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India

On the Delhi Pogrom

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The communal violence that erupted in the National Capital Region of Delhi on February 24th, and carried on for about a week, marks another orchestrated step in the Sangh's strategy of deliberately polarising the Indian public along Hindu-Muslim lines. In the past such politically motivated communal assaults have been large-scale and episodic. After 2014, such targeting of Muslims by the cadres and supporters aligned to Hindutva has taken the form of attacks, sometimes fatal, on individuals or very small groups, especially in the BJP-ruled states where the perpetrators mostly get away with what they have done. This kind of 'low-intensity violence' makes such attacks a 'routinised', 'normalised' and 'banal' affair. It displaces any blame on to the failings of the local 'law-and-order machinery' thereby disguising the machinations of Hindutva's hate-filled project of terrorising, inferiorising and ghettoising Muslims while deliberately spreading fears among local Hindu communities of possible Muslim retaliation.

The Delhi violence marks something of a departure from this post-2014 pattern in that it took place in the capital city; it overlapped with Trump's visit; and was contained after a few days and not allowed to go as rampant in scale and spread as was the case in the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984. Most importantly this took place after the BJP failure to make substantial electoral gains in the early February Delhi Assembly elections, though the BJP did somewhat expand its vote share and seat tally. It is not a coincidence that the violence was worst in the northeast region where there is more solid support for the BJP helping it to gain 5 assembly seats there out of its total tally of 8 such seats. Frustrating for the Sangh was the fact that the anti-CAA/NPR/NRC sit-ins and agitations were not showing signs of fatigue. Indeed, there was greater international media exposure of these protests as well as criticism of the BJP central government; all the more so because of the Trump visit. Senior BJP leaders already preparing the ground for the assaults through their calls for violence and hate speeches before and after the Delhi elections, felt enough was enough. Some kind of sharper and more hurtful message, albeit in a more contained time-span, had to be sent.

What was not expected was that sections of the minority community had out of impending fear, made some preparations for self-defence in a few areas. As a result of this casualties there were less than they otherwise would have been. But it also meant that there would be some casualties and damage in Hindu majority areas including the unfortunate death of an IB officer Ankit Sharma. This was played up out of all proportion by the BJP leaders and an absolutely biased media determined to ignore and divert attention away from the reality that easily most of the casualties by injury and death (a total of 53 deaths accounted for so far) as well as property damages lay on the Muslims. Making matters worse was the fact that there was video proof of the police either being silent spectators or actual participants in the assaults launched by pro-Hindutva cadres, many of whom according to local witnesses had come from across the UP border. This repeats the earlier cases when the police in Delhi did nothing to prevent masked intruders to enter JNU and beat up left students and even teachers. Nor have those intruders been rounded up and punished despite visual evidence enabling identification of them. Earlier in Jamia Millia Islamia University, the police had illegally entered the campus and caused serious injuries to many by brutally attacking students assembled there using stun guns, rubber bullets and tear gas as well as making lathi charges. The police also went into the libraries and hostels to carry out further brutal physical assaults and damaging property. In neither case have the police been brought to book nor will this happen in regard to this latest more serious round of Delhi violence.

That there were also remarkable and heart-warming instances of Hindus sheltering besieged Muslims and of Muslims protecting Hindu neighbours, doesn't alter the more disturbing reality of pre-planning so that in Hindu majority areas Muslim shops and houses were marked prior to the subsequent burnings and attacks on them. Moreover, police complicity and then its subsequent behaviour (clamping down on all violence only after the passage of a few days) can only be explained by sanctions, messages and orders coming to them from the political masters at the Centre.

On the Delhi Pogrom

What is most disturbing is the failure of the judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court to order the immediate trial of Sangh hate-mongers or to condemn the police. In asking Harsh Mander to prove his bonafides, the Supreme Court seems to have gone beyond that. This augurs ill for hopes of just, fair and impartial punishment later on for all those guilty of criminal violence. Should we be surprised then if there are unusually favourable rulings given to the party at the Centre and its members?

AAP did nothing to mobilise its support base and activists to protect the besieged areas when it could have done so. It has refused to highlight the disproportionate plight of Muslims for fear of alienating Hindu voters thereby reinforcing rather than contesting the BJP's ideological-political project. AAP has confined itself to offering relief to all victims who can show proof of their suffering - a difficult enough task requiring legal support not forthcoming from the Delhi government as distinct from concerned civil society activists and associations - and to the setting up of make-shift, poorly equipped camps where the perception of providing relief seems more important than providing sufficient resources to make relief real and adequate.

Other opposition parties have also done little or nothing. Sonia Gandhi as leader of the Congress, instead of assuring the AAP government when needed, that she would give her party's full support to any collectively organised effort to fulfil the urgent task of immediately bringing the violence to a halt, preferred to score political points by criticising AAP failures while not daring to mobilise Congress activists and supporters to march en masse to the affected areas as 'protectors'. The Left parties could have made a similar joint call but when the city was burning in places, they opted to carry out inconsequential marches and dharnas to the 'shop windows of Indian democracy', namely Jantar Mantar and Rajghat.

Modi and Amit Shah as expected, indulged in generalities, claiming to deplore the violence and calling for 'peace and harmony' but at the same time pushing, in direct and indirect ways (faithfully followed by their IT trolling cells, their MPs/MLAs and of course their drum-beaters in academia and media), the line that it is the months long unwarranted anti-CAA agitations (allied with their supporters in civil society and from other political parties) that is the real culprit which finally got out of hand and ultimately is to be held responsible for what has happened.

The overall political consequences are stark. First, the Sangh/BJP will most likely benefit from this polarisation. Communal violence invariably sharpens the religious identity and deepens the attachment to it. This for some time to come at least becomes the identity prism and filter to make sense of what is happening in the society one lives in. Allegiance to one's religious community generally becomes stronger. Second, the terrorisation and ghettoisation of Muslims is accelerated. Richer Muslims in Hindu majority higher class areas move to Muslim dominated neighbourhoods where they believe they will be safer. The reverse happens to richer Hindus in Muslim majority neighbourhoods who move out. But this is no parallel or equivalent process of 'Hindu ghettoisation'. Rather, it is the drawing of sharper boundaries diminishing the everyday actually lived co-existence of the two communities which can act to an extent as a counter to the hatreds espoused by religio-political extremist propaganda and practices.

The one bright spot exhibited by the anti-CAA agitations and the relief, information gathering and solidarity activities, displayed in the wake of the communal violence, is the commitment and participation of young people of college and university going age across religious faiths. In the immediate term, members of the RS in Delhi have participated along with others in these activities. In the longer term it is vital that RS connects to this youth which everywhere, inside and outside Delhi, has been appalled by what has happened and in one way or the other recognises the distinctive threat posed by the forces of Hindutva as well as the feebleness of the challenge, if any, posed to it by the other political parties. This is the constituency from which activists committed to the progressive social transformation of an India, where the socio-economic iniquities of neoliberal capitalism have today fused with the political-cultural ugliness of Hindutva, must be recruited and developed. They then will be a key input into the wider longer-term effort to successfully confront and defeat the hegemonising ambitions of the most evil fascistic force that today exists in our country.

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Source [Radical Socialist, 8 March 2020](#).

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