

Meerut 1987: Reflections on an Inquiry

K Balagopal

The Muslims started it' and therefore the administration dead" that it is going to wreak vengeance against the Muslims and ensure that they learn their lesson for good This is the 'theme' of Meerut 1987.

THERE has always been a surfeit of suffering in this country. Poverty, deprivation and slow death have long since ceased to affect us. But it is perhaps only recently that we have reached a stage where even large-scale and violent death affects us only momentarily. The truth of this degeneration hits you hard when it finds expression in attitudes that contradict accepted notions of ethnicity and ethnic chauvinism. That we are a caste-ridden and community-ridden people is a doleful self-image that is frequently deplored. Some castes and communities—the Muslims for instance—are regarded with particular suspicion in this matter. It is when apathy to suffering contaminates even this alleged cohesion that its full truth hits us in the face.

Activists of the Indian People's Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) who spent days on end in Meerut collecting material for an inquiry into the killing of Muslims by (or with the abetment of) the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) during the May 1987 riots found it strikingly evident that nobody other than those who were directly affected by the killings was in the least interested, barring perhaps some Jamaat-e-Islami leaders. There are many more Muslims in Meerut than live in Hashimpura, Mallana or Mian Mohammednagar, but not one of them appeared to have any interest in the proceedings. In the narrow and foul-smelling lanes of Hashimpura, interest in recounting the past is alive and active, but outside, on the bustling Hapur road with its frequently jammed traffic, it is as if Meerut 1987 never happened. As for Mian Mohammednagar, with the exception of those who are condemned by their professions to possess useless information—traffic policemen and pliers of hired vehicles, that is to say—nobody else, including persons who are obviously Muslims, even appears to know that there exists such a locality in the town.

It is not that there is no religious or communal solidarity in Meerut; no doubt there is plenty of it, just as there is plenty of sympathy for Tikait's peasantry and plenty of devotion at the Nauchandi *mela*. But it seems that these feelings, passions and emotions cannot be seen to exist permanently in steady quantities, and in a

mode of being susceptible to instant awakening at will, an assumption that pervades the Gian Prakash report, whose author views religious communities—especially the Muslims—as solid substances made of combustible material that can get crackling at the slightest abetment.

Once this understanding sinks in, one can stop seeing the victims of PAC as 'minority community' and start seeing them as human beings; not abstract human beings that one idealises and weeps over, but real flesh and blood creatures; they are no doubt susceptible to arousal on communal grounds, but that susceptibility is not absolute but is a function of—and is perhaps even determined by—other dimensions of their social life—and of society's life in general—that are in no way defined or delimited in religious or ethnic terms. One can start seeing them preliminarily as people who produce/appropriate/accumulate material wealth in a variety of modes, and on that basis live their lives, dream their dreams, empathise with some people, despise others, and hope for a better life, here or in heaven. The dreams, the empathy, the despise and the hopes are doubtless affected by their religious/ethnic world-view, passions and prejudices, but that impact is not absolute nor necessarily negative or destructive; it is inter-laced with the rest of their identity, and the result is much more complex and much less scary than is feared by people who are forever hesitant that one is pampering minority communalism by opposing majority communalism, or by exposing police partiality during communal riots.

And so, to Hashimpura and Malliana, dominated by thriving artisans and successful traders and transporters, you can find your way without too much difficulty and once there, you can find at least a handful of residents interested and optimistic enough to go around gathering evidence; but to Mian Mohammednagar, populated by the down-and-out and the dregs of society, it is difficult to find your way, and it is even more difficult, once there, to organise much enthusiasm for the inquiry. As for the rest of the 'minority community' of Meerut, it no doubt has its own opinion about new-rich artisans and transporters, about wretches who can-

not fend for themselves, and even about the communal solidarity that allegedly overwhelms all of us.

mid then it becomes possible to hate the PAC for what it did in Meerut last May. We only need to listen to some of the sixty-Guu victims who deposed before the tribunal when it sat at Delhi and Meerut during the second and third weeks of March. Mohd Osman of Hashimpura:

... on 22.5.87 evening at about 6 p m the PAC, the military and the police arrested me and everyone from our neighbourhood and made us sit on the road side. As I was watching they took away three of four truck loads of people from our mohalla and sent back home the old and the children. Lastly I with about 50 people from our mohalla were left when the PAC commander who had a mike ordered that we all be put in the truck. With me in the truck were Kadir Chaiwalla, Haji Mustaqeen, Haji Shamim, Naeem, Rizwar, Abdul Haq, and others whom I know by face but do not know by name. We were stuffed inside the truck and I was made to sit right inside. That is why I do not know which way the truck went. The truck stopped at one place and two or three PAC men got down and the truck started again, It kept going and I wondered why we had not reached the Civil Lines police station.

The truck took a right-turn and went on a curve when I heard one Of the people from our mohalla saying that there is the Muradnagar canal. After this the PAC took one man out Of the truck, shot him and threw him into the canal. Then they took out a second man from the truck, shot him and threw him into the canal, and like this the third man was also Shot dead. At that time the rest of the people said we should remember god because PAC is going to kill us all. Everyone stood up, at which time the PAC peppered us with bullets and those who were saved were also shot dead and thrown into the canal. One man fell over me and that is why I was not hit by a bullet. Then two PAC men picked me up and I started crying and pleaded with them to spare me because I had two very small children and old parents. At that time a third PAC man came towards me pointing a rifle and I caught the barrel and pointed it away from me and two or three seconds passed in this confusion and he put the gun on my stomach and shot. I shouted that I had been killed and those PAC men thought I was dead and threw me into the canal.

After I was thrown into the canal' I tried to swim but my legs would not work and with great difficulty I reached the bank. I caught the grass and pushed myself to the bank. When the PAC truck went away I came out of the canal and sat down... I reached the metalled road. Two Bihari artisans (who had been shot) were

already there. After that two trucks passed by and I tried to stop them but they did not stop.. A little later some policemen came by on a motor cycle. I signalled to them with my hand so they stopped. I told them that the PAC people had shot us and thrown us into the canal and the police said they would return with a jeep. One policeman stayed with us.

The policemen said if I gave such evidence my life would be in danger, so I should say that I had come to my door to see my brother when the riots broke out and I was shot at my back and I do not know who shot me...

During my treatment at the All India Medical Institute there was a CID man who stayed near me and who would not allow any journalist to speak to me. In this period whoever met me I told them the same story that the policemen had told me to tell because I felt my life was under threat,...

This was the infamous 'Gangnehar' (Ganga canal) killing, in which 32 persons were shot dead in cold blood and thrown into the canal. Two other survivors, Zulfikar Nasir and Naeem Ahmed, who escaped death as miraculously as Mohd Osman, also deposed before the tribunal. All the 32 belonged to Hashimpura. There were others from Hashimpura who were beaten to death at the Civil Lines police station and yet others who were beaten nearly to death and died later in remand at Fatehgarh jail. Here is an eye-witness, Parvez Ahmed, who holds a post-graduate degree in economics from Meerut University:

I, Kamaruddin and Shiraj Ahmed were at the residence of Nasruddin, No 9, Bageecha Mohd Hussain. At about 5.30 p m army entered the house and arrested me, Kamaruddin, Shiraz Ahmed, Mohd Nasru and Salim and took us to the main road. We found many other residents of the mohalla were also taken there... Major Pathania and a Sikh captain were in charge of this operation. I was put on a truck, in which Moinuddin was also taken and we were all taken to the Police Lines.

When the truck arrived at the Police Lines, it was surrounded by the PAC and they started beating us while we were in the truck. The truck was open from all sides. So there was a stampede inside the truck as we were moving from one side of the truck to another to save ourselves. Moinuddin fell down and was severely injured in the stampede.

We were detained at Police Lines for about 2-3 hours and then taken to Civil Lines police station. There we were dragged out of the truck one by one and beaten mercilessly. In this beating Moinuddin, Zaheer Ahmed and Meenu became unconscious and were dragged out and kept under a tree. It was around 11 p m at night. I think they succumbed to their injuries and died some time later. In the early morning, around 4 a m, the police

took the three bodies away from that place... Due to severe beating both my legs were fractured...

And an eye-witness to the happenings in Fatehgarh jail, Tajuddin, s/o Shamsuddin, says to the tribunal:

On 22.5.87 at around 5 p m I was arrested from my house (in Hashimpura) along with many people of my mohalla, including Mohammed Salim, Jamil Ahmed, Usrnan, Hanif Khan and Deen Mohammed. I along with IS of my mohallawalas including Deen Mohammed, Jamil Ahmed and Hanif Khan were taken in a closed vehicle to the Police Line?.

I and my companions were beaten very badly with lathis and hockey sticks as a result of which the condition of some of us, including myself, became very critical.

On 24.5.87 evening I and my companions were taken to the Civil Lines police station. From there some of us were sent to Fatehgarh jail and we reached r. here on the morning of 25.5.87 at about 7 a m.

As soon as we entered Fatehgarh jail the old convicts and the police beat us badly with lathis as a result of which Deen Mohammed died at that time. Hanif Khan and Jamil Ahmed, two people who came to the jail in another truck, and M d Salim died the next day on 26.5.87 at the Fatehgarh jail hospital. I was asked to identify the bodies of Deen Mohammed, Hanif Khan and Jamil Ahmed and I identified these people's corpses.

I saw Mohammed Osman who had come in another truck in Fatehgarh jail, with both legs broken. He died two days later at the Fatehgarh jail hospital..

Thus were the people of Hashimpura killed; some were beaten at the police station and died there or in jail, and some were shot dead and thrown in the canal; the total number comes to about 46. Their fathers, mothers, wives and children who were left behind in the mohallas when these victims were taken away in the PAC trucks, were in the dark for a long time about their fate. And the police chose the cruellest ways of informing them. Here is Shakila Begum, who lost her husband Hanif:

... On the 22nd May at about 3 to 4 p m the police (including PAC and women police) came. My husband who has been ill for the last three years, was lying inside the house. I asked the police not to take away a sick man but they hit him in the stomach with the butt of a rifle and took him away. I showed them the X-ray photographs and medical reports of my husband and begged them not to take him away but they dragged him out and when our 6 year old grandson obstructed them they dragged him out also. I went out and snatched my grandson and brought him back.

On the 27th the PAC people came and said Hanif is not well, will somebody come? I said, you have taken away

everybody, who else is there to go? I went with the PAC to the Civil Lines police station where they said we will give you a gift on the eve of Id and gave me my husband's dead body. They called me a bitch and said they had brought this gift for me all the way from Fatehgarh jail.

ABETMENT AND INCITEMENT

At the other two main areas—Malliana and Mian Mohammednagar—the PAC did not kill directly, but stood by and egged on Hindus to kill Muslims and loot their property. The killings of Malliana took place on May 21, 22 and 23. According to Aijaz Ali Siddiqui, an articulate resident of Malliana, a total of 73 were killed in the different mohallas of Malliana. Some were shot dead by the PAC, and some were killed or burnt alive by rioters, while all of them had their houses and shops looted. The individual accounts given by witnesses are somewhat garbled and incoherent, but put together they give a clear enough picture. It begins at Chandralok on the 21st, when 20 persons were burnt alive in just one house. Other houses of Muslims and their shops in neighbouring Sabun Godam were burnt and looted, while the police of Transport Nagar police station were busy at the same time searching the houses of the Muslims for illegal weapons. This looting, burning and killing continued on the 22nd in Kishanpura. The residents of the looted and burnt houses ran away to safety, as the police and PAC jawans standing by the roadside 'watched in amusement', as a witness tells the tribunal. Multan Nagar was another mohalla of Malliana that was looted and burnt on the 22nd. By the 23rd, most of the Muslims of Malliana start gathering in mohalla Shekhan, a predominantly Muslim mohalla, for safety. Then an attack takes place on this mohalla that day, under the direct supervision of the police of Transport Nagar police station, and the PAC. 40-year old Murad Ali describes the day's events thus:

... On May 23, all the Muslims of Malliana got worried... Slowly the Muslims of Islamnagar went to Mohalla Shekhan. At that time the police and the PAC were at the Holi Chowk on Baghat road. At about 2 p m, some more trucks along with officers in jeeps came to Islamnagar. The PAC then distributed itself into three batches and from behind Sanjay colony graveyard and from Mohalla Shekhan they collected near the pond.

At about 2-30 p m when Muslims were returning after reading Namaz, there were sudden cries of 'maro maro! Jai Bajrang Bali!' Hindu rioters armed with weapons came and started looting, killing and burning the houses of Muslims. During this attack the police and PAC stood on the high roof-tops of Hindus' houses, and started firing at Muslims...

... At the time when the Hindu rioters attacked the Muslim basti from the south,

the police and PAC were firing at Muslims from Holi Chowk and advanced towards and entered Mohalla Shekhan. From the western side, the police and PAC fired at Mohalla Shekhan from the 'Gaddhon ki basti'...

... In Mohalla Shekhan the police and PAC entered the houses of innocent Muslims and mercilessly beat them up. Valuables from their houses were looted... The Hindu rioters had the assistance and guidance of the PAC. In Sanjay Colony 9 innocent Muslims were killed and their bodies burnt; similarly in Islamnagar Mahmood and his family members were burnt alive by setting their houses on fire.

When the police and the PAC started entering the houses and killing Muslims, we decided that we will raise our hands and go to the officers near the pond so that they could arrest us. The old, the young, children, women, all of us went to the officers near the pond but the cruel officers did not hear our pleas.

What was the reaction of the officers who were standing at a very strategic spot (one has to visit Malliana to understand this) supervising the burning, looting and killing? According to Aijaz Ali Siddiqui, the police officers told the people to get back to their houses; when the people replied that the houses were burning and they could not go back unless the police helped to put out the fire, an officer replied; "We have not come to put out the fire, but to kill all Muslims". Another officer said: "We will create another Jallianwala bagh here". And a third added, for good measure: "You fellows applauded so much when Imran Khan was hitting sixers, now you face the consequences". This should no doubt be counted among the achievements of Doordarshan in its efforts to spread patriotic national consciousness.

WHY AND WHEREFORE

At the end, having listened to these endless tales of official brutality, one is faced with the inevitable question: how does one make sense of it? The riots begin on May 18 and in the beginning it is Hindus that are mainly killed and their property that is mainly looted, but by about May 22 the riots cease to be riots and become police and paramilitary action against the Muslims. In the first three of four days, according to an estimate submitted to the tribunal by the Jamaat-e-Islami, 51 Hindus are killed, and from about the 21st to the 25th, not less than 295 Muslims are done to death—almost all killed by or under the active supervision of the police and the PAC. The huge disparity in the numbers apart, the significance of this transformation of riots into state terror is to be clearly understood. This certainly did not happen accidentally; it did not happen just because the large majority of PAC men happen to be

Hindus. Anyone who is familiar with the mentality of policemen knows that a policeman will never kill without authorisation—general or specific—from quarters that are high enough to protect him from the consequences of the act. The Indian police is essentially a force of cowards and bullies whose instincts are those of mercenaries, not of heroes, even heroes in a wrong cause. Who, then, authorised the transformation of the PAC into the avenging army of the dead Hindus? The Gian Prakash Committee constituted by the UP government should have principally aimed at answering this question, but its report is oriented towards avoiding it. It does not even recognise the transformation in the situation after the first three days. It only says that excessive force appears to have been used—a criminal euphemism for what happened in Hashimpura and elsewhere. The report sounds as if two lathi blows were given where one would have sufficed.

Instead the Gian Prakash report follows a pattern that is by now familiar. It consists of a lot of pseudo-social science analysis topped with denigration of political and communal leaders and hopeful homilies about communal brotherhood. The one thing it scrupulously avoids is the one thing that the committee, by virtue of its composition, should be the most competent to talk about: the abdication by the administration of its responsibility to protect the lives of citizens and instead the assumption of the role of sectarian vengeance. The Muslims started it, and therefore the administration decides that it is going to wreak vengeance against

the Muslims and ensure that they learn their lesson for good. This is the 'theme' of Meerut 1987, and this is the theme that is entirely missing from the Gian Prakash report.

A second question that any serious analysis must grapple with is: what makes these riots—whichever community it is that commits the first murder—erupt with such apparent spontaneity? The Gian Prakash report considers and rejects the 'economic conflict' thesis: most of the powerlooms of Meerut are owned and worked by Muslims, as indeed are most of the establishments of the artisan type, but the business in the supply of inputs like yarn and the purchase of output like cloth is largely in the hands of Hindu businessmen. The feeling is said to have come up among the Muslim entrepreneurs that they are being squeezed at both ends, but Gian Prakash rejects it as a cause of the riots. He himself plumps for a more familiar explanation, the staple indeed of journalistic analyses of communal riots. The Muslims, especially the large number of immigrant Bihari powerloom workers, are educationally and socially backward and susceptible to communal incitement. The Ram Janam Bhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict was utilised by communal leaders on both sides (especially the Muslims) to create and maintain a climate of communal hatred; and at the slightest opportunity the Muslim communal leaders deliberately provoked, instigated and organised the masses of their community to turn violent. The element of conscious intent is emphasised strongly by the report. Since 'it was the Muslims who

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Started it', the explanation apparently fits the facts. But apart from the obvious distortion that the 'explanation', by virtue of what it chooses to concentrate on, leaves out the PAC's role, we may yet be interested in knowing what makes the leaders of the Muslim community advocate mass suicide, and what makes the people accept the advocacy. Are these twin phenomena really all that different from what one observes at a global level in the nation's politics: the seemingly suicidal

squabbling, mudslinging, mutual assaults and exposures, and the unscrupulous playing of dangerous games at the top, and the utter disgust with the system on the part of the people which expresses itself in equally suicidal and anarchic explosions at moments of unbearable stress? In other words, to what extent are communal conflicts 'communal', and to what extent are they just a specific expression of the deep-rooted tensions of the polity?

have to embrace both the urban and rural areas.

Further, whatever gains in the popular votes may have been made by the CPI(M) in the panchayat elections, there is no objective basis to take these gains as something permanent, as fluctuations of some order can never be ruled out. It would be absolutely unwise not to get an insurance against the unfavourable swing, in the form of support from the other Left-oriented parties.

A historical view of the Left parties' electoral ascendancy in West Bengal brings out a few valuable lessons for all of them!

First, so far neither of the two 'super powers', namely, the Congress(I) and the CPI(M), has ever gained a plurality of the popular votes in West Bengal. Even in the blatantly rigged 1972 assembly polls, the Congress had got less than 50 per cent of popular votes. While the Congress enjoyed sort of a monopoly of power in the pre-1967 period, it had secured 60 per cent or more seats with 39 per cent, 46 per cent and 47 per cent of popular votes in the first three general elections successively.

Inversely, the CPI(M) has derived the benefit of avoidance of a division of the Left votes as it secured 58 per cent and 64 per cent of the seats with 38.49 per cent and 39.29 per cent of the popular votes in the assembly elections in 1982 and 1987 respectively. The gains of the smaller Left parties, FB and RSP, from the alliance with the CPI(M) are also unquestionable, though of a much smaller dimension: in 1971 after the disintegration of the second United Front in West Bengal the FB and RSP had got 18 and nine seats with 2.70 and 0.63 votes respectively on their independent strength. In 1987, as front allies their strength rose to 26 and 16 seats with 5.84 per cent and 3.94 per cent of votes respectively.

Electoral statistics apart, there are other, and more weighty, arguments for a closer Left alliance.

First, the communists cannot afford to forget that the FB and RSP, more particularly the first, represent in the eyes of the Bengali middle class a certain linkage with the nationalist traditions. A separation between them and the communists may appear to these sections as the snapping of this link.

Secondly, and much more importantly, the recent developments on the national political stage, particularly the ominous portents of the centre's manipulation of the Tripura polls, the 59th constitutional amendment and so on, should warn all Lefts and democrats that the next round of elections, if and when held, may not be a simple ballot box exercise and that it may call for a far wider mass activation to defend democracy from illegal and unconstitutional machinations. All this really calls for a more dedicated Left unity!

For a More Dedicated Left Unity

Ajit Roy

The persisting tensions among the Left Front parties in West Bengal after the panchayat elections reflect in part a certain lack of clarity about the need for strengthening the Front and in part a failure to interpret correctly the results of the panchayat elections.

THE acute intra-Left Front tensions generated over the distribution of seats for the recently held panchayat elections in West Bengal have not entirely subsided. On the contrary, the CPI which earlier had seemed to have been more or less satisfied with the CPI(M)'s conduct has recently come out with serious allegations about the latter's breach of faith in about 1,000 panchayat constituencies. The other two discontented allies of the CPI(M) avail themselves of every opportunity to give expressions to their subdued disaffection against the leader of the Front. The basic cause of the persisting maladjustments among the Left Front partners may lie in a certain lack of clarity about both the need for the continuation, indeed strengthening, of the Front as also in the failure to interpret correctly the results of panchayat elections.

The results of the three tier panchayat elections in West Bengal held at February-end open to differing, and even contradictory, interpretations. They may be used to uphold the sectarian view of favouring a 'big brotherly' role for the CPI(M) on the one hand as much as unifying role for consolidating the co-operation with its smaller Left Front allies, on the other.

Despite bitter quarrels over the distribution of seats between the CPI(M) and its two other Front partners, namely Forward Bloc (FB) and Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), during the pre-election campaign, all the three parties have increased their tallies in the over 62,000 seats in the three-tier structure. The CPI(M) however, increased its share spectacularly from about 55 per cent of the total to about 66 per cent, while the FB and RSP also have made gains, if only nominally from 2.36 per cent to 2.64 per cent and from 2.74 per cent to 3.01 per cent, respectively. All these gains for the Left Front parties have

been secured at the cost of the Congress(I) whose share of seats has declined drastically from 31.88 per cent to 22.8 per cent. This out-turn may be interpreted in a way so as to strengthen an existing sectarian trend in the CPI(M) that holds that the alliance with smaller Left parties is no longer vital for taking on the Congress(I) in West Bengal.

The fact that a head-on collision with the CPI(M) notwithstanding, both the FB and the RSP have not only held their ground, but also improved their positions, however nominally, may, on the other hand, be put forth in support of a contrary view that recognises the independent strength of the parties and favours a more flexible alliance policy within the Left Front.

In view of the fact that party-wise distribution of votes is not yet known, there is certainly some room for divergent opinions on this score. But if the question is discussed in a wider framework, the need for the continuation of widest possible unity of the Left forces stands out clear and sharp. The reasons may be stated briefly as follows:

First, it will be foolhardy to presume that the voting pattern in the local body elections like the panchayat and the more explicitly political contests as in assembly and Lok Sabha elections will be exactly identical. Normally, 'the patterns are somewhat different.

Secondly, the last few rounds of assembly and Lok Sabha elections have revealed that the CPI(M) and the Left Front parties have a wider mass base in the rural areas of West Bengal than in the urban and, for that matter, industrial areas. It will therefore be extremely unwise to see the panchayat polls as the forerunner of the general elections for the assembly or the Lok Sabha which will