

# Reruns of religious dramas comfort Indians in dire times

By Vineeta Deepak  
The Associated Press

**G**URUGRAM, India — Staying home under lockdown while waiting for the worst of the coronavirus pandemic to pass, millions of Indians are turning to their gods — not in prayer rooms, but on television.

Seeking comfort in the certainty of the past, Indians are devouring reruns of popular Hindu religious dramas. They're drawing on shared experiences of Indian mythology, which is replete with tales of moral and ethical choices in times of crises and invokes the virtues of individual sacrifice for social good.

The country's public broadcaster has revived epic television shows like "Ramayan" and "Shri Krishna" — both highly revered mythological tales — airing them in primetime every night.

"Shri Krishna," a TV series originally broadcast in 1993, is an adaptation of the life of one of Hinduism's most popular gods.

In "Ramayan," a wildly popular series from the '80s, filmmaker Ramanand Sagar tells the story of Lord Ram, the prince of Ayodhya, who was sent into exile for 14 years and rescued his kidnapped wife Sita from the demon Ravan.

"When the show was first telecast, the streets used to be completely deserted and everyone watched it with devotion. The stories about the victory of good over evil were very engaging," said Vijay Kumar



**COMFORTING CONTENT.** A school boy dressed as Hindu mythological character Krishna has colored powder applied to his face in celebration of the spring festival of Holi, the festival of colors, in Kolkata, India, in this March 7, 2020 file photo. Seeking comfort in the certainty of the past, Indians are turning to reruns of popular Hindu religious dramas, drawing on shared experiences of old times when most questions had answers. Staying home waiting for the worst of the coronavirus pandemic to pass, millions are turning to their gods — not in prayer rooms, but on television. (AP Photo/Bikas Das, File)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often invoked Hindu scriptures in his speeches during the lockdown, asking people to do their duty and follow social-distancing rules to win the battle against COVID-19.

"There is no bigger force than our enthusiasm and conviction. There is nothing we can't achieve," Modi said in a national address on April 3, taking inspiration from a verse in the Hindu epic "Ramayan."

A court verdict last year paved the way for building a grand Ram temple on a site in northern India where Hindu hardliners demolished a 16th-century mosque in 1992, sparking deadly religious riots.

But faith transcends the politics of strident Hindu nationalism, and millions of moderate, practicing Hindus keep idols of Ram in their homes for daily prayer.

"In today's uncertain times, people are trying to make sense of their lives — who am I, what is my place in the universe," said Jain. "And mythology offers us truth and wisdom."

Jain, a physician and gastroenterologist practicing in New Delhi and an avid fan of the dramas.

On April 16, the show had a record 77 million viewers, India's public broadcaster Prasar Bharati tweeted.

"In this era of crisp and Gen Z content, these figures clearly indicate that there is still demand for values and ethos driven content in the world's largest democracy," Prasar Bharati said in a press release.

Meanwhile, on the streets, an epic but tragic drama of another kind is playing out.

Millions of poor migrant workers, hungry and in despair, have walked from cities to their villages after India's nation-

wide coronavirus lockdown took away their jobs and left them to fend for themselves.

With India's virus caseload at more than 190,000, the economy is beginning to reopen with some restrictions. But the anxiety over what lies ahead is running high.

"Showing majoritarian mythologicals when a diverse country faces a human crisis of unparalleled scale may create an illusion of wellness," filmmaker Dibakar Banerjee wrote in the *Indian Express* newspaper.

"In the midst of a pandemic that levels all, the chosen and the downtrodden, many of us fantasize about a return to a golden, simple past," he wrote.

## Sikh kitchens feed New Delhi's masses in virus lockdown

By Emily Schmall  
The Associated Press

**N**EW DELHI — At first, the kitchen at the Bangla Sahib Gurdwara cooked 40,000 meals each day for the hungry who live on the streets of India's capital city, or who have lost their livelihoods to the coronavirus lockdown.

But the need was greater than that. So workers at the golden-domed temple in central New Delhi made 80,000 meals daily. Then 100,000. Soon, they expect to be making 300,000 — all provided free to the growing ranks of the unfortunate.

For centuries the faithful have flocked to the temple for its healing waters and a free meal at the community kitchen, the symbol of equality found at every Sikh temple complex and open to all visitors.

The Bangla Sahib Gurdwara has remained open through wars and plagues, serving millions of people simple vegetarian food on the cool marble floor of its enormous dining hall. But during India's ongoing lockdown — among the world's most stringent — religious congregations are banned.

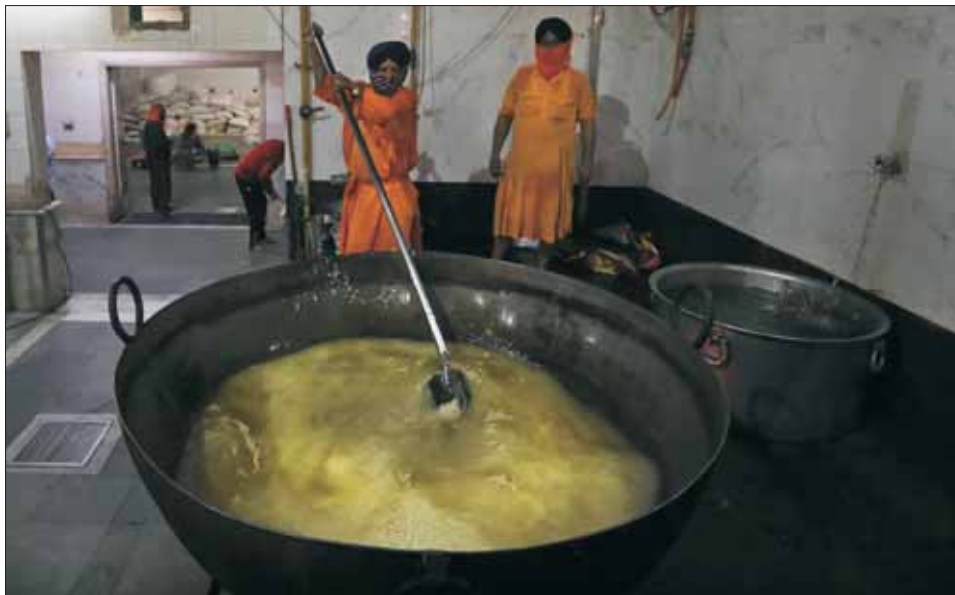
Bangla Sahib has kept its kitchen open, with the help of about four dozen men who sleep at the temple's guesthouse. To save time commuting to and from the temple and avoid the risk of infecting loved ones, they haven't seen their families since the lockdown began March 25.

In colorful turbans and cloth bandanas tied over their noses and mouths, they work in the industrial kitchen in 18-hour shifts.

Head cook Balbir Singh stirs an enormous ladle through a potato and soybean stew, simmering with ghee and coriander in a giant cook pot. A machine that every hour makes 5,000 *chapati* — thin, unleavened bread — whirs long before the sun rises and after it sets.

Singh, 44, lights the flames at 3:00am so 35,000 lunches are ready for pickup by 9:00am.

"If we serve at this time, god will give us more. It's a give and take system," Singh said.



**IMPRESSIVE UNDERTAKING.** A Sikh cook stirs rice in a giant vessel in the kitchen at Bangla Sahib Gurdwara in New Delhi, India. The Bangla Sahib Gurdwara has remained open through wars and plagues, serving thousands of people simple vegetarian food. During India's ongoing coronavirus lockdown, about four dozen men have kept the temple's kitchen open, cooking up to 100,000 meals per day that the New Delhi government distributes at shelters and drop-off points throughout the city. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

enterprise going. "This is the biggest challenge for me in my entire life," he said.

Anticipating many months of hardship ahead, he appears nightly on the Bangla Sahib's own TV channel to appeal for more donations.

A man from Montreal recently pledged \$10,000, another from London offered \$100,000, he said. The dining hall heaves with sacks of rice, flour, and lentils, and cans of oil — six months of supplies, said Jagpreet Singh, a 27-year-old temple clerk.

"We believe in god. He's giving us this power, so we provide," he said.

While nonstop news about the effects of the coronavirus has become commonplace, so, too, have the stories about the kindness of strangers and individuals who have sacrificed for others. "One Good Thing" is an AP series reflecting these acts of kindness.

Bangla Sahib is the largest of New Delhi's 10 gurdwaras, whose kitchens together form a vital part of the city's strategy to feed the poor during the pandemic.

The city government approached the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee just after India's nationwide lockdown began in late March, according to the committee president, Manjinder Singh Sirsa.

## 2021 Tokyo Olympics may not be the same conventional Olympic, Paralympic Games

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(IOC) acknowledged it would have added costs of \$800 million because of the postponement. The IOC said \$150 million would be made available for loans to national Olympic committees and sports federations, some of which have few sources of revenue outside the games.

But the IOC gave no details of where the other \$650 million would go.

Muto said he didn't know, either. Or at least he wasn't saying.

"As to the breakdown of how this money will be used, the IOC has said it's too early to tell," Muto said. "So we at the organizing committee have no idea of all the details about how this money will be spent."

Soaring Olympic costs are sure to be a touchy subject as Japan, like most countries, battles a deep recession brought

on by the coronavirus pandemic. Japanese organizers and government bodies are obligated by a Host City Contract signed in 2013 to pick up most of the Olympic costs. When they were awarded the games seven years ago, Tokyo officials said the Olympics would cost just over \$7 billion. Tokyo now says it is spending \$12.6 billion to organize the

games, but a government audit report last year said it was twice that much. All but \$5.6 billion is public money.

Muto said organizers are still trying to guarantee that 43 venues will be available next year, hoping to keep the same event schedule when the Olympics open on July 23, 2021. "It's going to take a bit of time," Muto said, "and that cannot be helped."

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