

## Changing the Rules of the Political Game

This is an account of **Manushi's** attempts to organise a meeting for communal amity on June 25, 1985. It may provide some notion of the enormous obstacles all of us face in promoting community based politics. It also shows how the power structures at the local level tend to thwart any spontaneous political initiatives, no matter how noncontroversial. Even to accomplish small things at the grassroots level, people have to put in a disproportionately huge effort and take big political risks. Most people give up in despair even before things have gotten underway. That perhaps explains why there are so few political efforts at the neighbourhood/community level, and why even fewer survive.

The meeting we organised was not a political meeting in the strict sense of the word. It was meant to pay homage to the memory of Shri Prabhu Dayal, who had died while trying to save three Sikh women from a burning house in Ashok Vihar during the anti-Sikh riots of November 1984. Shri Prabhu Dayal was a resident of Baljit Nagar. He worked in a factory owned by a Sikh family in Ashok Vihar. The employer's residence was situated on the first floor of the same building. On November 1, 1984, he was in his workplace when a big mob came to set the place on fire. Prabhu Dayal tried to dissuade them from setting the place on fire. However, the mob persisted. Everyone, including the

*chowkidars* hired to guard the place, ran away on seeing the mob. But Prabhu Dayal stayed on and went to rescue three Sikh women who had been trapped on the first floor after the house was set on fire. He sustained serious injuries in the process. He died on November 8, 1984, as a result of those injuries.

We publicised the case through **Manushi** and decided to raise some funds for Shri Prabhu Dayal's family. We did this not only because the family needed financial support but even more as a tribute to his memory. We decided that we would present the fund to his wife and children in a public meeting, and invited Sant Longowal to preside over the meeting and join in honouring Shri Prabhu Dayal through his family. I had met Sant Longowal in his village based gurudwara in Punjab. He expressed eagerness to come to Delhi for this occasion. On June 20, we were able to finalise June 25 as the date on which the meeting was to be held.

The decision to invite Sant Longowal was taken because he seemed to be one of the few leaders who kept emphasising the need for Hindu-Sikh amity at a time when very few people were in a mood for communal harmony. He seemed to be working against heavy odds among both Sikhs and Hindus. We felt that the honouring of Shri Prabhu Dayal — a Hindu — by Sant Longowal would be an appropriate way of emphasising that it is

actions like those of Shri Prabhu Dayal which help create a feeling of solidarity between different communities, rather than the doings of those who seek to "unite the nation" by force and violence or through the power of the army and police.

Rulers of nations have a long established tradition of honouring soldiers who come back victorious from battle after killing others and also who die in battle while trying to kill others. Thus, violence inflicted on others gets to be glorified as heroic. This has contributed to a situation whereby the very survival of humanity is today at peril. Therefore, it has become all the more imperative to ask: what is real courage? To kill other human beings as proof of one's power, or to choose to place oneself at risk, as Shri Prabhu Dayal did, in order to save the lives of others? In honouring the memory of Prabhu Dayal, we wished to pay tribute to all those who cherish and seek to preserve human life and humane values in the face of the forces which are spreading hatred, enmity and fear between different communities.

We were keen to hold the meeting in the mohalla in which **Manushi's** office is situated. We felt that if we held the meeting in one of the public halls which are normally used for political meetings, only politically committed people would attend. By holding the meeting in an ordinary neighbourhood, we would ensure that a number of ordinary people who normally

remain outside the purview of struggles for democratic rights, would have easy access to the meeting.

### **Positive Response**

For this reason we tried to enlist the support of the local residents' association of our block. We began by talking to the secretary of the association, who happened to be a Hindu. His response was heartening. This was the evening of June 20. Within an hour he introduced us to some other members of the association who also felt equally enthusiastic at the idea.

Next, we went to meet the president of the association, an influential Sikh gentleman of the mohalla, who supported the idea vigorously. These people volunteered to raise funds and take full responsibility for organising the meeting. The cause appealed to Hindus and Sikhs alike. They felt it would generate a better atmosphere in the area. So far, the issue was being discussed with individuals who were not acting as organisational representatives.

Some members suggested that an extraordinary meeting of the residents' association be called next morning to finalise the plans. Within a short time, the committed members had been informed. Then began what slowly turned into a traumatic learning experience about the problems of community based politics. We were naive enough to believe that if Sant Longowal was coming to pay tribute to the memory of a Hindu, and emphasised the need for Hindu Sikh amity, no one, including his worst enemies among the Hindus or in the ruling party, could possibly have any objection to such an event. We were also given to believe that the Centre was in the process of reformulating its attitudes and might adopt a more conciliatory approach to the Sikhs than had hitherto been the case. However, the drama that unfolded itself taught us that pious statements that national leaders and governmental heads make on public platforms seldom reflect the nitty gritty of political reality at the local level.

At the very outset, two local Congress(I) men began to raise objections to the idea of the residents' association

getting involved in organising or assisting the organisation of a meeting to which a "political" leader had been invited. Many of the members tried to reason that this was not a political meeting. But the Congress(I) men remained adamant and reminded them that the executive committee of the association had decided in one of its meetings not to invite any political leaders for its functions.

At this point, some of the residents began to waver. Yet the overwhelming

Sikhs are. As soon as you allow a meeting like this to be held, the extremists will descend here with their swords and they will deliberately provoke a clash with the police. Once that happens, no one can prevent a riot breaking out in this neighbourhood."

To the Sikhs, the message took the form of a barely veiled threat. They were asked: "Can you take responsibility for the behavior of all the Sikhs who are likely to come here and start shouting pro Khalistan

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feeling remained in favor of holding the meeting, and within a few minutes, substantial donations were given by leading residents of the *mohalla*.

I was the first one to concede the point raised by the Congress(I) men, and suggested that in the interest of working by consensus rather than confrontation, we would give up the idea of having the association officially involved in sponsoring the meeting. We were keen to avoid any clashes within the *mohalla* because that would defeat the very purpose of the meeting.

Despite this initial problem, the enthusiasm remained high. It was decided that even if the residents' association was not officially involved, individual members could take part and some of them volunteered collectively to bear the entire cost of the meeting.

### **Whipping Up Hysteria**

Soon after this, the local Congress workers began hectic political activity. At no point did they openly oppose the holding of the meeting. But the manner in which they began to sabotage it was far worse than outright opposition. Within no time, an atmosphere of terror prevailed in the *mohalla* as though a riot was just round the corner. The game they played was masterly and effective. To the Hindus they said: "You know how hotheaded these

slogans? Who is going to prevent Hindus from retaliating? If any violence occurs, all of you Sikhs will be held responsible for provoking an attack." The Sikhs were reminded of the November riots and were told that they ought to be grateful for having been spared during that time. This Lajpat Nagar area had successfully managed to protect itself from attacks, thanks to the joint vigilance efforts of Hindus and Sikhs during the riots. The local Congress(I) leaders took credit for having "saved" the mohalla at that time and darkly hinted that their services would not be available in case "something" happened now.

Since it is well known that the November violence was instigated and organised by the Congress Party with support and patronage from the top layers of the Party hierarchy and active connivance of the government machinery, the idea of displeasing the Congress(I) men created absolute panic in the neighbourhood. Even though many of the Hindus are not consciously aware of it, the knowledge of what happened to the Sikhs during the riots has driven home a very fearful lesson in everyone's mind. "If Sikhs could be dealt with as they were, why not anyone else or any other group?"

As a result of this fear campaign, another meeting was called the next