

MEERUT RIOTS: ALARMING SIGNALS **(The Spark, Vol. 1 No. 2-3, January-February, 1988)**

Recent riots in Meerut cannot be merely dismissed as vandalism of 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 of foreigners and communal elements in the police do have a role to play. These elements are the instruments used by vested interest and individuals or group 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 pregated 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 shared intimate moments. It is not the place worth living where one is scared of shadows'.

This brutalisation 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 with 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 attached 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 organisations.

The trends of increasing communalisation was noticeable even during the 1982 survey. The controversies relating to culture and religious roots were being debated in local vernacular press as well as in 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 was 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 'apologised' for her mistake and subsequently embraced Islam!

Not only the role of local vernacular papers, which are mostly communal in orientation, but graffiti on 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 Kahna 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 the 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 unorganised, 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 processions is disrupted or the public performance of religious practices is infringed upon by members of the religious group 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 organising the public performance of religious rituals becomes an issue for competition among rival communalists.

Strangely, even the so-called secular political party like the Congress was polarised 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 the 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 of 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. (to be concluded).

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