

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW**  
**MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES**

**[ISSN 2581-5369]**

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**Volume 4 | Issue 5**

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**2021**

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# The Flawed Notion of Islamophobia: From British Raj to Modi Raj

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## ABSTRACT

*India has been battling the Hindu-Muslim tensions since partition and beyond. The recent communal riots disheveled the collective conscience of the country and placed India in the eyes of doubt of International organizations and various other countries. This article has been written as an effort to counter the defaming allegations and to provide an insight into the origin of such differences. We have tried to explain how the re-initiation of such clashes might have a political schema behind it and how this has been benefitting a certain section of the society. The secularity and fraternity of the country stems from the Constitution and that by itself is the biggest safeguard provided to the countrymen by the Constituent Assembly. The article has taken into consideration the recent statements given by imminent political leaders and organizations and it has been left for the readers to decide the falsity of the allegations that India is facing currently.*

**Keywords:** *Islamophobia, propaganda, Hindutva.*

India is the power-house of religious and cultural miscellany. We are one of the few countries without an official state religion. The secularity emanates from the carefully constructed Constitution, sanctioning citizens from every faith to draw power from it without any segregation based on religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth.<sup>2</sup> The Preamble happens to be the mitochondria of the Indian Constitution. The sight of a Hindu celebrating Eid with his Musalman brothers or of a Muslim celebrating Diwali with his Hindu brothers is quite familiar in the country. The fraternity of the people residing in the country is palpable from the numerous government holidays declared by the Central Government to venerate the religious leaders of various faiths. Six religions have been identified as religious minority in the country—Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Zoroastrians.<sup>3</sup> The variation in practice of faith has led to the formation of diverse communities. Their tranquil co-existence is exemplary in nature

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<sup>1</sup> Author is a Working Professional in India.

<sup>2</sup> Constitution of India. Art. 15

<sup>3</sup> Proceedings of The Meeting of the Secretaries, Minorities Welfare/Minorities Development Departments of the State Governments and Union Territory Administrations, Annexure to the Report of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, Ministry of Minority Affairs, (Vol II), at Page 45, (July 13, 2005)

but when they clash, the hostility has been fittingly termed as ‘communal violence’.<sup>4</sup>The country primarily witnesses Hindu-Muslim clashes. The source of such brutality dates back to the hatred-induced partition of the country into India and Pakistan back in 1947. The dreams realized turned out to be relatively different from those that were dreamt. The partition initiated a streak of hate culture which is importunate and the end of which is unforeseeable.

The latest unanimity displayed by the central government with respect to the Citizenship Amendment Act unveiled a lot of repressed antagonism of the Muslim community. There were rumors doing rounds that the election manifesto of Bharatiya Janata Party to spread Hindutva throughout the country is being put into action. The verdict of the Apex Court in the notorious case of the demolition of Babri Masjid added fuel to the already raging wildfire. The onset of the corona virus pandemic in the country brought forth inconceivable challenges. The Tablighi Jamaat congregation in the Nizamuddin Markaz in the month of March right after the Prime Minister had announced a country-wide lockdown was held accountable for the initial spread of the virus in the country.<sup>5</sup> The Jamaatis were traced to every corner of the country. Reports of them misbehaving in the hospital and displaying obscene behavior to the female staff in a hospital in Ghaziabad where they were quarantined for their own well-being swamped news channels and newspapers.<sup>6</sup>The veracity of the news is indeed suspicious and has been termed as an astute propaganda to intensify the hatredness of the people towards a particular community.

Islamophobia has become a real thing now. The passing of the Citizenship Amendment Bill after the right wing extremist BJP won by a majority in its second momentous triumph in the legislative polls has deliberately elevated the long-standing religious apprehension in the country that is dominated by Hindus.<sup>7</sup> The criticisms have been pouring in from all over the world against the second-class treatment being accorded to the Muslims in the country. Spokesperson for the United Nations Chief Antonio Guterres, stated that ‘UN is closely analyzing the possible consequences of the amended law’ and the UN High Commissioner for

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<sup>4</sup> O.P.Sharma, Carl Haub, Change Comes Slowly for Religious Diversity in India, POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU, March 11, 2009, Available at <https://www.prb.org/indiareligions/>, Last visited on June 23, 2020

<sup>5</sup> Chanchal Chauhan *Coronavirus in India: Tablighi Jamaat's criminal act cannot be forgiven, says Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi at e-Agenda*, INDIA TODAY, May 30, 2020, Available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/coronavirus-in-india-tablighi-jamaat-s-criminal-act-cannot-be-forgiven-says-mukhtar-abbas-naqvi-at-e-agenda-1683674-2020-05-30> , Last visited on June 23, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Outlook Web Bureau, *Tablighi Jamaat Members Face NSA for Misbehaving with Nurses in UP Hospital*, OUTLOOK: THE FULLY LOADED MAGAZINE, April 03, 2020, Available at <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-tablighi-jamaat-members-face-nsa-for-misbehaving-with-nurses-in-up-hospital/349989> , Last visited on June 23, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Abdul Waheed Parry, *Coronavirus and India's Islamophobia; Plight of Indian Muslims*, iNSAMER, IHH Humanitarian and Social Research Center, June 10, 2020, Available at [https://insamer.com/en/coronavirus-and-indias-islamophobia-plight-of-indian-muslims\\_2974.html](https://insamer.com/en/coronavirus-and-indias-islamophobia-plight-of-indian-muslims_2974.html) , Last visited on June 22, 2020.

Human Rights said, ‘they are concerned that India’s new Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 is fundamentally discriminatory in nature and appears to undermine the commitment to equality’.<sup>8</sup> The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Imran Khan accused the Indian government of bigotry as the Muslim community was being targeted against the milieu of the pandemic. India rubbished the claims and declared that Mr. Khan was trying to draw the attention away from the dwindling internal affairs of Pakistan and how the religious minorities in their own country are treated by the Muslim-dominated populace.<sup>9</sup> In a briefing report published by ICJ,<sup>10</sup> it has been clearly stated that due diligence is to be observed by the Government so as to defend every person’s ‘Right to Food’. They seem to have drawn the inference that Muslim person in particular have faced severe discrimination from a newspaper report in AlJazeera,<sup>11</sup> which also claims that the Muslim fruit and vegetable vendors were denied access to localities in Delhi and Rajasthan and beaten up. True or not, the allegations have worsened India’s stand on the issue, the consequences of which is evident from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) wanting to blacklist India because of religious fanaticism and the non-existence of religious freedom.<sup>12</sup> The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also came forward to articulate their deepening distress over the mounting anti-Islamic sentiment in the country and stated that, ‘there is an unrelenting vicious Islamophobic campaign in India maligning Muslims for the spread of COVID-19’.<sup>13</sup>

For us to gain a better perceptive of how this hate culture has been tactically spewed throughout the country and through generations, we would need to dig deeper into the minutiae of the Hindu-Muslim relationship.

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<sup>8</sup> Shubhajit Roy, *UN human rights official says Citizenship law is fundamentally discriminatory*, THE INDIAN EXPRESS, December 14, 2019, 8:34 am, Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/un-human-rights-washington-us-citizenship-law-6166015/>, Last visited on June 20, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> PTI, *Coronavirus | India rejects Imran Khan’s allegations of discrimination against Muslims*, THE HINDU, New Delhi, April 20, 2020, Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-india-rejects-imran-khans-allegations-of-discrimination-against-muslims/article31384286.ece>, Last visited on June 15, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> India on the Brink of Hunger Crisis during COVID-19 Pandemic, Briefing Paper on India’s Legal Obligations to Guarantee the Right to Food particularly to People Living in Poverty During COVID-19, International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), (April 21, 2020), <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/India-Right-to-Food-COVID19-Briefing-Paper-2020-ENG.pdf>, Last visited on June 20, 2020

<sup>11</sup> This has been exacerbated by prejudicial statements and news coverage blaming the Muslim community for the spread of COVID19 due to the fact that a large number of cases have been linked to one gathering by a Muslim group between March 13-15, Akash Bisht et al, *How Tablighi Jamaat event became India’s worst corona virus vector*, AL JAZEERA, April 07, 2020, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/tablighi-jamaat-eventindia-worst-coronavirus-vector-200407052957511.html>

<sup>12</sup> *India should be placed on religious freedom blacklist, US panel says*, THE GUARDIAN, AFP in Washington, April 28, 2020, 21.15 BST, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/28/india-religious-freedom-narendra-modi-us>, Last visited on June 23, 2020

<sup>13</sup> Abdul Waheed Parry, *Coronavirus and India’s Islamophobia; Plight of Indian Muslims*, iNSAMER, IHH Humanitarian and Social Research Center, June 10, 2020, Available at [https://insamer.com/en/coronavirus-and-indias-islamophobia-plight-of-indian-muslims\\_2974.html](https://insamer.com/en/coronavirus-and-indias-islamophobia-plight-of-indian-muslims_2974.html), Last visited on June 22, 2020

The Mughal invasion of India did not bring forth the disparity as there was no considerable difference between Hindu and Muslim kings. The stake stood still at land, gold and politics. Pre-independence, the political leaders of the country expounded the principle of religious tolerance as a fundamental value of Indian history. Swami Vivekananda's speech in Chicago popularized how proud he was to be born to a faith that believes in lenience and universal acceptance as did Mahatma Gandhi who inculcated the *sarva dharma sambhava* philosophy as an indispensable tenet of India's religious culture.<sup>14</sup> There are studies that trace the disparity back to the Mughal era when differences in ideologies began and the spread of Sanskrit and Brahmins brought forth a cohesive religious culture in the country. Hinduism wasn't entirely set up as a religion but the self-awareness regarding an indigenous belief that turned out to be absolutely distinct from that of the Mughals thrilled every God-fearing person's wits.<sup>15</sup> The record of the first census in 1871, the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the conception of separate electorates in 1909 in actuality led to separate identification of two fluid groups who hadn't anticipated the arising of such an acrimony, the consequence of which was the enormous bloodshed and the biggest displacement in the human history- the partition of the country into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Prior to the partition, Muslims were the largest religious minority under the British rule and were habituated to their minority status with a series of protection measures carved out to preserve their position, including separate electorates and reservation in the legislative seats. The policy of 'divide and rule' initiated by the British Raj to ease their totalitarian rule over the country played a major role leading to the partition. All India Muslim League under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah won a substantial amount of Muslim votes in the provincial elections but the resolution of the British to drag India into the World War II proved to be the cherry on the cake. It turned out to be lethal for the comfortably established rule of the British and was fervently opposed by the Indian Congress Party. The Muslim League pledged to be the local war time allies of the British and in exchange beseeched certain political safeguards. They pressed for a separate state of Pakistan and the opinions of historians is divided on whether this was a counter-act of negotiation by the Muslim League to reserve ascendancy in the loose federal state of undivided India or a rigid intent of

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<sup>14</sup> Ajay Verghese, *Did Hindu-Muslim conflicts in India really start with British rule?*, SCROLL.IN, June 05. 2018, 1:30 pm, Available at <https://scroll.in/article/880832/did-hindu-muslim-conflicts-in-india-really-start-with-british-rule> , Last visited on June 22, 2020

<sup>15</sup> Akhilesh Pillalamarri, *The Origins of Hindu-Muslim Conflict in South Asia*, THE DIPLOMAT, March 16, 2019, Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/the-origins-of-hindu-muslim-conflict-in-south-asia/> , Last visited on June 20, 2020

<sup>16</sup> Ajay Verghese, *Did Hindu-Muslim conflicts in India really start with British rule?*, SCROLL.IN, June 05. 2018, 1:30 pm, Available at <https://scroll.in/article/880832/did-hindu-muslim-conflicts-in-india-really-start-with-british-rule> , Last visited on June 22, 2020

the Muslim League.<sup>17</sup> The unprecedented loss of Britain in the war rendered them incapable to rule the ever-growing confederation of India and in their haste to withdraw from the country they hatched an ill-fitting plan that astonishingly appealed to both INC and the Muslim League. The sketching of the Radcliffe line without any modernized maps and census data, delay in announcing the borders separating both the countries was the British's tactic of not incurring liability for the mass migration that followed.<sup>18</sup> February 1946 saw the circulation of an important paper in the Indian office of London that perpetuated the viability of Pakistan. The paper was intended to evaluate the outcome of the partition. The prevalent notion behind it was to shatter the economic concord of India which in turn would lead to the rupture of the central free trade area in the whole world. More over the Bengalis and the Assamese proved to be a liability for the military with respect to man power and as far as the Pakistan armed forces was concerned, every piece of clothing and equipment was needed to be imported which intended for a 50% amplification in the defence budget. Loosing India meant the loss of oil stakes in the Middle East for Britain. To secure its footing in the subcontinent, Britain decided to be an ally to the newly-formed Pakistan by providing military support. Hence, the partition of India suited the interest of Britain while securing its air routes and oil stakes in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

In the present scenario, the assertion of the Congress party to base their vote banks on the minority groups (particularly Muslims) is driven by a lack of proficient leadership and dearth of party discipline which has led the experts to conclude that the fomentation and prevention of communal violence in the country has a political schema behind it.<sup>20</sup> The ethno-religious polarization of the vote bank has affected the democratic elections to an extent where there is uncanny distrust on the government and the opposition. Studies advocate that the subsequent increase in the duration of Hindu-Muslim riots assisted BJP to bag more vote shares. The frequency of these remains undisturbed.<sup>21</sup> The riots that hit Delhi before the arrival of former President of United States of America, Donald Trump in India have been termed as one of the nastiest communal riots in decades. It is understood that the riots bore the hallmarks of a

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<sup>17</sup> Sarah Ansari, *How the Partition of India happened- and why its effects are still felt today*, THE CONVERSATION, August 10, 2017, 08.21 pm AEST, Available at <https://theconversation.com/how-the-partition-of-india-happened-and-why-its-effects-are-still-felt-today-81766> , Last visited on June 22, 2020

<sup>18</sup> Dr Crispin Bates, *The Hidden History of Partition and its Legacies*, British History, BBC, 03 March 2011, Available at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/partition1947\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/partition1947_01.shtml) , Last visited on June 22, 2020

<sup>19</sup> Raghvendra Singh, *What Britain gained by partitioning the subcontinent into India and Pakistan*, QUARTZ INDIA, August 09, 2019, Available at [www.google.co.in/amp/s/qz.com/india/1684372/why-the-india-pakistan-partition-suited-the-british-empire/amp/](http://www.google.co.in/amp/s/qz.com/india/1684372/why-the-india-pakistan-partition-suited-the-british-empire/amp/) , Last visited on June 22, 2020

<sup>20</sup> STEVEN I. WILKINSON, *VOTES AND VIOLENCE* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), ISBN 9780511510458, Available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511510458> , Last visited on June 22, 2020

<sup>21</sup> S. Jha, *Unfinished Business: Historic Complementarities, Political Competition and Ethnic Violence in Gujarat*, JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC BEHAVIOR AND ORGANISATION, Vol. 104, pp.18-36, August 2004

structured pogrom.<sup>22</sup> According to Ashutosh Varshney,<sup>23</sup> *‘Pogroms are a special class of riots when it’s no longer simply a clash between two mobs or groups. Instead, the police are siding with one group either by looking away or by abetting and sometimes even directly participating in the violence. The key difference between riots and pogroms lies in the behavior of the state—through its police. The term was born in tsarist Russia when pogroms were launched against Jews’*. The call log of the ones who were debased during the riots emphasizes a different narrative than the one that was portrayed by the government. Both sides suffered damage. But the police, being the primary protectors of the citizens failed to fulfill their indispensable obligation and decided to observe the hullabaloo taking the form of a full-blown riot from the sidelines. Tangible evidences show the police turning a blind eye to the atrocities committed against the Muslims which on the other hand gave the Hindu mob a free hand to demolish homes, places of worship and commercial enterprises pitilessly.<sup>24</sup> Experts believe that the first term of Modi government didn’t rely on its Hindu nationalist agenda as expounded in their election manifesto whereas the second term proved to be exactly that. That the elections in India empower the citizens to a more comprehensive ideological and cultural appropriation and acts as a thrust for the Hindu nationalist reconstruction is not a far-fetched notion. They also say that the national security dynamic played a major role in increasing BJP’s vote share.<sup>25</sup> Surprisingly, Iraq and Afghanistan occupied the first two places in the Global Terrorism Index<sup>26</sup> and even though it is erroneous of us to generalize a whole community on the basis of acts done by a certain few of the society, the verity of most terrorist acts being outfits sourced in Islamic countries is in-eliminable. Moreover, the welfare programs initiated by Modi government gained unimaginable popularity. Senior journalist Kanchan Gupta<sup>27</sup> rubbished the claims of the rising biasness against Indian Muslims and said that, *‘Look at the facts. Every single policy, program or scheme launched by the Modi government since 2014 has delivered welfare and other benefits irrespective of caste, gender, religion and any other identity. Are you telling me Muslim women have not benefited from the Ujjwala Yojana (free gas cylinders*

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<sup>22</sup> Ravi Agrawal, *Why India’s Muslims are in Grave Danger*, FOREIGN POLICY, March 02, 2020, 4.04 pm, Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/02/india-muslims-delhi-riots-danger/>, Last visited on June 22, 2020

<sup>23</sup> Professor of Brown University and author of the prize-winning book *‘Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India’*

<sup>24</sup> Ravi Agrawal, *Why India’s Muslims are in Grave Danger*, FOREIGN POLICY, March 02, 2020, 4.04 pm, Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/02/india-muslims-delhi-riots-danger/>, Last visited on June 22, 2020

<sup>25</sup> Ravi Agrawal, *Why India’s Muslims are in Grave Danger*, FOREIGN POLICY, March 02, 2020, 4.04 pm, Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/02/india-muslims-delhi-riots-danger/>, Last visited on June 22, 2020

<sup>26</sup> Terrorism- Statistics and Facts, Statista Research Department, Jan 28, 2020, Available at <https://www.statista.com/topics/2267/terrorism/>, Last visited on June 22, 2020

<sup>27</sup> He was in office during the term of Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the Prime Minister of India.

*for the poor) or PM housing scheme for the poor? I don't see why there should be any grievance. But what can one do if mistrust and grievance becomes a rallying point for forces opposed to Modi?'*

The growing trepidation has become a focal point of the governance mainly due to the obliteration of triple talaq, abrogation of Article 370, the verdict of the Supreme Court in the Babri Masjid demolition case and the passing of CAA and their resentment is focused on the government's attempt to establish a Hindu Rashtra in India which is fundamental to the ideological stance shared by RSS, their parent party.<sup>28</sup> Then again, this has been robustly opposed by the senior journalist and he views that the Muslim leaders have a tendency of making the Muslim population believe that they have veto over the electoral outcomes in the country which in turn gives them authority to alter the policy decisions. The unprecedented win of BJP in two successive Lok Sabha elections has refuted such claims and demolished their so-called veto. The vehemence that follows is a sense of them losing this influence and their foothold. Scientist Anand Ranganathan says that, *'I think it is a Catch-22 situation. Vested interests and the media have built up this perception for decades that the Congress is secular while the BJP is communal. I would say even the BJP mistrusts Muslims. Look at ticket distribution during elections. In the 2017 UP elections, the BJP did not give a single ticket to a Muslim though Muslims are 20 percent of the population. In Goa that has a 25 percent Christian population, 25 percent of the BJP candidates were Christians and 53 percent of the BJP MLAs are Christian. Someone has to change the perception and the reality that has built around it'*. A survey by the C-voter during the pandemic gave surprising outcomes. It discovered that the Indian Muslims have absolute faith in all the public institutions but no faith is placed on the Prime Minister and the ruling party. The survey is an unambiguous corroboration of how the notion of Hindutva and the political estrangement of Muslims in the country is a barefaced lie, handiwork of the secular fanatics. The zealots have single-handedly been triumphant in convincing the minority population that they are losing legitimacy under the ongoing administration.<sup>29</sup>

It is imperative for us to consider the underlying truth behind the major decisions that have reignited the fire of communal upheaval in the country and understand that the unexpected implications of it couldn't have been foreseen. The decisions in the Triple Talaq case has given a new found sense of autonomy to the Muslim women in the country. The abrogation of Article

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<sup>28</sup> Yashwant Deshmukh, *Muslims Are Alienated From PM Modi, Not the Indian State: Survey*, THE QUINT, May 20, 2020, Available at <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/muslims-narendra-modi-coronavirus-cvoter-survey>, Last visited on June 19, 2020

<sup>29</sup> Sanjay Kumar, social scientist.



370, which was formerly unattainable, has been overturned to make all of India whole again. There is a factor of inclusivity supporting this particular decision of the government which has elevated the spirit of every Indian. Regarding the hyped Citizenship Amendment Act that has led many countries to articulate their apprehension over the second-class handling accorded to the Muslim population in the country by discerning them on the basis of their religion while granting citizenship, they are choosing to ignore a very simple detail. For years, the countries neighboring India have exposed the people of faiths other than Islam residing in their countries to innumerable atrocities. Mainly Hindus have been religiously persecuted in both Bangladesh and Pakistan. The dwindling population of the Hindu minorities in the bordering countries is a testimony to such claims. Indian Muslims are tight-lipped over such issues being highlighted in social media whereas for every wrong-doing against an Indian Muslim, Indians have stood in unity and voiced their displeasure over such treatment. Be it the brutality that had overtaken JNU, the silent protests that rocked the country to invalidate CAA or the belligerence of the cow vigilantes to harm a person of diverse faith, the progressive Hindus have stood in unanimity, safeguarding the secularity of the Indian Constitution.<sup>30</sup> The countries calling out India on the atrocities committed on the religious minorities here have apparently forgotten about the parallel situations in the neighboring countries. Undoubtedly there have been numerous human rights violation due to these riots and the government needs to pull up its socks while addressing such sensitive matters but blacklisting India on the basis of such fallacious allegations needs to be double-checked by the ones making them. It is being thrown open to the people to decide the agenda as well as the propaganda behind such statements and who in reality has been benefitting from this all along.

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<sup>30</sup> Ghulam Rasool Dehlvi, *Why are Indian Muslims Silent Over Atrocities against Hindus in Neighbouring Bangladesh?*, SABRANG, Nov 12, 2016, Available at <https://sabrangindia.in/article/why-are-indian-muslims-silent-over-atrocities-against-hindus-neighbouring-bangladesh> , Last visited on June 22, 2020