

# India – Violence in Delhi: A Result of an Ecosystem marked by Acquiescence and Hatred?

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Amit Shah, Home Minister of India, recently in a statement in Parliament said, “Such riots can happen only when there is a pre-planned conspiracy behind it. We are also probing the conspiracy angle. All those who caused the violence will not be able to escape the law” (Indian Express, 2020). However, it is still unclear who is to be blamed for the riots in Delhi which burnt the city, mercilessly claimed lives of the innocent and ripped apart the social fabric of the neighborhood, scarring it with suspicion hatred and polarization. The riots triggered by incendiary speech of Kapil Mishra, who warned of forcefully eviction of peaceful protestors protesting against the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act/ National register of Citizens and National Population Register, claimed 53 lives—mostly of Muslims. The violence left over 200 injured and ravaged northeast Delhi areas of Mustafabad, Shiv Vihar, Brijpuri, Jafrabad. While it is more or less certain that these riots were pre-planned, there is a debate if this violence can be called riots, pogrom or genocide. There are also some stray parallels drawn between this riot and the others in the past. So what exactly is the nature of the violence that unfolded in Delhi between 23<sup>rd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> February 2020? And how is it similar or different from other riots that India have witnessed in the past? And who is responsible for this violence?

Let us begin by understanding all the three terms. According to Paul Brass, a riot carries the appearance of spontaneous, intergroup mass action while a pogrom is deliberately organized—and especially—state-supported killings and the destruction of property of a targeted group (Brass, 2002). As per the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Looking at the broader definitions or attributes of the words, riots, pogrom and genocide, it will not be incorrect to say that terming the Delhi violence as ‘genocide’ would be a little far-fetched. However, the violence does exhibit the characteristics of both- a riot and pogrom. Most of the times, genocides are masqueraded as large riots. Though there is enough on record to suggest that the police were mute spectators and also in toe apart from aiding the Hindutva goons while they

unapologetically and mercilessly attacking the Muslims, forcing them to chant or sing national anthem in their moment of fatal vulnerability, dehumanizing them, vandalizing mosques and “conquering” them by unfolding the saffron flag on them, calling this violence a pogrom would be inaccurate/ fallacious. Or at least terming all three days as a pogrom is fallacious. On the first day of the violence, there was attack and retaliation from the Muslims too. Hindu lives too were lost albeit very few compared to the Muslims. One can argue why the Muslims were or if they were compelled to attack or indulge in violence, but the reports state that Muslims also indulged in the violence, making it a riot on the first day. But the complicity of the police where they can be seen as not responding to the pleas of help, not giving way to the injured to the hospitals, beating up the Muslims and burning Muslim properties, or merely allowing this violence to go on for 3 days taints this violence as a pogrom. Reports and testimonies continue to pour out depicting how brutally the police turned against the Muslims during the riots.

The pertinent question at this stage is whether this riot/pogrom was planned or orchestrated? This point has to be investigated in order to ascertain the culpability of the perpetrators and bring them to justice for their heinous actions. The usage of guns, petrol bombs, gas cylinders, bricks, swords, rods indicate the planned nature of the violence. Not only were such weapons used but the efficiency and know-how with which the weapons were used with also points towards some degree of training to use such weapons. The survivors of the violence have repeatedly claimed that the attackers were not residents of the neighborhood but were “outsiders”. These “outsiders” in an organized manner attacked Muslims for over three days while the police controlled by the Centre government refused to help the victims.

This orchestrated violence was incubated in an ecosystem where on one hand there was acquiescence on the part of the Centre and a volatile atmosphere created at the local level with instigating speeches which provided a trigger. There was ongoing preparation for the riot in the form of a narrative- polemic where one group- portrayed as Hindus were pro- CAA/NPR/NRC and another group consisting of Muslims were anti- CAA/NPR/ NRC. This narrative regarding the Muslims was amplified to demonize them as anti-national and in the context of protestors occupying spaces in Delhi were depicted as “nuisance” obstructing the roads and traffic and thereby causing inconvenience to larger public. This in some way undeniably gave rise to a popular sentiment that CAA is the issue of the “Muslims” and inconvenience caused to the rest of the society was due to the protesting Muslims. The rallies in support of the CAA and the aggressive sloganeering deepened this sentiment, the cleave between the two communities and created an atmosphere of tension. The activation or trigger point came from the incendiary speech of Kapil Mishra, BJP leader from Delhi at a rally in support of CAA in Jaffrabad where he said, “We have given a three-day ultimatum to the Delhi Police to get the road cleared. Get the Jafrabad and Chandbagh (where another sit-in protest is underway) road cleared. They (the protesters) want to create trouble in Delhi. That’s why they have closed the roads. That’s why they have created a riot-like situation here. We have not pelted any stones. Till the US President is in India, we are leaving the area peacefully. After that we won’t listen to you (police) if the roads are not vacated. (Bhatnagar, 2020)” .

The ecosystem mentioned above needs some more attention. A riot at this scale for three days requires support and complicity even tacit at best from the higher echelons of the powerful. Kapil Mishra aided in providing a trigger point. However, one shouldn’t ignore the ominous ecosystem that was constructed carefully which had patronage and ideological support from the top. Right from the mark up to the Delhi elections, the campaigning was one of the most vicious pitched on religious and communal lines- polarizing, debilitating and downright filled with hatred. It normalized demonization of Muslims and violence against Muslims at multiple levels- hate speeches, police inaction while the Muslim youth and women were attacked during peaceful protests or on college campuses. Narrative played a pivotal role in shaping the larger public discourse on the CAA/ NRC

and the on-going protests against it- support to CAA/NRC was deemed as the ultimate act of nationalism or patriotism.

Anurag Thakur, Union Minister, exhorted in rallies to shoot down traitors of the nation referring to Muslims who were protesting against the CAA (Indian Express, 2020). Before the Delhi elections, speaking at a public event, Amit Shah said, “February 8 ke subah parivar ke saath, 10 baje se pehle kamal ke nishaan par button dabainge?... Aur mitron, itni zor se dabana woh button ki current se hi sham ko woh Shaheen Bagh waale uth kar chale jaayein (On the morning of February 8, will you, along with your family, press the lotus symbol before 10 am... and friends, press the button so hard that its current forces the protesters at Shaheen Bagh to leave the place by evening). (Rajput, 2020)” Thus, opposition to CAA was construed as anti-national. Students from colleges which participated in the protests were hunted down by the police by entering campus and using uncalled for force including usage of stun grenades against innocent students, protestors were fired at by Hindutva hoodlums chanting Jai Shri Ram. Little action was taken against these attackers, in effect sending out a clear message that the state supports such acts of intimidation and violence. This acquiescence at the higher level and the resulting ecosystem at the local level allowed hoodlums and the police in tandem to target the Muslims.

While all these aspects discussed above in terms of planning and the role of the police in complicity with the powerful has echoes of resemblance to that of the Gujarat pogrom, there are also some points of divergence from the Gujarat riots, often cited as a point of analogy with the Delhi riots. To begin with, the trigger point of the riot was different than those of other riots in the past. In Gujarat riots, 2002, the trigger point was the allegation that the Sabarmati express carrying kar Sevaks was burnt by Muslims. The ensuing pogrom that went on for more than three days was justified as a spontaneous reaction to burning of Sabarmati. In the other riots, especially the ones from 2014, religious festivals, processions having same routes or alleged defilement of places of worship have been the trigger points to spark off the riots. According to the monitoring of CSSS, in the year 2019, 9 out of total 25 riots, in 2018 20 out of total 38 riots and in 2017, 10 out of 43 riots were triggered by religious festivals/ processions or religious symbols (Engineer, Dabhade, & Nair, 2020).

Very large reason for this pattern is the aggressive masculinization and militarization of festivals where rallies are organized as a show of strength and assertion by slogans and openly brandishing of arms. Recent examples can be cited from Asansol riots in Bengal and Ram Navami riots in Bhagalpur where religious processions were turned into ground for political mobilizations. The riot in Delhi was different in a sense that this riot was directly related to the fundamental question of citizenship- who can be legitimately called an Indian? It also stemmed from the question as to who in India has a right to protest and occupy public spaces to have their voices heard. This riot's underpinning directly hits at who in India can assert against deep-entrenched discrimination and polarization. This marks a significant shift in the discourse of riots in India where any dissent is crushed brutally with complicit state power and patronage.

Rumours too conventionally play a big role in riots. The usual rumors are about defilement of places of worship by throwing forbidden meat in the premises, eve-teasing of women by the men of “other” communities, rapes of women, mutilation of their bodies, attacks on members of the community etc. However, in the case of Delhi riots, there were no rumors of such kind. This can be explained by reflecting over the purpose of rumors in riots. Rumors are used as mediums of mobilization for the riots. Community members get incensed after hearing about the cruelty inflicted on their community members by the “others” and participate in the riots to avenge. But in this riot, the “outsiders” who attacked seem to be hoodlums associated with a political ideology.

This also leads to another larger point of analysis- so far communal riots were instrumental in polarization along religious lines and subsequently pay electoral dividends. Thus various commission

reports have apportioned blame of the riots in the past on Hindutva organizations which were not ruling. Subsequently, the BJP came in power where major riots took place. Gujarat was an exception where BJP was ruling in 2002 but the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation was still dominated by the Congress. Normally the ruling governments during the riots don't want the riots to take place under its watch and may not even electorally stand to benefit. A Delhi riot is a point of departure from this pattern. While the state government of Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi was compelled to chant Hanuman Chalisa and did no more than twiddle its fingers from the safety of their homes despite the landslide victory just a couple of weeks before the riot, the BJP who has the police under its subject, allowed the vindictive hoodlums to run loose wrecking terror in the streets with police offering protection and also itself participating in the violence against the Muslims.

Roughly since 2014, the nature of riots in India has been that of small scale where the durations are shorter and they are more sporadic. These sub-radar and well contained riots are orchestrated in a way so as to attract little media attention or public condemnation. Thus the area of its impact is smaller and so is the number of casualties. But Delhi riot was a break from this pattern, the area spread out in northeast Delhi, 53 casualties with over 200 severely injured and economy of the region badly hit. The only bright spot was the encouraging stories of some members of both the communities protecting members from other communities reinstating faith in the shared existence of so many centuries.

What does it say about the Delhi riots? This riot was an overt unapologetic demonstration of hegemony and moral collapse of the ruling dispensation. All the namesake façade of impartiality of the state and the police crumbled in the face of the blatant complicity of the police and naked acquiescence of the Union government in this riot. Conducive environment or ecosystem of hatred was meticulously constructed to unleash violence- free for all or with no holds barred for the Hindutva hoodlums. The message is clear- Hindus and Muslims who subscribe to the ideology of the government can exist in India. Muslims are in a vulnerable position- prone to naked forms of violence, devoid of constitutional protections so bluntly subverted by the government. Muslims have no democratic space to occupy the streets or assert. Any form of assertion will be crushed with an iron hand- unyielding in the face of constitutional morality, promise of united India and trust with liberty and freedom that modern India had dreamt of.

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