ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What is Remembered in Pandemic: A Commentary on the Mediated Memories of Piety in COVID-19

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Abstract

The paper explores how the experiences of the present pandemic are shaped by the memories of popular religious piety during past pandemics and epidemics. Taking insights from the works of Astrid Erll and Reinhart Koselleck, the process 'remembering-imagining system' within the context of the pandemic is discussed by tracing the reemergence of pandemic deities and narratives of piety in India. Using digitally documented and disseminated narratives on piety emerging during COVID-19, an attempt is made to understand how these narratives shape the experiences, responses, and collective memory of the pandemic. Through a discussion of the shift in the imagination of political leadership and the moral responsibilities of the community, an attempt is made to highlight the mode in which the narratives on piety shape the contours of a time that is otherwise unimaginable. The mediated memories of popular religious piety make it possible to remember similar crisis times and to imagine and reinstate the social order that is threatened by this sudden unimaginable crisis. The paper thus argues that within the context of India, popular religious piety, though often overlooked, becomes a significant part of making sense and shaping the experiences of the pandemic time.

Keywords COVID-19 and society · Gender studies · Memory studies · Pandemic and its imaginations · Popular religious piety · Women politicians

Introduction

Differences in the responses to the sudden onset of COVID-19 have brought to focus a sense of surprise in certain parts of the world and a sense of preparedness in certain others. The difference in responses can be traced back to the presence and absence of mediated memories related to previous pandemics encountered in these regions (Erll 2020). The better preparedness displayed by certain parts of Asia, like Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam, in managing the ongoing pandemic, can be located within the mediated memories of past outbreaks like SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003, H1N1 flu in 2009, and MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) in 2015 (Yi & Lee 2020). Emerging from the experience of influenza pandemic from 1918 to 1920 (Hayami 2015), and the Swine Flu epidemic from 2009 to 2010 (Uchida et al. 2011), Japan also showcased similar preparedness in responding to the present pandemic. India presents a peculiar case as a systematic initial response to the pandemic was largely absent. However, the mediated memories of pandemics are very much a part of the collective consciousness of the Indian public, given the past encounters with various epidemics like cholera and smallpox. Furthermore, the response to the pandemic in India has not been based on the precedent of any specific outbreaks due to the lack of availability of documents and access to archives that recorded the practices and challenges encountered in past epidemics. However, digital space has registered a surge of narratives, based on the memories of past afflictions mediated through ritualistic practices of popular religious piety. These mediated memories then seem to emerge as a point of reference to imagine, make sense of, and respond to the first worldwide digitally witnessed pandemic in India, where 'every second of

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pandemic time seems to be recorded on digital media, distributed, and shared via social networks' (Erll 2020: 867).

Given the nature of the present pandemic, it is important to explore how the mediated memories of popular religious piety emerge within the 'remembering-imagining system' to make sense of the present pandemic in India. The paper explores how the digital documentation and dissemination of narratives on popular religious piety shape the experiences, the responses, and the collective memories of the pandemic. Also important to this exploration is a recognition of how these mediated memories of popular religious piety contribute to the discourses on gender within the imagination of the community.

Remembering-Imagining System

Observing that the past experiences of pandemics have a significant influence on the preparedness for the present pandemic, Erll (2020) argues that a 'remembering-imagining system' becomes central in making sense of what she calls 'Corona-time.' Erll bases this argument on German historian Reinhart Koselleck's (2004) treatment of historical time. According to Koselleck:

> The conditions of possibility of real history are, at the same time, conditions of its cognition. Hope and memory, or expressed more generally, expectation and experience — for expectation comprehends more than hope, and experience goes deeper than memory — simultaneously constitute history and its cognition. They do so by demonstrating and producing the inner relation between past and future or yesterday, today, or tomorrow. This brings us to the thesis: experience and expectation are two categories appropriate for the treatment of historical time because of the way that they embody past and future. (2004: 258)

Experiences, according to this thesis, overlap and impregnate each other; they repeat and re-confirm themselves as part of an imagined future. Erll (2009, 2017) argues that the challenges in responding to the pandemic in certain parts of the world[1] can be attributed to insufficient 'mnemonic premediation.' Erll notes:

> I use the term 'mnemonic premediation' (Erll, 2009, 2017), because collective memory is essentially a matter of mediation, from oral conversation to films and social

media. As all collective memory is mediated memory, all collective anticipation (or lack thereof) is therefore a matter of premediation. And in Europe, pandemics just have not been sufficiently mediated and remediated in the past – no famous paintings, novels, film, rarely very exciting lore of oral family history – so that they could then turn into a premediating force in the present. Such is the temporal dynamics of mediated memory. (2020: 864).

The resurgence of mediated memories of popular forms of religious piety in the digital spaces, then, could have a complex intersection with this process of 'remembering-imagining system' in the context of COVID-19. Various sociologists and theoreticians have traced the history of religious piety in shaping the economic and political discourses in society (Arruda 2020; Mahmood, 2011; Turner 2008; Weber 2002). When addressing questions like 'what is remembered during Corona times' or 'what memories are triggered by the experience of the pandemic,' one cannot overlook the re-emergence of mediated memories of popular forms of religious piety in the context of the pandemic[2]. These memories also contribute to 'which mediated experiences, beliefs, and narratives will make it into the memory discourses that shape the global future' (Erll 2020: 867).

Mediated Memories of Piety in Pandemics

The memories of piety towards pandemic goddesses mediated by means of ritualistic practices of veneration in temples and oral and written narratives about them are rampant across various parts of India. Studies have documented this phenomenon, exploring the role of mother-goddesses like *Maa Sitala*, *Ankamma*, *Gangamma*, *Mariamma*, *Maramma*, *Kaliamma*, *Kodungalluramma*, *Ola Bibi*, *Velankanni Matha* in the collective memory of the public, to ward off epidemics like smallpox and plagues. The divine embodiment of afflictions can be observed across various religions (Gentes 1992; Sen 2020)[3].

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[1] According to Erll (2020), the insufficiency of mnemonic premediation in certain parts of the world emerges from the association of the time-of-crisis mostly with that of wars than with epidemics. She observes 'what is remembered in culture constitutes the space of experience, which in turn shapes what can be imagined as possible futures, the "horizon of expectation". But the Spanish Flu was not a major item of the commemorative cycle or of school education, even after the recent "re-awakening" of its memory in the context of the Flu's centenary. Perhaps most importantly, it was nowhere impressively mediated – while its mnemonic competitors, the world wars, were all this, and in all respects.' (2020: 864).

[2] In the Indian context, the plurality related to religious practices results in a certain kind of intersection of religious piety with that of popular cultural, divine practices, like piety towards nature. Therefore, the form of piety engaged in this particular work is located within the spectrum of popular and religious piety.

[3] Similar instances of reference to disease-specific saints can be located within the folklores and myths in the Catholic Christian tradition as well. While tracing the role of the saintly figures who aided in the protection of the community during a crisis, Percciacante et al. (2021) analyze the hagiography of Saint Sebastian and Saint Roche to locate their influence in combatting the socio-psychological challenges and trauma emerging from pandemics. The resurgence of the folklores of these disease-specific saints during COVID-19 here becomes a mode for the community to not only handle the crisis but also to perform the exemplary acts of social responsibility set by these piety-invoking figures. A Del Castillo, Castillo, and Corpus (2021) also trace a similar trajectory by studying 'dungaw' as a faith-response to COVID-19 pandemic among the Catholic community in the Philippines.

For instance, Nicholas (1981) notes that the presence of *Maa Sitala*, as a prominent goddess of smallpox across the northern parts of India, can be observed in medical texts and literary works as early as the sixteenth century. Further, the temples dedicated to the deity can be found in various places of pilgrimage in Northern India. Research studies have also documented a series of ritualistic practices, folklores, and oral tales associated with the temples of local deities like *Ankamma*, *Mariamma*, and *Gangamma* in various parts of Southern India (Alam & Rao 1998). It is interesting to note that the narratives documented are often fluid, and they evolve with spaces, people, and community practices even when the same goddess is worshipped to ward off the afflictions. However, what remains consistent is that these narratives often represent the negotiation of fear and piety towards a local feminine deity who is responsible to take care of the community and protect them from afflictions. Some of the oral narratives also go so far as to attribute the affliction of the disease to the anger and wrath of the deity and therefore reiterate the need to appease the feminine deity through ritualistic practices of piety. These divine goddesses here become the embodiment of both the human and the sacred, representing the feminine qualities of care and protection, yet wielding the divine power over evil.

The mediated memories of the mother-goddesses in the Hindu context also fall within these imaginations. According to Nicholas (1981: 4), though these cultural practices are not in accord with western practices of documenting history, they shape the history of diseases in India. He notes:

> The history of smallpox in India and the history of the Hindu Goddess of Smallpox are, of course, quite different things. However, the interpretation by Hindus – both common people and intellectuals – of their experience of the disease and of divinities makes a connection between them.

Interestingly, this argument, though limited, provides significant insights into how the pandemic is remembered and imagined in the context of India. The mediated memories of veneration of pandemic goddesses appearing in digital platforms along with the emergence of *Corona Mata/Corona Amma/Corona Devi* across India point towards how piety, embedded within the collective memory as a response to crises, shapes the experiences of the pandemic time.

The Re-emergence of the Iconography of Mother-Goddess

The re-emergence of the iconography of mother-goddesses and the embodiment of Corona during the pandemic point towards a 'remembering-imagining system' that is intrinsically linked with the practices of piety (Fig. 1). A first-hand

account of a temple priest from Kollam district in the Southern Indian state of Kerala, as reported in *The Indian Express* (Roychoudhury 2020), mentions, 'I am worshipping the coronavirus as a goddess and doing daily pujas for the safety and well being of healthcare professionals, police personnel and scientists, who are toiling to discover a vaccine.' While the account reflects the individual's attempt to place himself by remembering the practices of piety during similar crises in the past, a larger imagination of the community is also formulated through the account. His role as a priest and as a responsible member of the society is imagined through his act of supporting the frontline workers.

Instances of these kinds of narratives, circulating in the digital platforms, also become a means to shape the imagination of the society by foregrounding the notion of social solidarity during the time of crisis. Here the society, through its networking, is imagined to endure the crisis collectively by bringing cohesion between individuals, thus ensuring social order and stability (Mishra & Rath 2020). The imagination of the frontline workers is also shaped accordingly to fit this imagination of the community. The frontline workers superimposed with the mother-goddess imagery (Fig. 2) in this imagination occupy a liminal space between the human and the sacred, symbolic of the entities known for restoring order and stability in crises.

The iconography, thus, celebrates the potential of humans to effectively combat the pandemic. Further, the elevation of certain occupations to the sacred by tracing them within the mediated memories of piety reaffirms the possibility to overcome the crisis. It also brings back the mediated memories of the divine feminine who saves the community and restores order and balance that has been threatened. A sense of reverence to the frontline workers is also evoked through this

Fig. 1 Pandemic goddess (The Wire/Sandhya Kumari/Gallerist.in)

imagery. Thus, any instance of unfair treatment of the front-line workers by the community members is treated as a threat to the community because these frontline workers are imagined to restore balance and order in the society. Here, if the iconography becomes a source of comfort and a means to reduce the stigma, it also then evokes an imagination of a society that works together to overcome this crisis. Any actions that jeopardize the frontline workers or their actions then are considered an act against the community and the divine. For instance, the non-compliance of initial lockdown measures by the members of *Tablighi Jamaat* (Sunni Islamic missionary group) was blown out of proportion. The media and the various digital platforms at length discussed how the actions of non-compliance rendered the actions of the frontline workers and the community ineffective. As a result, the Muslim community, in general, was blamed for endangering the larger community and its members (Jeelani 2021). The case of *Tablighi Jamaat* provides insights into how the community is imagined to function together during the time of crises; the lack of similar criticism of non-compliance by other religious communities highlights how the imagination of the community in crisis is also selective and exclusive.

Gendered Handling and Imagination of the Pandemic

The embodiment of the pandemic as a feminine deity and its association with piety highlight the gendered handling and imagination of the pandemic. The surge of narratives in the digital space discussing the need for compassion, care, and empathy imagines the pandemic as both a time of crisis and a

Fig. 2 A healthcare worker imagined as a goddess (image source: Times Now/Twitter)

time of trauma. However, the handling of the pandemic by the nation-state is often noted as aggressive with initiations of unwarranted emergency measures like unplanned lockdown and surveillance, curtailing individuals' freedom and democratic ideals. This, therefore, provoked a climate of insecurity, panic, anxiety, and doubt among the larger public (Agamben 2020; Nikolova 2021). This also led to discussions on the reimagination of political leadership that is conventionally placed within the masculinist discourse of aggression, toughness, and protective masculinity (Johnson & Williams 2020). If the pre-pandemic world perceived protective masculinity as a desirable response to crises (Johnson 2020), in the pandemic-ridden world this trait was insufficient to manage the fear and frenzy that the community seemed to showcase. Furthermore, the digital narratives celebrating the women leaders' effectiveness in handling the pandemic (Chamorro-Premuzic et al. 2020) narrativized the traits associated with femininity, like care and empathy, as the need of the hour. The possibility of the women to perform their gender roles of 'the mother,' to 'take charge of the household hygiene,' and traditionally be 'caring and empathetic in the time of trauma' (Johnson & Williams 2020: 3) were reiterated. Therefore, the perception of 'protective femininity' emphasizing the gendered role of women, disseminated through the digital space, is imagined to lead the pandemic-ridden world to safety.

In the context of India, this perception of 'protective femininity' intersects with the memories of piety to the divine-feminine deity during times of crisis. As discussed earlier, the recurrence of Corona goddess and mother-goddess in the digital space further reiterates this practice of relying on the powerful, protective feminine during the time of crises. The superimposition of the mother-goddess imagery on the frontline workers further validates this argument. The frontline worker here becomes the symbol of power, care, and protection, leading the community to safety. Interestingly, this superimposition also provides insights into how the gendered dimension of space is reformulated during the experience of the pandemic. Even though the pandemic goddesses are understood as deities occupying the public sphere, the mother-goddess is conventionally placed in the private sphere, performing the duties of household chores, safeguarding the honor, and wellbeing of the household members. The superimposition of the mother-goddess imagery with a profession conventionally understood as masculine points towards a reformulation of role and space during the time of crisis. Such a pattern of spatial reformulation also brings back in memory the similar patterns of change in women's role during the time of crisis (Thapan 2004). This reformulation in role and space can also be observed in the imagination of women leaders during the time of the pandemic.

Traditionally, political leadership in India has been imagined as masculine, in line with the global imagination of political leadership. As a result, historically, women in India had to mostly enter this masculine sphere by drawing legitimacy

through the extension of their familial role as 'mother' or 'sister,' and by drawing upon the mother-goddess imagery (Gerritsen 2014; Spary 2007). Most often, the women leaders are addressed with familial and divine epithets of *Amma* (mother), *Didi* (elder sister), and *Devi* (goddess). However, the imagination of 'protective femininity' as the need of society in an epidemic changes this gender dynamics. The act of dawning the mother-goddess imagery is now not just limited to the women leaders attaining legitimacy in a masculine sphere; rather, it becomes a means for the governing body to attain legitimacy in the public. The case of the health minister of the Southern Indian state of Kerala, KK Shailaja, provides interesting insights into the changing dynamics of the imagination of political leadership during the time of the pandemic.

Women Political Leaders During the Pandemic Time

The effectiveness of women political leaders in handling the pandemic has been documented and disseminated extensively in the digital space. Alongside other global leaders like Jacinda Ardern, Erna Solberg, and Angela Merkel, KK Shailaja, the health minister of the Southern Indian state of Kerala, has also received much attention in digital narratives. These narratives have been gendered in the sense that they attribute the success of these leaders during the time of crisis to their gender roles by foregrounding 'protective femininity.' Falling well within this gendered imagination, the slow transition of 'KK Shailaja Teacher' to 'KK Shailaja Teacher *Amma*' (*Amma* meaning mother) from the timeline of the Nipah virus outbreak (2018) to the COVID-19 can be observed. This transition is peculiar in the sense that unlike in the other states of India where female political leaders are addressed as *Amma* (mother), *Didi* (elder sister), and *Devi* (goddess) to attain legitimacy in the political sphere, this is not a common practice in the socialist electoral space of the Southern Indian state of Kerala. The usage of the epithet *Amma* (mother) is in contradiction to the general ethos of a socialist electoral space. However, instances such as these clearly indicate how society develops distinct mechanisms to cope with the crisis time. Further, the gendered nature of this epithet becomes more prominent when equated with the Chief Minister of the state of Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan, who is equally credited for the management of the outbreak. While he is addressed by his position, the Health Minister KK Shailaja is gushingly referred to and remembered in the narratives as *Amma* (mother), *Corona Slayer*, *Corona Warrior*, etc. The epithet of *Amma* evokes the imagination of the woman leader as the protective, caregiving mother. Further, terms like *Corona Slayer* and *Corona Warrior* in the context of India have a very close association with the powerful protective feminine goddesses who are venerated for combatting evil forces that threaten the peace and prosperity of the society. Thus, during the time of crisis, these

narratives that celebrate the imagination of KK Shailaja as the powerful protective feminine are oddly but happily consumed by the masculinist electoral space of Kerala.

The digital space is replete with narratives that celebrate this imagination of KK Shailaja Teacher *Amma* who 'inspired hope in Kerala in the time of fear' (Krishnakumar 2020). The viral Facebook post of Sajeesh (Kaumudi Online 2019), husband of Kerala nurse Lini Puthuserry who passed away by contracting the Nipah virus, reflects this imagination of the mother figure who becomes a source of comfort and strength to the victim and the larger public in the period of trauma. A sense of approachability to the leader (and thereby to the governing system) is inherent to this imagination owing to the leader's association with maternal qualities. The sense of a war that is created through these imaginations is very well reflected in the Vogue Warrior series (2020) that commemorates the contributions of women tackling the Corona crisis. In this campaign, KK Shailaja is referred to as the 'commandant of the corona battle' who leads a team of warriors to save the community from the crisis. This imagination of the battle is further invoked by carefully placing KK Shailaja within a template that evokes the memories of World War I Fig. 3.

The western imagination of nurses during the World War as caregivers and angels, occupying the liminal space between the human and the sacred (Fox 2014), is strongly evoked in the poster. The superimposition of the saree clad mother, KK Shailaja, within this imagination equates the present time as a period of war. The elevation of the leader to the divine also brings a sense of hope to the community. The woman leader in the narrative, thus, is imagined to save the community from

Fig. 3 KK Shailaja in the Vogue Warrior Poster (image source: Vogue India)

the crisis like pandemic goddesses. The memories mediated through oral narratives, legends, and ritualistic practices of piety towards goddesses thus become the means to evoke this imagination in the collective memory of the community. In the case of KK Shailaja, such an argument stands true as this imagination is temporal and transitory, specifically triggered by the recurrent outbreaks of epidemics and pandemics in Kerala. As the pandemic becomes normalized and part of every day, what remains to be observed is how the popular woman leader is remembered in the collective memory of the public. Also, given the history of the gendered imagination of women both in global and local contexts during the time of crises, the reiteration of the familial divine role of women in public through selective 'remembering-imagining systems' seems to be a means to restore, what is understood to be normative by the society.

Conclusion

Practices of piety towards pandemic goddesses have been one of the many responses to make sense of and cope with the affliction in India. These practices of piety have been part of the collective memory of public in India, sufficiently mediated and remediated through ritualistic practices of veneration of pandemic goddesses in temples as well as oral and written narratives about them. The recurrence of narratives on pandemic goddesses in the digital platforms and the embodiment of Corona goddess then become a means to make sense of the time of crisis. If the time of pandemic evokes a sense of unfamiliarity and strangeness, piety in this context enables imaginability and the possibility to restore the norms of the community. Entangled within the dichotomy of irrationality and scientific temper, the impact of popular-religious piety on the imagination of pandemics is often overlooked. However, in case of future outbreaks of similar kinds, mediated memories of piety would be rekindled to shape the imagination of the then-present, as is in the case of the now-present pandemic.

Declarations

Competing Interests   The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical Approval   Not required.

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