

Communal Violence in 2015 - Rise in Hatred and Polarization

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Communal violence, polarization of communities and the institutionalization of hatred it results in; have emerged as most the prominent threats engulfing the country in the year 2015. This has spelled adverse repercussions on communal harmony and led to shrinking of democratic space. This year, figures available till October suggest that there were 650 incidents of communal violence in which 84 people lost their lives and 1,979 others were injured. This was pointed out by Kiren Rijiju, Minister of State for Home in response to a query in the Parliament. The Times of India puts the figure of the total number of communal incidents till October 2015 at 630 as compared to 561 incidents in 2014. As compared to 2015, the year 2014 witnessed 644 incidents with a death toll of 95. However the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) pegs these figures at 1227, almost double of what the Home Ministry reported.

The home ministry reported that in 2015 no “major” communal incidence has taken place but two ‘significant’ communal incidents have taken place. These two incidents of communal violence relate to the building of a mosque in Atali, Haryana and the lynching of a man in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh over rumors of consumption of beef. Interestingly, the home ministry categorizes communal incidents in two classes ‘major’ and ‘important/ significant’. A "major" communal incident is described as one that results in either more than 5 deaths or leaves over 10 persons injured. An 'important/significant' incident is one that ends in at least one death or leaves 10 injured.

Upon closely looking at these figures, certain patterns can be discerned in the violence this year. Firstly the intensity of violence in terms of number of deaths and casualties has been low. Though the number of communal incidents has risen marginally compared to previous year, the number of casualties has remained low. 84 are reported to be dead due to communal violence in 2015 as compared to 90 in 2014. This is despite the rise in communal incidents this year compared to previous year. This reveals the nature of communal violence after the Hindu nationalists attain power. The communal violence resorted to now is low intensity in order to continue to produce communal polarization without attracting unnecessary media and international attention. The primary motive of violence now is to strike terror amongst the marginal and coerce them to accept the position of second class citizens. Low intensity communal violence enforces new norms decided by the Hindu nationalists. The marginalized sections, particularly the minorities may survive at sufferance and good will of majority.

The communal incidents, including those in Atali (Haryana) and Harshul (Maharashtra), Dadri (UP) are increasingly normalizing communal violence. Communities hitherto living in peace and harmony were mobilized in the violence. The houses and shops of Muslim residents in Atali were looted and burnt. Their vehicles were charred. Their cattle sheds were burnt. The Muslims were forced to flee for their security. This caused considerable displacement and consequent hardships. This type of violence has been categorized as sub radar violence by scholars following the trends in communal violence. The home ministry, as pointed out above, has categorized

communal incidents in two classes and listed down one incident in each. This is a deliberate attempt to trivialize these incidents and overall design of communal violence.

Secondly, the occurrences of communal violence have continued to take places in small towns and villages along with urban areas. Earlier communal violence was predominantly an urban phenomenon. However as one looks closely at the data, it becomes clear that the rural areas are fast being injected with communal conflicts and communal polarization. Violence occurred in places including towns like Palwal, Kannauj, Pachora, Shamli. Communal conflicts are kept simmering sub radar in rural areas under various pretexts. The tinderbox of communal violence this year was western UP, Bihar and Haryana. Both these patterns can be better explained when referred to the Institutionalized riots system (IRS) as established by Paul Brass after he studied major communal riots in India. Bihar and UP are slated for state assembly elections in 2015 and 2017 respectively. The political parties that benefit from polarization and the sharpening of voter constituency establish and operate IRS that is very active before election in the bid to mobilize votes by dividing communities over issues related to identity.

In order to garner votes in a complex matrix of caste and religious equations, the Hindu nationalists with the passive support of other parties (state governments that don't take adequate action to curb or punish the perpetrators) kept communal tensions brewing and made the social landscape volatile. After the Muzzafarnagar riots, BJP swept majority of the seats in UP during general elections in 2014. It is hoping for an encore for other state elections especially in UP by orchestrating violence.

The State and the criminal justice system responded rather poorly to the challenge of communal violence. Overall, the police have failed to bring the perpetrators to justice. At places like Harshul where around 40 houses and shops of Muslims were burnt down, pamphlets were distributed earlier by certain organizations and the same also warned the Muslims about the impending attack and violence, helping some of them to flee from the scene of violence before its occurrence. Yet the police didn't avert violence, hinting at either intelligence failure or lack of will to protect the minorities. In Atali, though the police sheltered the Muslims in Ballabgarh police station for over 10 days, its failure and reluctance to arrest the wrongdoers of the violence in May 2015, who were identified by the survivors, led to another similar attack on the Muslims in July. In Dadri, the reaction of police was appalling when it sent the meat found at Mohammad Akhlaq's house for forensic testing if it was. By its poor, and even lack of, response the state afforded space and legitimacy to vigilantism. The impunity enjoyed by the vigilante Hindu nationalist groups encourages such actions on minorities throughout the country. The role of the police has larger repercussions on the delivery and response of the Criminal Justice system of India. In a complete travesty of justice, the police personnel accused of gunning down innocent Muslims in Hashimpur were acquitted by the Delhi Court marking a new low in the realm of speedy justice and human rights. Those held guilty and sentenced for their crimes in communal incidences in Gujarat in 2002 are out of jail.

Another striking trend this year is the attacks on Churches across India. Churches and idols inside were vandalized and desecrated. The attacks indicate towards a concerted and deliberate attempt to target the Christian community, trampling their right to freely profess and practice their religion, a right guaranteed to all persons in India by Article 25 of the Constitution. When

the human right organizations protested and demanded action, the state dismissed the incidences as merely mischief by some local anti social elements to downplay its gravity. This along with rapes of nuns, intimidation and violence faced by priests particularly in Chattisgarh, has created insecurity and fear in the Christian community in India. The Christians in Kandhamal could not celebrate Christmas in peace. Hindu nationalists called for *bandh*, resorted to physical attacks on Christians and created an intimidating atmosphere in several blocks of the district.

According to Home Ministry figures, eight states – Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala constitute for 86% of communal incidents in the country. The triggers of the communal violence have largely been religious processions, personal rivalry between individuals of two communities, construction of Mosque in turn reflecting on the question of ownership of resources like land, alleged cow slaughter and inter-religious courtships and marriages.

The Hindu nationalists ran with impunity campaign on issues like ‘*Beti Bachao Bahu Lao Andolan*’ (‘movement’ to save (Hindu) daughters (from inter-religious marriages) and ‘bring’ or poach non-Hindu women into the community through conjugal relations). The RSS- Bajrang Dal has been running this campaign in Agra on such a magnitude that it attracted demand of action from UP Minorities Commission. According to a report, Bajrang Dal members have distributed pamphlets in girls’ colleges to warn Hindu girls against falling in love with Muslim men. This amounts to a hate campaign where there is a deliberate attempt to spread paranoia against other communities and infringement on the rights of individuals who want to get into a matrimonial tie out of their free will and choice. The Hindu nationalists have been encouraging Hindu men to marry Muslim women and convert them into Hindu religion. Interestingly, Agra was also in the grip of communal tension after the bid of forcible ‘*ghar wapasi*’ campaign. This campaign is not restricted to Agra but is prevalent throughout Uttar Pradesh. In West Bengal the Hindu nationalists went as far as exhorting the Hindu boys and their families to become members of BJP for ‘safety and security’ after they marry Muslim girls and convert them to Hindu religion.

The selective leakage of census data of 2011 was another such attempt for spreading hatred. It was revealed that Muslims now constitute 14.2% of the population up from 13.4% in 2001 census. This was juxtaposed with the decrease in the population of the Hindus. It was in order to create a factually incorrect impression that the Muslim population was growing so rapidly that it threatened the majority of Hindus in India. To create further hysteria, Sadhavi Prachi claimed that Muslims produce “40 puppies” through “love jihad” in order to turn “Hindustan” into “Darul Islam” (abode of Islam). To counter this, she urged Hindu women to have 4 children each! Similar appeal was made by Sakshi Maharaj. Both are BJP MPs and obliged to uphold constitutional principles.

Central to both these propaganda issues is the bodies of women and how they are perceived in the discourse of nationalism. Women are looked upon primarily as child bearers to make up for numbers in a nation, in this case to increase the number of Hindus. Challenges that restrict their rights and wellbeing are not untouched. Instead they are assigned the role of mere child bearers, not right bearers. It was shocking when we interacted with women in Atali, both Jats and Muslims. The Muslim women narrated how Jat women in their neighbourhood, with whom they grew up and shared all festivals, joys and sorrows, participated in stone pelting and burning

down their houses. The Jat women unfazed repeatedly asserted that Muslims have no right to construct any Mosque in the village and shouldn't be even allowed to return to the village. The mobilization of women to participate in violence is disturbing as it tears apart a constituency which benefits the most from peace. They also alleged that Jat girls were allured by Muslim men who pose a threat to village traditions (Mhatre & Dabhade, 2015).

Cow slaughter was also exploited to polarize communities. From June 2014 till October 2015, over 330 communal incidents have taken place over allegations of cow slaughter in UP alone. Innocent youth were killed on mere suspicion of carrying bovines for slaughter in Saharanpur.

Social boycott was another instrument to communally polarize and deepen communal identities. In Atali a social boycott was imposed on Muslims who returned to the village. The largely labouring community was not given any job by villagers, they were not sold food items and even milk for their babies, their goods and services were not accepted. This brought the lives of the Muslims to a standstill with hunger and despondency. Upper mobility amongst Muslims or slightest signs of wealth which disturbs the feudal social status quo and the power structure attracted a violent response. The large scale looting and burning of properties belonging to Muslims vindicate this premise. The response of the State in terms of its silence and the fashion in which it condones violence creates an alarm.

Communalization of attitudes and polarization are direct consequences of hate speeches. The hate speeches and the impunity against such hate speeches have sought to legitimize communal violence. Governors, Chief Ministers and MPs have indulged in hate speeches intending to strengthen the narrative of exclusion, bias and hatred (Dabhade & Engineer, 2015). Hate and distrust is spread by office bearers who are supposed to guard the cornerstone of our constitution. Emboldened by this, non state actors have had a free hand to inflict violence on the marginalized.

(... to be continued next issue)

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