

Riots in India: A Consequence of Democracy?

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'Communal' violence and riots in India have been portrayed as reflective of a nation steeped in religious frenzy (Khan, 2011), where two especially incompatible religions- Hinduism and Islam - generate perpetual hatred and conflict between their communities. This conception of religious violence in India seems to be a modified remnant of the Raj, when British rule was often justified as the rational, modern Western intervention to prevent warring, irrational religious groups destroying each other (Devji, 1992: 3-4) Defining India by its mutually hostile religions and the resulting violence has since been a recurring theme for many foreign observers, a theme that was seen as further validated in 1992 during the destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindu extremists. As Ludden (1996) points out:

...Hinduism and Islam together form a single image of religious militancy, as they entangle one another, fighting like two armies at war, or boxers in a ring. Newsweek even used a phrase from media coverage of militant Islam to headline its story on Ayodhya: "Holy War in India"

In India, riots are often portrayed as a 'spontaneous' reaction to an event that acted as a trigger, where the rioters are anti-social extremist elements who threaten peace and amity between communities. This narrative distances the violence from the masses, ignores the shattering silence of the majority and more importantly, does not identify the political actors, authorities who gain from these riots and therefore instigate or refuse to prevent them. Part of this narrative is the act of pronouncing both communities equally responsible for the violence, even when the casualties are overwhelmingly on one side. (Kaur, 2005) This is at best a misguided attempt to be 'neutral' and at worst is a deliberate attempt to absolve a community of guilt.

This essay hopes to explain the involvement of local/state authorities and politicians in riots that might be better termed as pogroms and argues that it is a conscious political decision that transforms an incidence of violence into a full-fledged riot. It draws on the 'instrumentalist' school of thought that views riots as organized events of violence controlled by 'specialists' through 'institutionalized riot systems' (Brass, 1997) that help perpetrate it. Political motivations, the compulsions of democracy and its vote banks, electoral ambitions offer a highly significant explanation for riots. However, they do not provide a full picture without taking into account the processes of religious mobilization, socialization into extremist ideologies, perceptions of 'the other' that lead to the active participation or approval for violence among the people. The essay describes the political environment in India which is defined by constant attempts to woo voters on the basis of their religious identities and also concentrates on certain examples of mobilization of people by the Hindu nationalist movement.

The Instrumentalist Explanation of Riots

Instrumentalist perspectives maintain that riots in India are hardly the outburst of natural hatred they are represented to be, but are the result of the complicity of local or state authorities including politicians and the police. Indeed the process of representing, framing violence and creating a broader narrative of Hindu-Muslim conflict that aids political ideologies is perhaps as important as the act of violence itself. Tambiah (1990: 750) terms the prevailing process of decontextualizing a specific, often ambiguous instance of communal violence as focalization, and refers to the aggregation of such incidents into a 'larger, collective, more enduring, and therefore less context-bound, cause or

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interest' as transvaluation. Such a construction of events is vital for it often leads to the portrayal of Hindu-Muslim violence as a continual, historical circle of repetitive acts of violence, where each riot is a 'reaction' to an 'action' (Kaur, 2005) and creates memories of past horrors that have to be avenged.

According to Brass (1997), riots are triggered due to the presence of 'institutionalised riot systems', informal networks that nevertheless function on 'established links of communication' wherein a community is aware of the roles that will be played by specific persons during a riot. The rioters are often well-known to the police and local authorities, sometimes even 'local celebrities' because of their involvement in previous riots. (Khan, 2011) A motley set of 'specialists' take on different roles: from those involved in the actual physical violence as 'mobile gangs', to those 'fire tenders' who await the chance of a riot by keeping the level of communal relations in a state of tension and others who work at spreading rumours, inciting violence among the general public. (Brass, 1997: 16) Often when the rioters are 'outsiders', they depend on coordination with local informers and collaborators (Tambiah, 1990: 746)

The two major pogroms in post-independence India – the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and the 2002 anti-Muslim Gujarat riots – are stellar examples of 'riots' that were frighteningly well-organised and involved the complicity of local authorities tasked with law and order, and politicians. Congress-I workers and VHP/BJP/RSS activists actively participated in or aided the 'riots' of 1984 and 2002 respectively, while the police either played mute spectators or were conspicuous by absence or were themselves involved in the violence. (Tambiah, 1990) (Brass, 1997) (Kaur, 2005). However, not all riots might involve this degree of organization and even organized riots take on 'spontaneous' actions spurred by emotions:

Riots therefore, are partly organized, partly spontaneous forms of collective action designed to appear or made to appear afterwards as a spontaneous expressions of *popular feeling*. (Brass, 1997) (Italics added)

This supposed representation of the opinion of the masses through riots is what connects communal violence to competitive electoral politics.

Democracy's majority and minority vote-bank politics

Few countries in the world contain a homogenous population, and India's billion strong population means that no 'minority' is minor enough to be inconsequential. Though Muslims make up only 13.4% of the total population, they number a significant 138 million: the third largest Muslim population in the world (Census of India, 2001) (Pew Forum, 2011) Ensuring victory in elections, then, could very well depend on polarizing minority (or majority) communities and ensuring their loyalty to a particular party. (Varshney, 2001) It is not much of a stretch to say that it makes political sense to play on the insecurities of these communities in order to benefit electorally. In such an environment, riots would seem a terrifying extension of political agenda. Both 'secular' and 'communal' parties in India, we shall see below, have exploited religious sentiments to ensure political power.

Those who decide on converting a skirmish between members of two different communities into a grand communal event that benefits them, often base their decisions on the proximity of an election. As Wilkinson shows, the closer the election, the more there is a likelihood of seeing an increase in the occurrence of riots. (Khan, 2011) This, of course, brings home the fact that 'religious' violence is not as much about religion as it is about political ambitions and ideologies justified using the garb of religion. In a blistering attack on the Indian conception of secularism, Nandy (2003: 56) points out that the riots witnessed in India are politically-motivated 'secular' riots that involve the dispassionate use of the passions of religion. In his words:

When secular modernists get involved in the game of organized religious or ethnic violence to fight off political defeat, they play the game not as fanatics trying to advance the cause of their own community or faith but as politicians who must take advantage of human passions to mobilize the political, especially electoral, support of the numerically preponderant 'passive' believers

Democracy has played a major role in causing political parties to focus on rallying distinctive communities as 'vote banks'. Unlike in the West where democracy was often the gradual solution after debates over national identity had

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been resolved, the quick transition to democracy in developing nations provided 'new incentives for political actors to organize and mobilize' people, wherein competing elites found it best to capitalize on old identities that could serve as the basis on which to mobilize masses. (Kohli, 1997) Therefore, there occurs a 'politicization of ethnicity, a hallmark of our time tied to the politics of elections' (Tambiah, 1990)

Indian politics seems to be a perennial quest to 'gain' vote banks that are defined on the basis of their 'old identities'. Just as caste identity defines vote banks (the 'Dalit vote bank'), religious identity too creates the 'Muslim vote bank', both of which are wooed by political parties for their numerical electoral significance.

The sense of trauma that communal violence and riots create amongst the religious minority works to mobilize their votes in favour of the 'secular' political party that promises to provide safety. The tense communal environment due to the Ayodhya dispute resulted in the Muslim community voting en masse, defined by their religious identity regardless of their political beliefs. According to Brass (1994: 238-239):

In the 1991 elections, many Muslim voters appear to have followed a strategy recommended by Muslim political leaders...to vote in each constituency for whichever secular party was in a position to defeat the BJP. In the last two years, the long-term tendency toward the political integration of Muslims in the electoral process has been reversed. Muslims have felt it increasingly imperative to vote as Muslims for their own protection

However, this vote bank aspect could also act as a shield and prevent political parties from aiding or abetting violence against minorities. Competitive electoral politics at the bipolar (two political parties) local/town level often provides incentives for a riot, whereas at the state level with its multipolar set-up (more than two parties), stiff competition for the all-important minority votes leads to incentives to protect Muslims and prevent riots. (Wilkinson, 2005 & 2002)

For the 'communal' political party though, a riot against a minority community serves to consolidate its audience, as exemplified by Modi's re-election as Chief Minister despite nationwide outcry over his involvement in the Gujarat riots of 2002. The power that the minority community wields as a vote bank with the ability to make or break an election adds to increasing resentment among members of the majority. Hindu nationalists, especially, have attacked 'secular' parties for indulging in 'minority appeasement' at the cost of the majority's wishes:

If, however, the "free" expression of Hindu nationalism is directed at the secular state, why is it Muslims who are attacked? According to the Hindu nationalists, because they allow themselves to be used as vote-banks by the established parties, who evade the imperative of Hindu populism by playing up the issue of minority rights.'(Devji, 1992)

Hence, the almost regular spectacle of 'secular' parties like the Congress proposing reservation or special benefits for minorities, especially Muslims, followed by the BJP fiercely protesting such a move. As recently as January 2012, the BJP slammed the Congress's election promise of a sub-quota for Muslims, an unfair promise meant to influence voters that was declared by the Election Commission of India as a violation of the 'Model Code of Conduct'. (India Today, 2012) (The Economic Times, 2012)

The BJP is hardly a shining example of not indulging in vote bank politics. The political project of the Hindu right has been to unite the Hindu community that is fractured by sects and castes into a 'Hindu vote bank', through religious mobilization (Jaffrelot, 1996: 345) Uniting and winning the approval of the masses during the Ayodhya agitation succeeded in the project of creating a Hindu vote in a way that the protests to ban cow slaughter in the 1950s and 60s did not. (Guha, 2007: 634)

The leaders of the 'secular' Congress party, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, too have engaged in tapping into vote-banks, minority or majority, whenever it suits their political purposes:

Indira Gandhi...needing to mobilize electoral pluralities...started flirting with communal themes, occasionally courting India's Hindus by railing against religious minorities, especially Sikhs. .. As his (Rajiv Gandhi's) political situation

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became less secure, however, he, too, like his mother, flirted with communalism, tilting occasionally in a pro-Muslim direction, but mainly courting the Hindu vote (Kohli, 1997)

A case in point is the controversial 'Shah Bano affair' where an aged Muslim woman asking for maintenance from her husband who had divorced her won her case in the Supreme Court. This led to protests by Muslims who declared that the ruling contradicted Muslim personal law, angering Hindus who saw the Muslim demands as unfair. The 'secular' Rajiv Gandhi government, 'panicky in an election year, caved in under the pressure of the orthodoxy' (The Hindu, 2003) and enacted the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act. Seeking to placate Hindus who protested that the Government was appeasing the minority, Rajiv Gandhi set the wheels in motion for an event that would redefine India, by arranging to get the gates of the Babri Masjid that were locked until then, open for worship. Appeasing both sides seemed to be a mistake that caused the Congress to lose power, while the BJP benefited and 'resolved to make construction of the Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid its election plank....Advani was confident that the resolution "will translate into votes"' (Puri, 1993)

Communal violence and 'we, the people'

Explaining the mindset of the people is essential to understanding communal violence, for political parties and politicians who activate 'institutionalised riot systems' depend on their votes. After all, it is not just politicians and their henchmen who are involved in riots, but also many civilians who 'seemingly return to the hum-drum of everyday life and neighborly existence after their spasmodic bloodlettings' (Tambiah, 1990)

Just as Michael Mann (1999, 19) writes of genocides that are often justified 'in the name of the people', it is worth remembering that it is the people whose sentiments are supposed to be reflected in 'spontaneous' riots. If every riot is the result of a calculated move for political gain, we should then consider the fact that political parties would not incite violence and riots if they did not expect a certain approval for such an act.

In this context, it is important to explain why 'riot systems' work in certain areas that seem to approve of the violence, but do not work well in 95% of India that is not riot-prone (Varshney, 2001: 373) For Varshney, civic engagement leading to 'institutionalised peace systems' is the crucial factor that prevents local political elements from inciting hatred on the basis of religion. In other words, high levels of inter-ethnic civic engagement implies that the population of that locality has not been socialized into hating 'the Other' through usage of memories, myths and partisan narratives of history.

On the other hand, examples from the Hindu nationalist movement are helpful in making the point that religious mobilization conditions the masses to accept a particular ideology and by extension the violence that might result from it. Informal local networks are formed due to mobilizing a religious community whose members often consider themselves apolitical or even vote for 'secular' parties. As Kaur (2005: 31) shows, the Punjabi Hindu community that arrived in Delhi as Partition migrants was introduced to the cult of the Sheran Wali Mata (Eight-armed Goddess) by the women's wing of the RSS:

The flexible, assertive and mobile characteristics of the goddess combined with her slaying prowess became popular among the recently uprooted community, now located in refugee camps and low cost state housing, which blamed Muslims for its current misfortune. Thus a Hindu community among the Punjabi migrants was allegorically mobilized and shaped over a collective symbolism

RSS' Vidya Bharati schools function as a way to propagate a partisan narrative of history which Hinduizes India, celebrates heroes who are all 'brave upper caste men and women who have fought Muslims' and presents as 'martyrs' a mob that encountered police firing when it tried to destroy the Babri Masjid in 1990. As Tanika Sarkar (2005: 201) recounts:

The Ayodhya temple issue was often brought up with such a wealth of emotion that, a headmistress told us proudly, even five year-olds would clench their fists in anger and vengeance.

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Similarly, young men are known to be socialized into becoming hyper-masculine 'virile, martial' kshatriyas (warriors) through mitra mandals (friends' clubs) associated with the Shiv Sena (Tambiah, 2005). Another case in point is the political usage of Hindu religious rituals, symbols and mythology by the VHP, RSS and BJP through the Ram Shila pujans (collecting bricks and money to build the Ram temple in Ayodhya), refashioning Lord Ram as *the* symbol of Hinduism, an (unusually) aggressive hero for *all* Hindu sects, a narrative that was aided by the overwhelming popularity of the broadcast of Ramayana on national television. (Jaffrelot, 1996: 385-391)

There have been more direct links between religious mobilization and communal violence. Jaffrelot (1996) details several cases where politically motivated religious processions – Ram Shilas – served as aggressive, emotional activity uniting a crowd and providing the ground for riots to occur during the 1989 election campaign.

While this kind of procession is bound to arouse 'some sort of madness' among participants who may not necessarily belong to communal organisations, the leaders of such groups can obviously manipulate the symbolism and rituals of these marches to provoke riots. Once a riot has broken out, its course and form is influenced by several other factors...but the fact remains that an aggressive procession is one of the most potent means of heightening communal tension and precipitating violence.

A different investigation into the involvement of civilians in rioting- Kakar's (2000) psychoanalytic study of the subjective experiences of Hindus and Muslims in Hyderabad too stresses on 'religious-political demagogues' who capitalize on and exacerbate historically-based feelings of enmity between the communities.

It is the vote-bank dependent political environment banking on the evocative use of religious symbols and historical memories to polarize its audience, in my opinion, that helps explain the emotions of those civilians who participate in the violence, the silence of those who while not participating in the riots, do nothing to prevent it or help those who are being attacked. This explanation of what drives the silent majority might aid in our understanding of why they seem to have transformed from being 'passive assenters during the 1960-70 period...to (taking on) the role of active participants in such riots during the last two decades' (Banerjee, 2002)

Conclusion

The instrumentalist understanding of communal riots illuminates several truths obscured by narratives that talk of primordial hatred or equal distribution of guilt between communities. The underlying political aspect of riots is hard to ignore, for, as Tambiah (2005) points out, 'civilian riots are a mode of conducting politics by other means'. The crucial subject here relates to the perceived public sanction for violence that provides a license for political parties to incite riots.

The 'healthy' democratic idea of seeking votes has transformed into a vicious political process in India that depends on conflating religious identity with political identity by indulging in majority and minority 'vote bank politics'. This has been common practice for parties and politicians of both 'secular' and 'communal' hues. Sustaining a 'vote bank' has often meant mobilization through the usage of religious symbols and icons, hateful portrayals of 'the other' and creating an environment where communal violence is more acceptable than it should be.

The proximity of riots to elections, the very nature of Indian politics that depends on mobilizing crowds, conducting rallies, organizing processions that could easily be steered into communal violence are factors that need to be taken into consideration in the mainstream narrative of riots in India.

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