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THE GODDESS AND THE VIRUS

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On April 12, 2020, about three weeks into the world's "harshesht" lockdown instituted by the state to keep COVID-19 at bay, a striking painting was released into the crowded image and media landscape of iconophilic India (Figure 1). Titled *Bharat Mata*, the work by Maharashtrian artist Monal Kohad (in a wash technique that had been made famous about a century earlier as part of anti-colonial nationalist art practice) features a four-armed Mother India, the embodiment of the nation, standing on a partly visible terrestrial globe, the outline map of India framing her body, its critical borders undefined.¹ She carries in two of her four hands, as she is generally wont to do, the national tricolor, a sheaf of grain, and a sword—also not entirely uncommon. What is novel is what she holds in a third hand: a decapitated human head adorned with the telltale spiked coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, colored green and red, the blood from which drips as ritual oblation onto a blazing brazier held aloft in her fourth hand. As Mother India gazes suggestively upward and to the east, directing our gaze as well to the luminous snowcapped Himalayan peaks delicately painted across the top of the work, her citizen-children applaud her triumphal act, paying homage to the goddess who has calmly but heroically vanquished the virus from the (mapped) nation.

We will return to the goddess and to the (decapitated head of the) virus momentarily, but for now, we draw upon this suggestive painting to underscore the founding argument of this short essay that the battle against COVID-19 in India is also being waged with and through images that are both critical and celebratory of the measures taken by the Indian state and the citizenry to contend



Figure 1. Monal Kohad, *Bharat Mata*. Watercolor wash technique, tempera. April 12, 2020. With permission of the artist.

with the newest epidemic to strike the subcontinent.² Many such images depict a nation under siege, readying itself for warfare on the twin fronts of health and the economy, a widely held view echoed across a variety of media including newspapers, television, and the prime minister's popular radio program, *Mann ki Baat*, "Heart Speak." This reification of fast-paced hypernationalist viral art, one might argue, occludes the actual failures of the state in its battle against the virus. This is what potentially keeps the enchantment of hypernationalism alive at a time when structures of governance fall short, and when a health crisis morphs

as well into an unmanageable crisis of hunger and loss of livelihood in the world's harshest lockdown.

Yet the hypernationalist art doesn't remain uncontested: it is challenged by critical artwork that depicts war of a different kind, an internal war in which the vulnerable poor are pushed further into precarity during the lockdown. These competing visual narratives constitute the emerging body of the viral imagery which covers a vast range, from high art produced in private studios and homes to public graffiti, street sketches, drawings by schoolchildren, and computer and screen-generated digital works. Practitioners of "folk" forms, such as Kalighat, Madhubani, Pat, Phad, and Kavad—whose very livelihoods may be catastrophically transformed in the long run—have adapted their practice to release images in support of social distancing, mask-wearing, and handwashing, but also to draw attention to the sick being treated in hospitals and to the domestic dislocations caused by the extended regime of quarantining.³ As has been the case globally, some high-end galleries have also resorted to new ways to get the public to engage with their image collections, many made available for the first time at the click of a mouse. The calamitous stilling of the world, it seems, has also unleashed an alternate dynamic of creative un-stilling.

Indeed, the very impulse to turn to the visual medium—undertaken also by agents of the state in their public health campaigns, and by medical illustrators and scientists in their models of "the terrible beauty" of the novel coronavirus—is a reminder that creativity in the age of COVID-19 is very much alive. Artists and the infrastructure of the entire art world, which is already not the most secure of social sectors, have been especially hard hit with lockdown measures. But this has not stopped image-makers from exploring alternate ways of getting their message—and their creative works—out into the world, leading anthropologist Ritika Ganguly to even claim, "The one thing that the coronavirus can't kill is art."⁴

At the same time, the very production and proliferation of these images alerts us to the fact that COVID-19 is the first global pandemic in the age of instant media. If the virus has shown us that national borders and security barriers are quite inconsequential for its global travels, it appears to have a close rival in images that with seeming ease also "go viral" across the world in seconds. Frequently untraceable to their original creator(s), triggering trails and consequences not formally intended, and often with a shelf life that is even more fleeting than their ephemeral analogue counterparts (if not the dreaded virus itself), the avalanche of such "poor" images nevertheless offers more than a window into public and private sentiments and politics ranging from outrage and fury to pride and satisfaction and grief and melancholy, with (guilty) pleasure, (inside) jokes, and even (outright) laughter along the way.⁵ It constitutes the visual field of twenty-first-century pandemic politics. The virus and its divine vanquisher are made

visible as political actors, both visually reconfigured to wage a modern viral warfare to safeguard health and the economic well-being of the nation.

Mother India's Pandemic Labors

If art has not been killed by the coronavirus, neither has the goddess. Indeed, not the least striking outcome of the spread of the novel coronavirus in India is the arrival of a new goddess in the midst of its citizenry, or rather more correctly, the adaptation of a recent goddess to the current moment.⁶ As Figure 1 clearly underscores, COVID-19 is a disease that even in its earliest phase has been deemed serious enough to demand a dedicated deity, and a female one at that. Scholars who work on religion and disease have long noted that peoples of the subcontinent, especially Hindus, have, over the centuries, turned to various goddesses of contagion in times of pandemics.⁷ In anthropologist Tulasi Srinivas's words, "These goddesses act as celestial epidemiologists curing illnesses. But if angered they can also inflict disease such as poxes, plagues, sores, fevers, tuberculosis and malaria. They are both poison and cure."⁸ As the cited scholarship shows, these "disease devis" go by various names in different parts of the country: Sitala and Mariamma(n) for smallpox, and Olabibi for cholera; there is even a "plague amma" and "an AIDS amma." The very presence of such deities—who have not disappeared even after the spread of secular medicine or the adoption of vaccination—underscores that faith enables their devotees to come to terms with horrific diseases, but also confirms that "religious beliefs do not necessarily stand in the way of prophylaxis and treatment but might actually serve to support such measures."⁹ These disease devis are, in other words, a standing reserve who can be drawn upon and "re-conscripted," in Srinivas's words, and indeed this is what appears to have come to pass with the enlisting of the most hallowed of recent goddesses—namely, Bharat Mata, aka Mother India.

Remarkably, at the time of this writing, this new avatar of Bharat Mata as a disease-fighting deity has primarily manifested herself as an image and through the interventions of an apparently secular art practice. She has circulated only through print and digital media. There are so far no temples to her, or specific rituals and hymns to placate her. Her iconography is still unstable, with elements borrowed from the old, the near-new, and the entirely novel, but some distinguishing features have already emerged to accommodate an emergent theology of social distancing with which she has come to be associated. She is almost always a multiarmed goddess, given the formidable enemy she faces. Thus, Sandhya Kumari's *Maa Bharati* (Figure 2) clothes the new goddess in the colors of the Indian flag as she stands on a terrestrial globe. In her very many arms (like Dasabhuja Durga), she holds the various objects with which she has destroyed the virus, all of which are essential to the work of modern secular medicine and public health but which are



Figure 2. Sandhya Kumari, *Maa Bharati*. Acrylic on canvas, April 2020. With permission of the artist.

now placed at the service of Bharat Mata in her new role as disease vanquisher: gloves, sanitizer, mask, syringe, stethoscope, scalpel, and first-aid kit. But it is worth noting that in this female artist's imagination, what really does the trick is

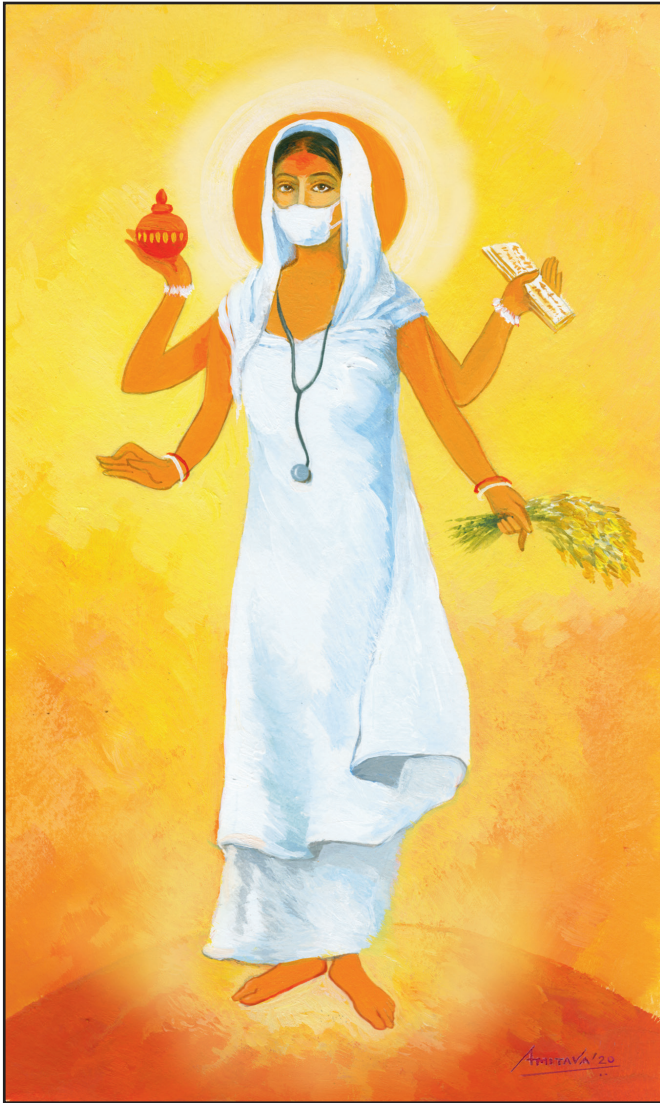


Figure 3. Amitava Chandra, Untitled. Acrylic on paper,
April 14, 2020. With permission of the artist.

the old weapon with which goddesses in the hoary past have killed their cosmic foes, the trident which snares and destroys the virus placed under one artfully drawn foot.

A different look is bestowed upon the goddess for her Bengali devotees, a look that would have been all too familiar indeed to the informed reader of

the venerable *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*, on whose front page she appeared on the morning of the Bengali new year, April 14, 2020 (Figure 3). As in the painting by Monal Kohad, Bharat Mata is a four-armed goddess, but she is neither armed nor overtly slaying the virus (which interestingly is nowhere on the scene). Instead, she benignly offers more conventional means by which to conquer the disease: food, knowledge, riches, and, as importantly, her personal blessing. In the words of Kolkata-based artist Amitava Chandra, also the principal designer for the newspaper, he sought to present the goddess as a hopeful and inspiring figure. It is notable that in aspiring to do so, he turns to the archive and retrieves an ancestral image from the early beginnings of Mother India's career as an image: fellow Bengali Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata* (1905). Tagore's saffron-clad, four-armed mother, however, has been replaced by the nurse and the physician, clothed in white, a mask on her face and a stethoscope around her neck instead of a bead necklace. The calming lotus pond of Tagore's painting gives way to a fiery red earth "burning with the coronavirus," in the words of the artist.¹⁰

Born at the height of British rule in the late nineteenth century as a substantial embodiment of national territory—its inviolable essence, its shining beacon of hope and liberation—and serving over the course of much of the twentieth century at first as a powerful rallying symbol in the anti-colonial movement, and then as the guardian deity of a resurgent Hindu nationalism, Bharat Mata/Mother India has embarked today on a new career as a disease devi in the time of the novel coronavirus. In critical contrast, however, to the ancestral disease devis, the new goddess is not imagined as a deified COVID-19, but as a virus vanquisher. As such, the enemy—strikingly left out of the picture in most received images of Mother India—is now rendered all too visible and anthropomorphized with a bright green or fiery red, spiked demonic face, the target of the goddess's new wrath. In the process, the disease itself has been nationalized as the devi goes to work on behalf of the entire body politic whose borders stand threatened by the new enemy, which in turns emerges as the subject of intense, if paradoxical, aesthetic attention.

Viral Warfare

The emergence of the virus as a distinct entity—hypervisible, supercontagious, and external to the body of the goddess—is a key transformative moment in the yet evolving visual history of COVID-19. In the early phase of the pandemic, the virus already came to be globally seen as an undisciplined intruder from the natural world that had not only catastrophically disrupted human life but also continued to evade attempts by scientists and political leaders to control its invasive spread. The arrival of the virus in the human world had upended the global supply chains that sustained goods and services and had unsettled the

established political-economic power dynamics. It is in this cataclysmic moment of “the once-in-a-century pandemic” that the virus began taking a visible form in the human imagination, one that continues to evolve as older mythical battles of good versus evil are woven into the twenty-first-century challenges the pandemic poses.¹¹

Translated from expert scientific disquisitions into the popular imagination, the virus was first given a distinctive visual identity by Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins, medical illustrators with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, as a spiky blob designed to stealthily hoodwink the immune system and colonize human bodies.¹² One of its first iterations in the Indian popular imaginary was its appearance as “Coronasura,” evil incarnate, during the festival of Holi in early March.¹³ Already a fortnight before the national lockdown was imposed, the virus was given the shape of a demonic asura, whose effigy erected in a Mumbai neighborhood was burnt in a ritual enactment of the mythical battle of good versus evil. Coronasura carried the virus—made visible by its telltale, cactus-like, prickly spikes—in one hand and a briefcase labeled “economic recession” in the other to symbolize the twin fears of public health and economic downturn (Figure 4).¹⁴ At this stage, the virus was imagined as an outsider, yet as something contained within the universe of Indian myths and folklores. Once the three-week national lockdown was imposed on March 24, it acquired a more sinister visage as fears of projected economic collapse and the breakdown of the social order in many parts of the world began gaining ground, this time visually fused with the discourse in which it was widely dubbed as the “China virus.” Central to this visual turn is the push to specifically name the disease agent as the “China virus,” a shorthand for the Chinese state’s concealment of information about COVID-19, its repressive policies, and its expansionist ambitions to gain a global edge in the twenty-first-century trade wars.¹⁵ By conjoining the virus to its place of origin in the popular imagination, the biological threat posed by the virus was merged with the political-economic threat posed by the world’s second-largest economy to the national well-being.

Return now for a moment to the image of Bharat Mata drawn by Monal Kohad (Figure 1). Pay attention once again to the decapitated human head the goddess holds aloft for everyone to see.¹⁶ The viewer will have noticed how the artist drew the facial features with the thin downward curve of the mustache designed to suggest a man of Chinese descent. What attracts particular attention is his head adorned with the colorful virus, its round, spiked form visible from afar. This image brings alive the “China virus” in a concrete shape: the spiked form of the virus conjoined with a human head that is made to stand in for China. It is noteworthy that this visualization emerged out of the strict curfew-like state of lockdown, “when everyone had to stay home and watch TV,” as the artist recalled.



Figure 4. Ashish Raj, Photograph of the Corona Virus effigy made by the Veer Netaji Krida Mandal, Bombay Development Directorate (BDD), March 8, 2020. With permission of the photographer.

The iconography of the virus itself “was derived from the visual imagery of the virus as shown on television,” or put differently, an artistic rendition of a world conceived and projected on television.¹⁷ The reference to “television” here hints at the wider media trend in India that had drummed up the discourse of the China virus. Consider the widely circulated cover story entitled “Super Spreader,” published a week into the national lockdown by the Hindu conservative magazine *Swarajya*, with the tantalizing byline, “China covers up, WHO plays along, and before you know it, humanity is facing its biggest threat yet” (Figure 5). The magazine prominently featured President Xi Jinping in full stride across its cover with the Chinese national flag in the background. The text and the picture together made unambiguous connections between the Chinese state, the relentless onward march of its ambitious leader, and the spread of the virus. And if anyone was still in doubt, the star on the Chinese flag spouted the virus, made visible by its characteristic spikes. This dominant media discourse, or what Kohad names as the “root of Corona virus,” has also sparked the popular imagery of the pandemic.

In Kohad’s image, the metaphor of “root” worked in a double sense—“root” as in cause, or the origin of the virus located in China, and its symbolic representation as the head from which the virus spouts forth. By decapitating the human head upon which the virus grows, the mother goddess destroys the root cause of the pandemic in more ways than one. She not only vanquishes the virus but also China, the reservoir within which the virus germinates. This artistic reimagination of the goddess in the time of COVID-19 bestows upon the figure of Mother India the healing powers of the disease goddesses. The new goddess, however, asserts her sovereignty not by offering a cure to the virus but by slaying a ruthless external enemy in the garb of a virus. The trail of dripping blood from the decapitated head suggests the powerful blow, the complete destruction of the enemy at the hands of the goddess. This shift in divine strategy to counter the virus—from cure to complete decimation—was linked to how the virus was perceived. It was now no longer just a contagion to be dealt with by public health experts, but a destructive force closely aligned with the world’s second-largest economy, one that was threatening to destabilize the established post-Cold War world order. In this visualization of the “China virus,” global health concerns had fully merged with the imperatives of geopolitical dynamics and nationalist politics.

To be sure, the image was more than a mere reproduction of the anti-China discourse drummed up on television. It had emerged as a *full* political actor that *immediated* a possible script for military action against the enemy. The popular imaginary of the virus both drew upon and reinforced this worldview of an impending apocalypse, one that could only be countered by mobilizing forces against pure evil. It is hardly a surprise, then, that the metaphor of war came to be widely used to describe this siege-like condition as nations around the world imposed various forms of lockdown and social distancing to control the contagion.



Figure 5. *Super Spreader*. Magazine cover, *Swarajya*, April 2020. With permission of the magazine.

In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the first twenty-one-day lockdown as a “state of war against coronavirus,” in which every citizen was a soldier fighting off the infection.¹⁸ The war metaphor to combat a disease worked well with his characteristic hypermasculine image as a stern man of action, a strict disciplinarian, and therefore, a guarantor of efficient management in the time of crisis.¹⁹ The war metaphor allowed Modi to enforce a harsh lockdown by turning citizens into corona warriors, and their immobilization into a call for action in the service of the nation.

If the lockdown was a declaration of war, it was a war waged simultaneously on two fronts, one an avowedly external enemy—China—and the other an entity who is never deemed assimilated enough in the internal constitution of the nation:

the Muslim. In the popular imagination, China undoubtedly came to be seen as the original source and reservoir of the virus—and such a view is shared globally. What adds a pernicious twist to the Indian iteration of this global discourse is that Indian Muslims were cast as reckless conduits of its spread in society. Early on during the national lockdown, a congregation of the members of Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi was identified as a cluster of COVID-19 infections, a “super-spreader.” They had assembled in mid-March to participate in a conference, but before they could disperse, the lockdown had been imposed with a warning of less than four hours. Their movement curtailed, many participants were forced to stay at the organization’s premises without means to observe social distancing, while others traveled elsewhere across the country. Once infections were reported in the media, the story turned from a health challenge to a question of Tablighi Jamaat members’ refusal to follow official guidelines.²⁰ Quite rapidly, the discourse shifted from Tablighi Jamaat to Muslims in general for being responsible for the spread of virus. Some statistical graphs charting the course of the pandemic across the body politic created a separate count for infections connected with Tablighi Jamaat, thereby publicly shaming and shifting the blame on to the “other” community.²¹ It was no longer just China that was held responsible for the pandemic, but also Muslims of India who were said to be derelict in their civic duties, the saboteurs who were working (from within) against the war on the virus.

This shifting discourse shaped how the virus came to be visualized during the lockdown. The virus is painted alternately or simultaneously in two colors—red and green, the colors of China and Islam (Figure 1). Strikingly, such visual rhetoric has been introduced to children as well, as evidenced in at least two artworks produced by Indore siblings Devayani and Shivaranjani, which are based on line drawings given to them by their teachers in a school competition (Figure 6 and Figure 7). The enemy within and the enemy without had laid siege to the body politic and could only be saved if the citizen-as-corona-warrior—her children—were mobilized on behalf of the nation and mother.

Wretched Bodies on the Move

In the mobilization of the citizen-as-corona-warrior, art and artists have thus played a critical role as informal partners of the state. Sandhya Kumari’s painting (Figure 2) is accompanied by an important exhortation that the artist directs to her fellow citizens, “Maa Bharati [Mother India] will vanquish the coronavirus, but every Indian has to assist: stay at home and follow the rules. Jai Hind [Long Live India].”²² In the painting produced by young Devayani (which cleverly cues the alert viewer to recall the half-female, half-male *ardhanarishvara* manifestation of Shakti and Shiva), the new heroes are the (female) doctor who saves lives armed with a stethoscope, and the (male) police officer, armed with his baton who ensures



Figure 6. Devyani, *Ardhanarishwara*. Drawing on paper circulated on Twitter, April 6, 2020. With permission of Smita Bhardwaj.

that the citizen stays at home (Figure 6). Shivanarjani's painting has the goddess herself carrying a baton to ensure that her "children" observe the (draconian) rules of the lockdown laid down by the Indian state (Figure 7).

And yet in India, as in other parts of the world, the real costs of "stay at home" orders have been borne by the most vulnerable, the toiling masses rather than the flying classes, as critics have been quick to point out. Indeed, a public health



Figure 7. Shivaranjani, *Affect on Society*. Drawing on paper circulated on Twitter, April 6, 2020. With permission of Smita Bhardwaj.

and economic crisis almost immediately unleashed a vast humanitarian crisis, as millions of people who make up the vast informal sector—in some estimates close to 90 percent of the workforce—found their lives and livelihoods upended within a matter of hours.²³ Rendered jobless and homeless, a sweeping internal migration of the most affected—comparable to the great (and bloody) movements of peoples at the birth of the nation more than seventy years earlier—ensued, even as the flying classes stayed at home, clapping hands, ringing bells, and clanging pots to celebrate “the essential worker” forced to continue labor for, and on behalf of, the

nation. If artworks have sustained the state's project of lockdown, they have also called attention to the underlying injustice and inequities that it also revealed.

We draw on two images that do so powerfully and poignantly. Chennai-based artist Hasif Khan's digital painting, *Social Distance*, starkly highlights the physical—and existential—distance between the abject masses forced to live by the labor of their sweat and without whom the air-conditioned lifestyles of the beautiful people on the balconies would be well-nigh impossible (Figure 8). Who or what are the latter cheering in the artist's imagination? Even as they applaud the state's apparently speedy response to the devolving pandemic with stringent lockdown measures, they are also, after all, bearing witness—albeit from the safe height of their lofty balconies—to the departure from the midst of their fellow citizens, their entire lives folded up into wretched bundles that they are carrying back to their villages.

Could one of the faceless young women be Jyoti Kumari, the fifteen-year-old from Gurugram who used the last of her savings to purchase a rickety bicycle in order to take her injured father, Mohan Paswan, back home to their village of Siruhalli in Bihar, pedaling more than 700 miles to get there? Or could it be the pregnant woman forced to evacuate Nashik in Maharashtra, and who, after giving birth, walked another 150 miles to reach home in Satna, Madhya Pradesh? Her



Figure 8. Hasif Khan, *The Social Distance...!* Digital painting, March 2020.
With permission of artist/Ananda Vikatan.



Figure 9. Subhadeep Sinha, *O traveler of light, this is night, don't stop here*. Digital painting, April 2020. With permission of the artist.

story—and similar others—captured the imagination of a young Bengali man, Subhadeep Sinha, who was inspired enough to paint *O traveler of light, this is night, don't stop here* and release it on social media, where, unfortunately, he was also taken to task by several of his fellow netizens (Figure 9).²⁴ Its protagonist is a mask-wearing woman walking across the country barefoot, with a bundle on her head, holding her newborn in her arms with its umbilical cord still intact, as she bleeds on to the map of India. On the one hand, it is clear that even observing the public health rules of the state in the time of COVID-19 does not guarantee the wretched of the nation the privilege of staying safely in their home to ride out the pandemic.



Figure 10. Hasif Khan, *Enga Area Ulla Varate* (Do Not Enter My Area). Digital painting, March 25, 2020. With permission of artist/Ananda Vikatan.

They are forced out into the streets, their lives up for grabs. On the other hand, the very nation in whose name and on whose behalf the world's most severe lockdown was conducted is for sure not a safe haven for that nation's abject, hungry, and on-the-run peoples. They have lost both their home and their homeland.

Viral Art in the Age of COVID-19

Viral images—produced in the various stages of lockdown and unlocking—disclose not only personal and collective strategies deployed to battle a relentless global pandemic, but also how the celestial warfare with which pandemics are fought has itself undergone a rapid shift. A major shift in the inherited traditions and practices of divine figures and the epidemics they unleash or control is the displacement of the reservoir of infections to an external source—China—and the targeting of an internal enemy, Muslims. In sharp contrast to the disease devi of antiquity who was the reservoir of both the infection and its cure, the new goddess stands forth triumphally as virus slayer. Separated from the body of the goddess, the virus appears not just as a lethal contagion but also as a destructive force said to be unleashed by an aggressive China, in collusion with the internal enemy, the Muslim. Put simply, the image-world of COVID-19 might at first seem familiar for the global viewer, yet the inner mode of operation of the figures that inhabit this world is radically different in India. Retrieved and recycled, the updated Mother India performs her “pandemic labor” in the name of public health but also extending beyond to geopolitics. What we witness, then, in these viral images is the making of a new composite figure that transcends the domains of the secular and the sacred, of health security and geopolitical security, a nationalized goddess that demands full obedience (and policing) at home as she goes to war with an external enemy that has treacherously infiltrated through the security cordon. We end by giving the last word to a conscientious artist who, even as triumphal images of India's success against COVID-19 were circulating, presciently wondered otherwise. Hasif Khan's *Enga Area Ulla Varate (Do Not Enter My Area)* has Prime Minister Modi—with the help of the citizen-turned-corona-warrior—trying to shut the door on the treacherous China virus (Figure 10). They try hard and mightily, but to no avail. The virus still manages to escape and enter the homeland, even as the map of India itself stands abandoned by Mother India.

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Notes

¹ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

² Alongside other measures, it is noteworthy that the Government of India also sponsors a national—and global—competition, “United in the Time of Corona: Express Through Art”: <https://www.iccr.gov.in/flashnews/art-competition-%E2%80%9CUnited-against-corona-express-through-art%E2%80%9D-guidelines-participants>.

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52464028>; See also <https://thewire.in/the-arts/community-transmission-coronavirus-enters-an-ancient-folk-art-form>, and <https://www.thehindu.com/society/corona-is-watching-you-the-pandemic-inspired-pata-paintings-of-anwar-chitrakar/article32463683.ece>. For a performance featuring such art, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJZvJY6J4BY&feature=youtu.be>.

⁴ <https://thewire.in/the-arts/community-transmission-coronavirus-enters-an-ancient-folk-art-form>.

⁵ Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *E-flux*, 10 (2009): 1–9

⁶ For a comparable update of Saint Corona to meet the demands of the 2020 pandemic, see <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/20331-25/>.

⁷ Ralph W. Nicholas, “The Goddess Śītālā and Epidemic Smallpox in Bengal,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (1981): 21–44; David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Fabrizio Ferrari, “‘Love Me Two Times’: From Smallpox to AIDS: Contagion and Possession in the Cult of Sitala,” *Religions of South Asia* 1, no. 1 (2007): 81–106.

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/indias-goddesses-of-contagion-provide-protection-in-the-pandemic-just-dont-make-them-angry-139745>.

⁹ David Arnold, “Epidemic Smallpox in India,” *Historically Speaking* 9, no. 7 (2008): 33. See also Nicholas, “The Goddess Śītālā.”

¹⁰ Interview with artist, May 30, 2020. See also Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation*, 15–17.

¹¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/bill-gates-coronavirus-pandemic-world-war-define-era-generations-a9482306.html>.

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/health/coronavirus-illustration-cdc.html>.

¹³ Called Holika Dahan, the battle ends in the ritual burning of the demonic figure of Holika to proclaim a moral triumph of the good.

¹⁴ The fear of economic recession in the image hints at more than the loss of livelihood. It invokes the logic of economic growth that has been central to the emergence of “new India” as a rising global power (Ravinder Kaur, *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

¹⁵ While the early news reports linked the COVID-19 outbreak to a wet market in Wuhan, some alternate theories were floated that linked the outbreak to an accident in a laboratory located close to the wet market, or even a bioweapon unleashed on an unsuspecting world.

¹⁶ In the course of the anti-colonial movement of the first half of the twentieth century, artists frequently produced images of Bharat Mata receiving as a “sacrificial offering” the heads of devoted patriots (Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation*, 217–231). For a relatively rare print, where Mother India herself engages in an act of maternal filicide, see *Ibid.*, Figure 118.

¹⁷ Interview with artist, June 13, 2020.

¹⁸ <https://theprint.in/india/every-citizen-a-soldier-in-war-against-covid-19-says-pm-modi-in-mann-ki-baat/409257/>.

¹⁹ <http://www.tasveergharindia.net/essay/corporate-masculinity-art.html>.

²⁰ <https://theprint.in/india/new-wave-of-anger-against-muslims-threatens-to-hurt-indias-virus-fight/407964/>.

²¹ The Indian Ministry of Health and Welfare official data maintained a separate count for infections among the Tablighi Jamaat: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/rate-of-doubling-of-covid-19-cases-4-1-days-without-tablighi-jamaat-incident-it-would-have-been-7-4-government/articleshow/74994181.cms>). See also https://www.google.com/url?q=https://scroll.in/article/958392/explained-sampling-bias-drove-sensationalist-reporting-around-tablighi-coronavirus-cases&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwiB__fTltDrAhWSl4sKHdhYCgIQFjAHegQIAhAB&usg=A0vVaw2bM9Xwt6htVi5BF7TlftYU. Also see the essay by Manan Asif (chapter 11) in this volume.

²² In Hindi, “Maa bharati karegi coronavirus ka ant lekin har bharatiyon ko sahyog karna hai, ghar mein reh kar aur niyamon ka palan karke. Jai Hind.”

²³ <https://www.wiego.org/blog/die-hunger-or-virus-all-too-real-dilemma-poor-india-and-elsewhere>. For searing visual critiques through the medium of cartooning, see <https://www.groundxero.in/2020/06/19/the-pandemic-in-cartoons-part-1/> and <https://www.groundxero.in/2020/06/23/the-pandemic-in-cartoons-part-2/>

²⁴ Interview with artist, June 22, 2020.