

Reporting communal conflict

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after 20 years of almost continuous communal violence, the basic principles of reportage -- facts are sacred, comment free; get both sides of the story; check your facts before writing them -- are not enough in reporting communal riots. The guiding rules for reporters should be: look for the background; don't perpetuate the stereotype; find residents who deal with both communities; corroborate victims' accounts as well as police accounts; ascertain the role of the police, the politicians and the media; highlight stories where communities have helped each other

In the first few days of the Mumbai terror attacks on November 26, 2008, The Times of India carried a set of 'briefs' on top of every news page, which served as news highlights, alongside the headline 'Warfront Mumbai'. Among them was 'Foreigners who are Muslims have reportedly been guaranteed safety by the terrorists'. This was carried on Friday, November 28.

Imagine the reaction of readers to this bit of information. Crucial no doubt, in determining the identity of the terrorists. But worth separating from the text and highlighting? What would have been an average Hindu's instant reaction, especially against the backdrop of the spate of bomb blasts in the last four months and the hype about jihadi terror? And how would an average Muslim have reacted? Would this kind of news highlight have raised communal animosity or lowered it?

Journalism schools in the 1970s taught us nothing particular about reporting on communal conflict except not to name the communities involved. Probably that was to prevent readers from getting worked up. Bland reports about two groups clashing and one place of worship being attacked are designed to leave readers of both communities in the dark. The premise behind the rule was that readers would riot if they learnt the details. But does that happen? Forget the English press, would even readers of the Shiv Sena mouthpiece Saamna drop everything and take to the streets on learning that Hindus were being killed by Muslims? It's unlikely, given the fact that a newspaper brings the news to its readers at least eight hours after the event, at a time when readers are starting a new day. Those in the affected area already know the violence is on. Most people prefer to stay out of harm's way. Those who actually riot do so at the instigation of some party. If not party cadre, they generally have some links to the party's cultural/social organisations. Rarely do non-political people spontaneously come out onto the streets.

One such spontaneous reaction was by Mumbai's Muslims after the Babri Masjid was demolished on December 6, 1992. Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple in Amritsar also had Sikh soldiers deserting their posts.

What role did the media play in triggering these spontaneous reactions?

Interestingly, the conflict at the root of these outbursts of anger was not a conventional riot between two groups, but the destruction of, and severe assault on, a place of worship linked to the community's religious identity.

One can safely say that the telecast of the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6 by the BBC did play a role in provoking Muslims to come out on the streets in many cities, including Mumbai. What angered them was not just the demolition amid scenes of jubilation by the RSS cadre, but also the inactivity of policemen posted there to prevent the demolition. That is why the first Muslim mobs in Mumbai, on December 6 and even the next morning, vent their ire on public property and symbols of government, such as municipal vans. The only Hindu targeted that evening in Mumbai was a local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader who had actively campaigned on the Ayodhya issue.

What is significant, however, is the violence after the demolition by Hindu parties, directed against Muslims. Shiv Sainiks targeted Muslims in Dharavi during a victory rally after the demolition; later that night, a Muslim was killed in Mahim. The media played no role in this communal violence. However, the Shiv Sena mouthpiece Saamna had been carrying anti-Muslim editorials for a long time, portraying the so-called kar seva at Ayodhya as a religious war in which Hindus had to take part.

Would the Muslims not have taken to the streets on the evening of December 6 had the BBC not telecast the demolition? It is difficult to say. Would Shiv Sainiks not have stoned Muslims had Saamna not built up the anti-Muslim rhetoric? Again, it's difficult to say. At any rate, the rule of not naming communities was irrelevant here. The Sikh desertions took place quite a few days after Operation Blue Star. Censorship imposed at that time prevented details being published of the actual extent of damage to the Golden Temple as well as the death of many ordinary pilgrims there at the hands of the army.

Obviously, the desertions weren't inspired by the media. Here, there were no two communities involved; it was a conflict between the State and one minority.

Thus in both these cases where spontaneous reactions took place along communal lines, the naming of communities involved wasn't the trigger. In any case, the perceived advantage of this rule was lost whenever a riot went on for more than a day; the second day's reports sometimes quoted victims. Even today, when this rule is observed only in agency reports, initial reports say "a religious procession lingered outside a place of worship". To those familiar with the pattern of communal riots, the community of the processionists and the nature of the place of worship become obvious.

This rule was thrown out after the Emergency, when investigative magazines such as Sunday and Ravivar carried in-depth reports on the spate of major riots that took place after the Janata Party took charge: Moradabad, Jamshedpur, Meerut, Biharsharif... Who among our generation can forget Sunday's cover page on the Moradabad riots -- "ID, Day of Death" -- with the cover story written by editor M J Akbar? This was the period when Girilal Jain, editor of The Times of India, wrote edit page pieces fulminating about "the Pakistan hand". Readers could then join the dots as to who was responsible for the riots.

But this was still early days. After the Shahbano affair, all pretence at keeping communities out was gone. The RSS's high-powered campaign on the Babri Masjid, the vitriol against Muslims poured out during L K Advani's rath yatra, the so-called debates on pseudo-secularism, the Bhagalpur, Indore, Maliana and Meerut riots -- was there any doubt which two communities were involved?

By the time the 1992-93 Mumbai riots took place, nobody remembered this old rule. And a good thing too. When Hindu-Muslim conflict is the issue of the day, it's ridiculous to refer to them as "two groups". Readers were shocked during the 1992-93 Mumbai riots by the free use of "Hindus" and "Muslims" in reports. Did that instigate readers? Nobody went out and rioted after reading the English papers. I doubt anyone went out even after reading Bal Thackeray's incendiary edits in Saamna. But the reports did impact the riots -- creating support among Hindu readers for the Sena's violence against Muslims. That didn't happen because the two communities were named. It happened because of the way the incidents were reported.

The first task of a reporter covering a riot is to report the violence, find out how it began by talking to both sides, get the official version, try to get corroborative evidence, and present as coherent a picture as possible. Of course, this is tough to do in a day. However, though more than one reporter normally covers the violence, even after a couple of days one rarely gets a comprehensive picture.

Take the recent riots in Thane on September 29, 2008. True, the violence began late at night, so it may not have been possible for Mumbai's dailies to send reporters there in time to get firsthand reports. Hence the next morning's reports were mostly based on what the police told the press. One newspaper got a quote from the spokesperson of the affected Hindus; another had a quote each from both Hindus and Muslims.

But even two or three days later, a complete picture hadn't emerged. How long had the negotiations between the Hindus and Muslims been going on regarding the location of the Navratri arch and pandal, the reported point of dispute? Why did they fail? How had this question been resolved in previous years? Most papers carried quotes of Congress-NCP politicians blaming the Bajrang Dal; followed by a report on the VHP giving its version at a press conference held soon after the incident. But an independent investigation into a riot on the outskirts of the city, which left one dead and 50 injured, and turned neighbours into marauding enemies, is still waiting to be done.

Similarly, the Dhule riots that began on October 5, 2008, got a lot of coverage, but we are still to learn why such vicious and large-scale violence -- by both communities -- shook Dhule for the first time after the post-Babri Masjid riots there. When was the Hindu Rakshak Samiti formed, which put up the inflammatory posters that were torn off, which in turn led to the violence? Who were its members? Why did the police not heed the complaints against the posters? What was the role of local leader Shabbir Bhangarwala who led a procession hours before the violence erupted? The violence spread to the highway, where Muslim travellers who had nothing to do with Dhule were attacked. How did this happen?

Six weeks after the Dhule riots, newspapers front-paged the remand application for Bhangarwala, which stated: "It is an established fact that Muslims are the masterminds behind all terrorist activities across India." The application justified the actions of the Hindu Rakshak Samiti as "mere retaliation to what has been happening in the country for past few years (sic)". Surely this was an appropriate time for newspapers to go back to the Dhule violence and fill in the gaps, especially regarding the role of the police and the Hindu Rakshak Samiti? However, though this remark made news over two or three days, no newspaper thought fit to follow it up by a report from Dhule. Is this because Dhule is far away from Mumbai, and its concerns don't really interest Mumbai readers? But then what about Thane, which can now be considered a suburb of Mumbai?

Proximity to big cities where editions are based is definitely a factor determining coverage given to incidents of communal conflict. But then, are riots that take place in big cities comprehensively covered? Depends on how many people die, how much property is damaged, how long the violence lasts, and how widespread it is. Localised violence that dies down in a day doesn't get much attention. After all, for news to be news it must be "sensational".

The last major riot in Mumbai began on December 6, 1992, and petered out by December 12; it started again around January 5, 1993, and petered out by January 16. Ample time for spot reports and in-depth investigations. Yet, what is the final image of the Mumbai riots? Radhabai Chawl, where six Hindus were burnt alive; angry Muslim mobs battling it out with the police on Mohammed Ali Road; the killing of mathadi workers; Muslims burnt alive in Pratiksha Nagar…

The myths of the Mumbai riots were most zealously propagated by the English press. Muslims furious over the demolition of the Babri Masjid came out onto the streets and started attacking the police; naturally, the police had to fire, hence the high number of Muslim casualties. Demoralised by the criticism of their action, the police refused to fire in January 1993, hence the Shiv Sena had a field day retaliating for Radhabai Chawl and the killings of innocent mathadi workers by Muslims.

The Srikrishna Commission showed that this was exactly the theory for the riots put forward by the police and the Congress government, and not too different from that put out by the Shiv Sena. Ironic, isn't it, considering that the English press was accused by the RSS and Sena of being pro-Muslim during the riots! The Times of India was even called The Times of Pakistan.

The Commission also showed that this theory was wrong; that, in fact, after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the first stone was thrown by the Shiv Sena on a mosque; the first person to be killed was a Muslim; the first Muslim mobs were targeting not the police but public property, and, had they been handled better, might have dissipated their anger through rasta rokos. The second phase of the riots was not sparked off by Muslim attacks on Hindus; Radhabai Chawl was one among a whole lot of violent incidents that were taking place in the first week of January; the police showed no sign of demoralisation while tackling unarmed Muslim mobs in January, but grew passive when faced with Sena-led mobs -- this too was proved by the report. So, how did the English press get it all wrong? It's not as if Justice Srikrishna drew his conclusions from secret documents. There were just two sources he relied on: police records and victims' testimonies. Both were subject to intensive scrutiny; policemen and victims were cross-examined by all parties, for days.

The press too basically relied on the same sources. But while they preferred to take the victims' accounts with a pinch of salt, they swallowed the police version almost hook, line and sinker. The overall impression they gave readers was that of violent Muslims on the rampage in December and early-January, resulting in a Hindu backlash -- exactly what the police themselves believed.

The Commission proved that the Mumbai police were communal, that even in their own affidavits, the police blamed only the Muslims even though their records spoke of violence by Hindus. The first stone of the Mumbai riots was thrown by Shiv Sainiks in Dharavi, but, despite this fact being in the police records, the entire police force believed that the violence originated in the Muslim areas. It was this police force that briefed the press. No wonder readers -- at least those who read the English press -- believed both phases of the riots were started by Muslims, and that the Sena only retaliated, and needed to be supported.

The Srikrishna Commission's findings must surely be the most publicised and debated findings reached by any inquiry commission. Yet, the lasting image of the Mumbai riots continues to be Sena-saved-Hindus-from-marauding-Muslims, not Sena-and-cops-targeted-innocent-Muslims.

Despite this, the Mumbai press continues to rely on this force for its information on communal violence!

Why? How does a Hindu-Muslim riot become a police story? Because the first news of violence emanates from the police control room? Or because the police is the official source of information and therefore seen as the most reliable?

Can they continue to be seen as reliable, at least in Mumbai, even after the Srikrishna Commission report? Isn't it time editors published the police version as just one of the many versions their reporters bring back?

That leads to a third point: should journalists be trained to cover riots? Or should the basic principles of reportage -- facts are sacred, comment free; get both sides of the story; check your facts before writing them -- suffice?

These rules cover the essentials of riot reportage. But, after 20 years of almost continuous communal violence, shouldn't editors brief reporters on certain other basics: that the immediate cause of the violence isn't all that needs to be reported; look for the long-term cause of the violence? Often, the immediate violent act is carried out by Muslims: stoning a religious procession that throws gulal on a mosque; moving the saffron arch that has come up outside their colony; tearing down posters of a Hindu organisation; going berserk when the police stop them from distributing pamphlets outside a mosque. If you were to ask the police (or the RSS), the first act is always carried out by Muslims.

Getting the background as well as the immediate cause right -- as far as possible -- or at least publishing both sides, is important, not just because that's our job, but also because one of the fallout of communal reporting is that existing prejudices between communities get affected. The stereotype of the 'violent Muslim'/'communal Hindu' get strengthened if reporters do not go beyond the surface; the distance between communities can grow if only one side is presented; and both communities might accept the violence of groups

who are seen to be protecting them.

The English press has a greater responsibility to report both sides because Indian language newspapers, catering to just one community, never bother to do so. Take the Urdu press: its reports are diametrically opposite those published in the English press. Indeed, the Urdu press is openly biased. While the English press does expose glaring instances of police brutality on minorities (Cheetah Camp, Mumbai, in 1984), or, as in Gujarat and Delhi 1984, State-supported killings of minorities, the Urdu press refuses to even acknowledge that Muslims can be violent. Most Muslims still feel Radhabai Chawl was burnt by mercenaries hired by a builder who wanted that little plot of land. A Muslim once asked me: “You mean Muslims were also violent in the 1992-93 riots (like Hindus)?”

The same attitude exists in the Urdu press regarding Islamic terrorism. I use the phrase deliberately because the Jaish-e-Mohammed, the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and the Al Qaeda, that openly espouse terrorism, call themselves by Islamic names and use Islamic terms such as jihad. In the same way, the Malegaon blast perpetrators are Hindu terrorists. Hasan Kamal, as a columnist, may write against extremist elements among Muslims in his column in the Urdu paper Hamara Samaj, but no Urdu publication will ever report anything against SIMI. In this they are like Saamna, which portrays its leader and its party as the protector of Hindus. The Urdu press portrays SIMI as religious young men committed to Islam, who dare to speak out for their beleaguered community when Muslim politicians have sold out, and for doing so are hunted by a State which allows the Bajrang Dal to flourish.

Reader compulsions? I doubt Muslims will reject the Urdu press if it told its readers facts about SIMI that are common knowledge. Many Muslims read only Urdu, so there is no alternative. Those who do know other languages read newspapers in those languages in addition anyway. Far from compulsion, the Urdu press’s bias has more to do with the beliefs held by Urdu journalists.

A parallel here is the Gujarati press. Its readers would have continued to buy Gujarati papers even had they not blanked out all news of the violence against Muslims after the Sabarmati burning in Godhra. Instead, the Gujarati press published wrong accounts of what happened after the train was burnt, including gory tales of Hindu travellers being raped and their breasts cut off in mosques adjoining Godhra station. They did not print the collector’s rebuttal of such “news”. Nor did they print the letters of condemnation issued immediately after the incident by Godhra’s Muslims, nor the open apology on behalf of his community by Maulana Umerji, the maulvi of Godhra’s Ghanchi Muslims. This apology was made at a peace committee meeting called by the collector. The 70-plus Umerji is still in jail as a conspirator in the train burning.

Though the Gujarati press knew that the Sabarmati travellers had tried to drag a Ghanchi Muslim girl from Godhra station, they wrote nothing about this, or of the roughing up of Muslims there by RSS travellers. They simply projected the burning as a Pakistani plot. What did the Gujarati press achieve by this one-sided reporting? A lot. Gujarati Hindus ended up believing that Godhra’s Muslims had, without provocation, not just burnt alive 58 Hindus, but had not even been punished for it (there was very little retaliatory violence in Godhra itself); nor had the community shown any remorse. The news about the terrible retaliation by RSS-led Hindus in other parts of Gujarat on innocent Muslims was dismissed as lies cooked up by the anti-Hindu English press. The Gujarati press thereby built up a solid reservoir of support for Narendra Modi, who was projected as the defender of Hindus.

However, here one needs to say that the English press ignored the Sabarmati incident. After the first reports, no sustained attempt was made to find out more about the people who were burnt alive in Coach S-6. It was almost as if because these were VHP supporters, they didn’t deserve any attention. Would the English press have done this if Hindus had burnt a coach full of Muslims, and Muslims had retaliated elsewhere? The defence that violence against Muslims broke out immediately and was on such a large scale that all one’s resources were spent on it, is not good enough. For journalists need to go out of their way while reporting communal violence to ensure that victims from both sides get their stories heard. If the media doesn’t report the stories of one group, or the State refuses to hear them, they may well be forced to turn to those “defenders of the faith” who want to cash in on their misery. At any rate, professionalism demands that both sides be heard.

Gujarat turned many journalists of the English press into activists. Long before that, editors like Nikhil Wagle have held that a journalist has to be an activist, and for this he’s had to pay the price of being attacked by the Shiv Sena. But many seniors in the profession are against such activism, for they feel it will affect a journalist’s objectivity -- the basic principle of the profession. But the manner in which we report communal conflict makes us, to some extent, a part of the Hindu-Muslim question. The language we use: “disputed structure” for the Babri Masjid; “feisty sanyasin” for Uma Bharati, the woman who cheered as the Babri Masjid was being brought down, the politician who enjoyed fast cars when she was chief minister of Madhya Pradesh; “terror techie” for the Muslim computer experts suspected of planting bombs; no adjective at all for Lt Col Purohit, a serving officer of our army, arrested for planting bombs aimed at killing Indian citizens he was duty bound to protect; “terrorists” for suspected Muslim bombers, but “extremists” for Hindus arrested for planting bombs in Thane; “sensitive areas” for Muslim mohallas in Mumbai alone, even though much of the violence usually starts from Dadar and Kherwadi -- Sena-dominated areas.

The pictures we use also contribute to raising or lowering the communal temperature. How right is it to put on page one the picture of namaz being offered under the shadow of guns (always in the aftermath of a riot), or the unforgettable picture of an elderly Muslim being made to remove his topi by a policeman ostensibly searching for explosives on the former's head, against the backdrop of a Red Fort decked up for Independence Day? This picture appeared on page one of a national daily a few days before Independence Day 2006. The indiscriminate use of burkha-clad women for any article on Muslims is irritating to a community that is not homogeneous, for the kind of image it conveys. The reason for using such pictures may be sheer laziness (it's available in the files), but its effects are much more serious.

But none of this is taught. It comes only through trial and error, when one's own gaffes are pointed out by the affected communities. Perhaps its time to start specialised courses in conflict reporting, at journalism schools. Apart from the basics of reporting, the guiding rules should be: in reporting communal conflict, look for the background; don't perpetuate the stereotype; find residents who deal with both communities; corroborate victims' accounts as well as police accounts; ascertain the role of the police, the politicians and the media; highlight stories where communities have helped each other. It's also time the English press took the initiative in conducting a dialogue with the Hindi, Urdu, Marathi and Gujarati press about these issues -- to learn what they feel about the English press.

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