

Religion in the Context of the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Functionalist Perspective

Paper Submission: 02/05/2021, Date of Acceptance: 14/05/2021, Date of Publication: 26/05/2021



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This paper is based on a survey of 76 respondents. It adopts the functionalist perspective to study the relevance and the role of religion in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The key issues revolve around the issues of faith and belief and if religion reinforces the collective conscience in the Indian society today. The analysis suggests that religion causes divisions as well as promotes faith and solidarity – but most importantly, it acknowledges moral values and acts as a yardstick to measure and judge actions of members of the community.

Keywords: Religion, Functionalism, Covid-19, Pandemic, Social Solidarity, Superstition.

Introduction

The first part of the paper is a brief introduction to the functionalist perspective in general, and specifically to the perspective as it applies to religion. In the second part, the results and analysis of a survey undertaken are discussed. The survey was conducted in the first week of April 2020 when the country was under lockdown due to the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. Though the questionnaire did not specifically mention the pandemic, it is interesting to note that several of the respondents referred explicitly to the pandemic in their answers. This leads to the next part of the paper where we attempt a functionalist analysis of religion in the light of the coronavirus pandemic. This is divided into two sections: dealing with religion as a divisive force and the relevance of superstitions in India. The concluding section is based on the results of the survey as well as observations relevant to understanding the role of religion in the pandemic.

Aims of the Study

This paper aims to explain and critically evaluate the relevance of the functionalist perspective of religion in the Indian society today. It seeks to do so in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. To state more precisely, the research questions are as follows:

1. Does religion associate with uncontrollable, unpredictable events of human life? (2) Does religion promote social solidarity in Indian society today?
2. Does religion reinforce collective conscience in Indian society today?
3. What is the role of myth and superstition in shaping popular beliefs and perception in India today?
4. The paper seeks to engage with these questions using both primary data as well as secondary sources.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

The functionalist perspective in Sociology is best understood when compared to the science of biology — just as body parts do not work and cannot be understood in isolation, the functionalist perspective considers all the parts of the society to be interrelated and forming a whole. Therefore, to understand any part of a society— for example religion as this paper seeks to do—the part must be taken not in isolation but in relation to the society as a whole. This is done by examining “contribution of that part in the maintenance of the society.”¹

The first major sociological thinker to explain religion from a functionalist point of view was Emile Durkheim, whose work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1915, was based on a study of Australian tribes. His theory can be summarized as follows: societies divide objects and events into two categories — profane and sacred. Religion falls

in the latter category, that is the realm of the sacred. According to him, Totemism was the earliest form of religious worship, where certain objects were worshipped by a clan. These objects were the symbols of the clan, and therefore people were in fact worshipping the society itself. This worship of society reaffirms shared social and moral values referred to as the "collective conscience," and promotes social solidarity.²

The next major thinker is Bronislaw Malinowski, who in his book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventures in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, 1922, studied the Trobriand Islanders. Like Durkheim, he too concluded in his study that religion promotes social solidarity. However, he disagrees with Durkheim on the point that religion is reflective of the society as a whole. Instead, it functions in specific areas of life which lead to stress and tension. Two such areas are life cycles such as death and uncontrollable, unpredictable events. The coronavirus pandemic would certainly fall under the category of such unpredictable events.³

The third and final thinker whose idea is important in the functionalist perspective of religion is Talcott Parsons. Parsons, in his book, *The Social System*, 1964, laid down that religion is part of a social structure, and is the ultimate source of social values and norms. Religion provides guidelines for moral conduct against which human action can be judged. Like Malinowski, he believed that religion is anchored to the uncertainty and unpredictability of human life. It also helps give meaning to important aspects of human life such as pain and suffering.⁴

The criticisms of functionalism by Robert K. Merton in *Social Theory and Social Action*, 1968, point out that all the parts of the society do not always play a positive functional role in society.⁵ Several other thinkers, especially of the critical and Marxist persuasion concur with him.⁶ However, he does not deal with religion extensively or exclusively, and his theory is outside the scope of this paper.

Kanchallaiah, in his book, *Why I am Not a Hindu*, 1996, has put forward the view that certain sections of people in Andhra Pradesh have always worshipped certain goddesses for the cure of illnesses and diseases as they believed that appeasing the goddess would protect them from ill health.⁷

In his article, "The Power of Superstition in Public Life in India," 2008, Dipesh Chakraborty explains why despite scientific advancement in various fields, superstition still remains a part of public life and continues to shape popular beliefs and perceptions in India.⁸

Ajnesh Prasad, in "The Organization of Ideological Discourse in Times of Unexpected Crisis: Explaining How COVID-19 is Exploited by Populist Leaders," 2020, has shown how the dynamics of the organization of ideological discourse represents strategic acts of populist leaders that would help in advancing their own political agenda.⁹

Kowalczyk, Roszkowski, Montane, et al. in their article, "Religion and Faith Perception in a

Pandemic of COVID-19," 2020, elucidate the various ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted religion and faith. Through a survey the study examined whether the power of religiosity and faith is reinforced in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.¹⁰

Through his article, "Religion in the Times of COVID-19," 2021, Joseph documents the response of religious believers who turn to their faith for spiritual nourishment and to make sense of the world and the happenings around them in times of a crisis.¹¹

As this paper deals with an on-going situation, it should also be mentioned that scholarly papers dealing with this particular juxtaposition of religion and the pandemic in the Indian context are scarce.

The Primary Study

For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was prepared. It consisted of 10 questions, out of which 9 were multiple choice questions and one was qualitative in nature. The first three questions were related to the demographic profile of the respondents, the rest were related to various aspects of religion. The questionnaire was administered in the on-line mode using a Google form. The questionnaire was answered by 76 persons, all of whom are educated and of Indian origin. Sensitive or personal information on caste and class, was not asked in this survey. This ensured a quick and unhindered response and participation in the survey.

The sample consisted of 46.1% males and 51.3% females; 2.6% did not disclose their gender. A majority (67.1%) of the respondents were students, 27.6% were employed and 5.3% had superannuated. The group was predominantly Hindus, much like the Indian society: 78.9% were Hindus, 5.3% were Muslims, 0% were Christians, and 15.8% classified themselves as others.

Analysis of Quantitative Questions

The demographic data shows that the sample is predominantly representative of students, while the proportion of the superannuated is the least. Therefore, this data is majorly representative of the young people of India. This is relevant in analyzing the question "Do you believe in God?", wherein only 51.3% answered "yes". Further, if we look at the answer of the 51 respondents in this survey, 26 of them answered in affirmative, which is roughly 50% (see Figure 1). The fact that 50% of respondents are either atheists or agnostics is relevant, because this shows that the importance of religion amongst the educated youth is not as high as one would assume. India is historically a "deeply religious society," however it seems that religion is less important to youngsters than to older people. This data is in line with data collected in a YouGov-Mint Millennial Survey,¹² wherein it was found that religiosity increases with age.

Although 51.3% of the sample identify themselves as "believers", only 22.4% said that they never pray (see Figure 2). This shows that people who do not believe in God, or may believe in God, also pray. Further, 27.6% people said that they pray every day, while 32.9% said that they pray only on

religious occasions and festivals, and 10.5% said that they pray only when they are under stress. This totals to 43.4% of the respondents who only pray during religious occasions or stressful situations. The behaviour of these 43.4% of the respondents is in line with the theories of Malinowski and Parsons, who assert that religion is associated with unpredictable and life cycle events.

With respect to the statement if religion promotes social solidarity, 32.4% of the respondents agree and 7.9% strongly agree (see Figure 3). This totals to 40.3% of the respondents whose views are in tandem with the basic principles of the functionalist school of thought on religion. While 18.4% of the respondents strongly disagreed, 18.4% disagreed. This implies that a total of 36.8% people do not agree with the functionalist perspective of religion. Further, 21.1% people, said that they were neutral about the statement. So, although the largest proportion of the respondents agree with functionalist perspective on religion, the proportion of people who do not are also considerable.

The next question gave more clarity on the relevance of the functionalist perspective on religion. As many as 32.9% strongly agreed to the statement that religion plays a divisive role in the Indian society today, and 42.1% agreed (see Figure 4). This totals to a considerable majority of 75% respondents who think that religion now plays a divisive role. Less than 10% strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. These results are contrary to the functionalist perspective, which advocates that religion promotes social solidarity.

To the statement that religion reinforces social and moral values in the Indian society today, 43.4% respondents agree, while 15.8% respondents strongly agree (see Figure 5). This totals to 59.2% of the respondents who would agree with Durkheim's idea that religion reaffirms collective conscience of the people. Only 11.8% strongly disagree or disagree with the statement; the rest (28.9%) were neutral.

To the statement "Religious values are a yardstick to judge people's actions in Indian society today," 42.1% agreed and 9.2% strongly agreed. 15.8% disagreed while 14.5% strongly disagreed, which totals to 30.3% of the respondents (see Figure 6). However, the majority (51.3%) agreed with the functionalist perspective that religious values are used to judge people in society as articulated by Parsons.

Analysis of the Qualitative Question

The questionnaire had one non-mandatory qualitative question, to which 56 persons responded. The question was: "Do you believe that religion plays an important function in Indian society today? If yes, give examples, if no, give examples." Out of 56 respondents, 82.14% (46 respondents) answered in the affirmative. Prima facie, this seems to conform with the functionalist perspective on religion that religion promotes social solidarity. However, 13 out of 46 respondents who answered in the affirmative also pointed out that religion can be divisive or be associated with impracticality.

It is relevant that this questionnaire was made and circulated in the first week of April 2020,

during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five out of 56 people brought up the role of religion in relation to the pandemic in their answers. Two respondents spoke about Prime Minister Modi's request to the Indian society to light earthen lamps/ candles/ lights to show solidarity with people during the pandemic. This action of lighting earthen lamps/candles/ lights, they said, is rooted in religious sentiments and events such as Diwali. It should be added that light is an important and meaningful symbol not just in Hindu religion, but also in other religions such as Christianity. So, on 5 April 2020, when millions of Indians lit up the sky, it was a show of solidarity that was rooted in a religious symbol.

However, one respondent said that religion is "not helping" the pandemic situation, which is against the functionalist view that religion is associated with stressful times. Further, two respondents emphasized the divisive role that religion was playing during the pandemic. They blamed the Muslim community for the current pandemic. One respondent went so far as calling it "corona jihad". Another respondent said that religion unites Hindus against Muslims. Since the sample consisted only of educated people, this shows that contrary to common belief, religion also plays a divisive role amongst the educated people.

This discussion brings us to the next section where we discuss religion in the light of the Coronavirus pandemic from a functionalist perspective.

Religion and the Pandemic Division and Superstition

The above analysis of the survey data has shown that 75% of the respondents thought that religion plays a divisive role, which is against the functionalist perspective of religion. Further, this was also reflected in the qualitative question which asked the respondents to give an example of religion's function in the society, and respondents went on to blame one religion for the current pandemic. Now, it is time to examine the relevance of religion in the Indian society during the Coronavirus pandemic. I do so in the next two sections – first discussing the divisions that it has caused, and next the aspect of superstition.

Division and Demonization

A religious gathering in March 2020, that led to the multiplication of positive corona cases in the country sparked the demonization of the entire Muslim community. This gathering, the Tablighi Jamaat, a century old Islamic missionary movement, was attended by thousands of Muslims from India and abroad.¹³ An official of the Union Health Ministry of India said that, "If the Tablighi Jamaat incident had not taken place and we compare the rate of doubling ... currently it is 4.1 days (including Jamaat cases)... then the doubling rate would have been 7.4 days."¹⁴ Further, over 1,000 coronavirus cases found in 17 states were traced to the Tablighi Jamaat congregation.

There is no denying that the congregation resulted in a steep rise in the coronavirus positive cases in the country. However, several political leaders attended ceremonies during the month of March, and later on as well, even after the declaration

of the national lockdown. There were other instances of hundreds of people commuting together, for example the mass movement of migrant workers and positive cases being detected in Dharavi, the world's largest and most populated slum in Mumbai. Needless to say, there are various sources of the spread of the virus. However, the focus of most of the Indian media during the early days of the pandemic was on the Jamaat, and this led to a strong anti-Muslim feeling among some sections of the Indian society.¹⁵

Even if significant numbers are attributed to the Jamaat, it does not justify the demonization of the entire Muslim community. In March and April 2020, tweets with hashtags such as #CoronaJihad appeared over 300,000 times on Twitter. This term was also used by one respondent while answering the survey. Further, the social media was flooded with various videos claiming Muslims to be intentionally coughing and sneezing on people. Some of these videos were debunked by the fact-checking organization AltNews.¹⁶

Apparently, the actions of a small proportion of a community was being used to demonize the entire community and rumours were being circulated that the Tablighi Jamaatis were the "super spreaders" of covid-19.¹⁷ On 6 April 2020, a writ petition was filed in the Supreme Court by the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind to stop the media from spreading bigotry and communal hatred in relation to the Jamaat incident.¹⁸

In this situation of fear, stress and panic, religion could be seen as a divisive force in the Indian society between Hindus and Muslims. It was also creating a division amongst those Hindus who were demonizing the entire Muslim community and other Hindus who thought that the Jamaat gathering was wrong, but that the entire Muslim community could not be blamed for one episode. Further, it also played a divisive role amongst Muslims: while some were defending the Jamaat by stating that no lockdown had been declared when the Jamaat started, others agreed that the gathering was misplaced and an irresponsible act.

Another religious gathering, the Mahakumbh, a Hindu festival held once every 12 years, began in March 2021 in Haridwar, Uttarakhand and was considered by many to have sent coronavirus cases surging. Hindus believe that bathing in the river Ganga during this period absolves people of sins and helps attain *moksha* or salvation from the cycle of life and death, Lakhs of Hindu devotees gathered at Haridwar and although public areas were sanitized and millions of masks were distributed by the Uttarakhand government, social distancing norms were openly flouted by the devotees. It was widely believed that the devotees returning from Haridwar were responsible for an upsurge in their home states.

Myths and Superstitions

Out of 56 respondent who answered the qualitative question about the function of religion in Indian society today, 4 respondents associated religion with impracticality. This becomes an important aspect of religion to be examined from the functionalist point of view, especially Parsons, who

argues that there are certain questions in life that cannot be answered by science, but religion provides the answers.

Even as the world is in an age of advanced technology, superstitions remain an important part of the Indian society today. Most of these superstitions overlap with religion.¹⁹ It is said that "one person's superstition is another person's religion."²⁰ This also holds true in the times of the coronavirus pandemic. The WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated that the coronavirus is not just a pandemic, but also an "infodemic," where fake information is spreading as rapidly as the deadly virus. Accordingly, a team of WHO "mythbusters" has been created, who are countering superstitions and myths, for example, the myth that eating large amounts of ginger and garlic can contain the virus.²¹

Despite the attempts made by scientists and medical practitioners to disparage and debunk the cures and preventive therapies (cow urine, magic beans, consecrated oil, etc.), more and more people are turning to religion in order to make sense of the pandemic afflicted world. For instance, in a study conducted in Poland, a rise in religiosity and religious practice was reported among the young and the elderly people.²² Also, a quarter of the respondents in a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre in the US said that their faith had grown amidst the pandemic.²³

In India, there are several religious superstitions that are floating around. For instance, people are doing "pooja" every day and watering and lighting lamps near Neem trees, writing words of prayer such as "Om Namah Shivaay" in front of their houses, blowing conches, drinking cow urine as "elixir," or lighting up lamps in fields etc. to ward off coronavirus.²⁴ All of these actions have religious connotations. Medical science does not yet have a cure for coronavirus –perhaps due to this, people are resorting to religion and religious superstitions for answers.

Conclusion

This study has primarily aimed to examine the relevance of the functionalist perspective on religion. Through the data collected and analyzed, and in the light of the current coronavirus pandemic, we conclude that the relevance of religion among the educated youth in India is not on the upswing. The functionalist argument that religion promotes social solidarity is not always true in the current Indian society. More often than not, it acts as a divisive force, especially in a multi-religious society. This is evident both through data analysis of the survey, as well as looking at the coronavirus situation in India wherein terms such as "corona jihad" are being used.

However, Parson's view that people turn to religion when they do not get answers in science, and Malinowski's analysis that people turn to religion during uncertain times – still holds true. The participation of the people in the performative aspects of religion, that is, rites, rituals, ceremonies, etc. have been transformed due to the measures put in place by the government to control the spread of the virus. The social distancing norms have altered the way religion

is being practiced today, especially in urban areas. Much of it is now conducted virtually as religious believers innovate, improvise and continue to remain connected to their faith. "Satsang, pujas, artis, religious discourses, ritual performances and darshan have all metamorphosed in lightning speed in the online mode, something unthinkable in pre-Pandemic times."²⁵ So one is no longer confined to observe their faith in the local place of worship: with the click of a button one can log on to virtual religious performances being conducted anywhere in the world.

Superstitions practices, too, are still abundant in the Indian society. Kanchallaiah refers to the worship of goddess Pochamma in Andhra Pradesh who protected people from all kinds of illness as she was hailed as the curer of diseases.²⁶ Devotees have been setting up Corona Mata temples to seek spiritual forms of healing from the infectious disease in many parts of the country. In Pratapgarh, Uttar Pradesh, villagers set up a temple in the belief that praying to the deity would help them fight the virus. The authorities of Kamatchipuri Adhiman, a temple in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu have consecrated "Corona Devi" to ward off the virus. Similarly, the villagers in Madhuvanahalli village, Chamarajanagar district, Karnataka have consecrated the "Corona Maramma" to protect the people from the virus. The ancient tradition of offering prayers to gods and goddesses to seek protection against ill health and disease is still prevalent.

To conclude, we would like to emphasize that the survey data shows that most people still agree that religion promotes social and moral values and acts as a yardstick to judge people's actions in the Indian society today. Therefore, Durkheim's idea that religion reinforces collective conscious is also still relevant today. One of the functions of religion is to offer solace to believers in times of grief and suffering. The therapeutic and the cathartic aspects of religion is thus highlighted. Thus, though the functionalist perspective of religion has not completely been falsified and still holds its relevance, one major argument that "religion promotes social solidarity" is somewhat questionable in the Indian society today.

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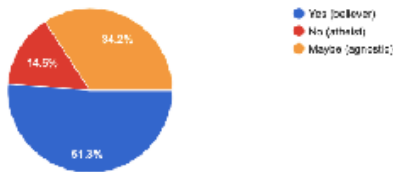
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Do you believe in God?
75 responses

Figure1



How often do you pray? (Select the closest option)
75 responses

Figure2

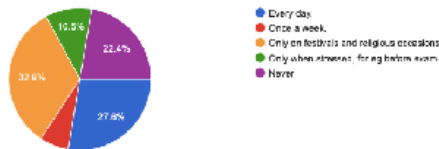
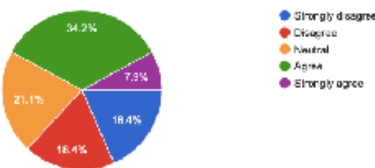


Figure - 3

Religion promotes social solidarity in Indian society today.
75 responses



Religion reinforces social and moral values in Indian society today.
76 responses

Figure - 4

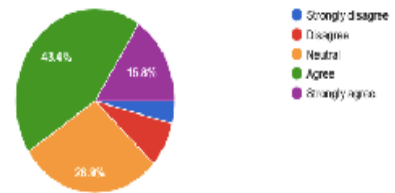


Figure - 5

Religion reinforces social and moral values in Indian society today.
76 responses

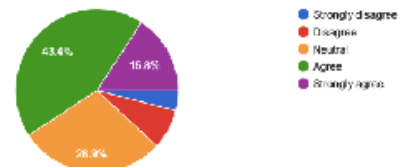


Figure - 6

Religious values are a yardstick to judge people's actions in Indian society today.
76 responses

