Countering the Hate Design - Facilitating Peace and Harmony

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Abstract

Communal riots generally happen due to the previous existence of a communal ideology in the society. The hard-core communalists are hate mongers who, by their fiery speeches and provocative statements create a situation which is very conducive for riots o break. The role of the police during communal riots has not been found to be very satisfactory. But, in spite of all odds, there have been people, bodies and organisations which have exhibited compassion and courage during riots and have saved the lives of people. Such people and organisations are role-models who need to be emulated. In riots, the leadership of the police is very crucial. The Indian Police Service officers need to exhibit more of courage, boldness and grit in helping the poor and the victims of riots. A new riot control culture has to develop. The responsibility of maintaining communal harmony lies with all sections of people and organisations. Each of us need to contribute our might to combat the design of Hate and facilitate Peace and Harmony.

Keywords: Communal Harmony, Communalism, Compassion, Police, Riots

Hate and Violence among religious groups are the consequences of a communal ideology. This ideology negates the very concept of pluralism and assumes that not only the interests of a religious community are common, but these are necessarily opposed to the interests of other religious communities. The communal ideology always requires an enemy i.e. the members of some other community. The communal elements propagate the belief that the political and religious interests of their community can be secured only by hurting the interests of other communities. The consequences of pursuing such an ideology is fear, rivalry, revenge and violence. Ultimately it expresses itself in the form of violence and riots e.g. the Hindu-Muslim riots in India.

Ward Berenschot, a political scientist at the Royal Netherlands Institute for Southeast Asian and Carribean Studies (KITLV) has done an intensive study on the riot phenomenon in India, especially the Gujarat riots of 2002. According to Berenschot, violence happens most likely in areas where there are politicians who perceive communal conflict to be advantageous and where these politicians are supported by local networks of (extremist) organisations and individuals who specialize in creating and maintaining communal tensions. These networks are 'institutional riot systems' that specialize in the creation of communal tensions and the organisation and instigation of violence. He asserts that riots are never fully spontaneous and are generally fuelled by the need to maintain and strengthen relationships with influential and useful people.

Ashish Khetan is a journalist and a lawyer. He has done a number of undercover operations to bring out the truth of Gujarat riots. Referring to the Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman he mentions that *Holocaust* was a natural extension of the dehumanising bureaucracy of modern society in which otherwise normal individuals become capable of committing atrocities against others once a sense of personal responsibility has been removed. The communal ideology had similarly dehumanised large parts of Gujarat administration. For some it was a matter of pride to kill members of the other community.

It was the morning of 27th February, 2002. The Sabarmati Express train, carrying hundreds of *karsewaks*[1], returning from Ayodhya, arrived at Godhra station in Gujarat. It is reported that there was an altercation of karsewaks with fellow passengers and also with the vendors at the platform. It is alleged that one of the karsewaks tried to abduct a muslim girl standing on the platform with her mother. A rumour spread that karsewaks were forcibly taking away some muslim girls on the train. A group of muslims came from nearby locality and started pelting stones, burning rags and projectiles at the train which had started to move out of the station. Meanwhile, the train stopped a second time after moving out of the platform. Coach S-6 of the train caught fire and the tragic incident occurred when 58 people were charred to death. The facts recorded by the court point out the violent actions of an out-of-control mob, enraged by a previous confrontation and rumours.

After the incident there should have been swift investigation and punishment of the offenders along with appropriate compensation to the families of the persons who died. Instant steps should have been taken to prevent any further escalation of communal tension and to maintain peace and order. But sadly enough, things proceeded otherwise. A bandh was called by communal organisations which marked the beginning of one of the worst incidents of communal violence. Large mobs went on rampage in 20 of the 25 districts in Gujarat and the violence continued for over three months. The violence was, on the whole, very one-sided, co-ordinated by a relatively small group of people. The rioters were also given money, alcohol, tobacco, and weapon to motivate and de-sensitize them. The violence in Gujarat was exceptional in the scale of violence and cruelties and the absence of remorse. It was also exceptional because of the complicity of the State.

V. N. Rai is a former Director General of Police from UP. In a project sponsored by the National Police Academy, he studied ten major Hindu-Muslim riots in India from 1931 to 1993. In his study he found that since the persons manning the police come from the same society that breeds the germs of communal antagonism, they carry along with them the prejudices, fears and hatred prevalent in their community for the other community. Even under *Khaki*[2], they continue to remain Hindu or Muslim. Police in most of the communal conflicts in India has displayed marked bias against minorities. Among his recommendations are (1) Representation of Minorities in Police (in proportion to their population and a minimum of 10 to 12% of the police force. The increase in the numbers of Black, Asian and Irish people has helped the average white US or UK policeman to improve his conduct while dealing with the minorities), (2) Training Interventions, (3) Fixing of Accountability, (4) Participation of the People. The representation of minorities in the police force may be a debatable issue, but if it improves the efficiency of police and instils a sense of security in the people, it is a suggestion worth considering.

In every despair there is a ray of hope and diamonds are found in heaps of pebbles. There are persons and groups who have shown us the way which are worth emulating by other persons, groups and institutions. During the riots when there is an environment of hatred, there are people who have exhibited a sense of love and compassion and have risked their own lives in saving the lives of the people of other religious communities.

Bhiwandi is one of the most communally sensitive areas in Maharashtra. In 1988, mobile peace committees were formed by the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Suresh Khopre. Each committee consisted of 25 members each from the Hindus and Muslims and an officer of the rank of Sub-Inspector of Police was the liaison officer for 2-3 committees. There was amazing result of this experiment. Even during days of Dec. 1992 and January 1993, Bhiwandi remained calm. Another example is that of Ramrahimnagar slum locality in Gujarat. When the news about the burning of the train coach in Godhra spread, the 23 members of the Ramrahimnagar Jhopadavasi Mandal (RJM) both Hindus and Muslims got together and resolved to defend Hindu-Muslim Unity in their locality. The round the clock patrolling by RJM members succeeded in keeping all riot-mongers out. Not just in 2002, since 1969, Ramrahimnagar remained

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1 A karsewak is someone who freely offers one's service to a religious cause.

2 Khaki is the light brown colour of the police uniform.

peaceful throughout the many instances of violence that plagued the surrounding city. Their peace keeping role has been recognized at the national level and the RJM has been honoured with the Indira Award for National Integration. Rahul Sharma, a 1992 batch IPS officer was posted in Bhavnagar District. On 2nd March, 2002, a mob surrounded a madarsa (muslim religious school) in Bhavnagar and tried to kill the 400 children there by setting the school on fire. Using tact and force, Rahul dispersed the mob and saved the children. While Gujarat was burning, Rahul led his force from the front and took decisive action against the rioters. This was one of the rare instances during the riots when the police came to the rescue of besieged Muslims. Later Rahul was harassed by State Government and he had to take voluntary retirement. In the Naroda Patiya massacre of 2002, Judge Yagnik sentenced the main accused Babu Bajrangi to life imprisonment and two others to long prison sentences. In spite of all kinds of pressures, temptations and threats, she kept her head high and observed the oath of upholding the Constitution. Later, in an interview, she stated 'my religion was that of judge detached from all caste, creed and ideological complexions'. On 26th February 2020, Justice S. Muralidhar of Delhi High Court asked the police to register FIRs against the ruling party politicians for hate speech. Justice Muralidhar expressed his anguish and questioned the Delhi police on its delay. He was immediately transferred to Punjab and Haryana High Court. The FIRs were never registered. Had the police taken prompt and preventive action, the Delhi riots could have been avoided.

Riots may easily be avoided if the police implements the law in its true spirit. Section 141 of the Indian Penal Code defines Unlawful Assembly as an assembly of five or more persons having a common object of using criminal force to intimidate the government, resist the law, commit offences, take property forcefully, or coerce someone to act against their legal rights.. Section 146 defines rioting as Whenever force or violence is used by an unlawful assembly, or by any member of thereof, in prosecution of the common object of such assembly, every member of such assembly is guilty of rioting. It may often be predicted in advance that riots might happen. First there are hate speeches and animosity is created between communities. Then a procession is organised in which there is slogan shouting by aggressive elements. Then the procession reaches an area where there is a place of worship or concentration of another community. The conditions for starting a riot are now very conducive. Then somebody from either side throws a stone and the riot starts. It is then is reported that the riot started because of stone pelting. This in general is a false reason for the riot. The truth is that in general both Hindus and Muslims are peace loving and want to live in peace and harmony[3]. But there are some notorious elements in every community who create the conditions for a riot and then take part in rioting. It is an irony that instead of taking action against the members of the unlawful assembly and the rioters, the police often considers it a fight between two communities. The aggressors and the defenders are equated and the victims are also considered as rioters. People often sense that riot is going to happen. They also make preparations to defend themselves if they are attacked in their homes. Now, if stones are found in house searches, such innocent persons and families are considered as the main rioters while the aggressors and attackers often go scot free. Necessary action may be taken if people keep illegal arms in their houses, but in a riot it needs to be clearly pointed out that which was the unlawful assembly and who were the rioters. Innocent citizens should not be punished for barely defending themselves or protecting their lives and property. It is often noticed that the houses of such people are searched and people get harassed. If the police is alert, most of the riots may be averted. Even if a spontaneous riot erupts, it should not take more than 24 hours for the police to contain it, if there is sincerity.

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3   *Strictly speaking, it is a misnomer to call a riot as a Hindu-Muslim riot. It is better to clearly point out the few rioters who attack a religious place or the residence of the other community. These rioters are generally from outside and their co-religionists in the area are not able to confront them out of fear of themselves being killed by the rioters. It would be very rare to see the Hindus and Muslims in an area fighting each other on the basis of religion. The violence against Sikhs in 1984 is rightly called anti-Sikh riots and not Hindu-Muslim riots.*

The police is often blamed for not taking prompt action against the rioters and for being partial. In general this appears to be true and this might be happening because of the inadequate representation of all communities in the police force. But it has also been noticed that the same police force has performed excellently when bold and proper leadership was provided to it. Police is a disciplined uniformed force and they will act as per the directions provided by the leader of the force. The police personnel in general cannot be blamed for police inactivity or complicity. The role of the Indian Police Service (IPS) officers is very crucial. Examples are there where IPS officers have exhibited commendable courage and have not surrendered themselves before politicians and communal elements. In a riot like situation, the innocent citizens, mainly the poor, consider the police officials as their saviour. An introspection has to be done by the whole IPS that what prevents them from becoming angels to people in distress. Why are there fake encounters? Why do communal riots linger on? Why the rioters go scot free and the innocent people and the defenders are unnecessarily searched and harassed? The officers of the IPS need to ponder over these questions and take a firm commitment to act as per their oath to abide by the Constitution, thus giving a strong message that in their jurisdiction there will be no riots, no harassment of innocent people, no fake encounters and no injustice. If IPS officers make such a resolve, the political bosses will be forced to abide by the law. They will understand, that an IPS officer is not the servant of their wishes, but a soldier of the Constitution of India. During the initial training at the Indian Police Academy, the young IPS officers need to be groomed and engrained with such noble traits.

But the onus of maintaining communal harmony lies with all responsible governments, organisations and persons. A few resolves and actions may go a long way to tackle the menace of Hate Design

- Peace committees be formed in every locality and these should work in liaison with the local police. Stories of role models and those who have exhibited boldness, courage and wisdom in fighting hatred and providing justice to the victims need to be propagated in society by peace committees. Such persons should be honoured and their experiences should be shared all over.

- If there is a hate speech by some politician or religious leader, then the people of that community should come out strongly to condemn such an act and request the police to take action.

- A new riot control culture should be adopted by the police. If a riot occurs, then the outsiders who are the rioters, should be identified and punished. It should not be called a riot between two communities, but an attack by the rioters on the other community. The innocent and the defenders should not be unnecessarily punished and harassed[4]. Even if a house search is to be made, it has to done taking care of the dignity of inmates. The house search should be made according to the procedure prescribed by law, in the presence of independent witnesses and preferably under video recording.

- The recommendations of former DGP V. N. Rai given in his book 'Combating Communal Conflict' be seriously considered for implementation.

- The guidelines framed by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India to deal with lynching and mob violence be sincerely implemented.

- The religious leaders of different communities should exhort their community members to imbibe the values and traits of love and compassion for others. It should be a frequent activity to vow for imbibing the teachings and character of Shri Ram by Hindus, Prophet Muhammad by Muslims, Jesus Christ by Christians, Guru Nanak by Sikhs, etc. The religious leaders of all religions should also resolve that they would not insist on any religious procession being taken on a particular route or through a particular area if there is an apprehension that some anti-social elements might utilise it as an opportunity to start a riot. In such a situation, the advice of the police should be given priority.

- The members of different communities, especially those in peace committees, should on special

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4 *Recently, there have been instances where the houses of people were bulldozed just because, as it was alleged, they threw stones at a procession. The aggressive elements in the procession were not subjected to such a treatment. Moreover, such an arbitrary action without following the prescribed procedure is deplorable. It is a grave injustice to snatch the livelihood and residence of innocent people especially the poor.*

occasions vow for a commitment to communal harmony. Such a commitment may be expressed in a form similar to the vow of Hindu-Muslim Unity as requested by Mahatma Gandhi to his followers during the protest against the Rowlatt Act on 6th March, 1919

'With God as witness, we Hindus and Mohamedans, declare that we shall behave towards one another as children of the same parents, that we shall have no differences, that the sorrow of each shall be the sorrow of the other and that each shall help the other in removing them. We shall respect each other's religion and religious feelings and shall not stand in the way of our respective religious practices. We shall always refrain from violence to each other in the name of religion'.

Let each of us contribute our might in combating the Design of Hate and to facilitate Peace and Harmony in the country. Hate cannot be defeated by hate. Hate can be conquered only by the expression of Compassion and the implementation of Justice.

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