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MUZAFFARNAGAR RIOTS

Lineages of a riot: Muzaffarnagar foretold

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A lady showing a photo of her son, who was killed in the riots. PHOTO: PTI

In the wake of the recent riots in Muzaffarnagar, Tanweer Fazal analyses the surge in communal violence in Uttar Pradesh. In recent years, he says, the State has been witnessing a new-found political consolidation among Muslims that allows them to enhance their representation in the Assembly and local bodies; the political equilibrium is under stress, and violence is plausibly the route adopted to settle it decisively.

Does the violence in Muzaffarnagar defy all explanations of communal strife in Independent India and demand a fresh theorisation? Several peculiarities are being presented to suggest that the script was different this time. The fact that the riots were primarily rural, even though urban localities were affected,

does question the received wisdom about an idyllic village, an abode of inter-religious peace that city-dwellers need to learn from. A new lens of rural-urban continuum is being offered to explain this. That a government dependent on minority votes did little to afford them security, demolishes the theory that linked votes and violence. Muzaffarnagar's history of communal peace, though breached by this incident, suggests the absence of an 'institutionalised machinery of riot-making' — hitherto a key theoretical tool to explain the engineering of riots. Higher per capita income of the district Muzaffarnagar is being cited to refute the explanation that rising income levels mitigate inter-ethnic conflict and perforce diffuse identity-based politics. Finally, it is also being projected by some that Muzaffarnagar was not necessarily an anti-minority pogrom as Muslim complicity in violent incidents has been recorded. These departures from the past, it is being argued, make Muzaffarnagar a unique case.

In contrast to the 'departure school', is the effort to draw parallels, in particular with Gujarat 2002. The patriarchal, and indeed sexual nature of violence; the indecision of the state government in acting promptly, including alleged collusion of one of its ministers, have been cited to demonstrate this continuity. Having presumed equivalence, two different responses emerge from, purportedly, mutually opposed quarters. While one demands parity in condemnation, the other, for obvious political goals, sees in it an opportunity to obfuscate and diffuse the vehemence of Gujarat. Why single out one person, or for that matter one party, when riots are the order of the day?

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Any study of ethnic violence begins with underlining the uniqueness of every such outburst. The specificity of Muzaffarnagar notwithstanding, it is not entirely a break from the past patterns. To my mind, it is not Gujarat of 2002 that offers a neat comparison but scores of others that preceded it. Programmatic communalism of the Modi-led government simply remains unprecedented. A leaf from the forgotten past is Bhagalpur of 1989, a city that boasted of a well-established university, a network of convent schools and the silk industry, and certainly ranked high on the economic and educational scale.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad's Ram *shila yatra*, passing through Muslim localities, drew the ire of Muslim crowds and proved to be the immediate provocation for the riot, which went on unabated for the next full month, engulfing some 250 odd villages; rural areas reported some of the most gruesome massacres, which left more than 900 Muslims killed. Muzaffarnagar has much lower casualties but comparing statistics of the dead is unethical and probably immaterial in trying to understand communal violence. The commission of inquiry headed by Justice Ramanand Prasad that looked into the Bhagalpur riots pointed out the complicity and inaction of the local administration. Bihar was ruled — much like UP is today — by a secular party that, till the violence broke out, had enjoyed the unambiguous support of the minorities. So, in fact, while the violence in Muzaffarnagar may appear to be novel, it is only too familiar and sadly routine.

What do we make of the current surge in communal violence, particularly in one of India's biggest States that incidentally sends the largest contingent of members to the Lok Sabha? It was Uttar Pradesh that proved to be the Waterloo for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 2004; and again, it was in Uttar Pradesh that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) gathered steam for its second spell in 2009. The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) decline from 57 Members of Parliament in 1998 to a meagre 9 in the last general elections was interpreted as defeat of the purveyors of religious identity at the hands of the votaries of caste politics. Is it a matter of coincidence then, or meticulous planning, that most of the major occurrences of violence in the State have been reported from

constituencies where the BJP or its ally had performed reasonably well in 2009? Moradabad, Ghaziabad, Faizabad, Meerut, Bareilly, Bijnore, Mathura and Muzaffarnagar, invariably, fit this frame (the last three were contested and won by its ally, the Rashtriya Lok Dal – RLD, which is now with the UPA). Western U.P., with a Muslim presence of nearly 47%, is a laboratory in which it is worth burning fingers. In recent years, the State has been witnessing a new-found political consolidation among Muslims that allowed them to enhance their representation in the Assembly and local bodies. In the villages of western U.P., Muslims and Jats have traditionally voted more or less alongside, until Ajit Singh's flirtations with the BJP ruined the bonhomie. The rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the region, symbolising Jatav assertiveness, is a spectre that the landed Jat peasantry dreads. Sections of Muslims have found in the BSP a formidable formation to align with. The political equilibrium is under stress, and violence is plausibly the route adopted to settle it decisively.

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On both sides of the divide, Hindutva on the one hand, and a politics based on empty minority tokenism and bluster on the other, a perpetual state of hostility is undeniably the most productive. A vertical unity across caste, class, and regional affiliations guarantees audiences and promises electoral dividends. It is also the most cost-effective means of political mobilisation—a lesson in politics made easy. And yet, the two sides differ in terms of their capacity to enact violence—the experience and wherewithal at the service of the Hindutva ideologues is simply inimitable. Beginning from the earliest one, the Madon Commission (Bhiwandi Riots, 1961), and including all such major eruptions of violence—Ahmedabad (1969), Beed (1986), Bhagalpur (1989), Bombay (1993)—all commissions of inquiry have squarely credited the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), VHP, Shiva Sena and their siblings with prompting and enacting violence. The history of communal violence in India, thus, has been unequivocally termed as a history of anti-minority pogroms by Paul Brass.

Most accounts, in reducing the violence to the immediate trigger, tend to miss the wider picture — that whether it was a skirmish emerging from 'love jihad' or an innocuous bike accident, multiple versions of the episode keep it shrouded in mystery. Such narratives, invoking fear, terror, and horror of the other, are the staple precursors to all riots. In all the reported cases of eruption of violence in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere, the usual stimuli are employed: sacrilege of sacred texts (Ghaziabad and Moradabad), use of loudspeakers (Meerut), 'eve-teasing' (Faizabad). The precipitants are tried and tested, and their potential to generate violence recorded since the inception of Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. Thus in Masuri (Ghaziabad), Muslims who gathered against the alleged desecration of the Quran found that the person who reported this to them was never to be traced. He had come to stay in the locality only a month back, and had vanished mysteriously after the violence was over. The case of eve-teasing of Hindu girls could never be verified but left a trail of blood and arson in Faizabad. In Bhagalpur, the riots started with the rumour of Muslims attacking the 'peaceful' Ram Shila Yatra of the VHP. The Commission found little truth in the claim, neither could it verify the alleged killing of hundreds of Hindu students by Muslims. In a sordid repetition, we find Muzaffarnagar too ripe with rumours of Muslims having butchered scores of Jats.

Passion is a critical element of any riot and yet the patterns of timing, targeting and location are evident. Donald Horowitz, in his study of ethnic violence, looked at nearly 150 riot situations drawn from as many as 50 countries.

His conclusions bear an uncanny similarity with Muzaffarnagar or indeed, any other riot in India: The riot, despite its suddenness, is not spontaneous. Identification of targets precedes the precipitating incidents, which is done with certain precision. The absolute and continued impunity enjoyed by the rioters as well as their protectors in the administration only emboldens the actors of violence.

Why do secular parties and governments fail miserably in defending minorities? Steven Wilkinson found the answer to this in the extent of political competition and the reliance on minority votes. The higher the dependence of the ruling party on minority votes, the greater its investment in checking violence. The opposite, however, is equally true: the lesser its desperation for minority votes, the less the inclination towards ensuring security. Enquiring into the 1993 Bombay riots, the Srikrishna Commission was perturbed by the statement of the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra, that Bombay would have burned had leaders of the Shiva Sena been arrested. Bombay still burnt, though the government was voted out of power. The brutalities of Bhagalpur continue to blight the Congress in Bihar. Muzaffarnagar has all the ingredients of a typical riot that Horowitz lists. There may still be a chance, though, to escape the ignominy of impunity. To this point, however, with more than 100 riots since the formation of the government, the irresoluteness of the Akhilesh regime in responding to collective violence is far too obvious.

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