

Communal Violence and Communalism

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WHILE discussing issues related to communal violence in western India one has to consider the fact that the nature of communal violence has, over the last two decades undergone characteristic changes. What was broadly confined to large metropolises have now invaded towns and mofussil areas. It is not only that their geographical spread has changed but also their lasting capacity, for many riots today last for days together.

Certain urban centres have now almost got identified as riot-prone cities with quite a few of them experiencing what can be called a "relay effect" of communal outbursts at one place. Examples of such a phenomena occurring through cities like Baroda, Ahmedabad, Bharuch have been recorded in recent times. Political interferences in the activities related to engineering of riots have not remained remote any more, for their direct involvement in such activities seems to be clearly evident.

Number as well as participation of interest groups in the riots especially in cities have also increased over the time. It is no more the dominant realm of the bootleggers but also contractors, land grabbers and other petty interest groups. The nexus between such groups and politicians have become much clearer and has of late got more strengthened and to an extent even "institutionalized".

Participation of tribal groups and women in the riots in a more direct fashion today was unheard of earlier. Inciting the masses through religious discourses and recitation of pulp history through media has almost become the order of the day. With the increasing channels of communication, communal ideology has got a boost in its spread across larger geographic areas and social areas. The extent, nature and character of such changes may be a matter of debate but never-

theless they have been significant and important, and along with various other issues the changing meaning of communication in the contemporary socio-economic context was also focused.

The Centre for Social Studies, Surat organised a seminar on Communal Violence and Communalism in Western India on February 9-11, 1994 at Surat. The seminar revolved round the following five major themes --

- Communalism : Theoretical Views and Perspectives
- Role of Caste and Community in Communal Consciousness
- Gender and Violence
- Politics of Communal Organisations
- Origin of Riots and spread : Surat and Bombay

Twelve papers were presented by distinguished writers in the field and they were based on their readings as well as first hand encounters with ground level realities. The seminar also linked the issues and perspectives on communal consciousness and communal violence to both the internal dynamics within civic society and its cultural moorings as well as other external forces including social, political and economic.

The presentation gave hard data on the extent of damage to persons and property, and also dealt with extensively on the psychological and cultural dimensions of group relations including their conflicts. Ideological bases of communalism was also thoroughly discussed and debated with reference to situations developing within western India as also other parts of the country including UP, MP and some southern states. Discussion also focussed on the social and political hampering beyond the boundaries of Indian frontier and some parts of South Asia.

There was a broad consensus on

the following. The participants felt that communalism is an important subject for the enquiry and special praxis in the current times for all branches of enquiry. It also felt that deeper meanings and nuances of communal consciousness need to be uncovered to link this phenomenon to other sectors of national life.

Secondly, the participants recognised the complexity of this consciousness and its visible violent manifestations; but felt that other groups and agencies and their role need to be assessed in conjunction. This also meant that role of the political leader, party, criminal gangs, fundamental organisations, etc should constitute the agenda of future studies and reflection.

The group also felt that there is urgent need to review and re-examine our notion or ideas about the trade union, feminist groups, and other organs of social mobilization and movement and to enquire into their apparent/real failures in combating communalism.

The presentations were followed by lively discussions. Also short films on communal riots were screened after the sessions. The participants, forty in number, were drawn from universities, research institutions, NGO's, journalism and social activists from various regions like Surat, Baroda, Ahmedabad, Pune, Kolhapur, Bombay, Aurangabad, etc.

Three Jesuits participated in the seminar. Fr. Lancy presented the theme note of the seminar. Fr. Cedric Prakash spoke movingly on the impact of communal violence on urban poor. Fr. Stany Pinto presented a paper on Communalization of Tribals in South Gujarat. This seminar was sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Western Regional Centre, Bombay. ■