

MEERUT RIOTS: SOME ALARMING SIGNALS

Pramod Kumar and Dildar Khan

The authors have been engaged for the past six years in the study of communalism at the Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, headed by Rashpal Malhotra. The Centre has provided more than 12 exhaustive studies conducted through interdisciplinary approach and selected riot-prone and riot-free districts in the states of UP, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh.

Recent riots in Meerut cannot be merely dismissed as vandalism or anti-social elements or conspiracy of some Pakistani nationals or handiwork of the few communal elements in the police and administration or slackness of the law and order machinery.

This is not to deny that anti-social elements, conspiracy by foreigners and communal elements in the police do have a role to play. These elements are the instruments used by vested interests and individuals or groups adhering to a normative value pattern which has its basis in communal ideology. In this context it must be understood that these elements are not used merely for incremental economic or political incentives. The motive behind using these sections as instruments for fanning communal frenzy are many and there is something deeper in it.

The increase in duration, intensity, area coverage and participation of larger population in the recent Meerut riots has been alarming. A critical and comparative analysis of communal riots in Meerut since Independence clearly shows that the latest riots were pregnant with certain new and dangerous trends.

Some new trends were noticed with regard to participation of the people. For instance, the participation in previous riots used to be limited. The participants being usually hired riff-raff, delinquent youth, petty artisans and shop-keepers, unskilled workers and hawkers. But this time, perhaps for the first time in the history of communal rioting, people living in the same localities attacked each other, in connivance with riff-raffs from outside.

There were a significant number of instances when a Hindu neighbour attacked his Muslim neighbour and vice-versa. Some of the respondents interviewed by us pointed out that residents living in the same locality, instead of coming to the rescue of one's neighbours, either joined hands with the rioters and indulged in looting arson and killing or stood apart as silent spectators. One of them, who was still under trauma, remarked; 'It is a shame that one fears the man with whom one has lived all these years, with whom one has shared intimate moments. It is not the place worth living where one is scared of shadows'.

This brutalization of human psyche is a clear indication of degeneration of human relationship. It was shocking to find that people were preparing themselves, both physically and mentally, to live and die in a violent environment. This trend is contrary to the natural human urge to strive for making society more humane.

Another new and dangerous trend noticed was the participation of people from lower middle and middle strata of population in looting, arson and killing. This new trend of unabashed and open participation in communal riots by this section of the society has much more serious country-wide repercussions than being only confined to Meerut city. In previous riots, this section of the society did nurture antagonistic feelings, but never actively participated in communal rioting.

It was also revealing that a large section of Harijans also participated in the riots and attacked localities inhabited by Muslims. So much so that in some areas the rioting appeared to be between Harijans and the Muslims. This new tendency imparted ferocity to communal rioting and also provided the caste Hindus with a vanguard.

During the course of our survey in 1982, it was observed that the conversion of Hindus into Islam had created a new source of tension. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Arya Samaj leadership, due to their ideological and circumstantial compulsion, launched a movement to bring Harijans into the mainstream of Hinduism by highlighting the perceived negative aspects of the Islamic culture. Mobile temples to facilitate Harijans to perform religious practices and rituals were also introduced. During the 1982 riots, a large chunk of Harijans had also participated in the orgy, as if to defend the glory of Hinduism.

This increase in participation of diverse sections of the society is symptomatic of pervasiveness and increasing extremity of communal ideology. This is also a pointer towards the trend and increasing acceptance of elements specific to communal ideology. It also signifies the legitimacy that has come to be attached with the perception which projects social relations in the form of communal cleavages.

One may therefore assert without fear of contradiction that such a situation was the direct outcome of the communal antagonism preached and practiced by various political and social organizations.

The trends of increasing communalization was noticeable even during the 1982 survey. The controversies relating to cultural and religious roots were being debated in local vernacular press as well as in a day-to-day interaction among the people. For instance, an editorial in an Urdu newspaper on 22 March, 1982, tried to add to the controversy by reviving the story that when Hazarat Bale Mian Sahib reached Meerut to propagate Islam, he waged a war against the Hindu rulers of Meerut. During the war, Bale Mian lost a finger which has been buried opposite the Chandi Mandir, on which the Mazar of Bale Mian was erected (it is still there). Later, it is alleged, that Chandi Devi appeared before Hazarat Bale Sahib and 'apologized' for her mistake and subsequently embraced Islam'.

Not only the role of local vernacular papers, which are mostly communal in orientation, but gratification the walls are loaded to inflame dormant communal sentiments. A case in point was the reappearance on the walls of Meerut of the slogan coined in Lahore after Pakistan was formed. "Has ke liya Pakistan, Larh ke lenge Hindustan" (We got Pakistan without much effort, will now conquer India through war). A Vishwa Hindu Parishad poster read "Agar Hindustan main rehna hoga, to Vande Mataram Kehna hoga" (If you must stay in India, you will have to recite Vande Mataram). (This was actually being projected on the screen during movie shows in the theatres in 1982.)

During our recent visit we found that such communal assertions and slogans full of hatred have become more blatant and distorted. Announcements were being made even from public and religious platforms on loudspeakers on the 'danger' to one's religious group identities and need to unite together to protect it! For instance, an announcement was being made from Imiliyan Masjid, asking the followers of the faith to join hands and defend their religion. Similarly, followers of Vishwa Hindu Parishad were spreading rumours, full of hatred towards Muslims and need for unity among the Hindus.

Religious group identities get strengthened through such propaganda. It is also argued by communalists that their co-religionists face hardships because they are unorganized, and this will cause the extinction of their religion itself. In each case identity is strongly projected to be in danger every time a religious procession is disrupted or the public performance of religious practices is infringed upon by members of the other religious groups or even by miscreants. Although the blame for any untoward incident following the infringement is laid squarely on the administration, the exaggeration of religious group discrimination and a panicky appeal to co-religionists for unity is simultaneously made. Even the scale of organizing the public performance of religious rituals becomes in issue of competition among rival communalists!

Strangely, even the so-called secular political party like the Congress was polarized on communal lines. Majority of the Congress leaders who happened to be Hindus were vociferous about the damage done to the property and to the life of their co-religionists. Whereas, leaders who happened to be Muslims were highlighting the same in the case of their co-religionists. A similar trend was also noticed during 1982 riots. In order to keep its support base intact, specially when Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal were actively reinforcing and strengthening 'Hindu identity' and their increasing appeal amongst Harijans (a traditional support base of Congress), local leadership was following a policy of appeasing communalists of both the groups rather than adopting a secular approach to politics.

Here, it is relevant to point out that political groups using communalism merely as an instrument add to the legitimacy sought by political groups using and propagating communalism as an ideology. Individuals or factions within the Congress may gain in the short run, but in the long run it is the political groups ideologically committed to the communalism like the RSS, the Jamat-e-Islami, etc. will gain.

Such an opportunist use would only cause reckless acceleration towards extreme form of communalism. Nevertheless, communal politics as such remains a potent and criminal force as a propagator of communal ideology leading to communal riots.

PATRIOT – 19.07.87
Commercial component as additional fuel

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In all the previous riots in Meerut most of the affected localities were in the old part of city. For instance, the following mohallas were affected by community riots up to 1982. Azad Nagar, Bhomiapul, Jattiwara, Prahlad nagar, Gurdri bazaar, Islamabad, Ismile Nagar, Khair Nagar Gate, Naqarchiyan, Shahghasa, Moripara, etc. Only two localities affected by rioting namely, Gulzar Ibrahim and Brahmanpuri were from outer part of Meerut.

In the recent riots mainly nine localities in the old city were affected, whereas as many as 13 localities in the outskirts of Meerut city were engulfed. For instance, the localities in old city

affected by recent riots were: Bhumia Pul, Gurdri bazaar, Gole Kaun Cheepiwada, Valley Bazar and Kotla, etc. The localities in the outskirts affected were: Brahmanpuri, Delhi Gate, Sakeit, Subhash Nagar, Sadar Bazra, Lal Kurti, Nauchandi (Shambu Gate), Civil Lines, Begum Bagh, Shashtri Nagar, Hapur Road, Pilokheri, Kailash Puri, etc.

Another trend noticed this time was that the localities in locational confrontation with a locality most of whose inhabitants belong to a religious group perceived to be antagonistic were more vulnerable to communal rioting. The visual impression which one gathered in Meerut was that the Hindu majority mohallas enclose the Muslim majority ones in a shell-like formation, except in the south-western portion. For instance, Shahghasa, the site of 1982 communal riots, is Muslim majority mohalla, surrounded by Hindu majority mohallas in the south. Its boundary touches Khandak and Cheepiwada in the north and Moripara in the west. It serves as border area for the rioters belonging to both the religious groups.

The riot-hit Muslim majority mohallas, i.e. Ismile Nagar, Gurdri Bazar, Islamabad, are in locational confrontation with Hindu majority mohallas like Chatta Anantram, Kailashpuri, Madhungar, Kabari Bazar, Cheepiwada and Chahmenarah. The riot-hit Hindu majority Mohallas, i.e. Prahlad Nagar, Jattiwara, Lala-ka-bazar, are in direct locational confrontation with Muslim majority mohallas of Azad Nagar, Kher Nagar, Kotla, etc.

In Meerut, the central business district (CBD) is located in the inner city, which is also an area where most of the riot-hit and sensitive areas are located. This CBD is the commercial centre of the city where wholesale trade in 'khadar' takes place, whereas retail business has been decentralized to areas such as Sadar Bazar and Begum Bridge. Alongside the massive transactions in the 'Khadar' trade, the traditional household industry of making scissors is also located here.

In both cases it is generally the Muslims who happen to be artisans and majority of traders happen to be Hindus. A reasonable assumption would be that both the religious groups would prefer to avoid communal violence of any kind due to their economic inter-dependence. The recent trend has been that some of the Muslims are also emerging as traders. The reasons for the emergence and the growing prosperity of the new traders are based on factors like Muslims traders forwarding loans to Muslim artisans and workers and buying their products. Hindu traders have started believing that if they advanced money to the Muslim artisans, the latter may instigate riots to absolve themselves of credit liability.

Such beliefs arise from actual or pretended ignorance about market conditions in the household industry operating within a capitalist economy.

Trade in cloth, particularly, has a greater credit component: some of which is advanced by organized credit institutions but much more is advanced by wholesalers, middlemen and retailers.

The amount of credit varies with the market demand of commodities, i.e. higher the demand the more the likelihood of faster circulation of money leading to cash payments. Inversely, in conditions of relative depression, payments on a credit basis becomes more predominant. Such compulsions of the market are projected as benefiting only one section of traders, the Muslims. Competition arising from a clash of economic interests is thereby given the form of communal antagonism.

The tension arising from the slackness of administration and the alleged involvement of policemen, particularly personnel of the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC), turned large mobs into violent one, which in turn made the police force ineffective.

The question worth examining is why did the administration and police find it difficult to control the communal flare-up. During the 1982 survey, it was categorically known to the administration three months before hand that riots were about to erupt in Meerut. Therefore, one is perplexed, how could an administration be so insensitive unless there was political interference against taking preventive measures this time.

It was noticed that in certain cases the administration and the police played a partisan role, which provided ferocity and longer duration to communal rioting. It was also noted that officials were demoralized due to political pressures, frequent transfers and lack of encouragement to experiment with new idea. Ad hocism, cock-eyed perception and an indifferent attitude added fuel to the fire. No provision was made to meet retrogressive situations which are necessary consequences of development activities.

Increasing religiosity, the use of communal symbols, haphazard urbanization, fierce competition in trade and for jobs, communalized politics, non-functioning of democratic institutions and frequent misuse of military to resolve politico-economic problems, displacement and non-absorption of workers and clustering of religious or caste groups provide sufficient conditions for communal rioting. These conditions derive their life force from a non-expanding economy and operation of communal ideology.

The under-developed capitalist economy has failed to solve the basic problem of poverty, unemployment and inequality which breed frustration and generate unhealthy competition for the inadequate social and economic opportunities. In the absence of a secular and Left alternative, religious fundamentalism, appears to provide a misplaced psychological solace to the increasing miseries of the people. The failure to launch correct and consistent ideological and political struggle for the spread of class consciousness has left a barren ground for communal ideologies to persist.