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## Religion and COVID-19 in India

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As the world has been left reeling by the large and continuous loss of human lives due to the current pandemic, Pope Francis offered "Urbi et Orbi" (To the City and the World) in his blessings. He led a recitation of the Lord's Prayer on the feast of the Annunciation which was live streamed around the world, renewing his invitation to pray incessantly for the cure of the sick as well for the medical caregivers.

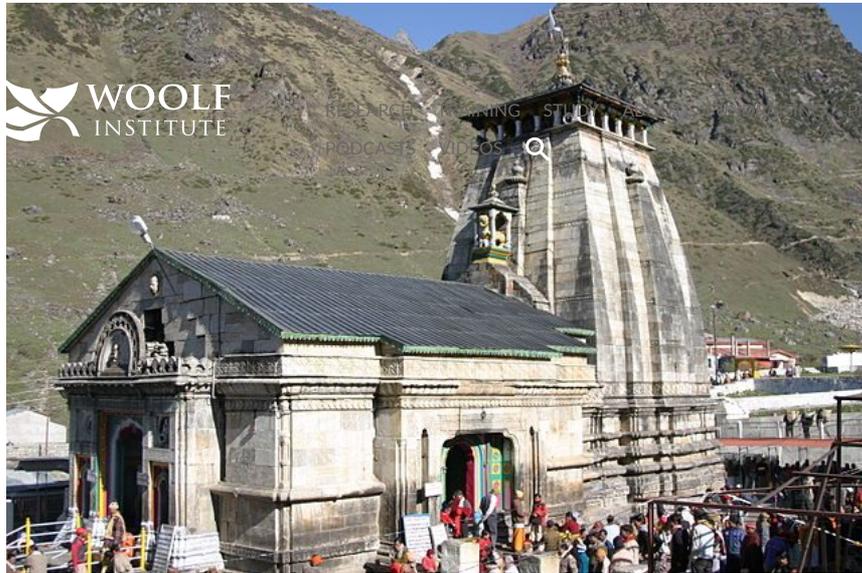
As places of worship across the world are closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people of faith need to either offer prayers within the restricted walls of their homes or make use of the virtual platforms available. One way to sustain communal worship is to rely on technology and that is how some of the temples and Gurudwaras in India are engaging with their communities. They have resorted to audio *kirtan* (call and response chanting) and songs through which they are delivering sermons and messages to their devotees. Whilst many temples have remained closed, some temples and Gurudwaras are still not ready to follow the restrictions implemented against gatherings. Flouting lockdown, several devotees have assembled outside the local temples of West Bengal and Patna on the occasion of Ram Navami and to offer *Pujas* (prayer rituals) seeking relief from COVID-19. However, the annual festivals to honour Lord Ram at Ayodhya – where thousands gather – have been called off.

It is believed by some religious practitioners that God would punish us if we could not offer homage to him in religious places. As Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati argued, however, God will be happy if we stay at home as that way, we are not only saving ourselves but the entire community as well. Faith leaders are trying to overcome the crisis and have appealed to their followers to practice social distancing, to desist from leaving their homes and also to use this new time within the home for self-development. In a religious sense, this development can come in many ways. For example, temples are now performing online *darshan* to stay connected with devotees while others are webcasting *aartis*, *darshans* and other rituals. Mahant Divya Giri, head priest of Mankameshwar Temple, has appealed the devotees to go online and visit the dedicated Facebook page where evening *arti* (a practice to offer light usually flame, along with incense, flowers to deities followed by songs sung in praise of deities) is now webcast. The Char Dham shrines – which appear for six months during the summer – attract millions of pilgrims and tourists to the state of Uttarakhand from across the world but again, because of the lockdown, the priests at these sites have opted for digital worship. As pilgrims cannot offer prayers in-person, they can now opt to book slots to offer their prayers online and see the rituals performed.

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Kedarnath shrine, part of the Chota Char Dham, Hindu pilgrimage circuit (credit: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kedarnath\\_Temple#/media/File:Kedarnath\\_Temple.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kedarnath_Temple#/media/File:Kedarnath_Temple.jpg))

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In other religious communities, parish priests and churches in India have restricted the entry of worshippers to individuals only. The North East India Regional Bishop's Council has incurred restrictions on the practice of kissing the crucifix or using a single towel to wash one's feet on Holy Thursday. As with other worshippers, many churches are now also organising Sunday Mass via platforms like Facebook. Even during Good Friday, sermons were delivered in the absence of any gatherings whilst elderly priests were advised to stay at home.

On the other hand, some members of the Tablighi Jamaat turned a deaf ear to the public health official's warnings; the Markaz in Delhi's Nizamuddin mosque flouted the lockdown rules which proved quite detrimental. Unlike the other mosques in India, the organisers enabled a large group to gather in a cramped area at this challenging time. As the country is grappling with the scourge of COVID-19, it is the duty on the part of the religious leaders of all faiths to exercise restraint on religious gatherings and this is the belief of *Imams* and *Maulvi saabjis* of other prominent mosques. Adhering to the lockdown norms, the *Ulemas* have advised the community to offer prayers at home and avoid large *iftar* gatherings during Ramadan. Mosques are empty, fast-breaking feasts during the Ramadan month have been cancelled at many places and the practice of making and distributing *nonbu kanji* (porridge) for *iftar* through the mosques has ceased. Prominent religious figures have also spoken out, emphasising the importance of adhering to safety guidelines during the pandemic. For example, famous Indian Muslim scholar Maulana Ateeque Ahmed Bastawi declared that he would not perform the special *Taraweeh* (special night prayers involving a congregation of more than three devotees) during the holy month. Another example is Nawab Mohammed Abdul Ali, the Prince of Arcot, based in Chennai, who advised the community to restrain from gatherings for, as he quotes, the Prophet mentioned that during medical emergencies and inclement weather, one need not visit the mosque.

There are many examples also of various religious communities working together while in isolation to support those most in need. The Chairman of Bengal Imams Association, Mohammed Yahia, and the Imam of Nakhoda Mosque of Bengal, Shafique Qasmi, have stated that only 3-4 people including the Imam would offer prayer at the mosque and the rest of the community should remain in their homes to pray. They have requested that devotees do not practice post-prayers alms offering to the poor but rather donate their funds to the mosque committee who will make arrangements to reach the needy. Paramarth Niketan of Swami Chidanand Saraswati has been trying to reach out to migrant workers who have been stranded across the country and have now arranged opportunities to distribute food. The Bharat Sevashram Sangh has opened community kitchens to offer free meals every day to 30,000 people, some of whom have lost their jobs because of the lockdown, as well as offering shelter to 2,000 students. The Caritas India, the development arm of the Catholic Church in India, has been reaching out to the poor, offering food supplies while also opening their schools as dwellings to migrant workers who have been unable to return home. The Sikh community have been working around the clock in their community kitchens to serve food to the poor and have arranged to convert Gurudwaras into isolation wards for medical purposes. Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, one of the prominent Muslim organisations in India, has opted to send gifts to the healthcare workers and volunteers to motivate them and acknowledge their contributions to counter the COVID-19 crisis.

These examples highlight the changes that India is experiencing during this crisis. During a time when many people may feel their faith has been challenged or forced to adapt, it is heart-warming to see how organised religion and a deep sense of community can play a crucial role in helping tackle the COVID-19 crisis.

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