

COMMERCIAL COMPONENT AS ADDITIONAL FUEL

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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.
This is the second part. The first part appeared on Friday last.

In all the previous riots in Meerut most of the affected localities were in the old part of the city. For instance, the following mohallas were affected by communal riots up to 1982: Azad Nagar, Bhomiapul, Jattiwara, Prahlad Nagar, Gurdri Bazar, Islamabad, Ismile Nazar, Khair Nagar Gate, Nagarchiyan, 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 in recent riots were: Bhumia Pul, Gurdri Bazar, Gole Kuan, Cheepiwada, Valley Bazar and Kotla, etc. The localities in the outskirts affected were: Brahmanpuri, Delhi Gate, Sakeit, Subhash Nagar, Sadar Bazar, 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 Cheepiwara 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, Madhunagar, 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 (CED) is located in the inner city, which is also an area where most of the riot-hit and sensitive areas are located. This CED 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 bazaar 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 trends 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 organised 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 projects 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.

A 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 were political interference against take preventive measure 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 ideas. 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 urbanisation, 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 problems 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 consistent ideological and political struggle for the spread of class consciousness has left a barren ground for communal ideologies to persist.