

Communal Violence and Inter-Community Relations

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The submission of the voluminous report of the Liberhan Commission and the consequent noise and contentious positions impel us to look at the fragmentation of the communities and societies in recent times. It also wants us to look at the divergent frames of the private and the public memory before and after the demolition of the Babri Masjid seventeen years back. The available social data undoubtedly underlines that the worst of the violent episodes in recent times have occurred when the criminal aggression got “ritualised”, meaning thereby that the perpetrators had nothing to fear and nothing to feel bad about, for it was all intrinsically devised as a set of rituals and supposedly with the consensus of a *majority*. The blurring lines between ritualised violence and brutal criminal violence indicate a major shift in the socio-cultural framework governing *distantiation* and consequently, the formation of the *disparaged others* category who are summarily denigrated as people, they are presented as entities who absolutely lack values and principles which are integral to *our* persona. In fact, the agitation which was led from the front by the VHP/BJP and RSS leaders witnessed substantial ruptures in inter-community relations in almost every part of India. Expression of violence brute physical and psychological, were just the natural corollary of a politics which frequently changed the garbs of religion, culture, politics and social reconstruction.

Bijnor, Khurja, Mumbai, Dang and Bhagalpur might offer variations in terms of the smaller frames of the big picture of violence and its victims. However, the unifying theme is that these crimes and acts of barbarity were committed *en masse* not only in regard to the number of victims, but also in regard to the numbers of those who perpetuated the

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crime. Interestingly, the chief protagonists as well as the perpetrators committed the crime without ever believing that it was departure from the normal and *civilised* behaviour. To put it succinctly, they were living in altered contexts of morality and normal situations. This is one of the main points that Hannah Arendt (2002) emphasises throughout her report. She does not think that prosecution had proved “beyond a reasonable doubt” that Eichmann had committed an overt act of murder “with his own hands”. She strongly objects to what she takes to be the prosecutor’s melodramatic attempt to demonise Eichmann to portray him as a “sadistic monster” who was possessed by an “insane hatred of the Jews”. By relying on such conventional categories, the prosecutor obscured the character of this “desk criminal” and his crimes. Arendt highlights that Eichmann was neither “perverted nor sadistic”. He was “terrifyingly normal”. And the perpetration of the most barbaric and brutal violence since the mid- 1980s in India was built around the vortex of *terrifyingly normal* persons. The victims appeared defenceless and numb on account of the fact that actual physical violence followed the subterranean ideological work by the Sangh Parivar which meticulously aimed at the *othering* of certain communities from the private as well as the public realm in localities. Ironically, studies on mass and organised killings have been marred by a poor understanding and an under-theorising of *othering* and *distantiation*. Othering is a broad, imprecisely used term, encompassing a variety of processes and phenomena. This naturally poses enormous problems for explaining the perpetration of mass killing because a central task of any such attempt is to evaluate whether and how the ideology of othering and distantiation produced and influenced its many aspects, the way it did.

Most of the explanations coming in the wake of progression of violent episodes following the demolition of the Babri Masjid, in reality caricature the perpetrators i.e., those who chose to participate in the mayhem since the opening of the lock at the disputed structure. The accounts treat them as if they had been people lacking the ability to decide a moral sense, lacking the ability to make decisions and take stances. They do not conceive of the actors as human agents, as people with wills, but as beings moved solely by external forces or by *transhistorical* and invariant psychological propensities such as the slavish following of narrow self-interest.

The conventional explanations available for the progression of the violent episodes in the decades following the opening of the lock at the disputed structure at Faizabad also suffer from further conceptual obscurity. Even before the submission of the Liberhan Commission report, there was no dearth of detailed narratives of the accounts of the death and destruction drawn on diverse episodes of violence from all over India; they in fact fall much short of underlining the extraordinary nature of the act i.e. the distantiation followed by mass killing and destruction of the “disparaged others”. Most of the accounts which locate the centrality of RSS in inciting people to commit such acts of barbarity also depict it in such a manner in which it appears that killing “others” on the encouragement of the agency is no different from making them do other undesirable tasks. In fact one of the most important and immediate tasks for us is to look at the culpability of ordinary people in such crimes, for so far we have conveniently allowed them to go ahead freely presuming that they were cajoled to be perpetrators. Drawing from the writings of Staub (2007), Waller (2007) and Goldhagen (1997) in the context of Nazi Germany, we have reasons including substantial empirical evidence which suggest that we should not undermine the actors’ nee perpetrators’ capacity to understand, apprise and judge and it should also take into account their own personal negotiations with morality and moral framework of connectedness. It needs to be recognised that we were and remain a normal society and hence what made people agree and willing to distantiate (at cognitive as well as spatial level) the “disparaged” others requires a different structure and frame of understanding.

While talking of the nature of evil, Waller (2007) says, “In general conversation, we easily substitute ‘moral wrongness’ or ‘bad’ for the term ‘evil’ without any loss of meaning. Even those authors and scholars, who derive and make their arguments on the basis of religion and philosophy, do not actually define ‘evil’.” Waller (2007) highlights that, “to specifically define the ‘judgmental’ and ‘moralistic’ concept of evil seems to threaten the academic ideal of ethical and value neutrality”. This is a behavioural definition that focuses on how people act towards one another; and the definition of human evil includes the creation of conditions that materially or psychologically destroy or diminish people’s quality of life – their dignity, happiness and capacity to fulfil basic material needs. Such conditions aim to threaten or impact socio-cultural

as well as economic and political realms of the “disparaged others”. It belittles their persona, pushes them further on to the margins and without allowing them any space for speaking out whatever anguish they have.

The Psychology of Perpetrators: Individuals and the Cultural System

To understand the psychology of perpetrators, we must consider their persona, the forces acting on them, and the system they are part of. The cultural system makes one of the most pervasive impact on the persona of all known by the differential categories such as perpetrators, onlookers, bystanders and the witnesses through selective over-emphasis on specific items in the worldview. A worldview, according to Waller (2007), includes the presuppositions, intentions, meanings, rules, norms, values, principles, practices and activities through which people live their lives. It is a fundamental orientation that includes the core cultural ideals of what is good and what is moral. Implied in this *distantiating* worldview is the obliteration of a common ground between perpetrators and victims and between the wounded and the witnesses as well as with regard to the bystanders. Meticulously built aggression towards the *others* consequently transcends the boundaries of the moral framework governing inter-personal and inter-community relations as we have seen in recent times through the orchestrated violence against Muslims and Christians in different parts of India. Needless to reaffirm that this orchestration of physical violence has followed the call made by the ideologues that had been emphasising on distantiation of *others*. The innermost aspects of *distantiation* can be seen in the manner in which we come across newer spaces increasingly appearing witness to minor altercation being transmogrified into issues of permanent contention between communities and at times amongst the rival factions within the same community. Politicised religion and its rituals perform diverse set of functions and one of them is no matter how much of sin the recruited ones have committed in the past, they are not to be pushed away from God, at least in the collective memory of people around. Participation with vigour and *dedication* in the public theatre of politicised religion in effect allows them to have recompense come quickly and readily for them. And consequently areas drawn from diverse contexts changed and transformed the way communities looked at inter-community irritants. Communities had differences and altercations always between individuals

but they were never approached with the lens of the political-religious identity of the communities involved. However, these new spaces in a short span of time had developed tremendous capacity in signifying an existing irritant between two individuals (belonging to two different communities) as ready case in point of *intrinsic incompatibilities* of the two religions. We have evidence galore to believe that with the ostentatious and arrogant celebrations of the Ramshila Pujan in diverse localities, any possibility of rapprochement between the communities were lost forever. With continuous dress rehearsals, every locality was an ideal-typical site with adequate number of willing ears and disposed minds to carry out the task expected of them. Volkan's (1997) *Chosen trauma* and *Chosen glory* had become integral ingredients of the borders and boundaries between the communities. "They" i.e., the rioting crowds did not take much time in establishing an instant chord with the crowd which had a maypole in the local as well as the national leaders of the Sangh outfits (Volkan: 1997).

Much before Graham Staines had to happen or a Gujarat 2002 was to take place, the *new India* was writing the prologue for more of the genocidal violence which in all likelihood was seeking greater validation for *distantiation* and *othering* in the coming years. The dead ones have long gone and so have the diminutive and ritual protests which were raised against such *total* violence. But bigger questions remain in the psyche of the children (who could manage to survive) who are adults now. And the most fundamental question from them is – what has been done to retrieve the sites and spaces which have been lost to the ideology and ideologues of "othering and distantiation"? Like the Germans during the Nazi regime, people here also shared the life problems and culture that gave them a common inclination, a societal tilt, to experience certain ways of fulfilling them. The earliest Nazis probably had characteristics that intensified these needs and desires – a wish to relinquish a burdensome identity, authority orientation, anti-Semitism and these became the means of their satisfaction offered by Hitler, especially congenial doctors in particular who may have been attracted to the "biological" aspect of Nazi ideology and its scientific racism. The different categories of leaders such as pseudo-moderates, radicals etc., indicated by Justice Liberhan (2009) testifies to multiple layers and levels at which the organisations affiliated to the Sangh have been working to accomplish *othering*.

Demonisation of Others

The instances of near total violence directed against Christians in Gujarat, Karnataka and Orissa or against Muslims in various places build on the political and moral justification of distantiation. Once the distantiation is accomplished at the psychic level, expression of violence is merely a routine and a predictable pattern of behaviour directed at *others*. Before the desire of the dehumanisation/demonisation gets a favourable climate, the tendency to dichotomise the world into *us* and *them* is under way. As Staub (1959) says, “the ties that bind people to significant in-groups are much stronger than this: deep affective associations, shared understandings, common goals and the perception of a shared fate.” Consequently, enemy groups i.e. those outside of our in-groups are created and categorised by an emerging ideology, usually on the basis of cultural devaluation. Consequently, dehumanisation appears as a psychological process whereby the in-group views the *other* as less than human and thus not deserving moral consideration as well as political consideration. The accounts of the perpetrators and the bystanders of the riots beginning from the Ramjanma bhoomi agitation bear testimony to the completed cycle of demonisation and this is one important reason for why it never appeared as morally outrageous to any significant populace. Protracted conflict not only strains relationships beyond repair; such conditions often lead to feelings of intense hatred and alienation among the groups. Once moral exclusion of the *other* is complete, the killing or the destruction has to negotiate only with the statutory and legal framework, which of course shall operate within the altered moral framework of the society. Robert Sternberg (2003) moves further and underlines that underneath the demonisation of *others* as prerequisite to their decimation lies the subterranean ideology of hate which is carefully nurtured and shaped in order to accomplish ends that are knowingly planned and systematically conceived. In his conceptual model, Sternberg suggests three components of hate. The first, *negation of intimacy* which involves the seeking of distance from a target group. This component of hate is affective; it is experienced as a negative emotion. The second component, *passion*, expresses itself motivationally as intense anger or fear in response to a threat. The final component, *decision/commitment*, is characterised by cognitions of devaluation and diminution toward the target group. This is the cognitive component that is often nurtured by institutions. Dehumanisation starts at the point

when, thanks to the distantiation, the objects at which the bureaucratic operation is aimed, can and are, reduced to a set of quantitative measures. Dehumanised objects cannot possibly possess a “cause”, much less a “just” one; they have no “interests” to be considered, indeed no claim to subjectivity. A strong identification with the same leads to social death, i.e., the natural death which follows subsequently is merely a corollary-anticipated and desired one!

Ritualised riots and disparaged others

The expressions of violence which concerned people at large in the wake of the Ramjanma bhoomi agitation was crafted around the perceptions of each others' identity between the two communities. It believed that conflict can be caused by accentuating the feelings of *threat* for the majority community and by further highlighting the Muslims as *disparaged others*. Such *threat perceptions* were drawn from the mythical version of a tense past, an unresolved or knotty loss in the public memory. Rituals are associated with and are performed according to a given set of rites and happen to be a detailed method laying down procedures for following up. Rituals also channelise the aspirations into expressions of collectivity through a progression of performative acts. Rituals have much more agency and dynamism than what constitutes routine. When rituals are invented and propagated they are likely to generate ritualised minds in ritualised spaces. Participative minds in such altered and designated spaces find arenas where important and critical reality is perched. On occasions, activities resemble customary practices, albeit conducted with more dramatic flair when othering is accomplished as critical social reality. Groups affirm their identities through practices that ritualise the routine of everyday life. Annihilations were always the ideal-typical examples of the violent episodes and there was no dearth of them in the episodes of violence we witnessed since the unlocking of the gate at Faizabad. However, there are other facets of violence which have not received attention to the same degree i.e. executing deprivation for *disparaged* others, prohibiting purchase from *their* shops, refusing to supply *them* basic necessities such as milk, etc. Besides mental processes: feelings, attitudes and values that individuals and communities were made to hold, grounds were prepared for eruption, legitimisation and subsequent glorification of violence. Hate, fear and mistrust as driving feelings were deliberately pushed in the cognitive structures by the diverse agencies and instruments of Sangh

Parivar, which allowed people to *classify* Muslims as barbaric, uncivilised and disparaged others. If an entire community lacked human values as we have within us, killing and annihilation of *disparaged others*, does not prick community conscience at any significant level. In intense conflict situation communities' sense of "who they are" mixes up with "why they are so" and the plight, the vulnerability, the miseries seen around us are attributed to the disparaged others, making the cycle of dehumanisation complete in all aspects.

We can also look at the way the leaders of the Hindutava movement tried developing their social, cultural and political aims into a whole. They, in fact, learnt a beautiful lesson from Frame theory which is pivotal in the making and maturation of any movement. Frames, according to Benford and Snow (1992) are "slices of observed, experienced, and/or recorded 'reality' [which] are assembled, collated and packaged...such that a new angle of vision, vantage point, and/or interpretation is provided". By carefully altering the way the Hindutva movement constructed and presented itself, it changed probably forever the discourse between *us* and *them*, or the *other*. It altered all possible reasons and mechanisms by which public conscience could have come to critically engage with the multilayered processes of *othering*. In the carefully designed frame where the locus of the problem was pre-diagnosed by the organisations through all possible manipulation, attribution (of the blame) came quite naturally to the confirmed converts as also to the potential ones who were fence sitters for the Hindutva movement. The carefully orchestrated operational part of frame resonance predefined the degree to which individuals could identify with the stated positions of the newly developed frames of Hindutva. It naturally provided immense opportunities by which the movement wrote the script for a "new India" and consequently achieved resonance with a wide and diverse audience from diverse cultural and regional zones. Resonance also proved to be the manifestation of what is known as consensus mobilisation, whereby movements "activate individuals who already agree with their views and aims" (Snow and Benford, 1992).

Identity Construction, Memories and Inter-Community Relations

While mapping the contours of the community it is imperative to locate and delve into the issues of memory and history besides identity at the local level. It is generally understood that for any discernible and disturbing

rupture in community relations, the *adversaries* must have a sense of collective identity about themselves and about *others* against whom they are supposedly juxtaposed. And in the process of conflict each side believes that the fight is between us and them. Developing a sense of self is an essential part of every individual's evolutionary pattern within the larger community identity. Each person's self-conception is a distinctive combination of several identifications based on gender, class, sect, religion etc. Although identity of the self may apparently coincide with a particular human being, identities per se are actually much wider than that. In their best perceived sense, identities are collective and they stretch beyond *borders* created by the states and the governments.

Locating identity in our times Bauman (2004) writes: "In our world of rampant 'individualisation', identities are mixed blessings. They vacillate between a dream and a nightmare, and there is no telling when one will turn into the other. At most times the two liquid modern modalities of identity cohabit, even when located at different levels of consciousness. In a liquid modern setting of life, identities are perhaps the most common, most acute, most deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of *ambivalence*."

Moving a little further, we also realise that hegemonic superimpositions too create and construct identities for the individuals and the groups. And on account of the pervasive impact of these constructed identities, people feel (or are made to feel) injured when other persons sharing their identity are injured or killed. It should be stressed that huge physical distance is no check that the images seen and perceived shall not cross administrative *borders* and *boundaries*. Identities are constructed on the basis of various traits and experiences and there are large numbers of players engaged in the vocation of identity construction. Several of those characteristics, which are presented as sets of identity markers are in reality open to different readings, interpretations and explanations.

Identities are portrayal of the self as also attributes projected on to others. They also indicate not only *who we are* but *what others think of* who we are. Bauman (2004) depicts the distinction between choices and free will of some on the one hand and of incapacitated on the other hand, others as far as identities are concerned. "Let me note that identification is also a powerful factor in stratification; one of its most divisive and sharply differentiating dimensions. At one pole of the

emergent global hierarchy are those who can compose and decompose their identities more or less at will, drawing from the uncommonly large, planet-wide pool of offers. At the other pole are crowded those whose access to identity choice has been barred, people who are given no say in deciding their preferences and who in the end are burdened with identities enforced and imposed *by others*; identities which they themselves resent but are not allowed to shed and cannot manage to get rid of. Stereotyping, humiliating, dehumanising, stigmatising identities...” Such constructed identities, if remain uncontested, can persist for generations creating *borders and boundaries* between *us* and *them*. We do need to admit that arriving at the foundation of the inter-community relations is a worthwhile aim to pursue irrespective of the hazards and risks it entails and if the process of seeking information touches the core of the people’s heart, many corridors of the past as they see are open to us. On the other hand, memory is an interdependent process of remembering and forgetting. Memory is also a label for a diverse set of cognitive capacities by which humans retain information and reconstruct past experiences, usually for present purposes. However, when the external stakeholders are at work in helping people remember (read manufacturing), remembering is often immersed with emotion—a heightened passion, an irrational one as we have seen in our times. As such with *manufactured memories*, the casualty list includes rationality, reasoning and logical interpretation of events. Memory goes wrong in disastrous ways and the contemporary history bears witness to the same. Memory also is a storehouse of different constituents besides possessing a ready reference for an actual or anticipated event. The past does not correspond to the *real* in any direct, unmediated way since what we remember are memories—screens always already impressed by the fantasies or distortions of a series of successive remembering. Hence memories, like dreams, are highly condensed symbols of hidden preoccupations (Halbwachs, 1992). We must also realise that imagining the past differently from what it was can change the way one remembers it. What is it about imagining a counterfactual event that causes people to later become more confident that it really happened? A growing literature shows that imagination can change/alter and even destroy autobiographies and that applies to the persona of all large groups including a nation or community.

Memory serves as both a phenomenological position of identity and a carrier for overt identity construction. As memory emerges into consciousness, eternalized and increasingly objectified, it depends on cultural vehicles for its expression. In building connections between the past and the present, between who we are and what others perceive us to be, narratives or stories dug from the past have a very important contribution.

One important aspect of memory indicates what people remember. Halbwachs (1980) argued that what we choose to remember derives from the social arena which people always inhabit when they remember. He therefore introduced the term *collective memory* (*memoires collective*). Halbwachs (1992) stressed how strongly social processes influence not only people's personal memories of their own lifetimes, but also a community's shared memories of the past. Such collective memories are crucial for the identity of groups such as families, believers and followers of a religion, or social classes (Halbwachs 1992). James Young should join in here (1992) to remind that we should rather speak of *collected memory* rather than *collective memory*.

The nature of the networks within a particular place or grouping is of fundamental importance when making judgements about community as a space and community as feeling of solidarity; and the extent to which people can find *shared spaces* within them. Ability to and availability of opportunities to connect to others and interact with them widens the possibility of a broad spectrum of community. However, shared histories in shared spaces have been one of the most important casualties in recent times in the process of *othering* whereby an adversarial identity is superimposed on *them* without their approval and consent. Manufactured superiority and imposed inferiority on to others further complicates community life in locales where familiarity and unbridgeable social distance can happily go with each other.

It shall not be an exaggeration to underline that people and communities do not always form opinion about the *self (us)* and *others* on the basis of their own personal encounters and experiences but, more often the guide for interaction comes from *above*, from *distant quarters* with or without the consent of the receivers. Such *freely rented* experiences have added to the make-up and hardened postures of beliefs and a subsequent take on "self" and "others". The images of hurt and distress

caused to the victims of inter-community violence have not been able to pervade the extant notions of morality and justness and ironically life moves on but leaves a few posers and one of them is that the violence aimed at the *disparaged others* cannot simply be perceived as malicious design of an agency guiding the events through a remote control. They made us kill you is a very poor defence and hence cannot stand critical prosecution.

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