

HARD TRUTHS FROM THE RUBBLE OF COMMUNAL CONFLAGRATIONS

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'Neither riot nor religious procession is new in India. What is new is the use of incendiary slogans and aggressive acts' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

The spate of riots that erupted around the recently held Ram Navami festival and Hanuman Jayanti in States such as [Madhya Pradesh](#), [Gujarat](#), Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan and in [Delhi's Jahangirpuri](#) seem to have begun a new chapter in Hindu-Muslim violence. The last time such a cycle of Hindu-Muslim violence erupted simultaneously in so many States was after the [Babri Masjid demolition on December 6, 1992](#). While the demolition of the Babri Masjid triggered riots in various parts of India that year, no such singular tragic event could be attributed to the current cycle of violence, indicating a radical shift in not just inter-faith relations at the societal level but also in State-community relations.

In recent events, the demolition drive after the violence saw, for example, the [use of a bulldozer in Jahangirpuri](#); the entrance of its local Jama Masjid was damaged. Thus, from the Babri Masjid's destruction to the demolition of a part of Jahangirpuri's Jama Masjid this year, it has been a full circle in the right's approach to the Hindu-Muslim issue. Between 1992 to 2022, the Hindu right's politics seems have etched [the word 'demolition'](#) in the journey of Muslim identity in modern India. At the time of the Babri Masjid's demolition in 1992, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-governed four States: Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh; and these governments were dismissed by the P.V. Narasimha Rao government of the Congress after the demolition.

Some commentators who questioned these dismissals tried to justify the secular credentials of these BJP governments by citing the absence of riots in these States. But these days, such claims about BJP-ruled States cannot be made. Instead, according to reports, riots may be engineered to perpetuate polarisation even in non-BJP ruled States, with Muslim victims presented as perpetrators.

In the present instance, the Supreme Court of India has intervened, fortunately, and has made [sharp observations about the use of a bulldozer in Jahangirpuri](#). But the point is that the use of the bulldozer as a 'solution' to rioting has emerged as standard practice in several BJP-governed States. While [Uttar Pradesh is the first State in India to use the bulldozer as an extra-judicial weapon](#), other States such as [Madhya Pradesh](#) (in the instance of violence in Khargone) and Gujarat (in the [violence in Sabarkantha](#)) too have justified it as the final solution. Riots are not specific to India, and happen even in developed countries, for example, race riots in America. But in no other country does the state deploy bulldozers as a solution.

In Jahangirpuri, for example, BJP leaders have brought in the 'presence' of Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees as a factor, as if their clusters are integral to all Muslim neighbourhoods. Like all ideological movements, the right seems to use invented facts in a reckless manner to promote its ideological propaganda. By virtue of this, the right has been able to present Indian Muslims — one of the most deprived communities in modern India — as the most pampered one in public perception using the allegation of appeasement over the years. By bringing 'Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees' into the conversation, the right seeks to question the legitimacy of Muslim belonging. With the fact of there being no historical right to homeland, the 'right to home' evaporates. Hence the use of the bulldozer becomes the most apt intervention.

Neither riot nor religious procession is new in India. What is new, however — and as the media reports — is the use of incendiary slogans that are meant to hurt the Muslim community, and resorting to aggressive acts such as the display of swords in order to try and provoke retaliation, thereby leading to riots. While further inquiry would lead to the discovery of more facts that have led to or aggravated the violence, the truth is that there is a deliberate attempt to change the nature of what are purely religious processions, thus marking the deeper penetration of a Hindutva ideology into otherwise routine religious life.

On Hindu-Muslim violence in India, there is robust scholarship by scholars of various disciplines. Here, there are two observations on which there is consensus: first, Muslims suffer disproportionately in terms of loss in lives and livelihood in riots. Second, the main cause for communal violence is most often trivial. What has changed now is that communal violence can occur even without there being a trivial reason. What is even more intriguing now is the difference in the state's approach to grappling with riots and post-riot situations as opposed to a pre-majoritarian moment in Indian politics. In the past (particularly under the so-called secular regimes), the general approach applied to handling post-riot situations included the setting up of a judicial investigation; compensation for victims; a visit by leaders such as Chief Ministers or even the Prime Minister to the violence-hit neighbourhoods. For example, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Muzaffarnagar after the violence in 2013.

On the other hand, after the Jahangirpuri incident, the Delhi Chief Minister, like leaders in the BJP, has chosen not to visit. It has been argued that by doing so, the Chief Minister has 'smartly avoided' falling into the BJP-laid trap in this atmosphere of toxic communal politics. But the fact is by doing so, the Delhi Chief Minister has only internalised the fear of the Hindutva narrative and has sub-consciously trapped himself on the BJP's terms. Any ideological politics requires clarity over convictions and fearlessness in its execution. Therefore, it is futile to claim to represent an alternative to the right today without having clarity over citizen's rights and a confidence to perform the solemn duties of a public servant.

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