled-from-helicopters-2554127.html>

20 Sonam Ongmo & Tej Parikh, "What Explains Bhutan's Success Battling COVID-19?" *The Diplomat*, May 8, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/what-explains-bhutans-success-battling-covid-19/>

Furthermore, over the years the Buddhist majority states have used their narrative and other means of power to persistently spread the Islamophobic propaganda in their societies which has led to the marginalization of their Muslim minority communities. Such as, when COVID reached Sri Lanka, the populist government and the mainstream media quickly accused the Muslims of its spread. The Muslim religious practices were termed as 'super spreader events' and the Buddhist majority was warned not to purchase any food products from Muslim vendors.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, at the end of March, two Muslim COVID victims were forcibly cremated in the country which jolted its Muslim minority community. This was because the South Asian island nation had initially agreed on burials but later revised its guidelines in April making cremation as a mandatory procedure of disposing of the bodies of COVID victims. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) has allowed both burial or cremation for people dying because of the novel virus. It signifies that this given measure by the Sri Lankan government has not only deprived the Muslims of their fundamental religious right but has also contributed to the predominant perception that it's the Muslim religious practices that exacerbate the spread of coronavirus.<sup>22</sup>

### **Islam and its Narrative on COVID**

Islam is a monotheistic religion that emerged in the 7th Century in the Middle East region. The precise meaning of 'Islam' word is to 'surrender' or 'submission'.<sup>23</sup> Islam's book, the Quran, is sacred, and the only model of guidance for its

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21 Omar Suleiman, "Like India, Sri Lanka is using Coronavirus to Stigmatise Muslims," *AlJazeera*, May 20, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-sri-lanka-coronavirus-stigmatise-muslims-200519134939934.html>.

22 Ashkar Thasleem & Shereena Qazi, "Anguish as Sri Lanka Forces Muslims to Cremate COVID-19 Victims," *AlJazeera*, April 3, 2020, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/anguish-sri-lanka-forces-muslims-cremate-covid-19-victims-200403053706048.html>.

23 "Islam Origins, Islam History, Islam Beliefs," *Patheos*, n.d. accessed July 20, 2020, <https://www.patheos.com/library/islam>.

followers. This is because it is a narrative where the story is narrated to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by Allah Himself. The Holy Quran even encompasses tales of the good end for its pious believers and also concurrently the terrifying details for the non-believers on the Last Day of Judgement. Moreover, the Quran comprises anecdotes describing Allah's mercy such as the story of Prophet Noah and the flood; Moses and Pharaoh and division of sea where He used natural events like earthquake, thunder, flood, and lightning to punish the ones who disobeyed His message and provided relief to its believers. This sacred book also predicts the end of the world order and the occurring of the Day of Judgement through illustrations of 'Yajaoje' and Ma'jooje' where the new nations will appear and gradually destroy the world and life on it.<sup>24</sup>

In South Asia, the religious institution wields a tremendous amount of influence in their societies. However, it's worth noting that this social power is 'latent power' as mostly it is not a part of the judicial state structure. Here, Pakistan serves a perfect example where its religious leaders have ever hardly won any significant number of seats in elections but still hold an indispensable position in the society (which comes from their threat of coming out on the streets).<sup>25</sup> As the deadly virus started intensifying in the country, the government banned all large gatherings across the provinces. In Sindh, the government announced a curfew from 12 noon to 3 pm to stop people from coming to mosques for Jumma (Friday) prayer. Still, then people gathered outside the Ghousia Mosque in Liaquatabad in Karachi which resulted in a confrontation between the

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24 Amal R. Kitishat, "Contemporary Theoretical Insights of the Qur'anic Stories: A Case Study of the Narrative Elements in the Holly Qur'an," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2016): 95-100, accessed July 20, 2020 [http://jiscnet.com/journals/jisc/Vol\\_4\\_No\\_2\\_December\\_2016/10.pdf](http://jiscnet.com/journals/jisc/Vol_4_No_2_December_2016/10.pdf)

25 Asad Hashim, "In Pakistan, Mosques become Coronavirus Battleground Issue," *Aljazeera*, May 6, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/pakistan-mosques-coronavirus-battleground-issue-200504102030000.html>.



people and police. Likewise, in Bangladesh, another Muslim populated state, there was no official ban on mass Friday prayers but its highest religious body called the Islamic Foundation to urge the people to not visit the mosque in areas where there was a high risk of virus. Despite that, people gathered for Friday congregation in a large numbers in Baitul Mukarram, the largest mosque in Dhaka.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the Pakistani President Arif Alvi requested the Grand Imam Shaikh of Egypt's Jamia Al Azhar to issue a fatwa concerning the suspension of Friday prayers to empower this decision. The religious edict emphasized that public gathering could be a vector of viruses spread, therefore, the Muslim countries do have a right to cancel them at such said times. It even stressed on amending the Adhan (calling for prayer) with such words that would encourage people to pray at home rather than mosques. Instead of following such conditions, the religious committee, Ruet-e-Hilal declared that all mosques will remain open and congregational prayers would not be ceased. It further advised people to perform Wudu (ablution) at home as well as offer the Sunnah before and after the Farz prayers at home as means of curbing the spread of the given novel virus in such attendings.<sup>27</sup> Later on, the Pakistani President along with provincial governors arranged a meeting with both Sunni and Shia religious leaders to convince them to shut down mosques for mass prayers but their request was outrightly rejected by the clerics.<sup>28</sup>

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26 SorvarAlam, "COVID-19: Countries Ban Friday Prayers, Muslim at Home," *Anadolu Agency*, March 3, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/covid-19-countries-ban-friday-prayers-muslims-at-home/1781948>

27 "Clerics Reject Calls to Suspend Prayers in Mosques," *Newsweek Pakistan*, March 26, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020

<https://www.newsweekpakistan.com/clerics-reject-calls-to-suspend-prayers-in-mosques/>.

28 Haroon Janjua, "Coronavirus and Islam: Pakistani Clerics Refuse to Shut Down Mosques," *DW*, March 31, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-and-islam-pakistani-clerics-refuse-to-shut-down-mosques/a-52969639>.

Moving forward, during the current health crisis, crowded places and gatherings are the last places to be visited for one's own safety and health. This precaution has largely been ignored by many South Asian states to curb the deadly virus. For example, in Pakistan, the Tablighi Jamaat conducted a two-day religious congregation on March 10 which was attended in large numbers including several foreigners. Subsequently, this gathering at Raiwand Markaz proved to be the major cause of accelerating the spread of the virus in the country and was, therefore, later on, declared as a quarantine center by the government.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in Bangladesh on April 18, thousands of people gathered at the Rahmania Madrassa in Bertola village defying the nationwide lockdown to attend the funeral of a known Islamic teacher, Maulana Jubayer Ahmed Ansari.<sup>30</sup> Only a month earlier, about 25,000 people gathered at Lakshmipur Raipur to perform 'Khatme Shifa' or 'Ayat ash-Shifa (six Quranic verses of healing) with a belief that it would protect them from this novel virus. It was chiefly because a large part of Southern Bangladesh is religious and people strongly believe that such Islamic prayers and sermons can solve their issues.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the given health pandemic was viewed by various scholars by the Islamic lens. Each Islamic scholar gave his view on the underlying reason for this crisis in the world. Ejaz Ashrafi, the senior cleric of Tehreek-I-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), once stated that this epidemic was mainly due to 'our sins' and for not following the teachings of Islam.

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29 Asif Chaudhry, "Tableeghi Jamaat in Hot Water in Pakistan too for Covid-19 spread," *DAWN*, April 8, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1547354>.

30 Kamran R. Chowdhury, "COVID-19 Cases Soar in Bangladesh; Thousands Defy Lockdown to Attend Imam's Funeral," *BenarNews*, April 20, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020.

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/cases-climb-04202020173834.html>.

31 "Coronavirus: Bangladesh Mass Prayer Event Prompts Alarm," *BBC News*, March 19, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51956510>.

He even disagreed with the government's initial decision to close mosques.<sup>32</sup> Another prominent Pakistani Islamic cleric claimed that coronavirus is a 'God's wrath' due to increasing obscenity and nudity prevailing in the community. The religious leader believed that when women indulge in immodesty and wrongful deeds, Allah sends His wrath in such forms. These remarks were made during Prime Minister Imran Khan's telethon to raise funds for the affected people of COVID which incited a lot of controversies.<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, in Afghanistan, some radical Islamic preachers claimed that if any Muslim dies from this contagious virus, he will be considered as a martyr.<sup>34</sup> In Islam, a martyr is one who dies in the way of Allah or Jihad and will be granted a special place in Jannah (paradise). Taliban, in the early weeks of pandemic, offered to assist health workers and international organisations responding to coronavirus cases. Most importantly, Taliban offered safe passage to healthcare workers and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and expressed readiness for ceasefire if disease outbreak occurs in areas under their control.<sup>35</sup> In April, Taliban members also conducted awareness campaigns in Taliban-controlled districts of Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup>

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32 Haroon Janjua, "Coronavirus and Islam: Pakistani Clerics Refuse to Shut down mosques", *DW*, March 31, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020.  
<https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-and-islam-pakistani-clerics-refuse-to-shut-down-mosques/a-52969639>

33 PTI, "Coronavirus is God's Wrath for Obscenity and Nudity: Pakistan Cleric's Bizarre Remarks," *News18*, April 25, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020,  
<https://www.news18.com/news/world/coronavirus-pandemic-gods-wrath-for-obscenity-nudity-pakistan-cleric-2592667.html>.

34 Said S. Ibrahimi & Syed M. Kamal, "The Battles That Can Cost South Asia the War Against COVID-19," *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/the-battles-that-can-cost-south-asia-the-war-against-covid-19/>.

35 Kathy Gannon, "Taliban Ready to Begin Cease-fires in Virus-hit Afghan Areas," *Associated Press*, April 1, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020.  
[https://apnews.com/e8e5b61b29b3ff00850272778fd0dce4?fbclid=IwAR0AdqITf\\_XGjOuoqStjFos1nCL3pcueJknFZxp1GhKRHI-CtTV4JSfSYbY](https://apnews.com/e8e5b61b29b3ff00850272778fd0dce4?fbclid=IwAR0AdqITf_XGjOuoqStjFos1nCL3pcueJknFZxp1GhKRHI-CtTV4JSfSYbY)

36 Ruchi Kumar, "Taliban Launches Campaign to help Afghanistan Fight Coronavirus," *Aljazeera*, April 6, 2020S, accessed July 20, 2020

Afghanistan, meanwhile, remains particularly vulnerable to the impact of pandemic. A raging COVID-19 has the potential to further destabilize politically, and overwhelm its fragile health system, while bringing economy, formal and informal, to a standstill. The impact of more than four decades of continuous war is visible right now across Afghanistan. The UNDP has estimated that at the present levels, pandemic will lead to economic contraction by nearly 17 percent over next three years.<sup>37</sup> This compounds the already challenged Afghan economy dealing with reduction in international aid from donors.

For Kabul, the management of COVID-19 is becoming a much bigger challenge as violence resurges and political instability deepens. After Taliban-U.S. agreement on withdrawal of U.S. forces, clashes between Afghan security forces and Taliban continue across Afghanistan. Meanwhile, political process is slowly registering intra-Afghan dialogue. Taliban agreeing to full ceasefire during the pandemic is also undermining the current situation. The real brunt, however, is being faced by the healthcare sector. Despite the pandemic, militants have attacked healthcare facilities. In a harrowing attack on May 12, militants targeted maternity ward of a hospital in Kabul killing 24 people, including 12 mothers, two new born babies among others.<sup>38</sup> On the same day, ISIS militants attacked a funeral in Eastern Afghanistan killing 24 people. These attacks show that Afghan healthcare system is dealing with twin pressures of catering to those injured in militant attacks, while managing the COVID-19 patients. This

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/taliban-launches-campaign-afghanistan-fight-coronavirus-200406055113086.html>

- 37 "Afghanistan Covid-19 Impact: Short Term Disruptions and Policy Considerations," Note by UNDP (Afghanistan), April 15, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020.

<https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/covid19/Afghanistan%20-%20Covid19%20Impact%20Note%20-%20Final%20%20April%2015%202020.pdf>

- 38 "Afghan Attack: Babies Killed as Gunmen Storm Kabul Maternity Ward," *BBC News*, May 12, 2020, accessed July 20, 2020/

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52631071>

is taking place in a country where there are just four doctors per 10000 people. Weak healthcare infrastructure, few hospitals, and diagnostic facilities has meant that doctors and medical workers are under pressure while operating in an environment with limited resources.

A matrix surmising influence of prevalent narratives in countries explored here is given below:

Country	Political	Religion	Violence
Afghanistan		X	X
Bhutan		X	
Sri Lanka		X	
Pakistan	X	X	
India	X	X	

SOURCE: Author's observations based on secondary data available on the subject.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The two domains of religious narrative and public policy intertwine because both are important in their own ways. Yet, they overlap with significant impact on how people think and take decisions. Where religion tells people on how to live and what to do, and what not to do. Similarly, public policy-makers, through man-made laws, also allow and outlaw types of behaviour. This tension has been most apparent during the pandemic. Across South Asia, societies have prioritized messaging of religious leaders over the policy-makers.

A way for policy-makers could be to engage religious leader in informal and formal talks before announcing a policy-decision. Getting input of religious leaders before taking a public position, strengthens hands of policy-makers. Another way, for policy-makers, is to impose penalties for deviation even on religious leaders, irrespective of their narrative. This route is seldom taken owing to potential disruption in public order. The most effective way to counter religious narrative is responding to such narratives through religious scriptures.

When religious narrative is countered via its own scripture, then the potent appeal of religious narrative can be addressed.

The prevalent COVID-10 pandemic needs to be taken as signal to be prepared for future crises to hit South Asia that can be acute climatic emergencies, social and food calamities, extreme hunger and poverty, environmental degradation - transnational and global happenings. This is the time to understand and engage with the gaps and vulnerabilities that exists within the states. The missing links in governance patterns needs to be fixed on proactive and sustainable basis. All this requires a dialogue, engagement and deliberations with the majority and minority religious elements across the board. The role of state is to be facilitator of its citizens (irrespective of religion) aspirations and a guarantor of peace within and beyond.

In a nutshell, religious narrative in South Asia remains a complex mix of conflictual messages dotted with peace intrusions from time to time. This will stay this way for future as well. The aim of South Asian governments should be to harness the positivity of religious diversity and work towards the regional peace and stability.