

NOT BY REPRESSION ALONE

(The Spark, Vol. 1 No. 1, August 15, 1987)

During the past 40 years of Independence India has been rocked by more than 9,000 communal riots. These riots have taken a toll of more than 8,000 human lives and caused injury to around 50,000. They have also contributed to the degeneration of human and democratic values. The recent riots in Meerut and Delhi are a pointer towards increasing brutalisation and dehumanisation of society. These communal eruptions are only an aggravated manifestation of a phenomenon which has been experienced in its varied forms and intensity in other parts of India.

An analysis of available data reveals that between the mid-fifties and the beginning of the sixties the incidence of communal rioting in India was moderate. It increased by one and a half times between 1954 and 1969 and to a similar extent between 1969 and 1981. The increase was particularly sharp during the mix-sixties. Thereafter, the number of communal incidents started declining until the mix-seventies. In the late seventies, the number of communal incidents began rising again.

Communal riots spread to new areas. In 1961, 61 districts were affected and by 1979 as many as 216 out of the 316 districts then were rocked by communal riots.

Riots have become longer in duration after the early sixties. A feature of communal riots in India had been their spontaneous and unplanned, though possibly organised, nature. It is significant that of late they have acquired a new dimension of being planned on the basis of communal ideology against a particular target. This planned nature of communal rioting is one of the factors influencing the intensity of rioting.

The increase in the incidence, intensity and duration of communal rioting is alarming. It signifies the increasing brutalisation of Indian society. The increase in communal eruptions will only lead to a fascist State. A study of riots in Bhiwandi, Malegaon, Jamshedpur, Delhi, Bihar Sharif, Ahmedabad, Vadodara, etc. reveals the use of fascist gangs to engineer violence. Physical violence is unleashed against individuals or groups perceived to be posing a threat to the so-called Hindu, Muslim or Sikh identities.

It also signifies the false perception of social divisions as communal cleavages. This legitimises the notion that jobs, representation in public bodies, legislature, Parliament and judiciary should be based on the numerical strength of religious groups. The access of individuals to these positions or jobs is projected as a gain of the whole "community" to which the beneficiary belongs. The communalists accept individual gains to have benefitted the whole "community" and a communal vicious circle is set in motion. For example, if an individual who happens to be a Hindu becomes a Judge, the communalists will project it to be a gain of all Hindus and a loss of other religious groups. All this points to the isolation and decline of secular institutions and organisations and the passivity of the State and partisan involvement of the police personnel and other functionaries which imparts ferocity to rioting and accentuates its intensity and duration. This can be discerned from the fact that the State had actively or tacitly given support to those who foment or engineer communal

riots on different occasions. The Delhi, Kanpur and Bokaro riots of November, 1984, can be cited as examples.

The solution to increasing eruptions of communal violence is sought in frequent and excessive use of police and para-military forces and the army. In spite of the frequent resort to this method, communal violence continues unabated.

There is a strong belief that communal violence can be checked by the timely use of para-military forces. Communal rioting is treated like other ordinary crime, arising from inadequate intelligence and inefficiency of police officials. Even certain police officials consider communal riots to be a consequence of their lapses and they are confident of tackling these through police reinforcement.

Various enquiry commissions have also treated communal riots as ordinary crime by individuals and hence largely as a law and order problem.

A critical evaluation of the reports of commissions appointed by the Government of India to look into the causes and course of riots reveals that communal riots are thought to have erupted due to the intolerance of people towards other religions, non-alertness of intelligence and police agencies and slackness on the part of the administrative machinery. The causes for riots are traced only to the incidents immediately prior to the conflagration and an analysis of riots is lost in the details of the courses of events. Hence, the root of riots is seen to lie in religious practices, festivals and processions. Solutions, therefore, centre on formation of peace committees and tightening up of police and administrative apparatus. However, the task of these commissions exclude the role of communal ideology and the crisis caused by socio-economic factors.

The one exception to this law and order approach is contained in the reports of the Kanpur riots enquiry committee (1931) set up by the All India Congress Committee (AICC). This committee found that the riots were not only influenced by "mutual distrust, conflict of rights and interests of the two religious groups" but also by economic factors and communal politics.

The excessive use of physical force and frequent misuse of paramilitary forces to check communal riots has provided an impetus to communal rioting itself. For example, in Punjab the continued presence of the BSF and the CRPF since 1980 has rendered the normal functioning of democratic law and order machinery ineffective. In Punjab today, there are as many as 32,000 police and para-military personnel in addition to regular police forces. In spite of this, terrorism continues unabated. A quick look at the comparative extremist crime figures for three years makes this point clear. The total number of extremist crimes in 1984 were 1,310; in 1985 these crimes decreased to 455 but increased to 1,665 in 1986. One of the reasons for the fall in extremist crimes in 1985 was the attempt to have a politico-economic approach to resolve this problem. The Punjab accord was signed and elections to the State legislature took place during this period.

The display of physical forces at the disposal of the State has prevented a large number of people from turning into active dissidents using peaceful methods or methods short of

physical violence like bandhs, gheraos, fasts, etc. Section 144 is in operation in Chandigarh and many other areas in Punjab for the past five years or so. The effectiveness of Section 144 is taken for granted by the police. Because of this routinisation around 250 teachers demanding better service conditions had to remain in jail for three months. Such unimaginative use of powers has proved to be counterproductive for the democratic functioning of the polity. The imposition of Section 144 or other such measures does not in any way check terrorism, only restricts the freedom of the people to express their genuine grievances through peaceful methods. The grievances of the people have multiplied and resulted in the decline of the security and political system.

It is in this situation that terrorists in Punjab share the grievances of the wider community and gain social recognition by overreacting to dissent. Further, State terrorism as reflected in fake encounters and non-trial of individuals by the courts has made a mockery of the rule of law. The delay in trial and the subsequent harassment of innocent persons are examples of the insensitivity of the State.

Not only this, the police force which is under the influence of communal ideology is being used to check communal violence and terrorism. It is a paradoxical situation. It has been noticed that the police actively taken part in acts of communal violence. Policemen, political leaders and riff-raffs, who are under the influence of communal ideology, all have one thing in common, i.e. they work to make the world safe for the individuals who are responsible for creating communal violence.

This excessive use of physical force and physical elimination of individuals is justified by referring to the Naxalite movement. It may be recalled that number of Naxalites were physically eliminated without trial. From this is inferred the tattered hypothesis that terrorism can be controlled by eliminating terrorist. This approach does not take into consideration socio-economic and political facts contributing to the emergence of terrorism in Punjab. The presence of Governor Ray, known to be the main behind the wholesale physical elimination of Naxalites in West Bengal, reinforces such an understanding. This approach and the presence of people identified with its execution have resulted in the neutralisation of democratic and secular forces and also alienating a large section of devout Sikhs (who are not communalists) from the existing socio-political arrangements. The need is to evolve a multi-pronged strategy having the following two basic components:

- (a) To analyse the situation with a total perspective and to evolve a long-term social and politico-economic strategy; and
- (b) To launch a struggle to revive participatory democratic institutions and to establish political federalism.

This will not come by way of gradual reform which is believed to be the logical outcome of the existing socio-economic and political arrangements. History shows that most reforms were won only after long-drawn, persistent political and ideological struggles. On the contrary, most of the crises needed reform have been caused or aggravated by the existing social, political and economic arrangements. For instance, the slow pace and blocked nature of capitalist development in India has reduced the capacity of the ruling classes to resolve or even accommodate the emerging social, economic and political interests and also conflicts

emanating from growing unemployment, pauperisation and poverty. The ruling groups, therefore, are using their power to stamp out or curtain competition and safeguard their position by simultaneously using shortcuts like communalism and repression to silence dissent and discontent. It would be wrong to merely abuse those who resist fundamental reforms. It is necessary to understand the political process which provides the basis to such an approach, even in view of the pressing human needs. Those who are committed to bring about radical and fundamental changes like secularism, socialism and democratic consciousness do not yet have the power; those who have the power have not been so motivated to commit class suicide. The point is that retrogressive tendencies like communalism, terrorism and other social problems are not the logical outcome of a progressive and just system. Rather these retrogressive tendencies are the logical outcome of a basically exploitative system.

By Pramod Kumar