



One of the sites of bomb blasts in Bombay

Safety is Indivisible

The Warning from Bombay Riots

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It is unfortunate that our political leaders, industrialists and opinion makers have responded to the tragedy of the bomb blasts that shook Bombay in March, as well as to the earlier riots of December, 1992 and January, 1993, in their usual irresponsible manner. Instead of mourning the dead, our political and business leaders are mostly concerned about the negative impact the bomb blasts and the riots will have on foreign investments. Never mind if the lives of the people of this country are safe or not; never mind that hundreds of thousands of people lost their source of livelihood in the repeated riots and massacres instigated by our political leaders. All they seemed concerned about was whether the investments and profits of the elite who enter into collaborations with foreign corporations are safe.

So far there is no definite evidence of who is behind the blasts. Even if we were to accept the version that the bomb blasts were indeed the handiwork of Pakistani intelligence in collusion with certain Muslims in the Bombay underworld, the self-righteous indignation of our political leaders is rather misplaced because the Indian government has been involved in somewhat similar activities over the last couple of decades: injecting terrorism into the politics of Punjab and Kashmir to destroy the ruling parties' political opponents, getting RAW, the Indian government's own intelligence agency, to train the terrorist outfit, LTTE, for insurgency operations in Sri Lanka.

However, even more important than finding out who are the culprits is to recognise the various deadly flaws in our security system. The smuggling of such huge quantities of

sophisticated, powerful explosives into the country, without the intelligence agencies being either aware of it or able to intercept the flow, points to their utter incompetence. Their failure to do their job might well be due to the involvement of top political leaders and police officials with weapons smuggling. The smuggling of drugs and guns has for a long time been carried out with powerful political patronage. Men like Dawood Ibrahim, who is being accused of involvement in the bomb blasts, are known to be protégés of powerful Congress politicians such as Sharad Pawar.

The bomb blasts highlight one simple fact: when the state machinery is hijacked by criminals, it loses its ability to perform the most elementary of tasks expected of it — to provide security of life to its citizens. They also give us a message of warning:

safety, like health, is indivisible. Just as the elite of India cannot hope to stay healthy on the strength of Bisleri water bottles and air conditioners as long as the general water and air are not clean for all, likewise Hindus cannot hope to be safe as long as their leaders encourage violence against the Muslims, with active participation of the police and paramilitary forces.

It is unlikely that we will ever know the real truth behind the bomb blasts. The tendency of our government is to shroud everything in secrecy and feed the citizens on half truths and lies to suit the interests of those in power. The anxiety and fear generated by the bomb blasts are likely to be exploited by our rulers for further dividing Hindus from Muslims, and to cover up what happened during the Bombay riots of December, 1992 and January, 1993, following the demolition of Babri Masjid on December 6. It would be suicidal not to realise the full implications of that violence because it demonstrates how large sections of the government became indistinguishable from criminals. The police joined the hoodlum brigades and murdered and raped many hapless victims, looted thousands of Muslim homes and shops, and burnt houses and drove thousands out of their homes.

In one sense, there is nothing dramatically new about these massacres. They are part of a continuing process, similar to the riots in Bhiwandi, Sitamarhi, Meerut, Ahmedabad and Bhagalpur. However, there are some new and noteworthy developments:

- The scale of violence and the extent of brutality is escalating with every new outbreak.
- The politicians who instigate these massacres are becoming increasingly brazen about their participation in it.
- The police and paramilitary forces do not feel the need to maintain even a facade of neutrality or of

pretence concerning their expected role as keepers of law and order.

- The riots are not carried out by *goondas* and anti-social elements alone. The middle classes and other supposedly respectable sections of society are actively supporting and even joining the murderous brigades.

- The violence is no longer confined to poor bastis. It is beginning to engulf elite areas as well.

- Women, and even young girls, are taking an active part in violence and hate campaigns.

- In recent years Hindu-Muslim riots are acquiring overtones of ethnic cleansing, similar to what was attempted in parts of India at the time of partition — that is, hounding hundreds of thousands out of their homes, forcing them to flee as refugees in their own land. According to one estimate, during the January outbreak of violence, 2,15,000, people fled the city of Bombay for their villages or wherever they could find shelter. Most of those who fled were Muslims.

Almost all the shops and business establishments in the Hindu majority areas belonging to Muslims were destroyed. One could count on one's fingertips the few that survived. So well planned was the targeting of Muslim homes and shops that in almost all cases the neighbouring Hindu homes and shops stayed intact.

This issue concentrates on the nature of violence in Bombay and Surat even though riots took place in several other cities as well. The reason for picking out these two cities for somewhat detailed reporting is that even though neither of these two cities has a history of continuous Hindu-Muslim tension, as some other cities like Ahmedabad have had, yet the violence was most ferocious in these two places.

The Surat report has been put together mostly on the basis of

interviews with Muslims in refugee camps, together with what the authors from Surat witnessed or heard personally.

The Bombay report could not cover the entire city. A comprehensive report detailing what happened in each area of this sprawling city would require a much bigger and longer investigation than we could manage with our limited means. We have focused on a certain select area of Bombay, around a predominantly Muslim basti called Behrampada.

As for the rest, we have relied on eyewitness accounts of Hindus in different parts of the city, who personally saw incidents of violence; accounts of victims of violence, some of them in refugee camps; accounts by social and political workers who are doing relief and rehabilitation work among the victims and have, therefore, close knowledge of what happened. All this does not constitute a systematic study of the Bombay riots but only an attempt to delineate the patterns of violence and some of the characteristic features of the riots in Bombay.

The December Riots

The impression created by the press, including supposedly secular papers, is that the riots that followed December 6 were caused by Muslim mobs getting violent as they came out to protest against the Babri Masjid demolition. But if one closely follows the pattern of violence in different cities, one finds these were not really Hindu-Muslim riots.

Bombay witnessed two rounds of violence — the first one happened soon after the demolition of Babri Masjid, starting December 7, and the second one in early January. As far as the December killings are concerned, there is a widespread agreement about the nature of killings. When the news of the demolition of Babri Masjid reached Bombay, Muslims in some areas came out on the streets to mourn