

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

The Saffron Wave Against Virus. The Hindu Nationalists and the CoViD-19 Emergency

by Chiara Lapi*

chiara.lapi@unipi.it

Even sickness can be used for political, discriminatory and sectarian aims.

Around mid-February 2020, Chakrapani Maharaj, who is the President of the Indian fundamentalist party “All India Hindu Mahasabha”¹, asserted that “corona is not a virus, but an angry avatar who came into the world to punish those who eat meat and to protect poor people”².

This Party has actually one delegate in the Lok Sabha of Parliament of India³ and represents the right wing of Bharatiya Janata Party, the party which won the

* Researcher fellow in Law and Religion at the University of Pisa (Italy).

¹ The party was founded in the 1910s by Veer Savarkar who reckoned that “The Mahasabha is a pan-Hindu organization shaping the destiny of the Hindu Nation in all its social, political and cultural aspects”. N. Gondhalekar and S. Bhattacharya, *The All India Hindu Mahasabha and the End of British Rule in India, 1939-1947*, in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 27, No. 7/8, p. 51.

² See “Hindu Mahasabha says coronavirus an ‘angry avatar’ to punish meat eaters” in diresomnet.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/coronavirus-meat-eater.pdf.

³ See <http://loksabha.nic.in/Members/partyar.aspx>.

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

2019 elections and leads the country since 2014 with the Prime Minister Narendra Modi⁴.

On last Saturday (14th March 2020), the “Hindu Mahasabha” gathered 200 people in order to drink cow urine to prevent the infection caused by the CoVid-19. The embellishment of the participants characterized this meeting so much that one of them stated firmly that: “we have been drinking cow urine for 21 years; we also take bath in cow dung. We have never felt the need to consume English medicine”.

As is typical of other populist movements⁵, “Hindu Mahasabha” use symbols and imagines capturing the attention, especially of less educated people. Indeed, during the above-mentioned party, Chakrapani Maharaj wanted to be photographed as he turned the cow’s urine with a spoon into a saucepan and served it in the glasses of the diners, while a caricature of the virus’s cell stood out in the background of the photo with the inscriptions “Save Animals, Save Life”.

Thus, the virus becomes the pretext for politically fighting against those who eat cow meat: especially against Indian Muslim minority. This approach is compliant with what the Hindu movement has done with regard to killing cows. While several Indian states banned the slaughter of cows, an army of Hindu young voluntary men formed to defend the cow from those who usually kill her to the cry “the cow is the mother of the world”⁶. This religious and political

⁴ From 2014 to 2018, the *BJP* increased the consensus: in fact, in 2014 it had a majority in 7 out of 29 states, in 2018 it held a majority in 21 out of 29 states. E. Anderson and A. Longkumer, ‘Neo-Hindutva’: *evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism*, in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2018, pp. 371-372.

⁵ N. Colaianni, *Populismo, religioni, diritto*, in questionegiustizia.it/rivista/pdf/QG_2019-1_21.pdf, 1/2019, pp. 151-161.

⁶ E. Schmall, *AP Photos: India’s sacred cow a symbol of rising nationalism*, in apnews.com, April 9, 2019.

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

fanaticism identifies itself by the color of dresses which men and women wear: the yellow-orange saffron. Scholars have indeed described the growth of Hindu nationalist movements as the “saffron wave”⁷.

Fortunately, while nationalist movements were joking around with the cow’s urine, the public institutions – as the Government of Delhi or the Archeological Survey of India – imposed strong restrictions to avoid commercial, cultural, political and religious gatherings⁸.

⁷ T. B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999.

⁸ See, *The Economic Times*, March 17, 2020.