

Religious Mobilization and Organized Violence in Contemporary South Asia

Agenda >
South Asia

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Religious violence, also called communal violence, is often described as a ritual or a 'pact of violence between social groups' that keeps the community boundaries in place. At times the ritual turns from symbolism into organized pogrom. This is sometimes explained, for example by the police agencies, as the work of 'local criminal elements', or as the effects of deep religious passions and sentiments. These explanations not only provide convenient excuses, but also imply that religious violence be accepted as an inevitable feature of the South Asian social fabric.

Any meaningful legal enquiry into the development of religious violence, therefore, is made redundant because violence with religious overtones is considered outside the universe of criminal offences. This raises questions about the role of the state and institutions of law enforcement and policing. Do they hibernate at such critical times or do they actively engage themselves in violence? In Gujarat, the state's withdrawal, or its active complicity at times, has been clearly demonstrated where the state's Chief Minister followed the internecine violence with a *gaurav yatra*, the celebratory 'journey of pride' through Gujarat. The chosen strategy was indeed a far cry from a display of restraint and/or remorse that we tend to associate with state executives, in case of such turbulent events. Here we could witness a high official of the state justifying the killings as a Hindu reaction to repeated Muslim provocation and mischief. The pretence of neutrality and arbitration between communities has been replaced by a more openly partial and 'ethnicized' stance in favour of the majority community.

How can we understand the face of violence characterized by a lack of remorse combined with brash display of communal power? This question opens the domain of religious mobilization through sustained, long-term programmes organized by nationalist groups with religious overtones and

undeclared political ambitions. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, a national volunteer organization); Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, Global Hindu Organisation); Minhaj Ul Quran (MUQ, Path to Quran); and Markaz Dawa-Wal-Irshad, of the Wahabi sect; are some of the organizations in India and Pakistan that over some decades have successfully mobilized urban men and women to participate in new Holy Wars fought on both real and virtual turf. The impact of this mobilization can be seen for example in Gujarat where after the recent riots some VHP leaders congratulated themselves for having 'successfully raised the Hindu consciousness'. The significance of these riots lies not just in the brutality and the number of people killed but also in the systematic destruction of residential and commercial properties that belonged to Muslims. With the destruction of homes and sources of livelihood, the continuation of socio-economic exchanges between the communities in the post-riots situation has been rendered impossible. Like their Hindu opponents Islamic organizations, the ones stemming from the Wahabis in particular, seem to be engaged in militant activities, suicide attacks and other activities, that are col-

lectively dubbed as Islamic terror networks. With these transnational networks the issue ceases to be of mere national or even bilateral significance between India and Pakistan.

The third and last theme is the symbolism, scale, and nature of violence. The attacks on Hindu temples in Gujarat and Jammu in 2002 and the destruction of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya a decade ago, augured a new kind of highly charged symbolic politics. Violence is no longer represented as the mindless act of fringe elements of society but as an act with a well thought-out strategy and years of mobilization behind it, using to full effect the emotional power of TV media and a strongly communalized vernacular press. Government banning of electronic media from Gujarat in March 2002, for instance, stands in stark contrast to the highly charged news coverage in India of the attacks on temples, or incidents in Kashmir.

This two-day workshop attempts to cover the issues and questions opened by the recent events in South Asia through comparative or specific studies of religious violence, organizations and their (trans)national linkages both at empirical and conceptual levels. <

More info >

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