

# Violence and the 1989 Election

## Implications for Women

by

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India is not only the world's largest democracy, but also has one of the most politically aware electorates in the world. The Indian people may indeed be said to live and breathe politics. Conversations, whether between friends or strangers, whether in elite drawing rooms, village *chaupals* or buses and trains, almost invariably veer around to politics sooner or later. India is one of the few countries where most people would, if forced to choose, perhaps prefer to hear a V.P. Singh

speaking than to watch a pornographic film or a football match. This intense involvement in monitoring the doings of those in power and those vying for power makes the average Indian voter a formidable customer for the politician. Even the most authoritarian of our rulers dare not tamper with democratic institutions beyond a point. For instance, although two and a half years of Emergency had not aroused much open rebellion, yet Indira Gandhi felt compelled

to hold elections in 1977. The Indian people have not allowed their rulers to hijack democracy as has happened in most other third world countries.

The 1989 national election was in some ways the most heartening of all the elections we have had so far. In the face of the most blatant attempts in all major parties to use violence as an instrument to manipulate the elections, the people's quiet determination to use their independent judgement in exercising their



voting right proved stronger. Both at the centre and at the state levels, most ruling parties the Congress(I), the Janata Dal in Karnataka, the Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, the Left Front in Kerala - were humbled. More important, we, for the first time, have at the centre a multiparty coalition government - the National Front, supported by the Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP) and the Left Front, with the Congress(I) as a large opposition. It is to be hoped that the various groups represented in parliament will act as checks and balances on one another so that no one group or coterie is in a position to run amok. The situation is still fluid, as the coming assembly elections are likely to render it yet more complex.

Many of the implications and consequences of the election have been analysed and debated in the media. We shall here focus on two issues which particularly affect women - the use of violence and the non functioning of political institutions.

The Congress(I) government had systematically undermined the normal functioning of government and other public institutions. Almost nothing now works without a bribe or string pulling. While this was detrimental for all citizens, it was especially so for disadvantaged groups like women. Women have relatively less ability to use money or muscle power and other forms of influence in the public sphere. Hence, when the apparatus of public affairs and of welfare services become intransigent, women's powerlessness and dependence on male members of the families to get things done is increased. Women's presence in public affairs also declines.

The peripheralisation of women in the 1989 elections was apparent. Here, we refer not primarily to the decline in the number of women members of parliament(though this too occurred - from 44 to 27) but rather to the complete absence of any women's issue on the electoral scene. Even high priority women's issues did not become voting issues. Women were not organised outside of political parties in a way that

they could choose and support those candidates who committed themselves to women's interests. During the election it became amply clear that, despite all the rhetoric of "integration of women into development", despite the crumbs thrown to women, like the Indira Mahila Yojana announced by Rajiv Gandhi on election eve, politicians do not have to reckon with women as a constituency.

The new visibility of women's issues in the media should not mislead us into thinking that women are organised on any significant scale to press for concrete demands. Almost every other deprived section has a list of demands (however relevant or irrelevant to their situation) which have to be taken into account when politicians make electoral calculations, but apart from making a futile gesture like the promise of 30 percent reservations which they have no intention of fulfilling and which would not serve much purpose

even if fulfilled, parties totally bypassed women.

Violence was an equally important factor in marginalising women. The election took place in a turbulent atmosphere rife with different varieties of violence. Violence always has the effect of further confining and restricting the lives, movements and activities of women.

An important reason why women cannot make it on their own in electoral politics without a male protector is that our political milieu as it is constructed today actively pushes out independent women. This it does by various kinds of violence, overt and covert. Electoral politics in India today is increasingly relying on violence and intimidation. A candidate is considered a "winning" candidate if he commands money power and hoodlum power - to capture booths, rig votes, and terrorise weaker sections and opponents. No party can claim that



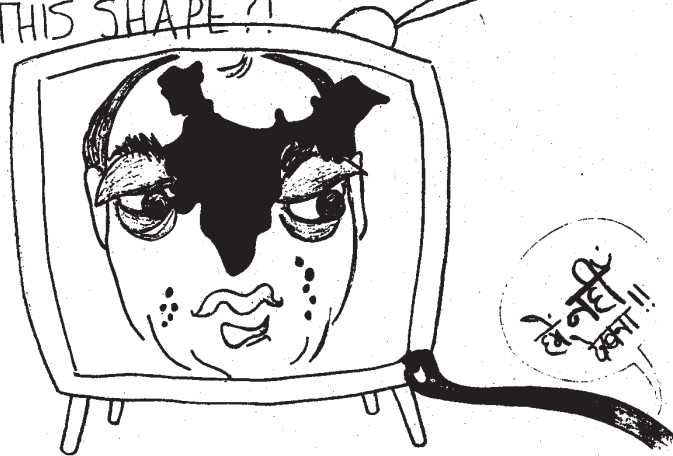
none of its candidates are criminalised. According to one estimate, 100 people died in the course of the 1989 election, not of course counting the hundreds killed in pre-election communal violence engineered with an eye on the election. It is a truism that women will not participate in large numbers in activities that generate violence as Indian politics does today.

The only women who can venture to campaign or contest in such a violent atmosphere are wives and daughters of powerful male politicians. These women are protected by gun toting brigades. The couple of women politicians like Jayalalitha who are bold enough to venture into the field on their own are surrounded by coteries of criminalised male politicians and consequently fail to draw out women as active supporters or workers.

The offices of political parties today are no more secure for women than are our police stations. A lone woman would hesitate to enter either. It is not just an Ansari or a Narvekar or a Devi Lal's son who might molest a woman who comes his way, but also the many lackeys at lower levels. Witness the unruly behaviour of Youth Congressmen at national and international conferences, or of Devi Lal's green brigades at party rallies. As important as actual violence in repelling women from the political arena is the everpresent threat of violence.

Even if some intrepid women do venture into party networks on their own, they would not get far. In order to climb in the party hierarchy they would have to attach themselves as a wife or girlfriend to some party high-up. This is true of all parties, right or left. And even when established, women are unlikely to have much say in party decision making. An important reason for their exclusion is that in our political culture today, real decisions are taken not at open deliberations, which tend to be staged shows, but at late night drink sessions where women would not be invited even if they were hardy enough to wish to be present. It is at these booze sessions in hotel rooms and private residences that male politicians get

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together to form and break alliances. It is here that the real horsetrading is done and the deals worked out that decide which stated policy will be acted upon and which quietly dropped, which candidate supported and which stabbed in the back. Of all the kinds of violence used during the 1989 election - intimidation of certain sections of voters, booth capturing, rigging, attacks on candidates, shootouts between hoodlum gangs attached to rival parties, the most fearful was the violence and threat of violence against Muslims in northern and western India. This was also the form of violence that most directly and intimately affected women, invading their homes and families, violating their domestic relationships, and victimising them individually and collectively.

If women were ignored by contending politicians, Muslims were in the less enviable position of being manipulated and bullied. In contrast to the prevalent stereotype of Muslims as a pampered minority who blackmail government into granting them concessions, this election clearly demonstrated that Muslims are the victims of political blackmail. While the election eve massacre in Bhagalpur was by no means the first of its kind, it was remarkable because of the cynical way violence was engineered as an electoral weapon.

It suits the Congress(I) now to claim that its defeat in the north was because it was "secular" while the opposition appealed to the electorate on a communal basis. However, the fact is that the Congress(I) spared no effort not only to make its electoral appeal on a communal basis but also to terrorise people into voting on that basis. That the vast majority of massacres of Muslims (with the connivance and active participation of government machinery, police and paramilitary forces) have occurred in Congress(I) ruled states over the last five years was not a coincidence. Further, the Congress(I), in its typical style, deliberately fanned the flames of communal hatred in 1989 by dragging its feet on the Ram Janambhoomi Babri Masjid issue, preventing any settlement from being arrived at, and simultaneously throwing a sop to the Muslims by conferring second language status in Uttar Pradesh on Urdu, in the full knowledge that this would be used as a stick to beat Muslims.

Faced with this reality, Muslims in the north could not longer buy the claim of the Congress(I) that it was secular, and swung away from it. Where faced, as in Delhi or Maharashtra, by the Hobson's choice of the Congress(I) versus the BJP or the Shiv Sena, many Muslims refrained

Peggy

from voting, or chose a losing candidate. Others, with fear in their hearts, chose whichever of the two main contenders seemed to them the lesser evil. Wherever a real choice existed, as in Uttar Pradesh, they took it - the Janata Dal, the CPI or CPI(M), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). More significant, however, is that Hindus did not vote as a monolith any more than Muslims did.

It would be simplistic to interpret the vote for BJP or the Shiv Sena as a vote for more anti Muslim violence. If the Hindu voters wanted more Muslims killed they could not have done better than return the Congress(I) to power in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Yet, in this supposedly Hindi-Hindu heartland, neither the Congress(I) nor the BJP met with any substantial success. It was the Janata Dal, whose most visible leader in this area, V.P. Singh, had openly opposed the Congress(I) and also refused to share a platform with the BJP, which got a clear majority, while a number of smaller parties with an avowedly

noncommunal position (CPI, CPI-M, BSP) did surprisingly well. Very significant, for instance, was the victory of a CPI candidate in Faizabad constituency, where the disputed Babri Masjid is situated and where the CPI and CPI(M) had just held a rally opposing the Congress(I)'s, BJP's and Vishwa Hindu Parishad's communalisation of Ram Mandir the issue.

In rejecting the Congress(I) the electorate in north India rejected a party with a proven track record of antiminority violence, in favour of other parties which, even if they are not decidedly better intentioned, have, at least at the moment, less blood on their hands. Disgust with the Congress(I) misrule of violence and corruption was reflected in a vote for whichever alternative existed.

If the BJP and Shiv Sena interpret this as vote for more anti Muslim violence and fail to act responsibly, they will make the same mistake that Rajiv Gandhi made in 1985. His government interpreted the anti-terrorist vote that they got as a mandate

for more violence of the kind they had perpetrated on the Sikhs in November 1984. Consequently, they pursued a bloody, strongarm policy in Punjab, continuing to heap violence and humiliation on the Sikhs. But this backfired in 1989 when they lost both the Sikh and the Hindu vote. If the Congress(I) has not benefited electorally from the massacres it has perpetrated, there is no reason to believe that the BJP or the Shiv Sena will benefit from a similar strategy. Their leaders would do well to realise the long term implications for their parties and to move away from support to and advocacy of violence and authoritarianism.

The issue of violence in the polity is directly linked to that of women's participation in politics. Women, in any case, have to negotiate a number of forms of violence both in the home and outside. When, in addition, violent conflict erupts in society, women get pushed back into the domestic sphere, become further invisibilised and silenced. For example,

**Victims of the riots in Bhagalpur, November 1989. The children are dead, the mother still alive.**



*Krishna Maruti Kishan*

when a minority community is under siege, it is not just the women of that community who are terrorised but also the women of the majority community. Hindu-Muslim conflict is bred on prejudice, fear and lies. Thus, even when it is Muslims who are being killed, many Hindus genuinely believe that they are under attack. Hindu women are scarcely less afraid to step out of their house at such times than are Muslim women. If one cannot even move out freely, how can one participate in any kind of political activity?

Further, in an atmosphere where communal issues are mischievously made into top priority issues, women tend to submerge their own interests in what they imagine are the interests of the community. Thus, many women in Maharashtra, identifying the Shiv Sena as a supposed protector of "Hindu interests", would support it despite its blatant use of hoodlum power which can never be conducive to women's greater freedom or security.

How women's issues are subordinated and sacrificed to pressures from communal forces was demonstrated by the fate of Pramila Dandavate. She is perhaps the only national level woman politician who has consistently worked on women's issues and attempted to make them her main political plank. She was allotted a ticket by



**Pramila Dandavate (left) at an antidowry demonstration in 1982, consoling the mother of a murdered bride**

the Janata Dal as part of the National Front, but in the negotiations with the Shiv Sena, her ticket was bargained away in exchange for a seat adjustment. Her candidature was withdrawn in favour of a Shiv Sena candidate and in return the Shiv Sena did not put up a candidate against her husband Madhu Dandavate, also of the Janata Dal. This deal has an almost symbolic significance, involving as it does the sacrifice of a woman politician standing for women's issues to a Shiv Sena candidate standing on a blatantly communal platform.

If Indian women today are not organised as a political pressure group, it is not because they are indifferent to

public affairs or are delightedly submerged in domestic matters, as some newspaper comments insultingly made out (see box). One proof of women's interest in changing society for the better is the substantial number of women who are active in non-party organisations ranging from civil liberties and women's groups and Mahila mandals to social, charitable associations, even in rural areas and small towns.

It is also a fact that Indian women are enthusiastic about exercising their franchise. Over the years, the gap between the proportions of men and of women who cast their vote has been steadily narrowing. Under normal circumstances, that is, when there is no violence or blatant intimidation, women come out in large numbers and wait in long queues to vote. The familiar newspaper photos of women in *ghunghat* or *burqa* casting their vote express not just a cliché but a significant aspect of our political reality - that even women who lead confined lives are not indifferent to their right to vote. Several studies have also eroded the notion that women always vote as their families decide. While not enough is known about women's voting pattern, there is reason to believe that many use the secrecy of the ballot to vote autonomously despite the preferences or dictates of dominant male family members.

### **Adding Insult to Injury**

Few political commentators even noticed that the political parties who had promised to reserve 30 percent of tickets for women, in fact failed to provide even 10 percent. Two small items in the *Times of India* indicated the trivialising and unthinking manner in which the deliberate exclusion of women is blamed upon them, by stereotyping them as uninvolved. One item, noting that women formed only about 10 percent of the Congress (I) list, was titled "Ladylike Reticence?" Another item, "Orissa's Women" stated "Women in Orissa still prefer the kitchen to the clamour of balloting as evident from their having only five representatives in the 174 aspirants who filed their nominations for the Lok Sabha election."

In the last five years, an increasing ferment and unrest has also been evident amongst women, witness their large scale participation in many movements, especially the new peasant movements. Women's potential for participation in political life and for bringing about change can be encouraged, however, only if violence is somewhat curbed. Violence is being used by all major parties today. However, more frightening than the use of hoodlum brigades is the attempt by some parties to legitimise large scale massacres and coercive methods for resolving social disputes.

The appeal of the Shiv Sena, for example, is twofold. First, it claims to "get things done", by cutting through, violently if necessary, the net of corruption and inefficiency that envelops government functioning. Fed up with the inefficiency, corruption and nepotism that the Congress(I) rulers had developed into a fine art, people are lured into believing that a strong hand is required - that government functionaries will work only when terrorised from above. It is in this hope that they turn to a Bal Thackeray, even while they are afraid of him. The logic of this choice is evident in the Amitabh Bachan films of the eighties - when nothing works, only a ruthless strong man, a Shahenshah or a Toofan, can bludgeon the rusted government machinery into yielding results and can check the criminals who are ruling the roost in all spheres of public life.

The second part of the appeal to violence is based on the stereotyping of a minority community as "fundamentalists", "backward", "violent", "treacherous", and of the majority community as "secular" and discriminated against even though it is a majority. This strategy is pursued with a view to unifying the majority community through hatred and fear.

Perhaps the most fortunate feature of our political and social life, demonstrated in this election too, is that all of us Indians have many allegiances, and our vote is not normally determined by any single allegiance that overrides all others. Thus,

for example, a Hindu or a Muslim also has an allegiance to a particular regional group, local devotional community, linguistic group, caste, clan, village or town, and these loyalties are often as strong as, or stronger than, the so called "Hindu" or "Muslim" identity. It is fashionable to decry these crosscutting allegiances as divisive and backward looking. In fact, it is precisely these loyalties which act as obstacles in the way of unreal loyalties and artificial, abstract, pan Indian "Hindu"

or "Muslim" identities which would steamroller other, frequently more salient, identities. For example, a Hindu and a Muslim from Kerala who meet in Bombay will probably have more experiences such as language education and goals such as white collar professional employment in common than either would have with a coreligionist from Haryana. This commonality may help prevent them from being willing to legitimise murder in the name of religious oneness. Real unity is



unity with people among whom one lives, the commitment to stand against the murder of one's neighbour, not unity with killers on an all-India level who claim to share one's religion.

Parties like the BJP and the Shiv Sena, by appealing to our worst prejudices and by systematically promoting mistrust and hatred among different groups, try to make anti Muslim violence legitimate and respectable in a way that other forms of violence have not achieved. They can do this only because of our lack of knowledge of the real situation, especially of other communities than our own, from whom we are often socially cut off.

Fear breeds on misinformation. For example, each time a massacre takes place it is called a 'riot'. This misleading word suggests that two equally matched mobs clashed and both suffered equally. Newspapers, because of poorly thought

out, foolish laws, are not allowed to report how many of those killed belonged to each community and who killed who. Taking advantage of the gap in information, parties like the BJP and the Shiv Sena spread the lie that as many or more Hindus lost life and property as did Muslims. In fact, wherever studies have been conducted in the eighties, the pattern of violence has clearly emerged not as a clash between communities but rather as primarily a systematic attack on the minority by police in collusion with hoodlum brigades. A **Manushi** team that investigated the 1987 violence in Meerut, for example, found that the vast majority of those killed were Muslims (most of them murdered in cold blood by the police and PAC), the majority of those arrested as 'rioters' were also Muslims, and the majority of commercial establishments, houses and vehicles destroyed belonged

to Muslims. Yet almost all Hindus we met in Meerut were convinced that Hindus had been the primary victims of violence and would have been wiped out if the PAC had not come to their defence.

To explode such myths by presenting the facts is important, because these myths are built and used to legitimise the continuing use of violence in political life. Such lies can be exposed only by actually going to the sites of violence and observing the reality (for example, in Meerut we did a colony by colony count of burnt shops and houses and a house to house count of the dead and injured in affected areas). The reality cannot be understood merely by talking to authorities because they are too often blinded by fear and propaganda; some deliberately make use of it.

Women's groups are among those in a better position to expose the anatomy of

#### Meerut, 1987: PAC and police fuelled the fire



violence in our society. They have already contributed to this task in significant ways. For example, in the aftermath of the November 1984 massacre of the Sikhs in Delhi, women formed a large component of the Nagrik Ekta Manch, which did relief work, and also of the groups which produced investigative reports on the way the violence was engineered by the Congress (I). These reports played a crucial role in preventing the legitimisation of the massacre. The Congress(I) was put on the defensive, nationally and internationally, and compelled to realise that their pogroms against the Sikhs outside Punjab might not yield the expected dividends. Women's groups continue to work with the 1984 riot victims, and to keep the issue alive in public memory.

A similar role on a smaller scale has been played by women activists in Bombay, Ahmedabad and Hyderabad in exposing the role of government and police in massacres of Muslims. Our efforts in this direction need to be far more systematic as a necessity for making life safe for all of us.

Some of the steps we could take immediately:

1. As soon as a so-called "riot" occurs, an active group could organise to go to the spot and investigate the situation, observe and examine the actual losses, and record the facts, not just what is reported. For example, we must try to establish how many of each community actually got killed, injured, arrested, tortured, and lost how much property. Also, what part police, paramilitary forces, government machinery and political parties played in the violence.

We should then make this information available to the media as widely as is possible, to combat the mischievous and lying propaganda spread by communal forces.

2. We can play a similar role during elections, beginning with the coming assembly elections. We should select those constituencies where there is the greatest likelihood of violence and



intimidation, and should be present there to observe and record events. Very small efforts made in this direction during the national election indicated that even the presence of an alert team of two put the officials on their best behaviour and may have acted as some sort of check on blatant rigging.

By repeatedly exposing the mechanics of violence we can build pressure on the

forces, governmental and other, that perpetrate it. Only when to murder becomes a nonpaying proposition, when it exposes the killers to public disapproval and loses them political support and votes, will they think twice about continuing to murder. And only in a polity where violence is not the norm can women begin to participate in significant numbers and to press for their own priority issues. □