

Decoding Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India

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Abstract: Hindu-Muslim violence has become endemic to Indian secular society. The Hindu-Muslim antagonism in different forms and manifestations invariably takes the shape of communal violence. Since independence, incidence of communal violence and steady increase in their numbers, frequency, intensity and loss of lives and property has assumed serious proportion. It has sounded alarm bells among government, former police officials, intellectuals and civil society. Riots in last three decades have been manufactured with specific purpose of Muslim hate and vilification. The violence may be small town based riot or large and extensive state sponsored program of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. The recurrence of communal violence in India can be seen as result of various factors operating at the same time in Indian society and the nature of its electoral system. Different factors in different geographical places are systematically produced and nurtured with primary aim of creating rift in social relations between communities; vilification of Muslims creating resentment and anger leading to discrimination and prejudice and ultimately incitement of violence against Muslims. The economic prosperity of Muslims creates insecurity among the Hindus who feel that they might be economically and socially shadowed by the Muslims thereby raising demands of boycott of Muslim shops and business establishments. Economic competition, practice of communal politics, societal polarization on religious grounds, insecurity of life and property, biased police and media and an institutionalized system of riot production are important reasons for Hindu-Muslim violence in India. Since 2014, a persistent campaign has been launched with the sole aim of 'othering' Muslims through issues of burqa, skull caps, beef ban, frivolous petitions against Muslim institutions, malafide protests and demands by Hindu right wing organizations, new laws aimed at Muslim way of life thereby stoking religious passion, Muslim hate, vilification of Muslims and identifying Muslims as 'others'. The paper analyses the different methods and methodologies used to create an atmosphere of Muslim hate and constant threat of Hindu-Muslim violence.

Keywords: communal politics, discrimination, vilification, polarization, elections

COMMUNAL VIOLENCE: HISTORY AND CHANGE

The problem of communal violence is causing an irreparable damage to secular nature of Indian polity. The violent clashes between various religious communities, especially Hindus and Muslims, have been assuming alarming proportions in last few decades. The polarization of society along religious lines, use of religion for electoral politics, politics of hate preached by right wing Hindu organisations and communalization of Police Force has vitiated peaceful communal atmosphere of society. The decade after partition saw a relative calm in country which was on the path of planned development. The decade of 1960s witnessed deadly communal riots in Jabalpur, Jamshedpur, Ranchi and Ahmadabad which for the first time brought to fore problem of communalism in India. The decade of 70s and 80s also witnessed riots in various parts of the country, some riots assuming proportions of pogroms. The nature of communal violence in this decade underwent significant changes as; the number of Muslims lives lost very more than Hindus, the Muslim suffered significant loss of property and business and police was blatantly petition against Muslims. The decade of 90s change the nature of Indian society and values of communal harmony forever. The communal polarisation due to rath yatra and consequent demolition of Babri Masjid led to widespread communal violence engulfing the country causing heavy loss of life and properties of Muslims. This changed the contours of electoral politics and Hindu-Muslim relations forever.

A new trajectory of communalism gained momentum which consisted of socio-economic boycott of Muslims, saffronising education, attaching terror tag to ordinary Muslims and creating suspicion in minds of larger Hindu community about Muslim's allegiance to nation. This agenda of right wing Hindu organizations and active and blatant involvement of state machinery created an intense atmosphere of Muslim hate and distrust which culminated in Gujarat pogrom of Muslims in 2002. Since last decade, a systematic process is being carried by the right wing organizations through both state and non-state actors of vilifying the Muslim community, impeding their constitutional rights, rampant discrimination, attacking Muslim culture and symbols, huge protest marches under the garb of Muslim threat to majority Hindu community leading to 'othering' of Muslims and making every non-issue involving Muslims as a

flash-point of Hindu-Muslim confrontation. The reasons behind Hindu-Muslim violence after independence compared with last two decades have completely changed. With the sole purpose of gaining electoral supremacy Muslims are being blatantly discriminated, vilified and denied basic human and constitutional rights. The production of communal violence through institutionalized system causes loss of lives and property, increased polarization and 'othering' of Muslims. This system ensures subservience from Muslims with constant threat of communal confrontation or violence.

IDENTIFYING REASONS AND TACTICS OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

There has been discernible change in the nature of communal violence in India. Since independence to early 1980s riots were sporadic, spontaneous and reasons were local in nature. However, with advent of 1990s, Hindu-Muslim violence was systematically organized and institutionalized with specific purpose of vilifying and stigmatizing the Muslim community. The reasons for the violence assumed pan-India nature i.e. they were almost similar in nature, systematically plotted and the violence was well organized and orchestrated. Now in majority of communal riots, the Muslim suffers disproportionate loss of life and damage to business and property. It is accepted fact by intellectuals and academicians that communal violence in form of riots does not take place spontaneously. Riots that occur in India are systematically planned and carried out. Paul Brass (2003) argues that, riot system in India is institutionalized with different individuals performing their specific roles. He compares riots to a stage drama, which is planned meticulously at different levels and carried out in systematic manner. Communal riots are 'organised' and 'produced' by network of known persons in the City. Paul Brass blames the Hindu right wing organisation and its sister organisations like RSS, BJP, Bajrang Dal (popularly called as sangh parivar) for inciting riots. The vested political interests and active support of state machinery in orchestrating violence, the failure of law agencies to control violence and punish the culprits, active communal discourse in society and biased media have failed to contain the Hindu-Muslim violence tearing apart the secular fabric of Indian republic.

The distortion of history, memorialisation of dead, saffronisation of education and spreading of false facts to exaggerate imminent danger of Muslim superiority are some of the tactics used by these right wing organizations. The staging of pre-planned violence at the time of election guarantees rich dividends to political parties. The use of communal violence for electoral game has become an important strategy of political parties. Statistical evidence suggests that proximity to an election increases the likelihood of a riot (Wilkinson, 2004). The level of electoral politics in the state decides the frequency and intensity of riots. The competition for Muslim votes among different political parties decides whether riots will occur or not. States where there are multiple political parties and competition for Muslim votes is more are less prone to violence. In such States, the government will take active steps to protect the Muslims. States in which only two major parties are there, and the ruling party is having anti Muslim sentiment then possibility of violence increases manifold. The ruling government will be least interested in protecting Muslims and may be actively involved in violence e.g. the state sponsored pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat, 2002. Stephen Wilkinson (2004) believes that state autonomy and state capacity are important in controlling communal violence. Statistics point to the fact that even the weakest state having low state autonomy and capacity have done seemingly well in preventing violence. The will power of politicians to control riot or otherwise is of much significance along with state autonomy and capacity.

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF LAW AGENCIES

Riots are the most despicable and inhuman act of violence done by a fellow human against another. To stop occurrence of any further violence, there is need for timely, impartial and strict action by law implementing agencies. Any failure to provide succor and justice to victims of violence not just erodes the faith of victims in law and justice, but it also emboldens the perpetrators of violence. Time and again serious questions have been raised against the role of police in preventing occurrence and spread of riots. Most of the persons killed in most riots in India have been Muslims; moreover, most have been killed by the police in firing. The police force has been accused of being subservient to their political masters. Depending upon the inclination of their administrative and political superiors, the police generally act against the Muslims. Police are blamed as being partial, biased and acting against the interests of Muslims. It has been alleged that the police actively collaborate and cooperate with rioters against Muslims. Various judicial commissions probing communal violence have probed the partisan role played by the police. It is found that police are biased against Muslims and this is evident in discrimination done in making preventive arrests, enforcing curfew, recording statements, treatment method at police stations and general prosecution of cases. The police do not shed their affinity, while performing their duty, and work more as Hindu force protecting community interests. The communal outlook of police is more to do with social composition of police force. The negligible presence of Muslims in the police force at various levels has made it a force representing majoritarian community. This partisan attitude of police and discrimination done against Muslims has generated a feeling among the Muslims that police cannot be relied upon. The bias role of police has been highlighted by every judicial Commission probing incidents of communal violence India.

The police at all levels are engaged in blame displacement. Muslim criminals, politicians and media are all implicated in different cases accusing them of initiating the violence. The failure of police to maintain law & order and act against the actual perpetrators of violence erodes the capacity to effectively control communal violence.

CONTEMPORARY VIOLENCE: DISCOURSE AND RHETORIC

The landscape of anti-Muslim sentiment and targeted hostility in India has shifted significantly since 2014, marked by mainstreamed political rhetoric, a surge in localized vigilantism, and institutional policy changes. This has led to a steady decline in religious harmony in the country. A concerted campaign has been launched at different levels to create religious animosity between Hindus and Muslims. The 'othering' of Muslims has gained momentum and now every Muslim is looked upon with hate and mistrust. Now, Muslims are being blamed and held responsible for every problem facing the society whether it be covid-19 spread, riots, encroachment, protests against government policies etc. The use of social media by right wing groups and sensitization of news by media channels have systematically spread the hate against Muslims. This hate invariably turns into prejudices and discrimination while ultimately leading to physical violence. Now, everything that is associated and that can be associated with Muslims is looked upon with hate and systematic campaigns of socio-economic boycott of Muslims have become norm of the day.

The raising of non-issues like hijab, azan, beef, skull cap, jihad are nothing but a part of vicious campaign to spread hate and animosity against Muslims. Vigilantism has become a weapon in the hands of right wing organizations to harass and publicly humiliate Muslims. This is responsible for recurring daily cases of arson, physical violence, discrimination and socio-economic boycott of Muslims across the country. This has created a situation worse than communal riot, where Muslims feel unsafe and threatened on daily basis. The arson and violence during religious processions during Ramnavami and Hanuman jayanti in certain north India states recently is a proof of connivance of government with right wing leaders and police in targeting Muslim properties and religious places of worship. The partisan nature of administration and police is not only inimical to Muslims, but it is larger threat to the very idea of India. Now, through systematic planning and use of social media, a situation has been created to keep the animosity between Hindus and Muslims simmering. The policies of government, hate speeches by political leaders and pride on being Hindu speeches are being carefully crafted to create more polarization and atmosphere of hate against Muslims in order to win elections. This is in tune with election winning strategy of BJP and right wing organizations. However, it has created a very scary scenario for Indian Muslims for whom arson, physical violence and boycott have become issues of daily living with little or no help from administration and police. The partisan nature of media channels and newspapers in never reporting make it a near impossible task for Muslims to get justice from the courts. Hence, the Indian Muslims are now more at risk, insecure, alienated and the process of their 'othering' is coming to near completion.

CONCLUSION

Communal violence in preceding decades has assumed alarming proportion hurting the secular fabric of Indian state. The religious harmony and peace of society has to a large extent been disturbed by deadly violence causing loss of lives and properties. The communal polarisation in urban areas, the vicious campaign by right wing organisations against the Muslims and an institutionalized riot structure is responsible for increasing violence between Hindus and Muslims. The pre planned violence with assistance of communal police force has led to disproportionate loss of loss of live and properties of Muslims. The Muslims are at the receiving end in every act of communal violence. The enquiry commissions probing violence has correctly identify the culprits, but the failure of state governments to act against the accused has denied justice to the victims of violence. The non implementation of commission's recommendations by the state governments has weakened its ability to prevent the riots. New and insidious techniques of Muslim hate and vilification has made the community easy target for vigilantes and police. Though the electoral interest of ruling power is been achieved but the cost of violence the country will pay in years to come both at national and international levels is incalculable.

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