

THE NEW VIOLENT INDIA

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A Muslim man watches from his house after a shop was demolished in Jahangirpuri in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: AP

A picture on social media last week said so much about India today. Wasim Shaikh of Khargone in Madhya Pradesh stands in front of a piece of land cleared of a settlement. Shaikh's 'gumti' or tiny grocery shop was razed to the ground on April 11 because he was said to have thrown stones during a [communal riot a day earlier](#). Shaikh has no arms; he lost them in an accident in 2005. This does not matter. He is a Muslim in an area where there was violence and that is enough reason for the state to destroy his only source of income.

This is where India is heading, or where India has already reached. A society seemingly without humanity, which is violent, targets minorities, and has the state acting above the law.

Our 'naya' India is one of revenge and hate towards an imagined other. It is one where governments do not administer the law but flout it. It is one where, across India, [gangs go about terrorising Muslims](#) and if a riot ensues, the administration follows by [destroying homes and workplaces of Muslims](#). It is one where the leadership of the dominant political party is silent — because this violence solidifies hate and reaps electoral dividends. It is one where the police seek guidance not to uphold peace but from what the political mood wants of it. It is one where the victims of violence are turned into suspects and thrown into jail without bail. It is one where courts often look the other way, or do nothing more than rap governments on the knuckles. And it is one where across all classes, those who are otherwise recognised as decent people feel a sense of satisfaction and even take pleasure at this violence against their fellow citizens.

This is where we are as we celebrate 75 years as an independent nation.

The "[demolition of law](#)", which is the best way to describe this [bulldozer violence](#), comes with a fig leaf of legitimacy, of the clearing of illegally-occupied land. This everyone knows is only a cover for the fake news factories and the WhatsApp University to argue that the "law must follow its course". This form of governance is supposed to have made the [chief minister of Uttar Pradesh](#) very popular. Now others are copying it. [Gujarat is practising it](#) and [Madhya Pradesh has enthusiastically followed](#) and both States head to the polls over the next 18 months. This new weapon reached Delhi last week, where the local administration, citing a technicality, was able to cock a snook at the Supreme Court, no less, for a couple of hours.

The bulldozer violence is the latest step in the march of state-encouraged communal violence across India. It is worsening by the day and what is shocking today becomes routine tomorrow. Lynching, and economic boycotts are now passé. New horrors pile on top of the old which have been forgotten. Who now remembers the 2015 lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq in Dadri, or the murder of 15-year-old Junaid in 2017 on his way home during Eid? Or even from just seven months ago of Moinul Haque of Assam, shot by the police when clearing "encroachments" and whose body was then stomped on by a photographer hired to record the events?

Now the [open calls for killings of Muslims](#) have become routine. When the first such event took place in Haridwar late last year, the local police were stirred to act half-heartedly. Now a police report in Delhi can boldly claim that such public calls for mass killings are only about protecting one's religion.

Do we need to fear mass killings? As many have pointed out, you do not need to organise gruesome single-event communal violence, when the same result can be achieved with “1,000 cuts every day”. Across the country, even if mainly in the north and now in Karnataka too, there are gangs of volunteers to whom the work of harassment, intimidation and local killing has been “outsourced”. They are “[freelancers](#)”; they may not be a part of any political party and they may not receive any directions from political functionaries, but they have absorbed the poison of bigotry and do the work expected of them.

The actions of these vigilantes whip up hate and fear of the other, which, in turn, consolidates voter support that delivers election after election. It is not welfarism (*labhartees*, the word in Hindi for beneficiaries of government programmes) that is deciding elections. It is the consolidation of the vote on communal lines, plain and simple. It is pointless to ask the political leadership to speak out against mob violence when it is a part of a larger political atmosphere that has been harnessed so successfully at the polls.

If the mob is now free to target one minority, it will soon be emboldened to go after others. Which religious minority will be next? Which ‘lower’ caste will be next? The violence of vigilantes that is being carried out under the benign gaze of the state cannot be controlled. Soon it will outgrow its masters and India will end up reaping the whirlwind.

Pen-pushers like this writer think they can stir people’s conscience against the catastrophe that awaits us. But we are mistaken, we are impotent in the face of this tidal wave of violence that is driven by the ideology of revenge, muscular nationalism and inhumanity. All in the name of “righting historical wrongs”. The intense hatred of Muslims that is now being fanned is just another layer on top of the centuries-old violence against Dalits. It has brought to the surface a certain face of India that we did not want to acknowledge.

To modify the observations of the historian Upinder Singh, the messages of ‘shanti’ that Mahavira, Buddha, Ashoka and Gandhi preached were exceptions in the history of a couple of thousand years of a violent society. The violence of India is now there for us to see in full force in the 21st century, in what is supposed to be a modern nation governed by an exceptional Constitution.

There are exceptions and it is those strands of humanity that we must latch on to and hope that we will emerge from this tunnel. Like [Madhulika Rajput of Karauli](#), Rajasthan, who gave protection to a dozen young Muslims and stood up to a gang that sought entry looking for Muslims. Or the [young Hindu shopkeeper](#) in Jahangirpuri in Delhi who told a reporter, “I am a Hindu, he is a Muslim...we are friends, we help each other in distress...the mob is out to destroy our lives. I will stand, even if alone, in front of the masjid to protect it if a bulldozer comes to destroy it.”

We can only pin our hopes on the strength and conviction of such Hindu brothers and sisters.

(C. Rammanohar Reddy is Editor of *The India Forum*)

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