

Riots, violence and the power of perception

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 19 September 2013 05:58 - Last Updated Thursday, 19 September 2013 06:14

Ali Khan Mahmudabad's reflections on the Muzaffarnagar violence.

<http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/counterflows/entry/riots-violence-and->

[the-power-of-perception](#)

Ali was a participant at one of CfP's workshops on Identity.

At CfP, we are struggling to address the underlying causes of violence, and believe

that all change must start with ourselves...

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There is no way to write a history of violence. Perhaps the only thing that can be analysed, however incompletely, is the context in which the violence takes place. Unfortunately, this approach too has major shortcomings, not from the point of view of an analyst or academic but from the point of view of those who are affected by the violence. Part of the reason for this is that in the arguments over religious identity, socio-economic backwardness, ideology, political machinations, the numbers of people killed, or injured, caste configurations, the importance of class and money, the individuality of the victims are forgotten or subsumed into a narrative that does not seek to truly address the issue but just to further its own particular cause: nationalism, liberalism, secularism, Islam, Hinduism- you take your pick. In trying to write the history of violence,

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often the history of the future of the individual is silenced. The biggest tragedy

and injustice is that those who die, suffer or are uprooted are denied their

talents, denied their future.

Recently a town called Muzaffarnagar in Northern India has been torn

apart by what is labeled Hindu-Muslim sectarian violence. Many people

are outraged but sadly, behind a lot of the outrage are the calculations

of people who already know how they want to view what happened.

Therefore the sad fact is that the conversation about who is culpable,

who started the violence and who patronised it can never end.

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With the kind of technology available today, which of course has so many benefits, fake photos, videos and other material goes viral on the Internet. This has been the case in Muzaffarnagar and no one particularly cares for the truth but only how they can benefit from what happened. On the other hands there are hundreds of photos depicting the mass migration of entire villages, of frightened and teary faces of little girls and boys, of those who survived horrific injuries and of those who have been affected in some way. The problem then is of how we view these photographs and therefore the people depicted in them. The wider issue becomes one of what language to use to talk about them. When you see two young sisters holding hands in the middle of crowd,

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separated from their families, do you see Muslims, Hindus, Jats, Shias,

Sunnis, Dalits, Christians, Buddhists?

Language is ultimately the site of philosophy and therefore everyday we

consciously or unconsciously make existential choices about our beliefs,

our politics, and our bodies even. Philosophy might be talked about as

the hallowed preserve of old men sitting in ivory towers but in essence

we all partake in philosophical conversation every day. The real test

therefore is to question our presuppositions, our pre-commitments and

ourselves before we pass judgment. Ultimately of course it is not about

passing judgment but about understanding.

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One thing that appears particularly striking about the victims of violence

is how they talk about themselves and this is borne out by the testimonies

and experiences of victims from across the world whether they are in India,

Pakistan, Israel, Palestine, South Africa, Rwanda, Korea, Japan, America,

Russia or indeed any other country. Almost inevitably the loss which people

suffer is expressed as the loss of a brother, a sister, a husband, a wife, a father,

a mother, a son, a daughter, a neighbor or a friend and not as that of an Indian,

a Hindu, a Muslim, a tailor or a barber. It is ironic that even those who seek to

twist the suffering of others to suit their own agendas end up talking at the level

of the individual: at the level of the personal. So for instance the much-touted

slogan of a recent political rally, held in the same area that has experienced

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violence, used the slogan 'bahu-beti bachao' or save our daughters-in-law and

daughters in order to make the issue one of community pride.

There are no quick fixes and easy solutions to resolve situations in which violence

spirals out of control and those that are offered are often with an ulterior motive in

mind or are so abstract and vague that they cannot translate into anything tangible.

However, the one thing that is possible is that as individuals we can look inwards

and interrogate our own views and ideas. The way in which we view others is perhaps

one of the few things over which we do have complete autonomy, no matter what

extraneous factors exist. So even though it is claimed that identities are inherently

antagonistic, this conflict is borne out of our own gaze.

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One of the intriguing things about America is that when lives are lost in warfare

or 'terrorist' attacks the victims are always talked about in great detail. Their

relationships, their lives, their pasts, even the place where they bought coffee

are highlighted. Whether this is cynical propaganda or not is irrelevant. What is

important is that it helps others view the victim as no different from themselves.

Similarly, while sitting in a bus or train when two strangers speak, in itself an act

of trust and sadly an increasingly rare thing in today's segmented world, they try

and establish common ground: perhaps a language, a country, a religion or

something very mundane even, like a common destination or a shared experience

like waiting for late buses.

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Differences are inevitable, even within families, but these are embraced

because ultimately it is what is shared that matters. The question then that

we face everyday is whether we set out in order to determine difference and

therefore create distance or to seek out similarities and therefore establish trust.

Even in the most bleak of times there is always hope, provided we seek it out.

Amidst the tragic events in Muzaffarnagar, a few Muslim families decided to stay

on in their village despite most others having decided to leave. These people are

being protected by their neighbors who happen to be Hindu. Amongst the

people who stayed behind are 80 year old Nizamuddin and his wife Nabiyan who

said “even if our neighbors want to kill us, we will not say anything. We have

shared Diwali and Eid together. These Hindus are nothing less than my brothers.”