

Women, Communal Violence, and Rights Rhetoric

○ D. Parthasarathy

Recent television footage and reports from Gujarat have shown Hindu families, including women participating in violence and attacks on Muslims. Communal violence has spread beyond the traditional geographical confines of the walled city to middle-class localities, especially in cities like Ahmedabad. ‘Spontaneous’ acts of rioting and arson that involve lumpen elements have always been suspected as the cause of many riots in India. Though targeted violence was occasionally a factor at times in some earlier urban outbreaks, large scale mobilisation for targeted violence came into its own as part of the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement.

While scholars like Tanika Sarkar have provided a lot of insight into the increasing participation of women in Hindu fundamentalist bodies and movements, specific attention to the nature, prevalence and severity of women’s participation in violence is something that requires more attention¹. Much of the literature on this subject relates women’s violence to the mobilisation and wooing of women by Sangh Parivar organisations². At the height of the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement, and during the destruction of the Babri Masjid, women participated in large numbers in destructive and violent activity, especially in Mumbai and several cities in Gujarat³. But the kind of violence we are observing now,



where entire families, women and children included, participate in arson, looting, and murder, points to a new situation – active and aggressive participation in violence during riots has become a ‘normal’ social activity, suitable for the participation of all family members. How else can one explain or understand women in their *nights* coming out on to the terraces of their houses, egging their men on, and even throwing stones at neighbours belonging to a different community?

Newspapers have reported seeing Hindu women with weapons going around as part of mobs committing arson and attacking Muslims. There have also been reports that closed circuit cameras have captured images of women participating in the looting of shops. Activists on fact-finding missions have also reported observing women participating in violence, and Muslim women have complained of being “betrayed” by their (female) neighbours. Citing the

active participation of women in the violence against members of the Muslim community, the Head of the All India Muslim Women’s Conference termed it as a division of women along religious lines. In a society where social and family norms do not even permit women to show their faces outside of their homes, what changes have led to women participating in violent activities along with men? Has the legitimacy given to violence among groups provided legitimacy to changes in women’s behaviour as well? Has the strategy of the Sangh Parivar in bringing women into their fold also led to their greater participation in violence?

Women often bear the brunt of violence at the hands of their husbands and other kin without protection. Have their ‘collective mentalities’ been transformed by the Sangh Parivar led outbreaks of communal violence? Did it so ‘empower’ them that they could have broken through the norms that usually require them to accept without effective protest, the violence inflicted upon themselves? Did it impel them to engage in acts of violence and rioting when sanctioned by these same oppressors? Is it possible to explain a significant portion of violence by a woman on members of another community as just the pent-up emotions of victims of violence being released? Did the fact that she wasn’t likely to be harmed for

expressing it, rather applauded for doing so contribute in some way?

Some writers claim that when Hindu women assume militant roles they do so “without violating the norms of Hindu womanhood.”⁴ The implication in some of these analyses is that, while women may be part of militant outfits, provide informed consent to violence by male members of their community, and even participate in public protests, they stop short of actually indulging in violence, since that would go against the norms of womanhood, Hindu or otherwise. The sight of women actively participating in such acts as looting, arson and stone throwing leads one to question the current applicability of these interpretations.

Two discrete but interrelated streams of discourse and action seem to be at the heart of this social-political transformation in the last two decades. The first is the reactionary mobilisation of upper castes to oppose the increasing empowerment of the Dalit-Bahujans, reflected especially in the anti-reservation movements in the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s. The first large scale violence that took place in Ahmedabad outside of the walled city and involved active middle class participation was during the anti-reservation riots in 1985, which later turned communal.

During the nationwide anti-reservation violence against the Mandal Commission report, large scale violence was mostly treated benignly by the state machinery. For the first time many middle class young people, especially women, were involved in the violence. For many, it was the first time that they had come out on the streets and participated in public protests. The transformation of anti-reservation riots into attacks on members of other communities has

been observed in many areas throughout the country⁵. It is not an accident that the rise of the BJP in coastal Andhra has occurred in those areas notorious for atrocities on Dalits⁶.

The political linkages between the movement for the *mandir* and the anti-Mandal agitation are well known. Scholars have also established the ways in which the ‘*Manuvadi*’ forces have been working to incorporate some of the cadres from the Ambedkarite movement into their own ranks as supporters of *hindutva*. However we also need to understand the particular ways in which the anti-Mandal agitation marked a watershed in Indian politics. Especially to be noted is the rhetoric the agitation’s leaders used to justify the rights they claimed as a supposed meritocracy.



This claim dramatically shifted aspects of reservation policy away from their previous ostensible focus on remediating bias against marginalised groups. Sections of the media, intellectuals, and politicians aided *Manuvadi* leaders colluded in distorting the logic behind reservations by focussing on nothing but income differences, rather than on the strong effects of social inequality and discrimination. Their proposed substitute for the previous reservation policy, which was justified as a means of achieving substantive equality,

developed via a new rhetoric, a version of equality that highlighted ‘merit’ and ‘equality of opportunities’ as superior to reservations which are a recompense for historically based bias and discrimination.

More importantly, the movement actively encouraged direct violent action against other vulnerable groups. At the same time, they attacked the weak attempts by law enforcement agencies to prevent their attacks and to provide protection to their victims. They consistently regarded members of these vulnerable groups as legitimate scapegoats, eligible targets for their attacks. Through their political and social influence among those supposed to enforce the law, they confidently anticipated they would never be held to account in any way for their acts of oppressive violence.

This immunity from reproach by the law or retaliation by the victimised vulnerable groups, emboldened a new form of middleclass violence. The debased logic used to justify the attacks was assertively propagated by some middle class intellectuals who deliberately overlooked the vulgar nature of the justifications for the anti-reservation movement, and ignored its mindless violence, as well as the defiance of the law and breach of moral norms prevalent among the middleclasses. These intellectuals betrayed their vocation in support of direct, illegal, violence for what they believed were their group interests. They helped provide shape and legitimation to an ideology based on a singular and unexamined concept of ‘merit.’ They considerably shifted the national discourse away from the goal of reducing societal inequality. They made a major contribution to changing the terms of discourse as far as policies regarding equality, social mobility, and the rights of marginalised groups were concerned.

The *savarna* men and women who came out into the streets as part of the anti-reservation movement had little knowledge about the social structure of India, the history of its struggles to mitigate discrimination by constitutional methods, and its many other attempts to reduce social and political repression. In such a situation, *Manuvadi* propaganda focused on a crude and obfuscating notion of 'merit', created and sanctified by some liberal intellectuals who addressed meetings and wrote popular articles in newspapers and magazines.

This resulted in an ideological atmosphere in which traditional caste and other group based notions of hierarchy and superiority got reinforced, well reflected in the extremely derogatory statements made against Dalit-Bahujans. For example, demonstrators often taunted them by associating them with occupations *Manuvadis* considered shameful. They displayed their hatred and contempt of those who have been the victims of discrimination by displaying vulgar caricatures of members of these groups engaged in some traditional urban occupations such as polishing shoes and sweeping the roads.

Most young men and women who demonstrated at that time were extremely proud of their participation in their displays of hatred and contempt, and their riskless violence against weaker groups. One often heard their boastful accounts of brutal acts recounted with glee and pride. It is interesting that this was the first time that many of them had participated in any form of public protests. Interestingly, many had received parental sanction for them to participate. Many fathers were not only tolerant of their children staying out late to take part in 'strategy'

meetings, but also approved of their throwing stones at unprotected vulnerable people and burning up buses and other public property.

It is this sanctioning of brutality that may help explain women's violence during such demonstrations. Perhaps women are only willing to take part when and if their family legitimates their participation in violence. These women will gain approval from members of their family for expressing/redirecting previously forbidden impulses to violence they were not allowed to express toward those who brutalised them. This is one time when they find that male heads of the family cannot or will not impose restrictions against their expressing violence or participating in what are described as reprisals. Just as fear of further and more severe violence against them as well as other forms of reprisal within the family keeps many women in check and ensures their conformity to dominant norms and ensures that they do not reply in kind, the very absence of such fears during riots gives them the sanction to do things which they otherwise would not do. Perhaps, when women engage in such violence, it is just a form of catharsis or release for these women. Perhaps it also provides them with some feeling of empowerment. What is also important is that they get a sense of being included in a major public act of family and community members, an arena where they rarely participate.

This possible partial explanation for women's participation points to a need to pay more scholarly attention to the new ways of belonging and inclusion developed for individuals by the *hindutva* movements⁷. As Arvind Rajagopal has pointed out, more emphasis has been given to the disruptive effects of participation rather than to the possible role they

play in generating a greater sense of inclusion. The puzzle of increased participation in the *hindutva* movements of groups such as Dalits, OBCs, and women who have all had to bear the brunt of Brahminical, patriarchal violence may in part be explained by this kind of analysis.

The lack of adequate support structures for women is frequently given as the reason women are afraid to confront violence within the family. What we need to understand is how the same women become active collaborators in violence committed during riots. One explanation may be related to the way in which the majority of people in this country - male and female - view domestic violence. Despite the long history of legal action to protect women's rights, and constant attempts by women's organisations to get laws passed and courts to intervene on issues related to violence against women, a majority of women do not perceive domestic violence as a crime that is defined by law.

This is partly an outcome of the way in which political parties have related to such issues. Even left of centre parties have 'ghettoised' the women's wing of their parties, refusing to mainstream their issues, leaving them to be taken up solely by their women's wing (AIDWA, Mahila Dakshata Samiti, etc.). Many women's organisations affiliated to political parties have simply not had their party's political support to launch struggles to change public awareness as well as make the laws against domestic violence more stringent and enforceable, though there has been no dearth of attempts to do so.

Thus, struggles relating to women's issues have often been reduced to ineffectual forms of 'social' struggles, in the form of failed public awareness campaigns, as well as the

sporadic, momentary and inconclusive attention given to individual atrocities against women. It is interesting to note that a government official in Gujarat during the recent riots stated that rape cases must be taken up by NGOs, because the government's duty is only to look into 'law and order' cases, implying thereby the non-criminal nature of rape. Also, as is well known, women leaders in the *hindutva* movement have themselves spoken about the 'normality' of male domestic violence, and the consequent need for women to 'adjust' to violent domestic life⁸. Wife beating, for instance, they have said, is caused by the wife who 'irritates' her husband. These beatings are likened to the acts of parents admonishing their children⁹.

Sarkar (1999) mentions one respondent who blames rapes of women on those women who protest against their victimisation; they are viewed as forfeiting their "older modes of honour and motherhood" by participating in struggles for equality and rights. The implication is that women should retreat from such forms of politics into passive forms of domesticity to avoid rape. When women who struggle for such rights meet male oppression and violence, this repression is considered justifiable. Both female and male leaders of Hindu fundamentalist organisations argue that 'adjustment' and obedience of girls and wives to parents and husbands will avert male domestic violence. Domestic violence is thereby removed from the public sphere of illegal behaviour, and at the same time justified by attributing its occurrence to women's own 'deviant' behaviour. In their view, women should endure male violence in order to further strengthen the norms of the culture and keep the family together.

The combined effect of a) family and group legitimacy that enable attacks on members of other communities; and b) the failure to label domestic violence as criminal and illegitimate, have created a situation where women often find it much easier to collaborate with their own oppressors in inflicting violence upon others than to combat oppression within the family. Social codes relating to violence, the circumstances under which it may be legitimately inflicted on others, and the extent of enforcement of legal and other sanctions against violence, are important factors in understanding why some people engage in acts of violence more than others.



Again, while the knowledge that such illegitimate acts will not be punished is a significant factor in explaining why people are violent and in understanding socialisation practices, it is also true that levels of exposure to violence, and political mobilisation against violent oppression - all determined by one's location in social space - are important in explaining why some people engage in violence against others. Deciding to participate in violence against others for most individuals, but especially for women, is not a simple act; it requires a coherent explanation. This is especially true of the participation of

women in communal violence, which has become far more notable in recent years, and is a dangerous and disturbing development.

It is precisely at this juncture that intellectuals need to be more cautious and careful about how they explain this new development. Public space in India is already vitiated by ideologies that justify and legitimise violence, partly through the rhetoric of communal resentments and presumptions of justified exercise of special rights, and partly through recourse to some distorted versions of the traditional liberal idea of social contract. This is evident also in the rejection of the jurisdiction of courts in certain spheres of social life.

Another important point is the constant newspeak regarding past and possibly future attacks on 'Hindus' by members of the minority community. This propaganda is used to recruit men and women for training in physical 'self-defence' activities. In recent times, through rumours, propaganda pamphlets, public agitation and other such channels, fear has been created among Hindu women by providing mostly fictional accounts of attacks by male members of other communities on Hindu women¹⁰. The fear is now being specifically focused on violation of women's own bodies. This strategy is meant to bring about a radical change in the attitude of women toward willingness to sanction and even engage in violence against minorities. Those who promote such violence can then presumably claim to have a greater degree of legitimacy for its use against members of other groups.¹¹

Some intellectuals in this country seem to be similarly influenced by a distorted idea of social contract theory that results in their either ignoring or supporting organised

violence against the state and other communities. This is justified by appealing to a special normative order they believe exists within the confines of their own group. What they forget is that in the context of a hierarchical, stratified society, where even basic rights are yet to be realised for some groups, justification of certain anti-state movements in the name of a putative group-defined normative order may reinforce a discriminatory and unequal social order. Violence by women as part of such a movement, and their complicity in male violence on members of other communities, reinforces their own oppression by patriarchal structures.

Some women may temporarily be given an exalted status for their participation in such movements, whether it is an anti-minority pogrom, or the movement which brought down the Babri Masjid structure. Just as fundamentalist leaders justify participation in violence in the name of a distorted normative order which justifies violence and delegitimises constitutional bodies and norms, so also some neo-liberal advocates shift the rights discourse by justifying violence either through popular groups or through the state that acts in the name of a specific unconstitutional normative order.

Such violence usually targets the weak and the marginalised, the Dalits, Tribals, and others among the poor, including pavement dwellers, street hawkers, and slum dwellers. These groups are not allowed to use their identities, their rights are abrogated whenever they clash with mainstream 'development' policies, and their very existence is deemed illegitimate. There is very little public outcry against their forcible illegal displacement. There is also an

extreme lack of concern regarding their rights and welfare. The overall shift in the way in which rights are discussed, the condoning of violent actions targeted at the marginalised, and the refusal to recognise certain forms of social and political mobilisation among the underprivileged, all have contributed to an overall rise in the legitimisation of violent repressive actions by the powerful - be they men, upper castes, the state, or particular communities.

Some liberals are yet to learn that certain claims to group identities also are valid claims to human rights. Therefore, they differentiate among the many identities asserted by these communities for different purposes¹². Their lack of sensitivity considerably enhances the possibilities of movements by the oppressed getting co-opted by fascist and fundamentalist movements, as we are observing now. A colleague never tires of reminding me of Gandhi's approach to public issues - it is not just enough to be right, but one must be right for the right reason, for the right cause. □

Footnotes

- 1 In tracing the "gender predicament of the Hindu right" for instance, Sarkar points to women's retreat from active violence, and says that "an equal agency (for women) in violent politics does not seem to be on the agenda", Tanika Sarkar, "The Gender Predicament of the Hindu Right", In K.N.Panikkar, ed., *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, Viking Penguin India, New Delhi, 1999, p. 148.
- 2 See articles in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia eds. *Women and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1995.
- 3 For Women's complicity in the riots, see also Madhu Kishwar, *Religion at the*

Service of Nationalism, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.

- 4 Amrita Basu, "Feminism Inverted: The Gendered Imagery and Real Women of Hindu Nationalism", in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia eds. op.cit., p.179; Such an argument is also made by Zakiya Pathak and Saswati Sengupta, in analyzing the ways in which women in the anti-Mandal movement attempted to restrain violence by male agitators and the police. See, "Resisting Women" pp.270-298.
- 5 The vast number of sociological studies on communal violence, and the relative lack of serious studies on violence against Dalits, is worthy of sociological attention.
- 6 The infamous Chundur incident in Andhra Pradesh had a little known aftermath wherein the upper caste - dalit conflict was transformed into an attack by upper castes on Christians. The Reddis organized other upper caste communities and led an attack on the Andhra Christian College in Guntur, not just because the institution provided shelter to the refugees from Chundur, but also because it had played a significant role in educating and imbuing dalits in the district with a new found confidence.
- 7 Several of the articles in the volume edited by Sarkar and Butalia, op.cit. deal with these issues.
- 8 On this see especially Sarkar, 1999, S.Anitha, Manisha, Vasudha and Kavitha, "Interviews with Women", in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia eds. *Women and the Hindu Right*, 1995, pp.329-335.
- 9 See Anitha, Manisha, Vasudha, and Kavitha, op.cit., p.333.
- 10 In Gujarat during the recent riots, fundamentalist publications such as *Sandesh (Advice)* printed and distributed fictitious stories of Hindu women being abducted and carried away into mosques to be raped.
- 11 I wish to thank Rowena Robinson for pointing out the significance of this issue.
- 12 Typically banal liberal statements such as "if you are opposed to mandir, you must oppose mandal", leads us nowhere.

The author teaches in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai.