

# AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE MEERUT RIOT

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Meerut, about seventy kilometres from Delhi, has historical importance in that the first rumblings of the 1857 mutiny began here when the Hindu and Muslim soldiers resolved to fight together against the British rulers, unitedly declared war against their British masters and marched towards Delhi. Meerut has had the long tradition of communal harmony and till today the festival of Nauchandi is celebrated with great fanfare by Hindus and Muslims together. Although common Hindus and Muslims have lived and pursued their avocations together, the vested interests in both the communities have often tried to disrupt the harmony. The present riot has not changed the situation. During my extensive tour of the riot-affected areas I did not find bitterness in any one community against the other; on the contrary the sufferers and their sympathisers, bitterly complained against the PAC, the city police and district officials in league with some communal elements.

In Meerut, which has a population of more than five lakhs, the municipality has recently been converted into a municipal corporation. The ratio of Hindus to Muslims in Meerut is 51:49, according to some district authorities. One sees locality after locality exclusively inhabited by Muslims. There are also several localities where the Hindus and Muslims live together in harmony and peace. The corporation elections which people then believed would soon be held also cast an ugly shadow over communal peace in the town.

Most of the Muslims are engaged in handloom work. They are generally weavers and some of them even own looms. The

cloth produced by them is generally sold to the Hindu traders—Baniyas who, interestingly in Meerut, as elsewhere, are the bed-rock of the RSS. These conservative traders finance the local RSS and now also the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). A large section of Muslims are also engaged in producing scissors and brass bands, the latter being the exclusive monopoly of the Muslims. Many Muslims who own brass-band manufacturing units are quite prosperous. While the majority of Muslims are quite poor, one can see a section of well-to-do Muslims in Meerut, unlike in other places.

Recently a number of field studies of communal riots have suggested certain common characteristic features which are as follow:

1. Communal riots generally take place in middle-sized towns.
2. The proportion of Muslims in such towns happens to be high, usually more than 30%.
3. A section of Muslims in such towns is generally well-to-do and tends to be a potential competitor for the Hindu traders.
4. The riots now tend to be well planned and last for several days or weeks; they are no longer spontaneous outbursts they used to be earlier.
5. The core issues, more often than not, happen to be of either an economic or political nature whereas the spark is provided by some trivial incident.

In the Meerut riot all these features are more or less present. It is a middle-sized town with a very high proportion of Muslim population (around 49%). A section of Muslims is quite prosperous and has political ambitions of its own. In 1982 both the MP as well as MLA are Muslims (Mohsina Qidwai and Manzoor Ahmad, both from Congress (I)). Here too, as will be shortly evident, the riots were well planned and lasted for more than four weeks. The pattern of setting fire to houses and stabbing showed special training in both the acts. Another feature of these riots is the large role played by the anti-social elements who are seeking political legitimation and respectability through participation in such riots. They emerge as the saviours of their respective

communities. The increasing use of illegal weapons and other incendiary materials in a systematic way is also a pointer in this direction. According to R. D. Tripathi, the city S.P., until 7 October, the police had seized 31 knives, 1599 sharp weapons, 10 country-made revolvers, 28 bombs, 27 litres of acid, 16 kg of potash and 150 kg of other bomb-making material. What has not yet been seized must be much more than this. All this clearly shows the planned nature of the riots and the systematic participation of anti-social elements in them.

There is another important dimension of the Meerut riot which is worth noting. A conscious attempt was made to incite the Dalits to fight against the Muslims. There are several reasons for this. Some of them are as follows:

- (a) After the conversion of some Harijans to Islam at Meenakshipuram, the VHP, which derives its cadre mainly from the RSS, is trying its best to woo the Harijans. In this respect it pays off a great deal to carry on aggressive anti-Muslim propaganda among the Dalits. In northern India in general, and in Uttar Pradesh, in particular, such propaganda pays rich dividends and keeps tension between the Muslims and Dalits alive. Before the Meerut riots, clashes occurred near Turkman Gate in Delhi in July, 82 between the Muslims and Dalits had occurred. That too was by deliberate design as the field inquiry shows. Such tactics keep Harijans away from the Muslims and wreck efforts at unity between the two.
- (b) The RSS, by using Harijans thus in the forefront to fight against Muslims, can preserve their cloak of neutrality and even pretend innocence in the communal conflict. This has become necessary in a way, as its political arm (the BJP) has politically adopted the secular posture and even pretends to pledge itself by to Gandhian socialism.
- (c) Such a strategy, while promoting the myth of religious solidarity, helps bring about division among the have-nots of society.

In Meerut, it was alleged by Mrs. Harpal Singh, a teacher in the Department of Education, of Nanak Chand College, Meerut,



the caste Hindus used the members of the Valmiki community (i.e., Bhangis—sweepers), who are extremely poor, to fight the Muslims by proxy. It is rumoured, she said, that the Valmikis were given Rs. 200/- and a bottle of liquor for killing one Muslim. Even if it is not wholly true it at least shows the emerging new trend among the upper caste Hindus. Mrs. Singh stated that Mr. Mohanlal Kapoor, ex-MLA belonging to the BJP, now comes from a distance to perform puja along with the Harijans. This new-found love for Harijans is being displayed with a calculated motive: it could bring about split in the Harijan votes which are normally exercised in favour of the Congress I. It is also interesting to note that only the poor and illiterate Valmikis have fallen into the RSS trap. The Chamars who are more educated and conscious are nowhere on the scene.

A look at the genesis of the riot shows it to be political rather than economic. There is no apparent economic rivalry between the Hindus and Muslims. However, the political cause is quite apparent. The high percentage of their population (49%) makes Muslims politically very important. Their support to any political party becomes crucial, along with the Harijan votes. Hence a conscious attempt to woo the Harijans is being made by the BJP. At present, as pointed out earlier, both the seats, i.e., that of MP and MLA are held by the Cong. (I) in the city. Even at the height of anti-Congress feelings immediately after the emergency, Mr. Manzoor Ahmad of the Indira Congress had won the assembly seat, wresting it from Mr. Mohanlal Kapoor of the then Jansangh. Since then the Jansangh (now BJP) has been trying to increase its political clout.

To understand the genesis of this riot it is necessary to know what happened immediately before in Meerut. Balasaheb Deoras, the RSS chief, visited Meerut in January 1982. Surprisingly a rally was held in his honour on the Government Inter College Compound. More surprising was the fact that the Superintendent of Police Mr. Pyarelal (S. P. City) and additional District Magistrate Mr. Rajkishor Mishra saluted Balasaheb publicly. Both these officers, it is interesting to note, are notorious for their anti-Muslim bias and it is these officers who ordered firing on Mus-

lims on 29 and 30 September and 1 October 1982 which resulted in 29 deaths. The tension began to mount after Balasaheb's visit to the city. The Mazar-Temple controversy which we will shortly describe began to assume serious proportions from the month of April 1982. Also throughout the months of August and September the activities of BJP and VHP were quite prejudicial to the cause of communal peace in the town.

From 19 to 21 September 1982 the VHP held a meeting of its national committee at Varanasi, and on 20 September it passed a resolution that if the disputed temple was not unlocked (the administration had sealed the place as we shall see later) the VHP would start state-wide agitation. Similarly on 2 and 3 October the RSS-dominated BJP Youth organisation held its convention at Allahabad and passed a resolution that the people should be alert against anti-national elements who want to destroy the Indian cultural, social and political fibre—thereby hinting at the Muslims. All this was reported prominently in the local Hindi press which naturally aggravated the situation.

Another interesting fact to note is that in the elections to the newly formed Municipal Corporation, that people believed would soon take place each party had an interest. The BJP was making a serious bid to capture the corporation. The Congress (I) had its own factional politics which is no less interesting. Due to the high proportion of Muslims in the population, the tickets for MLA and MP's seats are generally given to Muslim candidates, which allegedly causes heartburning to the non-Muslim candidates. A source close to the Congress (I) told me that the city Congress (I) president Mr. Dharam Devakar and the DCC president Mr. Shanti Tyagi both have, of late, developed pro-RSS sympathies. Mr. Dharam Devakar, according to this source, wants to become mayor of the city with the help of BJP. When I checked with other sources it emerged that Mr. Devakar certainly played a partisan role which encouraged the administration to take an anti-Muslim posture.

In this series of background events one more event warrants our notice. In July 1982 the VHP held a camp at Hardwar to train people for carrying on its Jana Jagaran campaign. These trained volunteers came to Meerut and poisoned the atmosphere. It was alleged by Mr. Brij Rajkishore, a leading advocate of

Meerut and secretary of the CPI (Meerut city) that it was one of these volunteers of the VHP who killed the Pesh Imam Mazhar Ahmad in July.

We will now proceed to narrate, in proper sequence, the events connected with the Mazar-Temple controversy and how vested interests from both the communities took advantage of this controversy to advance their own interests. These events would show how a small dispute, due to powerful vested interests, can assume the proportions it did in Meerut.

In Shahghasa, a busy commercial locality of Meerut, are mainly cloth shops owned by Hindu traders who buy their cloth from Muslim weavers. It is a narrow street. Near one end of this street there is a *peepal* tree squeezed between a pan shop and a *piào* (a water hut). Near the *peepal* tree and behind this *piào* is an old well, during the partition riots, a few dead bodies were discovered, and hence under the instructions of Sardar Patel, the then Home Minister, the well was enclosed by high walls.

Adjacent to this well, in an extremely narrow by-lane is a house belonging to a Muslim advocate, Qazi Zaheeruddin. Opposite the well, there is some Municipal land which he is alleged to have usurped. There are also three shops adjoining the well. These shops and the well are the property of a trust (although there is no written record thereof) for a *piào*. But advocate Zaheeruddin, it is alleged, had an eye on the shops and the well. Urban land is becoming very valuable in Meerut too. There are many Muslims in that area but, according to advocate Brij Rajkishore, they insisted on having a Hindu in charge of the *piào* so that Hindus could also drink water.

The dispute, therefore, was between the trust and Zaheeruddin and no community was involved. But soon, some Hindu communalists gave it a twist and began to claim that there was a temple there. Different sources testify to the fact that there never was any temple there. However, advantage was taken of the *peepal* tree to support this claim. The then SP., Mr. Rawat, personally intervened, and in March 1982 a *ghanta* (bell) was installed and evening *aarti* (worship) started. No such *aarti* had been performed before. Now it became a regular practice. To add to this bizarre drama advocate Zaheeruddin employed the



equally bizarre tactic of claiming that a *Mazar* (tomb of a saint) existed there, which again was false. Actually where the *Mazar* was claimed to exist, Zaheeruddin had earlier constructed a lavatory.

As tension began to mount due to these claims and counter-claims, it was decided in April 1982 to hold an inquiry into the whole affair and the representatives of both the communities decided not to do anything until the result of the inquiry was made known. The inquiry was completed on 20 August 1982. On 13 August, in violation of the above agreement, and ignoring section 144 which had been imposed on the area, Mr. Mohanlal Kapoor and Brahmopal Singh, president of the city BJP, performed *puja* at the spot along with their followers. The police rushed to the spot and arrested some twenty-three persons. But at this stage the president of the local Congress (I) intervened and those arrested were released. This gave further encouragement to the Hindu communalists. Some Muslim communalists, on the other hand, were playing up the *Mazar* issue.

The Magistrate who was to deliver his judgement on the issue on 20 August was prevented from doing so by pressure. Here too the Congress (I) president is reported to have played an active role. The same evening a meeting of some prominent citizens of Meerut was held and an agreement was signed by two Muslims and two Hindus that the *ghanta* (bell) would not be used neither would the claim for the *Mazar* be pressed. However, some Muslim leaders who were not included in the signing of the agreement felt insulted. Hakim Saifuddin declared that he would offer *chadar* (a sheet of cloth) on the *Mazar* and began collecting money for the purpose. His sole motive was to defeat the purpose of the agreement.

On 12 September, the authorities sealed the place under section 146 of Cr. P.C. so that no one could enter there either for *puja* or prayer on the *Mazar*. The Hindu communalists took this as a challenge and an affront to Hindu sentiments and gave a call for *hartal* which went on for three days. The bar association then filed a revision petition against the attachment order in the court of district judge. The revision was allowed and attachment held illegal. Thus on 22 September the seal was removed in compliance with the court order. The next day, Mohanlal Kapoor

led a victory procession and was hailed as a Hindu hero. He was profusely garlanded.

Baqr Id happened to be on 28 September. The Shahar Qazi Zainul Abidin declared that the Id prayers would not be held at Iddgah but would be held in mosques in different *mohallahs* and that Muslims would wear black badges in protest against the removal of the seal. Black flags were also hoisted on some Muslim houses. Communal tension which had diffused began mounting again. Hindus now started the campaign to hoist saffron coloured flags in a big way. Soon the situation went out of control and hell was let loose from 30 September to 2 October. Before this, there had been sporadic killings. The Pesh Imam (prayer leader) of a mosque was killed in the last week of August. In retaliation Rambhole (a priest) was killed on 6 September. A Muslim home guard Shabbir was stabbed to death two days later while going on duty. Seventy-year-old Pesh Imam Shahabuddin who led prayers in the Choti Masjid of Kishanpadd was also killed the same day.

But from 30 September to 2 October, it was genocide by the PAC. Mr. Brij Rajkishore, the CPI Secretary alleged that the PAC were in league with the Hindu communalists. The communalists used to fire from house tops and the PAC jawans would then enter the Muslim houses alleging that the Muslims attacked. Many survivors of the PAC massacre told this writer that their menfolk were dragged out of the houses and shot. The houses were also not spared. The meagre belongings of the poor residents were looted. Mr. Zafar Ali, a Junior Engineer who resided in house No. 304C in Hori Nagar was dragged out and shot by the PAC. His house was also partially burnt. The widow of Sherdin told me with tears in her eyes that though she tried to hide her husband behind an old trunk, the PAC jawans spotted him and shot him dead. The widow Raisa Banu has seven small children. Most of the houses in this locality had bullet holes.

The worst affected was Feroze building where live many poor Muslims. It is nothing but a series of semi-pucca dwellings of poor Muslims. Not a single house in this building situated at Bhumian Ka Pul escaped the wrath of PAC. The most pathetic case was that of 21-year-old Iqbal who was the only son of



Shabbir Husain, a doctor. The father pleaded with the PAC to spare his son's life and kill him instead. The PAC jawans shot Iqbal along with his cousin and ordered Dr. Shabbir to load their dead bodies on a truck and wipe the blood clean. On top of it Dr. Shabbir was arrested and put in jail. In Goli Saniwali Shabana, a 8-year-old girl stabbed several times by the miscreants fortunately survived. There were eleven others from this building who were killed. Also the house of Abdul Aziz Nawaz Khan, a well-to-do Muslim whose two sisters were to marry within a couple of days of this incident, was looted. The losses are estimated at 7 lakhs.

I was told that no less than 42 persons were killed on 1 and 2 October, by the bullets of the PAC, and all of them were innocent. One of the tricks, Mr. Manzoor Ahmad (MLA) said, was to explode a bomb, and when people came out to see what had happened they were shot, alleging that they were miscreants. A delegation of some prominent citizens comprising K. D. Sharma of the Department of History, Meerut College; Dr. Harpal Singh, Head of the Department of Political Science, Nanak Chand College, Meerut; Mr. Mansur Ahmad, General Secretary, Scientific Works Association; and Mr. Mahabir Singh, advocate, went round the affected areas of the city and strongly condemned the riots. They said that the RSS and other communal elements in collusion with the district administration let loose the reign of terror on the poor and unprotected workers and toilers of the minority community. The delegation said that there are many minority houses in Meerut today wherein not a single adult has been left alive. Many women have become widows and children rendered orphans. All this has happened to the minority community only. The delegation, after careful inspection, came to the conclusion that all this had been done with careful planning and with the full participation of the PAC and the district administration. The delegation estimated that on 2 October, about 42 persons were killed by PAC bullets. The delegation also alleged that the officials of the district administration had ordered the PAC jawans to aim at the chests of the victims. (This statement of the delegation was published in an Urdu Daily from Delhi the *Al-Jami'at* dated 24 October and was verified for me by one of the members of the delegation, Mr. Harpal Singh.)

For want of space, there are several other details of the victims of the riot collected on the spot by me which are not included here. The Meerut riots make a horrible story and are a great blot on the fair name of India. What appeared in the press is hardly a tip of the proverbial iceberg. The national press has given very sketchy reports, revealing the attitude of the big press towards caste and communal riots. The local Hindi press acting as the mouthpiece of the RSS, of course, played havoc by publishing inflammatory material against minorities. Some of these papers are *Mayrashtra*, *Prabhat*, *Meerut Samachar* and *Hamara Yug*, and going through these papers one can estimate the damage that could have been done. And about the role of the PAC, the less said the better. After every major riot the Government gives its assurance that the PAC will not be employed again, but the same story repeats itself. It is a matter of great shame that the Government cannot even do as little as to refrain from employing the PAC in such delicate situations. Some police officers like the SP (City) Mr. Pyarelal and ADM Rajkishore Mishra were openly and blatantly against Muslims, and what is shocking is that they were not transferred despite the orders given by the Prime Minister herself. They still continue to be in Meerut and on active duty.

What happened at Meerut is a very sad commentary on the deplorable behaviour of petty-minded politicians who do not let go any opportunity to increase their influence and to gain easy access to power. They have literally no compunction in walking over the dead bodies of innocent citizens to occupy the coveted chair of power. A minor dispute between an individual and a trust was most unscrupulously exploited by them for their own selfish ends and ultimately caused disaster to hundreds of innocent families. In this crafty game of unconscientious politicians at least a hundred lives were lost (ninety Muslims and ten Hindus as if life is divisible between Hindus and Muslims) but that is how the figures are given and properties and business worth more than 100 crores destroyed. What a game for the communal politicians to play!