

Recd 14/8
Weekly Copy Ps. 5

Annual Subscription Rs. 2

OPINION

Vol. XXI

16th SEPTEMBER 1980

No. 20

COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

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THE residue of poison that events in the communal sphere have left behind in the public mind is so serious that we are likely to have large-scale conflagrations at any time, apart from the agony and shame of Moradabad.

All the thinking that has been generated, even in the media, and all the observations of people indicate that they are based on a complete absence of data or reliable reports. Everything is surmise and conclusion.

We take up each area for examination one by one as violence spreads—Assam, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Kashmir—as separate manifestations, separate causes, separate remedies.

What seems to be important is the small incident that triggered the explosive material; not the fact that we allowed explosive material to build up with our complacency and negligence, or did not prevent the explosion, and instead broke out into panicky retribution.

Pigs in Moradabad, date-line for foreigners in Assam, prices in Gujarat, anger at security forces in Kashmir, eve-teasing, student indiscipline. We refuse to analyse the problem in a systematic in-depth manner, so that the historical, economic and administrative facts of the present stage of communal rioting can be understood.

All over we seem to find hidden hands; manipulating, it would appear, the emotions of the masses of this vast country with extraordinary skill from distant lands, where even interest in us may be completely non-existent.

Why is it that we are unable to face the truth—the brazen truth—that all this has been caused by our own faults and weaknesses?

We have got used to hanging our heads in shame. We have got used to finding explanations like deep-seated conspiracies to expunge that shame. Within a few days the Dreadful Summer of 1980, and its terrible toll of about 2000 people killed all over, including north eastern region, will be forgotten. We will flaunt our undying faith in secularism, while the parents of the children who died in Moradabad point the finger of hate at us.

Instead of facing the facts squarely, analysing the whole situation in a scientific and cold manner, utterly free of every prejudice or bias, we are now bent on an underground campaign of vilification and slander which is building up communal disharmony at an alarming rate. Do we want to encourage murder and arson because of our lack of political perception and administrative skill?

Ever since the Ayatolla took over Iran there have been hushed whispers in India about the appearance of Islamic fundamentalism among our Muslims. Three important facts that are lost sight of when people discuss the downfall of the Shah of Iran are: first, that serious inflation was present which mainly affected the poor; and secondly, extraordinary riches were available for the aristocracy and the military-bureaucratic complex. Thirdly, the rapid educational progress of the country threw up a large number of educated men and women. Those that came from selected families were quickly absorbed. The rest, coming from lower middle class families, were left unemployed to lament over the manner in which their areas and their welfare had been neglected. It was in the peasantry of those areas which petro-dollars did not reach that discontent appeared first. Tehran flourished, the interior was like the Uttar Pradesh countryside, outside Delhi. The succeeding months of political mismanagement and police terror created conditions in which the Ayatolla's type of revivalism or purification had a strong appeal.

There can be no parallel between the Indian situation and the Iranian situation. In fact there has been no direct response to pan-Islamism in India. Ever since 1857 when the political nature of Islam got subdued, there has not even been an attempt at revival, except for a brief period during the Khilafat movement. There are several reasons also why such movements have not been able to make headway in India. As for revivalism, Islam in India would be fragmented at once into numerous sects if there were a strong revivalist movement. The Ulemas have been the first to resist, and to make it clear that it would be against the interests of Islamic India.

S. Shahbuddin has said :

"Islamic revivalism cannot make people jettison Western yardsticks for measuring progress—the application of science and technology to ameliorate man's state and thus raise his standard of living, the organization and management of national administration and economy in public interest and the introduction of the masses to the cultural goods. All it can do in the long run is to insist that the 'shariat' be accepted as the central point of reference for all executive or legislative activities, and hopefully introduce a measure of puritanism in private and public conduct, which may arrest the contemporary tendencies towards acquisitiveness and permissiveness arising from the uninhibited quest of the material."

Besides, the excesses of the Khomeini regime, particularly the executions and the floggings, have been extensively criticised by our Muslims. The Jamait-e-Islami was cornered in Kashmir after the death sentence on Bhutto was carried out. It was because of the strong feelings against the Jamait-e-Islami that hundreds of their houses were burnt all over Jammu & Kashmir and it became a problem to protect its supporters. Has all that been forgotten? Anyway, if there is doubt in the minds of the Hindus that Islamic fundamentalism or revivalism is attempting to divide the people of India, let the Muslims stand up and state clearly that

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they are not interested in any form that damages us in India. That in itself should finish this bogey.

There are some more scapegoats in the underground river of gossip in which we all like to wallow. Sometimes it is a politician, sometimes some religious leader or some other stalwart who is supposed to have organized the trouble. Or else we make mysterious references that can lead to any conclusion. As thinking people, we ought to ensure that such irresponsible gossip is rejected. We must realise the basic fact that our country is too big, millions of people are inaccessible, and an odd individual cannot create thunderstorms by striking flint stones.

The RSS, on which the Janata Party broke, is not even mentioned these days, which is an indication that all the tears that were shed on secularism were just a deception to cover the power greed.

I have begun to feel that secularism is worn only as a shawl to proclaim learning and elegance, and adherence to the Mahatma's teachings. It can be taken off as soon as you are out of the public gaze or descend from the dais.

And by a curious irony the only people who strongly believe in secularism today are the Muslim middle class.

What are the main causes of the present phase of communal rioting?

First, demographic causes. In the same newspaper in which we read about the stampede at Moradabad, there was news of a stampede at Eden Gardens in Calcutta where 14 persons were killed. A few days ago there was a stampede when someone decided to distribute free sarees, another stampede when cinema tickets were not available in a certain city. Our population growth is now reaching the stage when stampedes and disasters of rising magnitude are likely to occur. Besides urbanisation has produced over-crowding of a most dangerous type. In the urban areas even the semblance of social control that exists in the villages does not operate. The slogan of urban life is: "Get your way. Fight it out." If the growth and density of our population cannot be checked by persuasion, should we resort to compulsive methods?

The second cause is economic depression. It is surprising how soon we forget that economic depression coincides with the rising graph of turmoil and violence. In the years of economic boom in the early sixties, communal incidents declined, then when drought began to have an effect about 1967, the social scene changed again. We had the worst possible riots in Ahmedabad and other places in 1969 in which about 600 people were killed. And, because of the improvement in the economic situation, by the year 1970 we had begun to congratulate ourselves on the fact that the tragedy of communal rioting had been banished for ever from the land. Only ten years ago we were so confident. Violence again began to appear during the years 1977-79, and then in 1980 we found ourselves in an economic situation that was worse than any we had ever faced in the past. Hence the worst riots too.

We ought to know by now that in a poor country like India it is the disadvantaged section of society, the Scheduled Castes and some of

the poorer sections of the minority communities, that feel the impact of economic disasters first and most. If an industry is suffering, it leads to retrenchment of the poorest. If it is loss of production or a shop closing down its shutters, it is the small man, who goes. If there is drought, the landless labourer is pushed out. What effect does it have on a worker in a small industry if he is thrown out of work? He sells whatever he can to feed his children, he tries to get manual work. Inside him there is a volcano which will erupt at any time, for any cause; and looting becomes a basic necessity. If it is the lean month of August, you have a climatic factor too to destabilize the individual.

Yet despair and frustration alone do not cause a riot. You need fear, rumours, misleading reports in the press or in the river of rumour, tension, collection of fire-arms, a build-up of explosive material, and most of all an administrative breakdown. Beyond all this is the compelling, crushing need for jobs, for employment. There are frustrated men who have been waiting for years with a college degree, waiting for everything in life—a woman, home, perhaps even a plate of rice. It is this gnawing all-consuming longing for jobs, or a business, which is the basic cause of communal rioting today. And a subsidiary cause is over-crowding, the shortage of residential houses and shops.

This is why a riot does not occur in a sleepy little village of Uttar Pradesh where all suffer equally, nor in a tribal village of Madhya Pradesh where all live safely in their poverty. It occurs in Moradabad where the metal workers have built up a good industry—it occurs in Aligarh where lock-makers have made good—it occurs in Bhiwandi where power-loom rivalries are poisonous—it occurs in Hattia and Ahmedabad and Hyderabad and Jamshedpur where there are jobs to get, contracts to secure, houses and shops to capture—it occurs in Agra and Ferozabad, and in all other towns where economic rivalries are serious, and have to be covered up with the cloak of communalism.

In all these places the economic reasons are the compelling ones. But thoughtless administrators find explanations to make out that Muslim aggressiveness started the riot, as if this were sufficient to justify all the damage done. In rare cases it may even be true. The old guard of communal politics, the pompous pleaders who led the Muslim League in the past, the Mullah who had been put in the background and now gets easy access to other countries—all these find peace committees, processions, and visits to police stations an admirable occasion to reappear as saviours of the race; and they can start a riot too.

It is not as if violence as a result of social and economic unrest is peculiar only to India. Italy has been plagued for many months by violence. The last outrage was a terrible one at Bologna Railway Station in which 77 people were killed on 2nd August this year by a bomb. Terror has struck Turkey, a country habitually in economic trouble, and it has led to 1400 deaths by terrorist activities this year.

Thirdly the political situation in the country is so brittle that if tomorrow Mrs. Gandhi were to decide to retire for rest in Kashmir even

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for a month, the entire party structure would be split into numerous factions. All politicians for some unknown reason seem to be losing the mass base. Is it that the people are cynical? Is it that politicians are neglecting their constituencies because of the petrol hike? Or is it that the older type of leader is no longer honoured because he has destroyed the political machine and the bureaucratic autonomy on which all impartial judgments were based? Whatever be the reason, the decline of public esteem in the politician is a dangerous sign. It has preceded dictatorships in neighbouring countries. And another bad sign is the forsaking of men like Sheikh Abdullah, whose contribution to secularism has been unique.

Lastly, to come to the most deplorable feature of our contemporary scene—the breakdown of the district administration—which will remain as an ever-present cause of trouble. In the first place, there is a tussle between District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police as to who should sit in the driving seat of the law-and-order jeep. In the old days the Superintendent of Police drove and the District Magistrate sat by his side to advise, assist and support. Now it depends on who is stronger in the state capital, from where back-seat driving is done in a truly reckless manner, often without any knowledge of the road. Incidentally, the two men on the spot, who ought to deal with the riot, do not have to be selected on the basis of merit. They have to satisfy conditions of caste, lineage, relationship—and performance (which means doing the bidding of the powers that be). Both of them have to be ready to move at a moment's notice, even at the height of a riot. In fact the whole district lives in a state of perpetual motion so that there is not one man who is really equipped to deal with a riot. A District Magistrate or Superintendent of Police needs at least six months to learn the layout of the district, study its problems, and the staff that he has to work with and prepare his plans. What is expected however is that the officer should be so omniscient that, at any time, he can take over any district without any planning or security schemes and deal with any situation. Some people argue that now there is no need for professional competence in either the Superintendent of Police or the District Magistrate because they have to carry out orders given by a multitude of political figures, who do not get the information from the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police but from a host of voluntary informers, alarmists, mischief-makers and do-gooders. In fact the men on the spot have been transformed into men on the telephone.

As regards the police, one tragic development of the latest round of rioting is that in the area of rioting the Muslims feel that the police will not protect them, and the police feel that the Muslims will attack them. We have to set this right as early as possible. A whole package of measures will have to be devised. More than 20 years ago, the Conference of Inspectors General had suggested that all armed police should be under a central enactment, and liable for duty anywhere in the country. A measure of that type to include both armed police and home guards is very necessary. Secondly, rapport with the Muslims must be established

at all levels of the police hierarchy. On the investigation side, a big effort will have to be made to find each and every man who used fire arms against the police. Prolonged and continued investigations will be required to get to the truth. Were the fire arms used in justifiable circumstances, against policemen who had lost their heads? Or were they used to create a situation which would lead the country into disorder?

So badly have officers been mauled by events in the country in the last few years and so intensely do they feel "let down" that few of them want to be present in the streets at the time of trouble. It is far easier to send for the para military or call out the army. Why go through stoning, brickbatting, abuse, firing, criticism everywhere, judicial inquiries, suspension and transfers on the slightest pretext, if you can stay away from the scene and escape all of it? This has been, and will be, one of the biggest causes of police failure. A secondary cause is that briefing or proper explanation of background and strategy or even a rapport or a proper understanding between officers and men is not attempted.

Let the National Police Commission give the finest set of proposals for reform, and even assuming some of them are accepted, no good will come of them unless police officers are made to accept responsibility to lead the men on the scene of trouble. The armed police, particularly units like the PAC, require strong professional leadership. The officers have to be built up for that purpose in every possible way. You cannot get men to do difficult tasks if you reduce them in size and stature. And interchange of officers between the State armed police units and the para military formations of the Centre should be able to correct such short-comings, but first a central enactment would be required.

The ills in the police today are so numerous that I am astonished that they can still do some of their jobs well. Wherever they have failed, and Moradabad will be counted in that list, it is because officering has failed, and accountability of the rank and file has not been insisted upon in dealing with riots.

Finally let us firmly and conscientiously unmask the criminals who are fomenting trouble on both sides. But let us not be carried away by certain absurd and false suspicions that the Muslims have risen in a pre-planned way to damage the integrity and peace of the country.

"If you believe in absurdities you will commit atrocities."

Revd 20/9
54. Shri B. Venkatappiah,
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New Delhi 110 016.

Posted at Central Packet Sorting Office, Bombay on 20-9-1980
Regd. No. BYW 69
Licence No. 14. Licensed to post without pre-payment

Edited and published by A. D. Gorwala at 40C Ridge Road, Bombay 400 006 and
printed by him at the Mouj Printing Bureau, Khatau Wadi, Bombay 400 004
Proprietor : A. D. Gorwala.