COVID-19 First Responders: The Gayatri Pariwar and the Immune Ritual Body

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The following article investigates one North Indian new religious movement’s initial reactions to the onset of COVID-19. The Gayatri Pariwar is an organization popular in Uttar Pradesh, India, and its members believe it is their duty to save the world through a regime of virtuous lifestyle practices, beginning with the reformation of the self. Between mid-March and May 2020, the Gayatri Pariwar responded to the pandemic in three distinctive ways: it folded COVID-19 into the organization’s longstanding eschatological project, pursued ritual practices understood to provide immunity against moral and viral contagion, and insisted upon an ethic of caregiving meant to include society at large in their redemptive mission. This article analyzes the Gayatri Pariwar’s COVID-19–related YouTube video alongside ethnographic data to demonstrate how the Gayatri Pariwar used the viral pandemic as an occasion to reiterate and pursue its identity as a global moral custodian.

COVID-19 began its global spread as early as January 2020. During the ensuing months, the rapid encroachment of the viral pandemic upon all corners of the world elicited a multitude of broadly similar responses.

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Many recognized the pandemic as evidence of the coming end-time. Environmental activists and critics of capitalism saw COVID-19 as a sign of imminent structural unraveling—a herald of large-scale change that would forever alter urban ecosystems and national economies. Specialists and non-specialists alike identified the link between viral spread and the rapid international flow of people and goods as characteristic of the modern world and its vulnerability. To lesser or greater degrees, these reactions pertained as well to the Gayatri Pariwar, a Hindu-adjacent religious movement that positioned itself as an early responder to COVID-19 and its societal repercussions.\(^1\) Since its beginning in 1956, the Gayatri Pariwar has expanded to an international organization with locations in over twenty-five countries and a membership between six and ten million people, although its primary constituency, history, headquarters, and activities continue to be located in the Hindi belt of north and central India.\(^2\)

The leaders of this Gayatri “family”—that is the meaning of pariwar—explained the onset of the pandemic as a natural consequence of lifestyle practices they deemed improper: it was nothing but the most recent symptom of humankind’s longstanding moral decline. Yet the Gayatri Pariwar proposed a unique solution to this viral sign of the times. The group’s leaders aligned their COVID-19 relief agenda with the eschatological project that has been the mission of the organization since its inception: the inauguration of a worldwide Era of Truth (satyug) through self-reform and societal transformation. Rather than focus on containment in an effort to shield members from a dangerous world, the Gayatri Pariwar’s leaders enjoined the able-bodied among them to care for others. Moreover, the organization afforded its followers the means to become able-bodied themselves through accessible rituals understood to morally and materially purify adherents’ bodies, the surrounding environment, and society at large. In short, Gayatri Pariwar leaders urged their

\(^1\)Many within the organization would claim that it is not strictly Hindu but accessible to followers of all religions. For this reason, I propose to analyze the Gayatri Pariwar as Hindu-adjacent, since its cosmological framework and ritual repertoire are derived from Vedic and Puranic sources that have been modified to accommodate contemporary mainstream Hindu modes of worship, principally mārti pūjā—the celebration and service of the Divine in image form. To study the Gayatri Pariwar without reference to its connections to Hinduism would be impossible.

\(^2\)Regarding the size of the Gayatri Pariwar, in-house estimates suggest a constituency between ninety million members and 110 million members (Brahmavarchas 2014, 144; Heifetz 2021, 142), both of which are likely aspirational projections. In February 2020, employees of the distribution office of the Akhand Jyoti magazine, the most popular publication of the Gayatri Pariwar, informed me that there were 608,000 active subscriptions. Even if the average subscription is tied to a family of five members, and even if an equal number of members do not subscribe to the magazine, this suggests that the Gayatri Pariwar contains between six and ten million people.
constituents to act as COVID-19 first responders, empowered by ritual practices understood to render them immune to contagion.

The distinctive form of preparedness projected by Gayatri Pariwar leaders—projected to parijans, or “members of the family,” through a series of video broadcasts posted to YouTube (and distributed through other social media outlets such as Facebook and WhatsApp) between March and May 2020—brings into view three facets of religious responses to crisis that invite our attention more broadly. First is the contextualization of disaster in a cosmological framework wherein the “end” is not in fact the end. This offers a series of explanations that address both the cause and the cure of societal duress, thus providing certainty amid an otherwise chaotic discursive environment. Second, the great power attributed to specific ritual practices renders them concrete steps by which people can experience feelings of personal safety and, confident of their own bodily purity, pursue practices of civic custodianship. Third, the encouragement to move past militarized responses of blame and containment in order to engage in acts of caregiving relies upon and leverages the idea that bodies are porous and therefore susceptible to not only moral and biological contagion but also redemption. The bodies of the core community—the eschatological elect—can be the body of the populace as a whole. These three features are not replicated in every religious movement’s response to contagion, especially on the scale of COVID-19. They do show, however, that in the context of North India at least one religious group promptly folded the viral pandemic into its longstanding redemptive mission, insisting upon inclusive ritual caregiving as the vehicle by which society might find a way through the end-times together.

In what follows, I will consider a series of YouTube videos published by the Gayatri Pariwar between March and May 2020 against the background of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh in mid-March of that year, just before nationwide lockdown measures compelled me to leave. Nearly all of this data is in Hindi. I begin with an overview of the end-time narrative given to Gayatri parijans by the organization’s leaders, and I compare the assurances embedded within that framework to other ways of framing COVID-19. As I will show, the surety afforded by the Gayatri Pariwar’s narrative empowered parijans while stigmatizing others, yet the inclusive aspirations embedded in the organization’s response ultimately differ from the exclusionary projects often fueled by apocalyptic or conspiratorial explanations.

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3YouTube videos circulated through Facebook and WhatsApp messaging platforms were the readiest media by which members of the group received direct word from Gayatri Pariwar leaders during government-imposed lockdowns that prohibited face-to-face events and meetings.
of the virus. I then detail the ritual practices long held dear by the Gayatri Pariwar and which are understood to afford *parijans* ritual immunity from COVID-19 and other dangers. Rather than hide behind this ritual immunity, however, Gayatri Pariwar leaders encouraged *parijans* to go forth and care for others. I next discuss this inclination to caregiving and civic custodianship as what sets the eschatological ethics of the Gayatri Pariwar apart from those of otherwise comparable institutions. I conclude with a consideration of the Gayatri Pariwar’s continued relief efforts following the irruption of an especially aggressive COVID-19 variant in late April, 2021. The organization’s response to this second viral wave recognized that the particular need of the hour had changed but that the means of its fulfillment continued to depend upon the same ritual practices and service projects that characterized its efforts one year earlier.

**TIMELINE OF INDIA’S EARLY RESPONSES TO COVID-19**

Before detailing the official statements made by Gayatri Pariwar leaders between March and May of 2020, let me quickly review national-level responses pertaining to the same period. India is a country with a strong central government. Its actions in relation to COVID-19 provide crucial context for understanding what happened in the Gayatri Pariwar. Yet, the media also play a powerful role. Its various organs identified a Muslim missionary gathering in New Delhi as a viral super-spreader event (March 1–21), and they provided the backdrop for subsequent COVID-19 responses and their public reception. News outlets reported that thousands of Muslims, many of whom were foreign nationals, passed through metropolitan areas for missionary purposes. This coverage entrenched preexisting perceptions that religious “others,” especially Muslims, were threats to public health. To blame Muslims for COVID-19’s spread in India became a media trend during this time, and a series of incidents of violence against Muslim produce sellers, documented in national newspapers throughout April, demonstrate a conflation of Muslim religiosity with governmental noncompliance, Muslim diet with lack of hygiene, and Muslim bodies with vectors of disease (Mannathukkaren 2020; Jaiswal 2020; Pandey 2020a, 2020b).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi neither directly addressed the super-spreader event nor blamed COVID-19 on Muslims. Instead, he focused on national solidarity, containment, and fundraising as strategies to manage the pandemic. Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) he represents proclaim their secularity despite the fact that they are often depicted in both the international and domestic press as Hindu nationalists. The prime
minister’s appeals for national unity, such as his calls for clapping hands and banging pots during the one-day “People’s Curfew” (March 21) or a nine-minute candlelight vigil (April 5), likely felt unequally inclusive to citizens of differing religious affiliations. Outspoken Modi supporters, primarily Hindus, saw these symbolic actions as prophylactic measures based on Vedic science, numerology, and astrology (Subramaniam and Bhattacharyya 2020). Their enthusiastic interpretations preempted critiques that the BJP government’s response to the pandemic was merely rhetorical and suggested instead that skeptics were dissidents whose non-cooperation posed a threat to public health.

Government-led containment measures, most notably the twenty-one-day lockdown that Modi announced only four hours before its nationwide implementation (March 24), disproportionately impacted India’s working class. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers bereft of their incomes due to the sudden mandate were compelled to flaunt stay-at-home orders to travel from metropolitan centers to their natal villages (March 28). Censure of the resultant mobs at bus terminals suggested that these swaths of laborers should have prioritized public health over their need for tenable living conditions. The emphasis on the risks posed by the unruliness of the lower classes directed attention away from government oversight regarding the vulnerability of migrant workers. A national-level disaster relief initiative that solicited monetary contributions from the public (the PM CARES fund), launched by Modi one day prior, further contrasted welfare beneficiaries such as migrant workers to compliant donors.

| Date       | Event                                                                 |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| March 1–21 | Several thousand Muslim devotees from abroad gather at a shrine in Delhi, resulting in a coronavirus super-spreader event. |
| March 19  | Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls for the imposition of a “Janata Curfew,” a 14-hour nationwide lockdown, to be held on March 21. |
| March 21  | The Janata Curfew takes place. Following Modi’s encouragement, citizens honored essential workers by banging pots and clapping hands from their doorways at 5 p.m. |
| March 24  | Modi announces a 21-day nationwide lockdown.                           |
| March 27  | Modi creates the PM CARES fund, soliciting donations from the public in order to finance government-sponsored disaster relief work. |
| March 28  | Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers crowd bus terminals in New Delhi in attempts to return to their home villages. |
| April 5   | Indian citizens collectively turn off their power for nine minutes at 9 p.m., lighting candles in a symbolic expression of national unity. |
| April 14  | Modi extends the lockdown until May 3.                                 |
| May 1     | Modi extends the lockdown until May 17.                               |
| May 17    | Modi extends the lockdown until May 31.                               |
| May 31    | Lockdown restrictions begin to be lifted in select areas.            |
The background of sudden and dramatic government action, sometimes with damaging public results, presents a notable contrast to the confident and steadfast continuity of the Gayatri Pariwar in response to the pandemic despite the fact that many Gayatri pariJans align themselves unhesitatingly with Modi’s government. The ties between the BJP and the Gayatri Pariwar are informal, but present. For example, a YouTube video published by the organization on April 15 proudly depicts Doctor-sahib, the current leader of the organization, in a video conference with Modi about COVID-19 relief work, suggesting cooperative efforts between the national and religious leaders. Yet, as I will demonstrate below, the deliberate positioning of the Gayatri Pariwar as a model of government compliance was not for the sake of Modi, the BJP, or even Hindu nationalist ideals, but rather to foster a mode of civic-mindedness deemed necessary for the realization of the organization’s eschatological ambition to inaugurate another satyug.

CERTAINTY AND THE OUTBREAK NARRATIVE

The Gayatri Pariwar is a new religious movement that touts a regime of personal and societal reforms based upon repackaged Vedic rituals, mantras, and herbal recipes. Although healthcare is one aim of the Gayatri Pariwar, the institution’s leaders also take a wider view. They enjoin followers to wield their knowledge of such practices to redeem themselves, society, their nation, and the world from present moral waywardness; indeed, members regularly find occasion to chant the Hindi slogan “when we change, the era will change” (ham badaleṁge, yug badalega). The word yug denotes a period within the Hindu cosmological timeline—one of four stages in a cycle during which the world suffers an almost infinitely long process of societal and ethical decline. Similar to most Hindus, members of the Gayatri Pariwar identify the present with the kaliyug, the stage characterized by the greatest moral decay. Unlike most Hindus, however, members of the Gayatri Pariwar understand themselves to be

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4As his title suggests, Pranav Pandya (b. 1950) is a degree-holding medical doctor, and his rise in the Gayatri Pariwar owes much to his research on medical applications of yajña, a Vedic fire ritual described in more detail below. He is also the son-in-law of Shriram Sharma (1911–1991), who founded the Gayatri Pariwar in 1956.

5Daniel Heifetz argues at length that the Gayatri Pariwar and the Sangh Pariwar (the colloquial name given to a host of organizations with Hindu nationalist ideologies, including the BJP) have complex affinities. In brief, he insists that the Gayatri Pariwar lacks the hostility toward Muslims and Christians that characterizes the Sangh Pariwar, despite their shared hopes for the renewal of an idealized Indian civilization (Heifetz 2021, 159–60).

6Taken together, the four yugas span 4.3 million years. The shortest of these is the kaliyug, the duration of which is 432,000 years.
the harbingers of the next righteous age, or satyug.\textsuperscript{7} It is within the context of this transition—between the perception of a low point in human society and the anticipated renewal of a global utopia—that Gayatri Pariwar leaders positioned COVID-19 and their response to it.

It was March 11 when the Gayatri Pariwar posted its very first YouTube video about COVID-19, which contained a statement by Doctor-sahib (P. Pandya \textit{2020a}). His message began as follows: “The situation across the country these days is very adverse.”\textsuperscript{8} The key word in this opening statement is \textit{pratikūl}, which connotes adversity, opposition, and the quality of being “against the grain.” In front of a large crowd (social distancing had not yet become the norm), he explained that a virus had spread from China, where it has killed several thousand and affected over eighty-four countries, including India. In another video published less than two weeks later, Doctor-sahib’s son and heir to the Gayatri Pariwar, Chinmay Pandya, furthered this sentiment by suggesting that the current circumstances were an historical first (C. Pandya \textit{2020a}).\textsuperscript{9} Citing the words of the organization’s founder, Shriram Sharma (his grandfather), Chinmay explained that there is a difference between ordinary time and historical or unordinary time and that the current circumstances mark a departure from routine life and are characteristic of wartime, except that instead of being a battle between people, this fight is with an unknown threat: a virus.\textsuperscript{10}

In their YouTube videos, these two leaders of the Gayatri Pariwar said that time is out of joint. Yet, this aberrance is not without explanation: Doctor-sahib framed the onset of COVID-19 as a natural consequence of the growing opposition of humankind to God and nature. In particular, he claimed that COVID-19 was caused by meat-eating, filthiness, and poor hygiene, all associated with the moral laxity characteristic of

\textsuperscript{7}Absent from the Gayatri Pariwar’s understanding of the imminent satyug is the wholesale destruction of the world by either Śiva or Kalki that marks the end of the \textit{kaliyug} in popular Hindu cosmology. Whereas most Hindus imagine a definitive rupture, Gayatri parijans anticipate continuity—a smooth transition brought about by their reforms.

\textsuperscript{8}This and most quoted or paraphrased passages are based on my translations from Hindi. “is samay săre des’ men sthitiyāṁ baḍī pratikūl hain.”

\textsuperscript{9}“aisī paristhityāṁ hain jo sāyad mānnavatā ke itihās meṁ aur mānaviya safar meṁ pahalī bār āyī hain.”

\textsuperscript{10}“parāmpūya gurudev ne aṇekonā kālāri cintan diye. aur un kālāri cintan meṁ ek cintan sabase mahatvapārīṁ diya. vah yah diyā ki apattikāl kā adhyātm bhīṁ ho jātā hai. do tarah kā samay, gurudev ne kahā ki insān ke īvaṁ meṁ āṭe hain. ek samay to vah hai jo routine ke samay hain, sāmānya samay hain. aur kuch samay ve hain jīnako ham historical time bolate hain asāmānya bolate hain. sāmānya samay hotā hain to vyakti kī dinacarya abhī sāmānya hoṭi hain… yadi ham ājī kī paristhityāṁ ko dekhēṁ to ājī kī paristhityāṁ āisī hī yuddhā kī paristhityāṁ hain, apattikāl kī paristhityāṁ hain. antar mātra itanā hain ki insān ṣaṁśān se nāṁhu laḍ rahā hain… balki āisān aur ek unknown threat ke prati – āisān aur ek virus ke prati kā yuddhā ājī kī paristhityāṁ madhya ā jā rahā hain.”
foreigners and modern lifestyles. In this respect, Doctor-sahib enabled (if not encouraged) parijans to see COVID-19 in terms of a weakening adherence to indigenous traditions. The virus was the result of human error, specifically the error of following foreign cultural mores; according to Doctor-sahib, it is only in these modern times that Indians lack the vital force necessary to stave off a virus such as this. Doctor-sahib sharpened this statement in a later video, published on April 18, in which he flatly said that the main reason for COVID-19 is that humankind has “denied both God and nature” (P. Pandya 2020g). Nature, in his usage, refers to both the physical world and the primordial laws that keep it in balance. Doctor-sahib was deliberate when making the connection between nature (as world-order) and God. In the same video, he switched from Hindi to English to make the emphatic point that “discipline, ecological discipline, is the name of God.” He observed that even countries possessing abundant amenities such as the United States are unable to control the situation, and that we had all “opposed nature, whether in diet, sleep, or travel.”

By framing recent events as signs of the times, Doctor-sahib folded COVID-19 into the broader malaise of the kaliyug, the worst of all possible worlds. Though humankind has wronged God and globe, he said, particular blame for this societal duress belongs to foreign modernity, the influences of which draw people to eat meat, among other alleged aberrations from the presumed natural order. In pinning blame on this “other,” Doctor-sahib primed his audience to accept a return to an idealized Hindu culture as the solution to both COVID-19 and the parent problem of living in opposition to God and nature. This solution is the very same goal that the Gayatri Pariwar holds most broadly: they see the revival of Indian culture (bhāratīya sainkṛti) as the means to usher in another satyug, or golden age—when science and spirituality, humankind and cosmos, would once again fulfill one another (Heifetz 2021, 1). Such posturing encourages viewers to see COVID-19 and its

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11Doctor-sahib did not explicitly say that Chinese people are dirty, but the implication is hard to miss.

12“is ādhunikatā ke yug meṁ ham log abhī tak bimāriyon pe rokathāṁ nahīn kar pāyā. kāraṇ keval ek hī hai ki… jīvani śakti ki kamzorī.” Also referred to as immunity, these terms are discussed in more detail below.

13“in takλiṁoṁ kā mūl karaṁ yah hai ki ham prakṛti ko deny kar diyā aur ham ne bhagavān ko bhī deny kar diyā.”

14“āp ne vidroh kiyā, prakṛti se, aur prakṛti se vidroh karake āpne man-marzī kā kāṁ kiyā, kān-pān meṁ bhī, sone meṁ jāgne meṁ bhī, chalane-phirane meṁ bhī.”

15The connection between this depraved era and the spread of Western modernity is longstanding. See, for example, Cohen (1998).

16This is the very “affective politics of injury and nativist return” that undergirds Hindu nationalist tropes, as described by Subramaniam (2019, 117). I detail the proximity of the Gayatri Pariwar to Hindu nationalist ideologies below.
resolves in terms of the larger project of the Gayatri Pariwar, and it sug-
gests that the very same methods used by members of the organization
in their longstanding efforts to bring about a righteous era can be used
to overcome the virus. Before attending to Gayatri parijsans’ substantive
responses to COVID-19, however, the ramifications of this eschatological
framing merit examination.

Narrative Surety for Whom?

The Gayatri Pariwar is far from unique in its efforts to patch the soci-
etal rupture caused by COVID-19 into a larger narrative fabric that makes
intuitive sense to its members. Priscilla Wald, for example, argues that
a narrative cohered around viral infections throughout the twentieth-
century United States, one that “follows a formulaic plot that begins
with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of
the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epi-
demiological work that ends with its containment” (2008, 2). Especially
since the Cold War era, she argues, these “outbreak narratives” have satu-
rated epidemiological conversations about viral spread with the geopol-
itical language of invasion, infiltration, and subterfuge, on the one hand,
and conversations about wartime threats with fears of biological weapons,
on the other hand. Using case studies such as the early twentieth-century
newspaper sensation “Typhoid Mary” and Jack Finney’s novel *The Body
Snatchers* (as well as its 1956, 1978, and 1993 film adaptations), Wald con-
siders outbreak narratives to have the status of myths: their emotional
appeal “derives from and affirms the fundamental values, hierarchies,
and taxonomies that are the preconditions of [group] identity” (2008, 9).
She stresses that these outbreak narratives have consequences, especially
in their ability to “promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals,
groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and life-
styles” (Wald 2008, 3). To be sure, the mythic archetypes constituted by
Typhoid Mary or Finney’s “pod people” heightened public fears about
biological threats hidden within the human population, especially when
combined with tropes about Communist brainwashing that gained trac-
tion in the 1950s and 1960s.

Although Wald’s concept of outbreak narratives focuses on a par-
ticular discursive formation (not every outbreak narrative is of the type
she describes), her analysis of their mythic qualities helps us compare the
narrative certainty crafted by Gayatri Pariwar leaders with the convictions
generated by other attempts to explain COVID-19. Especially regarding
the Cold War anxieties about biological terrorism that continue to in-
form dystopian and apocalyptic conspiracy theories about the attempts
of organized powers to compromise the integrity of national populations, Wald’s outbreak narratives have much in common with early explanations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Writing about the prevalence of conspiratorial thought surrounding COVID-19 in the United States, Tristan Sturm and Tom Albrecht describe conspiracy theories as “a counter-hegemonic ressentiment—a reassignment of feelings of powerlessness and victimhood [from everyday people] to those perceived [to be] in control or responsible—where conspiracism is empowering as resistance [for] those who feel oppressed, victimized, or dominated by official expert knowledge” (Sturm and Albrecht 2020, 10). Within the context of the United States, the notion that the virus or the tests and vaccines meant to mitigate its risk were schemes used by those in power to sabotage people’s lives and freedoms, provides narrative explanations (however implausible) for many of the uncertainties or perceived incongruities that characterized everyday experiences of COVID-19.

Sturm and Albrecht also point out the “shared ingredients, motivations, and semiotics across apocalyptic conspiratorial Covid-19 narratives” and in doing so establish continuity between the end-times ideologies of religious and nonreligious groups across political party lines in the United States and elsewhere. In particular, they mention the recycling of Cold War-era narratives of biological terror plots by the Soviet Union or China as well as of the United Nations being ruled from the shadows by the Anti-Christ (Sturm and Albrecht 2020, 6). These narratives, they show, informed the conspiratorial explanations of COVID-19 touted by QAnon, evangelical groups, and even radical leftists, who were all wary of governmental and corporate overreach at the expense of public freedoms and health.

In their efforts to make sense of the pandemic, Gayatri Pariwar members, too, exhibited several of these stigmatizing motifs. In mid-March of 2020, I spoke with a man—let us call him Surya—who assured me that his Gurudev (Shriram Sharma) had prophesied COVID-19 fifty years ago. Surya worked as a receptionist at a Gayatri Pariwar center in Anwalkheḍa, a North Indian village well-known to parijans. Anwalkheḍa is both the place of Shriram Sharma’s birth and the site of regular naturopathic retreats hosted by the Gayatri Pariwar. Despite the growing alarm throughout India about the threat of COVID-19, Anwalkheḍa’s Gayatri Pariwar grounds were alive with parijans who were unafraid of the virus. I had become wary of Surya after several tense dinner conversations during which he blamed COVID-19 on Chinese meat-eating. Surya is likely right that the virus had zoonotic origins. Indeed, the epidemiological risks tied to the meat industry are made more insidious by the
international distribution networks and travel patterns characteristic of the contemporary global market economy (Liu 2020). Yet, the ease with which these international concerns become the basis for racist narratives and conspiracy theories poses other risks—more about those below. In an effort to justify his accusations regarding the origins of COVID-19, Surya explained to me that Shriram Sharma had written about a deadly illness spreading from China in one of his books, which was for sale at the bookstore on campus. He went so far as to lead me into the shop, locate the item, and thrust it into the hands of the cashier on my behalf, convinced that reading the book would benefit my research. It turned out that Surya was mistaken about his Gurudev’s foresight: Sharma merely cites—at length—the work of the American psychic Jeane Dickson, who predicted that China would resort to bioterrorism in a world war projected to take place between 1981 and 1984. But I was grateful for Surya’s tip. It made me aware of how much ink Sharma had spilled on the topic of civilizational collapse: the entire 350-page book is a meditation on potential transitions between this age and the next, which often involve environmental or political upheavals (Sharma n.d.b., 273).

Surya may have exaggerated the specifics, but the nature of his response demonstrated the faith pariJans have in their founder’s writings and the societal reforms outlined within them, many of which inform the organization’s responses to COVID-19. The idea that Shriram Sharma knew about COVID-19, that he had accounted and even prepared for it, allows pariJans to fit an otherwise disruptive global health crisis into the longstanding mission of moral redemption pursued by the Gayatri Pariwar. PariJans derive comfort from the knowledge that their late founder outlined a plan for their future—and that he continues to work toward that future now in the subtle body he continues to inhabit after his physical demise.17

I understand this manner of contextualizing the pandemic as apocalyptic insofar as the uncertainties surrounding COVID-19 are transformed into testaments to the certainty of cosmological transformations with specific implications for how humans ought to act. Perhaps especially when it appears as though all is wrong, religious and other communities provide recourse through explanatory models of their own. The idea that situations of personal or societal duress are divinely ordained or that their remediation depends upon divine intercession continues to shape religious explanations for hardship.

17In a speech delivered in 1986, aired on YouTube on March 28, 2020, Shriram Sharma comforts listeners by assuring them that he will continue to work for the world’s upliftment even after leaving behind his mortal sheath.
A comparison with other religious groups is relevant here. Perhaps the most outspoken responses to pandemics came from conservative Christians in the United States and elsewhere who preferred the promise of divine intercession to medical treatment by profane hands or denounced vaccines as violations of religious ethics and bodily purity (Pelčić et al. 2016; Wombwell et al. 2015). A number of charismatic leaders of evangelical congregations contextualized COVID-19 as a venue for “spiritual warfare,” and they urged their followers to flaunt social distancing mandates as a means of rejecting fear and expressing the power of their faith (Gagné 2020). Others interpreted the apparent global unraveling as a sign of imminent rapture or insisted that their own communities belonged to a divine elect and that the end that would not be the end, at least not for them (Kirby et al. 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Courtney Bender and Todne Thomas refer to this type of thought as an “escape hatch” by which people who understand themselves to be exempt from the finality of the imminent end can avoid “confronting demands for doing things now, joining with others now, and asking each other how . . . to live morally, ethically, within the space where the sky is falling” (Bender and Thomas 2021, 7–8).

Several of Doctor-sahib’s messages to Gayatri parijans contain references to Indian exceptionalism, and in that regard they resemble “escape hatches.” The confidence placed in Shriram Sharma’s plan for the future also suggests that parijans see themselves to be in a privileged position with respect to the pandemic. Yet, as I will demonstrate below, the assurances embedded in the Gayatri Pariwar’s official statements regarding COVID-19 did not promise a way out but rather a way through the dangers of the pandemic—a path along which they aim to shepherd all of humankind. It is at this juncture of eschatology and an ethics of care (rather than withdrawal) that the Gayatri Pariwar’s COVID-19 narrative ultimately differs from otherwise comparable responses to crisis. Whereas the refusal to comply with social distancing guidelines or vaccine efforts reinforces the perception that evangelicals adhere to a moral code that differs from those of other people, the Gayatri Pariwar’s alliances with government initiatives and their commitment to public-facing relief work has the effect of positioning the organization as the moral vanguard at the forefront of society, but still within it.

At Whose Expense?

Before unpacking the call to service that accompanied Doctor-sahib’s narrative explanation of COVID-19, the degree to which his ambitions for the Gayatri Pariwar align with Hindu nationalist projects deserves
mention. Nostalgia for an idealized Hindu civilization motivates the Gayatri Pariwar’s mission to facilitate the transition from *kaliyug* to *satyug*, and Doctor-sahib relied on nativist pride to reassure his viewers that Indians (read Hindus) have nothing to fear. The same video posted to YouTube on March 11 shows Doctor-sahib claiming that “we are very fortunate to be Indians, for we give precedence to cleanliness . . . and we are vegetarian,” going so far as to declare that “the majority of Indians are vegetarian” (P. Pandya 2020a). As a follow-up to his earlier attribution of COVID-19 to meat-eating and poor hygiene, his statement asserts that vegetarianism and adherence to cleanliness, especially during Holi and Diwali, are native to Indians. Although to the outsider these claims may seem outlandish, the esteem given to vegetarianism and ritual purity is a point of national and religious pride for many of the upper-caste North Indian Hindus in his audience.

Surya, for example, blamed the virus on Chinese meat-eating, employing boundary markers such as nationality and lifestyle choice to entrench a distinction between the causers and fixers of societal distress. He described the Gayatri Pariwar as an organization responsible for addressing the problems caused by those who follow morally suspect lifestyles. At dinner one evening, Surya expressed frustration at the fact that although it was the Chinese who caused the virus by eating animals, it was up to organizations such as the Gayatri Pariwar to step in and clean up their mess. Meat eating, he said, is an evil that should be punished by law, for it prevents people from retaining control over their emotions. Muslims, he said, pray five times per day for the sole purpose of keeping their bad impulses in check. It is clearly not enough. Were they to keep vegetarian, they would be able to circumvent those urges altogether. Surya’s statements posit vegetarianism as the precondition for self-control and moral righteousness, which casts meat-eating as the cause and condition of

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18“ham log bhāratavāsī bađe saubhāgyaśāḷī hain ki ham svacchatā meṁ viśvās rakhate hain – holi ke samay meṁ ham svacchatā ko pradhānatā dete hain aur divālī ke samay meṁ bhi pradhānatā dete hain svacchatā ko. ham svacchatā meṁ viśvās rakhate hain, ham sākhāhāri hain… adhikāṁś log jo hain sākhāhāri hain. jo nahīṁ hain ve ho rahe hain.” This statement sharply contrasts with studies that show that well over half of India’s population is non-vegetarian. See Bose (2016).

19Excessive use of chemical dyes and fireworks during these holidays suggest otherwise and have prompted government sanctions and limitations on their celebration in several urban centers.

20This association of diet and self-control attests to a prominent attitude among Hindus that the materiality of the human body is inextricably connected with morality. Regarding Hindu rationalizations of *brahmācārya* (a lifestyle regimen often glossed as celibacy), Joseph Alter writes that it is “not the action of self-control that builds character and resolve through a discipline of the disembodied self in a game of mind over matter. It is the matter itself from which the essentials of character and virtue emanate” (2012, 34). Alter also writes at length about Gandhi’s advocacy for self-control over dietary and (especially) sexual desires as “an embodied response that would substantiate, and not just theorize or even operationalize, Truth” (2000, 26).
depravity and irresponsibility. In this way, he articulated a broad contrast all too prevalent in North India, distancing Muslim behavior from the hygiene and moral rectitude characteristic of Hindus: meat eating strips people of mental clarity and control, which leads to evil urges and, in the case of COVID-19, a viral pandemic.

When I challenged Surya’s views, saying that plenty of Hindus eat meat and observing that those who live in mountainous regions especially have long kept meat as a staple part of their diets, he scoffed: he could not believe this to be true. If at one time meat eating was necessary in mountainous areas, he said, that time has long passed, for vegetarian food is readily available everywhere. Surya expressed revulsion at the notion that Hindus could ever have adopted a palate he associated with an animalistic lack of self-control. His disgust is not unique, nor are the racial or religious stereotypes through which it finds expression. Mei Zhan, in an article published in 2005, discusses media coverage of China following the 2002–2004 SARS epidemic, according to which “the Chinese, in indulging their appetites for exotic ‘wild animals,’ transgressed proper barriers between human and animal, the domestic and the wild, and culture and nature” (Zhan 2005, 37). Surya’s boundary drawing and Zhan’s wording closely resemble the statements made by Doctor-sahib to the effect that COVID-19 is symptomatic of global society’s contrariness to God and nature. The “wild” qualities associated with meat and its consumption contradict humanity’s proper place in the natural order, whereby humans (especially Gayatri parijans) are expected to exhibit self-control.21

Banu Subramaniam and Debjani Bhattacharyya warn that COVID-19 has become a rallying point for Hindu nationalists eager to point fingers at those of other religions or nationalities (Subramaniam and Bhattacharyya 2020). Clearly this is what we hear in Surya’s words. Wald’s warnings about the consequences of outbreak narratives come to mind, especially if “to look on a fellow human with a feeling of disgust is to downgrade them, their needs, and their claims on us” (McGovern 2014). Yet, publicly the Gayatri Pariwar professed and pursued a different stance, and even Surya’s personal inclinations toward punitive measures against COVID-19’s alleged spreaders gave way to the care-oriented activities of the organization. Despite his advocacy for the criminalization of meat-eating or his expression of resentment at having to clean up the messes of others, Surya remained an enthusiastic and active participant in Anwalkheḍa’s

21It is of considerable interest that the Ayurvedic texts upon which the Gayatri Pariwar bases the medical efficacy of certain ritual practices endorse red meat as particularly fortifying when cooked and consumed. Although these texts also endorse vegetarianism from an ethical perspective, their purely medical view on meat eating is uniformly positive. See Zimmermann 1987, 193–94.
manufacture of yajña kits. As will be described below, these were ritual care packages to be distributed to all, regardless of religious affiliation—one of several forms of ritual and material aid that parijans freely gave to the public. The militarization of pandemic relief efforts, whereby confinement and control supersede caregiving, did not characterize the Gayatri Pariwar’s substantive responses to the virus.

This is to say that Gayatri Pariwar leaders do not exclude those outside of their community from the future they envision. Nor are Gayatri parijans the elect few promised a place in the golden age they seek to inaugurate. Rather, they have the responsibility to make their ideal future possible for all by modeling a proper lifestyle and engaging with their communities through service projects and ritual practices. How each member chooses to pursue the joint tasks of self-reform and societal transformation is a matter of individual choice and ability, but the rhetoric employed in the group’s YouTube videos is meant to empower and inspire all parijans to action.

RITUAL IMMUNITY AND THE CALL TO SERVE

By framing COVID-19 as merely the latest episode in a saga of societal decline to be remedied by the organization’s longstanding efforts to inaugurate the next satyug, Gayatri Pariwar leaders have been able to afford parijans certainty amid chaos. I came to appreciate how effective this effort has been when I visited the Anwalkheḍa retreat center in mid-March of 2020. The Anwalkheḍa campus is one of thousands of Gayatri Pariwar “power centers” (śaktipūṭhs) spread throughout India. Originally I intended my trip as a retreat during which I could learn about the connections between naturopathy and the organization’s ritual practices—a fire rite derived from Vedic scriptures and the recitation of the Gayatri mantra (to be described in detail below). Alas, a paper notice taped onto a prominent wall signaled to visitors that all camps and functions were cancelled indefinitely to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Yet, this did not mean that parijans felt helpless in the face of the pandemic or that the organization would remain idle. I was still welcomed as a visitor to the retreat center, and everyone I spoke with expressed the conviction that the Gayatri Pariwar was prepared for both COVID-19 in particular and the moral depravity of the kaliyug to which they attributed it. Their faith was far from shallow comfort: the relief work and the routines kept up by volunteers, residents, and visitors to Anwalkheḍa during my visit prioritized an active lifestyle centered on ritualized self-betterment and social service framed in terms of the re-establishment of practices held to be
foundational to Indian culture (*bhāratīya saṃskṛti*). Significantly, Gayatri *parijans* understood their ritual practices to have the power to protect themselves and others from the maleficent effects of COVID-19 and its parent causes. It is to these ritual projects that I now turn.

**Yajña in Every Home**

The primary ritual activity of the Gayatri Pariwar is a simplified Brahmanical fire offering they call *yajña*. Although *yajña* varies in scale from a solitary act to a spectacle involving thousands, Gayatri *parijans* generally follow the same procedure: for around fifteen minutes, participants systematically chant Sanskrit mantras to one of several deities, punctuating each verse by tossing a small handful of dried herbs or ghee into a fire altar fueled by mango wood or dried cow dung. As with all of the Gayatri Pariwar’s practices, *yajña* is designed to be affordable and accessible to the common Indian. To this end, the organization has done away with the caste-, gender-, and age-based restrictions outlined in the Vedic texts pertaining to *yajña*—anyone can take part in the organization’s adaptation. Should someone claim that the lack of such restrictions compromises the ritual purity (and thereby efficacy) of *yajña*, the Gayatri Pariwar enforces other rules. Bathing and wearing a yellow dhoti are still strongly encouraged before taking part in *yajña*, since doing so signals mental and physical preparedness for the rite. More importantly, *yajña* itself is held to be an act of purification.

The second YouTube video published by the Gayatri Pariwar about COVID-19, released on March 13, promoted *yajña* as one of three staple ways to keep safe from the dangers of the virus (Shantikunj video Gayatri Pariwar 2020a). In the video, a student of *yajña* therapy (called *yajñopathy*) at the Gayatri Pariwar’s affiliate university in Haridwar described the rite as an age-old measure to prevent falling ill from increased airborne bacteria during seasonal transitions. The speaker not only drew a connection between Gayatri Pariwar *yajña* and Vedic tradition, but also attempted to establish the efficacy of the practice by citing a 2006 article

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22 According to a ritual manual published by the Gayatri Pariwar, a yellow dhoti and dupatta are required by both men and women (the exception being for Punjabi men and women who prefer pyjamas or salawārs) (Sharma n.d.a, 16). Extra dhotis are provided to guests at larger Gayatri Pariwar centers such as Shantikunj (the organization’s headquarters in Haridwar, Uttarakhand), but I have never seen anyone refused the chance to participate, regardless of dress.

23 The other two are to drink herbal tinctures and to engage in collective prayer and mantra recitation.

24 Dev Sanskriti Viśvavidyālaya is located less than a kilometer away from Shantikunj in Haridwar. Doctor-sahib and Chinmay Pandya serve as the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor of the university, respectively.
from *The Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, according to which medicinal smoke is habitually used to treat various illnesses in over fifty countries. In doing so, the speaker aligned Hindu ritual with both premodern public health and international modern medical sciences. When detailing how *yajña* works against COVID-19, the student explained that the smoke emitted from *yajña* fights it on two fronts: killing any bacteria living in the atmosphere and bolstering the weakened immunity of those afflicted by it. Although the narrator offers no details about how the smoke kills bacteria, he attributes the immunity-boosting effects of *yajña* to the inclusion of herbs such as giloy and *tulsi* (holy basil) in the ritual fire. Since these are arguably the two most common herbs used in popular Ayurvedic home remedies, alongside turmeric and ashwagandha, their inclusion among the ingredients necessary for ritual sacrifice (*havan sāmagri*) ties *yajña* to ayurveda as well.

The Gayatri Pariwar is neither the first nor the only organization to tout the medical benefits of *yajña*, whether generally or in the context of COVID-19. Many in contemporary India identify the fire rite with the Arya Samaj, whose founder Dayanand Saraswati made similar claims about it in the nineteenth century (*Saraswati 1919, 1*). Swami Chakrapani Maharaj, the President of the Hindu Mahasabha, also alluded to the rite as a strategy to combat COVID-19 (*Outlook India 2020*). Unlike other explanations of *yajña*’s efficacy, however, the laboratory tests that Doctor-sahib made in the 1980s allegedly demonstrated the antiseptic qualities of *yajña*, overtly framing it in terms of medical science (*Heifetz 2021, 6, 90–91*). The Gayatri Pariwar continues to expend resources in order to legitimize *yajña* in clinical settings, and its affiliate university offers a degree program in *yajñopathy* dedicated to preparing students for controlled therapeutic applications of the rite. Yet, there are only two places where *yajñopathy* is offered to patients, and they are both in Haridwar. 25 Although many, if not most, members of the organization know about *yajñopathy*, the vast majority of Gayatri Pariwar *yajña* happens outside of the clinic.

The claims made about the antibacterial and immunity-boosting aspects of *yajña* rely on scientific tropes drawn from a mixed bag of allopathy, ayurveda, and naturopathy. For example, the connection between health and environment has long been made within ayurveda, the core treatises of which include extensive attention to the influence of ecological factors on human physiology (*Zimmermann 1987, 19–31*). These texts primarily detail the potential benefits of cooking and eating local plants...
and animals (understood to impart the qualities of their environments), so it is by a clever inversion that the Gayatri Pariwar suggests feeding medicinal smoke to one’s own environment as a means of keeping healthy.\(^{26}\) Similarly, immunity boosting, which figures the English-language term immunity as a bodily substance that can be increased by ingesting certain herbs or performing certain activities, has come to characterize the promises of ayurvedic, homeopathic, and naturopathic responses to COVID-19 (as detailed in briefings posted to India’s AYUSH ministry website).

But what does it mean, in a pandemic context, to issue a call to science that commingles the Vedic and the medical? Subramaniam and Bhattacharrya are critical of the “revival of Vedic sciences as modern science,” especially insofar as Modi supporters have attempted to justify actions such as the imposition of a nationwide day-long curfew or the call to light clay lamps by imbuing them with scientific legitimacy, despite their lack of measurable results (Subramaniam and Bhattacharyya 2020). To be sure, the “sign of science” has rhetorical heft and influences public behavior (see Prakash 1999, 7). I am reluctant, however, to dismiss Gayatri Pariwar yajña as mere “pseudoscience,” for that would suggest that parijans are being duped by an organization seeking little more than to make money from them (cf. McKean 1996, 45–53). Rather, I follow Helen Tilley’s ruminations on Chinese medicine in the context of COVID-19 to the effect that non-allopathic modes of healing espouse a trust in forms of practice and experience—other kinds of know-how—that challenge [or at least coexist with] more dominant techniques of scientific proof and persuasion. And conceptually, they open the door to diagnoses and descriptions that oscillate between worlds of meaning and unsettle sharp boundaries around what is real and unreal, true and false, effective and ineffective. (Tilley 2020)

Regardless of its medical efficacy, yajña allows parijans to take ownership of their healing process and to reclaim a sense of control over frightening circumstances. Even this much surety matters in contexts where little governmental aid can be expected. Moreover, an indisputable merit of yajña is that it is accessible.

Especially amid the fears and uncertainties of the initial months of the pandemic, the Gayatri Pariwar reiterated the accessibility, ease, and scalability of yajña. In the same YouTube video published on March 13, the

\(^{26}\)The Gayatri Pariwar actively promotes Ayurveda as a healthcare regime, and many of their centers dispense Ayurvedic herbs. Yet, I have not encountered notable references to Ayurvedic texts within the organization’s literature.
Exploration of *yajña*'s benefits led into an advertisement for the Gayatri Pariwar’s brand of *havan sāmagri* (*Shantikunjvideo Gayatri Pariwar 2020a*). A narrator lists each of the herbs included in the mixture and assures viewers that, even if lockdown constraints make Gayatri Pariwar-brand *havan sāmagri* unavailable, it can be made at home. Doctor-sahib offered his audience an even simpler alternative in a video released one day later. Although he recommended Gayatri Pariwar-brand *havan sāmagri* and encouraged *parijans* to contact their local centers to procure it, he also stated that a household *yajña* can be done with two herbs—camphor and giloy—which many likely keep at home for other uses (P. Pandya 2020b).

Echoing the *yajñopathy* student, Doctor-sahib spoke of *yajña* as doubly effective against COVID-19 insofar as it is “both preventative and curative.” He urged viewers to conduct the rite daily and with discipline, and this is part of a more general push for Gayatri *parijans* to regiment their lifestyles as a way to bolster their immunity. Undertaking postural yoga and breathing exercises (*prāṇāyām*), keeping vegetarian, and ingesting ayurvedic tinctures are all practices that Gayatri Pariwar leaders defend on the basis of their immunity-building potential, suggesting again that immunity is a bodily substance that can be increased and conditioned. By consistently following these practices, they argue, *parijans* can ward off COVID-19, among other diseases.  

Although at first blush these self-care recommendations do not resemble relief work, the logic operative among *parijans* suggests that they fall on a continuum spanning individual lifestyle reform and social service. This logic pictures the individual human body as deeply enmeshed in the surrounding world and that human actions and transactions affect their moral and material makeup. Such enmeshment can render people vulnerable, as suggested by Doctor-sahib’s assertions that humankind’s compromised ability to ward off disease is a consequence of following lifestyles opposed to God and nature. Yet, the porosity of people and their environments is also the condition by which they can be redeemed. The link between material makeup and morality suggests that fortifying practices such as *yajña* can render participants fit to act as purifying forces in

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27For example, an advertisement for Gayatri Pariwar *havan sāmagri* asserts that it can prevent “malaria, swine flu, corona, etc.”

28The twin notions that the very materiality of living beings is morally coded and that this moral-material makeup is also porous (i.e., it cannot help but be altered by human actions and transactions) characterize what McKim Marriott terms “individuals,” the units of an “indigenous ethnosociology” of South Asia. His understanding of porous bodies largely overlaps with the attitudes held by *parijans* in regard to the causes and cures for societal distresses such as COVID-19. See Marriott 1976, 109–11; Marriott and Inden 1977, 232–33.
the world. Insofar as parijans believe the rite morally and materially works upon participants as well as the surrounding environment (and others within it), yajña operates as a type of counter contagion with the power to inoculate oneself and others with the will and wherewithal to advance the Gayatri Pariwar’s mission.

It will come as no surprise, then, that yajña is not only meant for parijans and that the Gayatri Pariwar made efforts to render yajña accessible enough to serve as a relief measure they could share with the wider public. While walking through the grounds of Anwalkhedha’s retreat center in mid-March, for example, I came across seven or eight women constructing cow-dung oil lamps (dīyās) in a concrete pavilion that overlooked green fields of grain and cow feed. With practiced hands and a touch of irony, these women formed the lamps by molding handfuls of cow dung over the heads of incandescent light bulbs, after which they carefully set the newly formed domes along the pavilion’s perimeter to dry in the sun. These cow-dung dīyās were part of a household yajña kit that the Anwalkhedha retreat center was preparing for free and wide distribution, so that any and all might partake in the Gayatri Pariwar’s ritual immunity. By sharing yajña with others, parijans enact the rhetoric that “we are all in this together,” and extend to others an invitation into the organization’s ritually bound family.

These sentiments were publicly endorsed by the retreat center’s head administrator, Ganshyam Devangan. An Agra-based news crew stopped by Anwalkhedha’s campus while I visited in order to record a statement about the Gayatri Pariwar’s efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In the interview that ensued, Devangan profiled the cow-dung dīyā as a surefire way to stop the virus: “Should yajña be done in a regulated manner so that the cow-dung ignites and offerings of havan sāmagri take place, then no bacteria will be able to remain in that environment. From doing this, at the very least, bacteria will be kept away for twenty-four hours” (Devangan 2020).29 Devangan suggests that the antiseptic quality attributed to yajña, particularly the smoke released from burning herbs and cow dung, can nip COVID-19 in the bud. Moreover, he ties the manufacture and distribution of these cow-dung lamps (included in a complete yajña kit containing a one-month supply of wicks and ghee) to an organizational effort to bring the practice of yajña to every home: “One plan of our revered Gurudev is ‘yajña and Gayatri worship in every home.’ . . . These are foundational pillars of our Indian mores and culture. Once this

29“yajña ghar-ghar niyamit rūp se yah yajña šurū ho jaye tāki yah gomay dīpak jalegā aur hamare havan sāmagri kī āhūtī hogī to us vātāvarān menh bacteria rah nahin payenge. kam se kam yah mān karke hī chaubis ghanṭe tak bacteria nahin rahegā.”
plan is set in motion, the coronavirus—or any virus, for that matter—will surely be brought under control. So we are moving forward with this as a movement” (Devangan 2020). Part of a movement meant to bring the purifying power of yajña and the Gayatri mantra to the masses and bundled into a package to be freely distributed by the Gayatri Pariwar, the cow-dung diyā is a material token of health, service, and Indian tradition. The ease and accessibility of the ritual, combined with its alleged power to inoculate the body and its immediate environment against contagion, demonstrate an effort by Gayatri parijans to include all within their mission. A second ritual practice further connects the eschatological ambitions of the organization with its COVID-19 relief efforts: recitation of the Gayatri mantra.

**The Gayatri Mantra Itself**

The Gayatri mantra is perhaps the most widely known Sanskrit scriptural verse among North Indian Hindus. Dating back to the R̥g Veda, the Gayatri mantra is an invocation that beseeches the Sun god Savitr for inspiration. The Gayatri Pariwar translates the verse from Sanskrit into English as follows: “May the Almighty illuminate our intellect and inspire us toward the righteous path” (Brahmavarchas 2014, iii). Gayatri parijans recite and write the mantra regularly. As shown below, they understand each of its twenty-four syllables to contain meaning and power.31

YouTube videos published by the Gayatri Pariwar on March 31, April 2, and April 3 call for daily collective chanting of the Gayatri mantra worldwide to provide relief from the ills of COVID-19. In the first video, Doctor-sahib invited Gayatri parijans to participate in a daily collective prayer of twenty-four Gayatri mantras so that they may “escape the crisis and advance along the path of wellbeing” (P. Pandya 2020d). The second and third videos include recordings of the Gayatri Pariwar’s late founder Shriram Sharma reciting the Gayatri mantra (Shantikunjvideo Gayatri Pariwar 2020b, 2020c). Presumably, Gayatri parijans would watch one of these latter two videos every day between 6:20 and 6:30 in the evening, resulting in synchronous prayer. As with yajña, Gayatri mantra recitation is at once accessible, central to the performance of Gayatri Pariwar identity,

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30“param pājya gurudev kī ek yojanā hai grh-grh yajñā aur grh-grh upāsanā…. gāyatrī aur yajñā hamāre bhāratīya dharm sanskṛti ke ādhār-sthambh hain. to yah ṣurā ho jāyega, niścit rūp se yah koronā ogarā jo bhī virus ogarā kā abhī prakop cal rahā hai yah mūl-cāl rūp se niyantarān men ā jāyegā. to yah hamārā cal rahā hai ek āndolan ke rāp men.”

31Linguists may protest that the Gayatri mantra contains only twenty-three syllables, but the Gayatri Pariwar emends the verse by following the conventional pronunciation of vareṇyam as vareṇyam.

32“saṁkaṭ se ubhāre aur kalyān ke path par āge baḍhāye.”
and held to be efficacious in both the eradication of COVID-19 and the establishment of the next satyug. It thus provides assurance and stability to parijans otherwise without recourse as well as reminds them of their belonging to a community that cares.

Although yajña includes Gayatri mantra recitation, the two practices are not coextensive. Whereas the efficacy of yajña involves the material offering of havan sāmagri, the medical benefits of which are authorized in terms of ayurvedic science, the power of Gayatri mantra recitation resides in the awakening of latent powers within the body and environment through vibrations. Although little mention is made within the aforementioned YouTube videos about how chanting the Gayatri mantra is supposed to work toward providing relief from COVID-19, this is not due to a lack of explanations. To the contrary, it is likely that ritual efficacy of Gayatri mantra recitation is taken for granted by parijans, for it is the subject of one of the most prominent books in the Gayatri Pariwar, titled Super Science of Gayatri. An excerpt from the beginning of the English translation is telling:

“There are twenty-four letters in Gayatri-Mantra which are related to twenty-four . . . glands located in the body which, on getting stimulated, activate and awaken the powers of righteous wisdom. By uttering Gayatri Mantra the sitar of subtle (Sookshma) body of the Sadhak [practitioner] starts playing, tinkling at twenty-four points, creating sound waves which impact important elements of the invisible world. (Sharma 2000, 14)

Just as the smoke of yajña allegedly bolsters bodily immunity while disinfecting the air, the vibrations of the uttered Gayatri mantra are understood to unlock hidden powers within practitioners’ bodies and their surrounding environment.

Gayatri Pariwar leaders emphasized the exponential increase of power and purity that results when ritual actions such as yajña or Gayatri mantra recitation are undertaken collectively. On April 5, Narendra Modi called upon Indians to light candles for nine minutes at 9:00 p.m. in a performance of national unity. In a YouTube video published earlier that day, Doctor-sahib encouraged parijans to participate by performing dīp yajña (the very type of yajña to be performed using the cow dung dīyās manufactured in Anwalkheḍa). He explained that the effect of collectively lighting oil lamps and reciting mantras will be the creation of an atmosphere or a mood in which darkness-cum-ignorance gives way to light and truth (P. Pandya 2020f). He admitted that the actual effects

33>cāro tarah tamogun samāpt hotā hai satogun badhatā hai... ek maulā banā pātā hai jis maulā ke mādhyaam se dekhāte-dekhāte parivartan dikhāī padāne lōgegā.”
cannot be known beforehand but told viewers he had faith in the words of their Gurudev.\footnote{“kitanā prabhāv paḍatā hai to ham nahīṁ kah sakate haiṁ, fir to gurudev kī bāt par viśvās karate haiṁ.”} Although his specific reference was likely to a 1988 speech Shriram Sharma made about the virtues of \textit{dīp yajña}, Doctor-sahib also mentioned Sharma’s more general writings on collective action. Doctor-sahib told viewers to consult a special issue of \textit{Akhand Jyoti} in which Sharma wrote at length about the power of group effort. Citing an example from the text, Doctor-sahib described how the synchronized march of a military parade is influential enough to cause bridges to collapse, so special measures must be taken to mitigate its effect.\footnote{The phenomenon he described is the Doppler Effect, which Shriram Sharma briefly mentions in the issue in question \cite{Sharma1983}, but which is detailed more fully in another Gayatri Pariwar publication titled \textit{The Eternity of Sound and the Science of Mantras}.} Just so, he declared, synchronized \textit{dīp yajña} contains manifold power.

The idea that collective efforts, whether \textit{yajña} or mantra chanting, constitute acts of service is important within the Gayatri Pariwar. Members of the organization firmly believe that the unified intentions of India’s masses have the power to bring about the next golden age. To say that symbolic stances of unity are merely platitudinal is to overlook the archetype of health that connects personal practice to social service, on the one hand, and the importance that the leaders of the Gayatri Pariwar place on the organization’s identity as a family, on the other hand. The efficacy of \textit{yajña} and Gayatri mantra recitation is understood to scale up when coordinated synchronously with others, and \textit{parijans} are thus encouraged to view their bodies and the regimens they are subjected to as deeply enmeshed in the surrounding world. Seen in this light, ritualized performances of togetherness such as collective prayer operate as a type of care that affirms community belonging both to the Gayatri family and to the Indian nation.\footnote{There is surely a global humanitarian component to both the importance placed on togetherness and the mission of the Gayatri Pariwar as a whole. Yet, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gayatri Pariwar leaders by and large focused on India as the venue of the organization’s relief efforts.}

\section*{CAREGIVING AND CIVIC CUSTODIANSHIP}

It is important to note that the ritual immunity promised by Gayatri Pariwar practices did not deter \textit{parijans} from complying with national-level public health protocols. To the contrary, Doctor-sahib and Chinmay Pandya urged their followers to act as model Indian citizens by both following the Indian government’s directives regarding COVID-19 prevention and helping those unable or unwilling to do so. For example, chaos
erupted at Delhi’s interstate bus terminals on March 28 when hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers, rendered jobless by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s imposition of a three-week nationwide lockdown, fought to claim seats on an inadequate number of vehicles set aside for their return home. The result was a mob of migrant workers (and their families) clogging the streets around the buses, many of whom were forced to attempt to walk over one hundred miles to return to their home villages (Peterson and Chaurasia 2020). Doctor-sahib, in a video response published one day later, projected a clear and simple message in response to these events. He entreated viewers to educate those who would endanger themselves and the public by traveling, underscoring the perception that Gayatri parijans know better (P. Pandya 2020c). In addition to spreading awareness about the imperative to follow social distancing protocols, Doctor-sahib encouraged viewers to help the suffering by offering food, shelter, and advice. Although the government-issued lockdown that resulted in these droves of newly jobless migrant workers was put into effect to mitigate the spread of the virus, following a militarized response based on containment and control, the Gayatri Pariwar’s efforts to ensure compliance with those mandates instead foregrounded caregiving.

During these initial months of the pandemic, several videos uploaded to YouTube by the Gayatri Pariwar specifically profiled the organization’s relief work. These videos were meant to accomplish three things: stir pride in the Gayatri Pariwar as an active responder to COVID-19 alongside other civic actors (such as hospital staffs, the police, and state and national government officials), repeat the call for Gayatri parijans to perform acts of social service, and advertise service opportunities to viewers looking to take part. For example, a video posted on April 15 showcased Gayatri Pariwar volunteers making and distributing food for those unable to access meals. A narrator described how volunteers at Shantikunj, the Gayatri Pariwar’s headquarters, distribute over 2,000 food packets daily and that

37“māṁ āpase amroddh karūṅga ki jitanā ho sake… jo bhaṭak gaye hain jo samajh nahīṁ pāye hain unako āp kaheṁ ki yahāṁ rukh jāo, thode din yahāṁ kāṁ kar lo, jo kāṁ kar sakate ho vah kāṁ kar lo… lok sīksāṁ kā kāṁ karanā, yah āpka kāṁ hai.”
38“gyātrī parivār ke pāṁc hāzār ke kāriṁ sākṭīpūṁ hain… in prajña saṁsthānoṁ ke mādhyam se ham bahut badā kāṁ kar sakate hainī sevā kā, ki jo hāṁ māre pās āise log hainī jo… gāoṁ kī or jā rahe hainī… un logoṁ ko rokenī… āp ek mahīṁ kā bhojan, ek ādaṁī kā dāyitva le lījīye. āise do sau log dāyitva le lenge to do sau logoṁ ko bhojan mtīte rahega. aur unāse kāṁ kariye. koi na koi kāṁ kārāte raḥiye.”
39An example from one year later attests to the consistency of the Gayatri Pariwar’s encouragement to adhere to government relief initiatives. A video posted to YouTube on March 20, 2021, showed Doctor-sahib just after receiving his second vaccine shot from the Ramakrishna Mission (P. Pandya 2021). He attested to the efficacy of the vaccine, its safety, and its lack of side-effects and encouraged everyone to seek out the vaccine as soon as it became available to them.
over 5,000 district centers have taken up similar efforts (Shantikunjvideo Gayatri Pariwar 2020d). At Shantikunj specifically, two residence halls, each with maximum occupancies of 2,000 people, were converted into quarantine wards on March 24, the first day of the long-term nationwide lockdown. In another video, Chinmay detailed ongoing Gayatri Pariwar efforts at Shantikunj, including the sewing and distribution of sanitation masks and hand sanitizer, before requesting that viewers ensure that every Gayatri Pariwar chapter takes upon itself the resolve to engage in at least one type of social service (C. Pandya 2020b).

The preparation and distribution of meals appear to have been the primary volunteer work that brought Gayatri parijans into contact with their surrounding communities from March to May, and this follows from the fact that only the largest Gayatri Pariwar centers have the infrastructure required for other kinds of relief work such as the manufacture of sanitation masks, hand sanitizer, or hand soap. The money required to produce and distribute these items primarily came from the Gayatri Pariwar’s Disaster Relief Fund (āpadā rāhat koś), and Doctor-sahib, his wife, Shailbala Pandya, and their son Chinmay Pandya encouraged members of the organization to contribute to the cause remotely by making monetary donations to this fund. Monetary donation enables parijans to participate in Gayatri Pariwar relief work without placing themselves at risk of contracting COVID-19, presuming that parijans have the financial stability required to contribute during a time when many have lost work. Despite the immense disparity between the average parijan’s donation to the cause and the one-crore (10 million) rupee check Doctor-sahib wrote for an analogous relief fund led by the Uttarakhaṇḍ state minister, the message is clear: all donations are important displays of support and are key means of sustaining on-the-ground relief efforts.40

Doctor-sahib’s request for parijans to donate to the disaster relief fund was made less than a week after Modi announced his “PM Cares” relief fund, calling on all citizens to contribute (P. Pandya 2020e). The proximity of the Gayatri Pariwar’s fundraising announcement to the inauguration of Modi’s fund may suggest to readers that the two exist in competition, yet the Gayatri Pariwar’s leaders were careful to depict the organization’s

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40This donation is profiled in one of the YouTube videos, and the narrator specifies that the donation was made from the Gayatri Pariwar’s assets rather than Doctor-sahib’s personal account. It is unclear whether Doctor-sahib even keeps personal funds separate from those of the organization he leads. Since he lives in the same quarters formerly occupied by Shriram Sharma and Bhagwati Devi in Shantikunj, his daily expenses are likely nil. Members of the organization understand Doctor-sahib to have dedicated his entire life to the Gayatri Pariwar, and compounded with his status as its current leader, it would not be proper for anyone within the group to inquire after his personal finances, were he to keep them.
efforts as being in the service of governmental relief work. According to a message written to the Gayatri Pariwar community by Doctor-sahib’s wife, viewable from the online donation page of the organization’s website, “the Gayatri Pariwar has opened its arms to donate to the Prime Minister’s relief fund at the time of every crisis, national and international.” Considered alongside Doctor-sahib’s donation to the state minister’s fund, Shailbala’s statement demonstrates a desire to align the Gayatri Pariwar’s service efforts with those of the government—yet not be subsumed by them.

This support of public institutions is an important part of parijans’ self-ascribed roles as custodians of societal well-being. Their alliance with government efforts, especially those promoted by politicians affiliated with Narendra Modi’s regime, however, should not be read as a flat endorsement of Hindu nationalist politics. The Gayatri Pariwar aligns its civic-mindedness to a long history of volunteerism as a means of societal reform, and they are proud of their links to social and religious reformers such as Mohandas Gandhi and Madan Mohan Malaviya. The pride parijans have in these connections attests to their investment in volunteer work as a mode of expressing Indian belonging itself, and in this respect their orientation toward service exceeds political party affiliations. Writing of similar COVID-19 relief work provided by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a volunteer association with strong ties to Hindu nationalist projects and to Modi’s government, Malini Bhattacharjee argues against the notion that such highly visible acts of service are merely political strategies meant to bolster the public image of religious organizations: “The space of humanitarianism is messy and political and yet the motivations for service are complex. There is genuine altruism, love for the nation as much as rational reckoning involved” (Bhattacharjee 2020). The Gayatri Pariwar’s proselytizing ambitions surely factor into their relief efforts, and this encourages us to consider the expectations placed upon the recipients of the organization’s care.

Predictably but significantly, the food that the Gayatri Pariwar distributes is vegetarian—the same food consumed by parijans who understand it to contribute to the fitness of mind and body needed to fulfill their duties as upstanding citizens. Alongside yajña kits, these vegetarian provisions do much to position beneficiaries in line with the lifestyle reforms parijans believe to be required to instantiate the satyug. Gayatri Pariwar leaders and members would likely resist the association of their

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41 Indian religious organizations have long been tied to societal reform efforts in the service of national betterment, and ready comparisons can be made to movements such as the Sri Sathya Sai Organization or the nineteenth-century Brahmo Samaj. See Hatcher 2020; Scott 2016; Srinivas 2010; Kopf 1996.
caregiving with proselytization. Even so, their handouts are intricately bound together with their eschatological ambitions. Although the Gayatri Pariwar’s COVID-19 relief efforts make no explicit demands on the parts of recipients, the implicit expectation is that beneficiaries will be worked upon, whether by vegetarian food or Vedic ritual. As mentioned above, the idea that bodies are porous and that their moral-material makeup can be transformed through human actions and transactions informs the Gayatri Pariwar’s explanation of the origin of and solution for both COVID-19 and the kaliyug. By this logic, yajña, mantra recitation, and the distribution of vegetarian food morally and materially inoculate participants against both COVID-19 and the errant lifestyles beholden to the kaliyug that have caused the disease to flourish.

RESPONSES TO THE SECOND WAVE

COVID-19 receded from the spotlight of the Gayatri Pariwar’s YouTube broadcasts in the fall of 2020. Apart from posting occasional videos meant to encourage the synchronous recitation of the Gayatri Mantra as a relief measure, the Gayatri Pariwar appears to have shifted its attention to the upcoming Kumbh Mela. Insofar as the religious festival draws millions of Hindu devotees to tightly packed riverbanks for ritual ablutions, the event quickly became a source of anxiety regarding COVID-19 spread. Since the 2021 Kumbh Mela was to take place (and did take place) in Haridwar, where the Gayatri Pariwar is headquartered, the organization made efforts to decrease the size of the incoming crowds. As early as November 2020, the Gayatri Pariwar announced a plan to bring the Kumbh Mela to devotees’ doorsteps so that they could reap its benefits from home; by January, the effort was in full swing. Equipped with water gathered from the banks of the sacred Ganges river at Haridwar, parijans across the country could participate in the massive gathering at the correct astrological moment without incurring the risk of disease. Bottles of this holy water were distributed to over one million families (Shantikunjvideo Gayatri Pariwar 2021). Yet, it was not until an acute increase in COVID-19 cases swept across India following the Kumbh Mela and regional electoral campaigns that the Gayatri Pariwar rearticulated its resolve to provide relief from COVID-19 through ritual observance and social service.

An interview posted to YouTube on May 3, 2021, showed Chinmay Pandya answering questions about what the Gayatri Pariwar can do to help amid the crisis of COVID-19’s second wave (C. Pandya 2021). Chinmay’s

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42The Kumbh Mela is the world’s largest religious gathering, which occurs every six years at one of four pilgrimage cities: Haridwar, Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad), Nashik, and Ujjain.
response closely resembles the calls to action he and Doctor-sahib issued to pariṇjans a year earlier: in times of distress, it is the duty of the Gayatri Pariwar to relieve suffering. Chinmay recognized that the challenges posed by the second wave differed from those of the initial months of COVID-19’s spread in India. Unlike the initial nationwide lockdown, the second wave had laid bare the need for critical medical care, hospital beds, and oxygen. Chinmay outlined several methods by which pariṇjans could help. Already, he said, the Gayatri Pariwar had established a dedicated critical care unit in its Shantikunj hospital, but there was far more that could be done at the local level. The other relief efforts he enumerated will sound familiar: pariṇjans should donate food, medicine, and money; offer ritual aid, whether mantra recitation or yajña; and make available community spaces for use by medical authorities. In addition, call centers should be established to discern local needs and organize relief measures, even if all that could be done was to give emotional support. In urging such efforts, Chinmay implied that it was not just the immediate relief that mattered but also inspiring others to adopt righteous lifestyles. In doing so, he reminded viewers of the great stakes of their societal project: humankind must follow the path of righteousness and well-being or face destruction.

CONCLUSION

For Gayatri pariṇjans, the will to embody the “good Indian” is part of a shared mission to establish a “good India” and, by extension, a good world. That Gayatri pariṇjans were able to take upon themselves this sense of national and humanitarian duty during the radically uncertain initial months of COVID-19 owed itself largely to the explanations that Gayatri Pariwar leaders were immediately able to provide. The community’s doctrine of societal distress provided a framework that made immediate sense of a viral outbreak that often seemed anomalous to others. This was a story that pariṇjans knew by heart, including its end. Moreover, pariṇjans understood themselves to be the joint authors of that story, equipped as they are with the ritual tools required to bring into existence the future they collectively envision. Their belief in the power of yajña and Gayatri mantra recitation empowered pariṇjans to take an active role in COVID-19 relief work, and that work included (but was not limited to) sharing with others the news of how they too could avail themselves of freely available ritual immunity.

Although the story told about COVID-19 by Gayatri Pariwar leaders dips into the reserve of xenophobic tropes that characterized “outbreak narratives” from the Cold War period onward in the United States, those leaders insisted that their followers also respond with acts of care. It is
this ethics of societal engagement, rather than withdrawal, that makes the Gayatri Pariwar’s eschatological project distinctive in regard to COVID-19. Rather than offer an escape hatch to an elect few or completely condemn those understood to be culpable for societal distress, the Gayatri Pariwar tried to persist in the cause of living with, and living for, the publics around them. This is both altruism and a redemptive mission, insofar as the framework provided by parijans’ pandemic relief work brings into being an effort that is intended to instill moral-material righteousness in society at large—to usher in the satyug.

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