

State and Religious Violence: Rethinking Communal Riots in India

Vrishali

M. Phil. Scholar, Inclusive Development and Social Justice

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

Communal riots have been a recurring phenomenon in India. While such riots have differed in their scale and magnitude, a common pattern can be traced in their attributes which have led academicians and officials to distinguish such occurrences from other forms of violence such as massacres and maintain them as distinct from organized social movements. Appearances can however be deceptive since recent revisionist researches have called out the flaws in perspectives and methodologies of their predecessors to argue that this clear-cut categorisation is not so much 'clear' and has its own share of ambiguities. The erasure of, or indifference to such ambiguities is a result of too much reliance on Eurocentric methodology and Oriental narratives by scholars, which fail to capture the complex Indian reality, or are the result of deliberate attempts of cognitive manipulation of truths by notorious social elements or economic and political stakeholders. Most of the times, however, this erasure is a culmination of a series of strategic attempts by the four P's, the party in power, the politicians, the press, and the police, who act independently or on behalf of another to safeguard certain vested interests and to keep certain structures of local power intact through the demonstration of an act of conflict which acts as an intimidation strategy for the 'others'. Thus, what might seem to be a solved mystery on the face of it after an easy joining of dots, can actually be a far more muddled-up puzzle, with its wide array of multiple versions, interpretations and subjective truths. Contradictory and often conflicting narratives might form a hotbed and the harbinger for such events. The onus, which, with an investigation into the initialisation of such acts of violence, might fall on a certain group or religious

community in the blame-game might actually have a much more carefully engineered and calibrated and skilfully masqueraded grander design. Hence, as Paul Brass argues, riots, their origin, functioning, impact and implications are far more complex than simple psychological acts of violence or a spontaneous eruption of smouldering communal tension and frustration and hence, need to be problematized and placed in the historical, spatial and temporal context in which they happen (or are made to happen). For instance, one might find that the line between a riot and a pogrom keeps getting blurred as we delve deeper and deeper into the detail to find the devil; isolated incidents may acquire newer meanings once looked at through a different perspective and placed in a wider context; the accused might come out as the victim. After all is said and done, realities often change once we take a closer look.

As Meena Menon has pointed out in her exhaustive research on the Mumbai riots (1992-93) and their aftermaths, the history of communal riots in a country as socially diverse (as well as differentiated) as India, can be traced back to as early as the developments post-1857 and more specifically, to the Cow Protection Movement launched and spearheaded by the Hindu revivalist group of Arya Samajis which formed the backdrop of the 1893 riots. As the movement advanced like a multi-footed sea-hydra, establishing and buttressing its footholds throughout the minds and DNAs of several northern Hindus, Hindu-Muslim antagonism began to grow. This movement later continued to serve the purpose of a functional utility to the conservative, extreme right-wing organizations such as the RSS, the VHP, the Jana Sangha and currently, the BJP which has internalized and purported the ideology of its predecessors. This has helped them mobilize the Hindu vote post-Independence by appealing to the orthodox, the traditionalistic and the reformist Hindus likewise and by uniting and then invoking the common aspirations of the urban centres and their suburban and rural hinterlands. The cow, which until then was seen only in the context of its centrality in the Indian agrarian and pastoral economy, continually and increasingly came to be appropriated as a religio-political symbol as religious fanaticism and politics joined hands to produce the progeny called communalism in British India. The developments of the entire nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in engineering and welding together the previously divorced rhetoric of Nationalism and Communalism to manufacture the Brahmanical 'Hindu' identity, themselves attest to the argument of several historians such as Romila Thapar, Harbans Mukhia and Bipan Chandra (ancient, medievalist and modern, respectively) that a communal identity never existed in the ancient and medieval periods of Indian history and that the

religious flavouring creating conflicts, producing dramatic rifts and plaguing people's collective conscience is a much more recent phenomenon.

Brass calls naturalizing or historical explanations for the origin of religious conflagrations 'unsatisfactory' or 'mystifying'. Imtiaz Ahmad, on the other hand, seeks political and economic explanations of such occurrences. He sees inter and intra communal riots, caste violence and other forms of sectional upheavals as an extension of the general social conflict. However, when talking about the Hindu-Muslim riots in particular, he warns political scientists and sociologists against categorizing communities as monolithic blocks and brings in numerous historical and political factors which cause riots in a prismatic fashion. Ashutosh Varshney, on the other hand, blames the absence of civic ties across communities as the primary reason for the conflict between such communities. He relies on empirical data to study the sustained absence of civic ties which leads to an 'institutionalized riot system' which ensures the better functioning of the administrative and the police force in the cities termed 'riot-prone' based on the variance in the outcome of the frequency of such riots. He also asserts that Hindu-Muslim riots are an exclusively urban phenomenon happening mainly in cities which form important economic hubs or emerging industrial centres, and cites the example of Ahmedabad with its numerous 'textile mills' to explain this. While talking about the institutionalized riot system and its functioning, Brass identifies 'specialists' who engage on inciting violence and maintaining communal tension on a regular basis and who look for the most opportune moment to translate their plans into action. These men who usually adorn the guise of members of cultural-religious, business or political organizations, actually make groups of readily available rioters who are always willing to translate rumours and general discourses into local mobilization on the shortest call. Thus, Brass hints at the growing links between politicians, police and criminals. Unlike Varshney and Ahmad, Brass, however, he does not undermine the importance which needs to be given to the broader cultural and psychological explanations of how, over the years, the history of Hindu-Muslim enmity has produced a rich archive of mythical knowledge of 'the other' which helps immensely in forming networks and instigating the local populace.¹ While Brass argues in favour of the intentionality, objectivity and sustained organization of riots by a handful of masterminds who may then, later, go on to lose control over matters, Steven Wilkinson analyses the Gujarat riots as a case of history repeating itself wherein he connects the occurrence of such

¹ Sengupta, Roshni. "Communal Violence in India: Perspectives on the Causative Factors". P.1.

riots purely with political motives and party competition, and lays emphasis on the state action or inaction in preventing or propagating riots of such kind and degree.

Brass borrows from Foucault's *I, Pierre Riviere*, to investigate the multiplicity of discourses, coexisting and often contradicting, which are used as "weapons of attack and defense in the relations of power and knowledge" and to maintain certain power relations. He goes on to suggest that the real victory lies in the removal of the power of the locals to define and interpret incidents of violence locationally, without placing them in the broader national or universal discourse. Hence, local people who suffer the direct impact and consequences of such acts of violence often have to make do with the contextualizations and narratives imposed upon them by outsiders, thereby tending them to categorise and contextualize their local reality only as responses to universal realities. Memory thus gets manufactured oftentimes. He goes on to raise important questions regarding the relationship between the issues of ethnicity, communalism and violence, on the one hand, and national unity, on the other, to analyse the implications of such acts of violence on the minority-majority relations and power dynamics, the minority rights and the unity and integrity of the country on a whole. He stresses on the 'functional utility' of such riots in buttressing all dominant political ideologies, both secular and communal in contemporary India, and in helping leaders to get through ideological persuasions in capturing or maintaining institutional or state power by providing convenient scapegoats and by highlighting dangers and tensions useful in justifying the exercise of state authority.² He further argues that economic or ecological explanations alone on the analysis of cities cannot help us understand why "waves" of riots happen in certain cities and towns and why not in other places because these explanations objectify certain groups of people and their responses, eliminate agency and responsibility of individuals and fail to identify clearly, the linkages between state and society as well as those between individual and social responsibilities. Hence, he rightly points out that a little amount of subjectivity is essential to bring out the various underlying narratives highlighting the existence of a plethora of factors which work towards the creation of such a situation. He also problematizes the objectivity which is often sought by social scientists and relies on an historical approach of narrative method to suggest that sources cannot really be seen as authentic sources in any study of riots but have to be seen just as interpretations. Hence, there is a call to move away from the Positivist obsession of objectivity and an effort to write a

² Brass, Paul R. *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*. "Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History". PUP.1997. P.6-7.

more inclusive or, what the Annales have called, 'total history'. This also brings us to the more tumultuous debate, one between history and memory, as Legoff puts it bluntly that in privileging the first, we give undue credibility and credence to official versions of history since the nation in crafting its own history deliberately erases certain popular or lesser popular memories. The project of history writing, thus, often erases minority's versions, which become crucial for constructing the larger idea of events and ones we cannot do away with.

Critiquing the quantitative social science technique of excessive reliance on conspiracy theories, Nebojsa Blanusa argues that the quantitative methodology of analysing different conspiracy theories in social sciences is problematic despite its promises of digging out new possibilities for the major reason that they are primarily related to political and historical controversial events and processes but are often not seen in this context. Brass also argues that this has often led to objectification of social processes and their categorization by scholars who tend to ignore the dynamics of events, the significance of the interpretations and so on and so forth.

Another important point to note is that while it is true that a reserve army of rioters or pseudo-rioters is often at work covertly or overtly throughout, it would be naïve to talk about these 'latent hostilities' in a manner which hints that all the members of the opposing groups are poised to committing violence.³ The readiness and willingness to respond to calls for an institutionalized riot hence very much depends on the profits that the role-playing actors in the riots seek and get. They also function hand in hand with the state at times to give the riot its episodic and sporadic nature by masquerading the predictability, thereby making them look like contentious forms of collective action which unlike social movements are hardly sustained in character. The exhausting study on the Black Riots of the 1960s, hints at the sporadicity and the mushroom growth of riots. The most recent riots in the capital city of India post the NRC-CAA and targeted violence on certain universities all over the country, have been debated to be pogroms however, which is described as state instigated and state supported riots against a minority ethnic group. These seem to have all the likelihood of the targeting of Jews in nineteenth and early-twentieth century Russia. The police's implicit support or complicity and the propagandist media's silence on certain crimes committed against the minority religious groups or their demonization of the Muslims are some issues

³ Brass. Opcit. P.9.

which have tended to signify scepticism towards the BJP government calling these incidents 'riots'. The police and the press, therefore, far from being just free state functionaries appear to be active participants in the game of the politicians thus losing their credibility in the eyes of many. Even the lines barring the interactions of the judiciary and the executive seem to be getting constantly blurred, thereby leading to a dwindling faith in their independence and a diminishing hope for justice.

Brass argues that some communal riots in India which have larger political uses are used by state and national Muslim politicians on the one hand to mobilize the Muslim minority and by militant Hindu nationalists to consolidate Hindu communal sentiment, on the other. They also have political uses for secular nationalists.

Riots have adverse impacts for the society as a whole with serious implications and consequences for minority rights. In India too with its long history of communal riots well before the Partition, reconciliation has been a rather painful process despite efforts. But as GG Marquez says, "...the heart's memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good, and thanks to this artifice, we manage to endure the burden of the past." Menon while writing about the Mumbai riots states that the story of many Mumbaikars is one of "shattered dreams and restricted choices" as the hauntings of the past continue both figuratively and literally. As justice remains elusive to many despite several years to the incident, the vast mosaic of stories keep adding to the city's complexity. She quotes Punwani to argue that despite the presence of spatial segregation since the days of yore, after the 1993 riots, many Hindus came to realize the perks of belonging to the majority community as virtually the entire city then became theirs to roam around freely without inhibitions, restrictions or apprehensions. Similarly, the 1984 Mumbai riots which many Mumbaikars today remain oblivious to, became the watershed which mapped a shift in the perception of the Bombayites as the image of the city being a microcosm with hardly any regional chauvinism, got annihilated since the riots had proved that the two principal communities lived in separate ghettos here "with little intermingling, their myths and suspicions about each other intact, easy prey to communal propaganda".⁴ After the 1992-93 riots, however, the situation worsened due to extensive polarization which created displacement (mostly of the minority community) to an unprecedented scale. Sushobha Bharve describes the changes in demography and the psychological impacts of the trauma post the riots by stating how Hindus living in

⁴ Menon, Meena. *Riots and After in Mumbai: Chronicles of Truth and Reconciliation*. Sage Pubs. 2012. P.33.

predominantly Muslim areas and vice-versa, became insecure and shifted to their respective neighbourhoods. Despite the Srikrishna Commission Report, several victims have become the accused and remain so and several cases remain pending, severely hampering the livelihood and time of those victims.

Besides the social consequences, the minorities are often at the receiving end of economic turmoil during and after such riots. According to Omar Khalidi, the Muslim labourers who formed the largest workforce in the urban commercial capital city, suffered the most as the riots targeted these very Muslims and destroyed their livelihoods leaving a vast majority of men unemployed and hence, their families economically insecure. Muslim businesses were burnt down. In the informal sector too, the Muslims suffered at the hands of textile mills. Even then they were considered security risks and there was a policy not to hire Muslims for daily wage labour in the mills. Recent researches have shown how banks, even till today, have red-marked certain Muslim areas and their loan and credit requests are not accepted given their false criminal records following the riots and the bombings. People were hesitant to give them jobs or let them stay in their buildings. Thus, they suffered social and cultural stigmatisation. The small traders and businessmen lost out and never recovered their balance as a common feeling of distrust which had historically spoiled intra-ethnic relationships and severed social ties. Besides, studies conducted in the twenty-first century have shown how the 'young male' was often the targeted victims in such riots in order to devoid the community of its human capital since these were the prime bread-winners. This has also adversely impacted generationally, the chances of getting a good education. The poor ghetto-dwellers suffer utmost discrimination, marginalisation and an eventual exclusion. As Menon argues, the huddling together of people of the same community signifies the underlying trauma and their helplessness towards the situation and the indifference of the government towards the redressal of these growing concerns. Barve adds that the far from satisfactory economic rehabilitation of the victims post the riots have left the victims to fend for themselves.

These experiential realities bring out the wide gap between the majority and the minority as new equations continue to be formed between them. While the majority experience a growing sense of security in the modern times amidst dominant ideas of communalism and nationalism, the minority are becoming the victims of division and strife in leaps and bounds. The mantle-bearers of such discriminations are mostly the Muslims who are tabooized and are asked to reiterate their nationalism and patriotism and proclaim their allegiance to the

national flag as the democracy continues to deal with the gargantuan monster of majoritarianism. As mentioned earlier, it is people belonging to minority communities who have to bear the brunt of state-sponsored terrorism as they and their rights are targeted in many ways such as not being issued passports or being arrested every time there is a terror attack or a blast. The so-called ‘Muslim criminal dens’ have revealed little organized criminal activity after police investigations. While the politicians continue using them as scapegoats, the fact remains that these are the very people brutalized by violence. Communal lynchings also remain a sad reality of the situation.

The ideological manipulation through propaganda and romanticisation of Hindu nationalism and species of sub-nationalism, one of which Advani called cultural nationalism, is such that stigmatizing of the other has become the norm and violence has become the normal. This stigmatisation does not just include intra-ethnic othering but also inter-ethnic othering (Dalits), the fuelling force behind which remain the Hindu notions of purity and pollution. As identity politics started becoming a part of hate politics post-Independence, riots became rituals for exhibiting power dynamics of the society. As the national identity traversed through the undulating terrain of secularism to communalism to populism, and the religious identities of the people started getting clubbed with their socio-political identities, the curbing of the rights of the Muslims became a central part of the obligation of the lower and intermediate Hindu castes. Thus, while these Hindu’s faith was put to test by Brahmanism, on the one hand, the Muslim’s patriotism had to be tested, on the other. The Hindu upper caste logic behind riots and caste-based violence became the rule rather than the exception and more so in the recent years with community consciousness and identity politics increasingly replacing individualism all over the world. The responsibility of continuing the Brahmanical rhetoric of Hinduism and maintaining its hegemony as also that of saving the ‘Hindu’ man and the society from the important problems of individual alienation and cultural dislocation by keeping Hindutva (Hinduness) intact was shouldered by the RSS and has been co-opted by the BJP.⁵ Besides, as Brass puts it, “Riots also provide a useful smokescreen to divert the attention from the demographic and economic contexts in which riots take place-in filthy slums unfit for human habitation whose habitation does not fit into their economic development plans and designs for the transformation of India into a great and powerful industrial-military state.”⁶ It is no chance that riots mostly occur before elections as these are

⁵ Menon. Opcit. P.lxv.

⁶ Brass. Opcit. P.11.

also individual methods or responses to ethnic or political rivals. As violence continues to remain an act of power, the joining of forces of communalism (Brahmanic Hinduism), nationalism and capitalism, spearheaded by the first, becomes lethal for minority rights.

Trauma emanating from such violence remains as a deep-seated scar. The resulting trauma and taboo remain forbidden political questions leading to curbing of dialogue between the majority and the minorities; myth manufacturing about the sufferers to demonize them and to glorify the perpetrators by eulogising their ‘sacrifices’ towards their community through symbols and rituals; establishment of asymmetrical binary oppositions between the victim and aggressor. All of these become tools targeted towards political silencing in the aftermath of a riot. The only hope towards liberation from such seductive narratives and an excavation of hidden realities in such situations when prejudice becomes common sense and exclusion becomes the new ‘normal’, can be found in the following reaction: “Do not do what is expected from you!”. As Mark Twain says, “Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect.”

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