

In India, rituals performed to calm down angry 'coronavirus goddess'

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ABSTRACT (SPANISH)

By Shubhomoy Chatterjee, Bhagalpur, India, July 30 (EFE).- Desperate times call for desperate measures even if it means worshipping a deadly health crisis to calm down a divine fury. With Covid-19 tightening its grip across India amid rising infections and fatalities, several groups of people in eastern parts of the country, mostly in the state of Bihar, are worshipping the virus as a deity, desperately asking it to leave. The virus has even got a heavenly name, Corona Mai, or mother corona, with

FULL TEXT

By Shubhomoy Chatterjee

Bhagalpur, India, July 30 (EFE).- Desperate times call for desperate measures even if it means worshipping a deadly health crisis to calm down a divine fury.

With Covid-19 tightening its grip across India amid rising infections and fatalities, several groups of people in eastern parts of the country, mostly in the state of Bihar, are worshipping the virus as a deity, desperately asking it to leave.

The virus has even got a heavenly name, Corona Mai, or mother corona, with its worshippers frantically trying to placate the so-called angry goddess.

"We hear Corona Mai appeared in a dream of a villager in another part of Bihar and asked to be worshiped this way and she would leave," an octogenarian woman who introduced herself by her popular name, Chachi, told EFE.

Unable to hide her curiosity, Chachi, from Bhagalpur in the eastern state, had visited the river banks one day to find out about the emergence of the new deity in the large Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses.

Santosh Kumar, who lives near the river banks, told EFE that before the arrival of the monsoon rains, some 10-12 women used to visit at sunset to pray to "Corona Mai."

The ritual involved taking a bath before digging holes in the ground and burying "nine cloves, nine laddoos (sweet balls), nine betel leaves, nine areca nuts, and nine hibiscus flowers".

"Then, you light incense and pray to the goddess to calm her anger and ask her to leave," Kumar said.

The news of the new deity has spread through the word of mouth and is now worshipped in the neighboring Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh states.

According to Prasanta Raj Pandit, a priest in Shiv Shakti Temple in south Delhi's Lakshmibai Nagar, Hinduism is known for its universality where everything is a manifestation of God.

People have always called on the divine in different forms and by different names for protection, he noted.

"This is exactly what these people are doing now. Praying to the divine for protection in whatever form they choose to see god," Pandit, a Sanskrit scholar who holds a Ph.D. in theological matters, told EFE.

However, not everyone seems to accept the new deity.

Anuradha Chaubey, a community leader in her 60s from Bhagalpur and who takes a keen interest in religious matters and the shastras, or ancient Hindu holy texts, expressed concern about elevating a disease as a goddess.

"Traditionally, there have been certain deities associated with protection from diseases, such as Shitala Devi, Nav Durga. What is strange here is that a disease is being worshiped as the divine rather than approaching the divine for protection against the disease," Chaubey told EFE.

"For example, we don't pray to cholera, but for protection against cholera. I haven't seen this before," she stressed. Moreover, socio-economic factors are also seen as the factors behind the reverence for the virus.

Satakshi Bhattacharyya, a former economics scholar at Kolkata's Jadavpur University in West Bengal, said the trend of "corona worship" has emerged mainly among people from a lower social and economic status who are mostly illiterate or semi-literate.

"These people are also more prone to social pressure. For example, if they don't join the prayers, they might be accused of helping the virus propagate by not collaborating or made to feel guilty about it," Bhattacharyya told EFE.

She underlined that it would be difficult to find well-educated people from more affluent backgrounds performing these new rituals, unlike other established practices and rituals in Hinduism.

Bihar is among the poorest and least literate states in India with 61.80 percent literacy rate, as per the last census in 2011, whereas Jharkhand (66.41 percent and Uttar Pradesh (67.68 percent) are placed better but slightly.

According to local media reports, in recent days, Corona Mai has also gained followers in some villages in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh and isolated parts of West Bengal (east).

India, with more than 1.5 million confirmed Coronavirus cases, is only behind the United States and Brazil, in the list of countries with the most number of total infections. The number of Covid-19 fatalities in India has already breached the 35,000-mark.

Interestingly, during the initial days of the outbreak in March, rightwing Hindu group, Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Mahasabha, organized a gathering in the national capital to drink cow urine and ward off the Covid-19. The gathering also offered the drink to a poster of a "demon" representing the virus.

"The coronavirus has been declared a pandemic. Religion is more about faith than science and blind faith exists beyond the realm of logic," Chaubey said. EFE

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