

Malegaon Riots

Unlearnt Lessons from the Past

The communal riots in Malegaon were the most serious in Maharashtra after the post-Babri masjid killings in the state in 1992-93. The riots have underscored once again the role of politicians in fanning communal tensions and the failure of the police and the administration to contain the violence in time and prevent it from spreading.

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Malegaon was shaken by a sudden spurt of communal violence on October 26 after the Friday prayers in the afternoon. Communal violence has often a connection, direct or indirect with the announcement of elections. Within a couple of months elections to the civic bodies are expected in Malegaon and other towns and parties and contestants are worried about their vote banks. But it is the people who have to pay the price for being governed through elected representatives.

The riots in Malegaon were quite serious and the biggest after the Mumbai riots of 1992-93. Not that riots had not taken place after the Mumbai riots of 1992-93, and during the Shiv Sena-BJP rule as one commentator had suggested. Several riots had taken place in Penn, Junnar and other places during the SS-BJP rule. But it must be stated that the Malegaon riots overshadowed these in the post-Babri riots in Maharashtra.

Malegaon, a taluka, is a Muslim majority town in Nashik district. It has roughly a population of 8,00,000 of which nearly 60 per cent is Muslim. Most of these Muslims had migrated from UP and Bihar after the 1857 revolt due to persecution by the British, and are quite poor and illiterate. Hardly any government in Maharashtra has done anything to improve their economic conditions. Governments have used them for votes. A survey shows that the incidence of TB is also quite high among the Muslims of Malegaon. Malegaon is also an important centre of powerlooms like Bhivandi near Mumbai.

Besides elections, it is the incidents of September 11 in New York and Washington, that were also responsible for what happened in Malegaon. Muslims in Malegaon, like some Muslims in other

places in India and elsewhere, are quite angry with the US for its continuous bombing of Afghanistan.

Some Muslims have expressed their resentment against US and Britain by giving a call for boycotting American and British goods particularly Coca Cola and Pepsi, the popular soft drinks. Some Muslim scribes from Deoband and other places in UP also issued a call appealing to Indians in general and Muslims in particular to boycott these soft drinks. Many Muslim hoteliers had even stopped selling these drinks. Some young boys in Malegaon were distributing the pamphlets appealing to the Indians to boycott these goods after the Friday prayers.

However, these pamphlets had nothing communal or offensive or even anything in support of terrorist attacks on September 11 in New York. It contained only an appeal to boycott American and British goods. The district authorities not wanting to take chances had made police 'bandobast' outside all sensitive areas, for Malegaon is considered as one of the most communally sensitive areas in Maharashtra.

One of the SRP constables snatched a pamphlet from a boy who was distributing it and reprimanded him. However, according to another version he even slapped and arrested him. It is said that the boy refused to hand over the pamphlets to the constable. This led to protests from the people coming out of the mosque and resulted in skirmishes with the police. It is also said that the pamphlets in question were being distributed in Malegaon even a week before that Friday. It was also said that the Imam of the Jami' masjid Mufti Muhammad Ismail and advocate Shuaib intervened and asked the people to disperse peacefully. It is obvious that much trouble could have been avoided if the police had merely requested for the pamphlets and

not used force. It is also being pointed out that first the police demanded the pamphlets and after it was refused force was used. Actually it should not be the job of the police on duty to demand the pamphlets. It could have been collected politely by a plainclothesman from intelligence department. Instead an SRP constable seized the pamphlets and so much violence resulted.

Protests and Counter-reactions

As there was anger already simmering against the police and the US attack, S P Suresh Ahire reached there with reinforcements and the local Congress MLA Sheikh Rashid also reached the spot. People were demanding an apology from the police for snatching the pamphlets and arresting the boy. As the crowd was getting restless the police resorted to lathicharge with great intensity. Many people were injured and they began to run. The crowd ran towards Muhammad Ali and Qidwai road and there were scuffles with the police. Stone pelting began and many people including three policemen were allegedly injured.

It is then that the police used force and begin firing in the direction of Muhammad Ali road. The police fired nine rounds in which seven persons were injured. Three persons died, of which one was a 18 year-old boy who was hit in the head; another 23-year old man was hit above his navel and a 45-year old woman Biqis Bano who was drying clothes on the terrace was hit in the chest and died in Faran hospital. All three were hit above the waist.

Before we proceed further some comments about the role of the police are in order. The police, particularly those in the lower ranks, often fire in excess against weaker sections of the society particularly the minorities, tribals and dalits. There is the instance of the sub inspector Kadam firing on dalits in Ghatkopar a few years ago in which more than 10 dalits were killed. The Gundewar Commission then had observed that the firing was in excess. We also have the Srikrishna Commission report, which probed the role of the police so painstakingly, and concluded that the police was guilty of deliberately killing Muslims in many instances, during the Mumbai riots of 1992-93.

If the government does not pay attention to intensive training and sensitising the police towards human life this will recur in riot after riot. No such attention is being

paid to this despite so many instances of the police brutalities. IPS officers of high integrity are few and far in between. For example in Malegaon too, an additional director of police was sent to control the situation. As a man of great integrity, he had controlled riots in Bhivandi during 1992-93 but this time it was too late. By the time, he went to Malegaon damage was already done.

The crowd became even more restless after the firing. The firing took place at about 4.05 pm on Muhammad Ali road. From there, the crowd spread to the other side of the river Mausam and began indulging in looting and burning shops and other properties belonging to the majority community; sections of majority community retaliated by burning shops and properties of Muslims. There is a Shiv Sena organisation in Malegaon called Janta Raja which is controlled by the Anand Dighe faction of Thane, who incited the Hindus to attack Muslims and their properties. The *Samna* also wrote, as usual, provocative articles and even said that if Muslims are in majority in Malegaon, Hindus are in majority in villages and we will teach them a lesson.

On October 26, 2001, cases of arson occurred between 4 pm and 7 pm in Dana Bazar, Gur Bazar, Kirana Bazar, Shashtri Chowk, Nihalnagar, Muhammad Ali road, etc. The communal elements of the majority community openly began provoking people in a number of areas around Malegaon like Samakser, camp and Suigaon and rumours began to spread in all directions, as is usual in riots. In Samakser, Muslim properties were destroyed, looted and burnt. Communal elements and anti-social elements from both communities were openly looting and burning properties. There were two cases of stabbing but all others (about 13 persons according to official figures and 15 according to other sources) were killed in police firing. Among those who died about 12 persons were Muslims and two Hindus, one remained unidentified.

The looting and burning continued for a few days and the situation came under control only after November 3, curfew had to be imposed for long hours from the very first day and day curfew has been relaxed since November 7. The night curfew, however, still continues.

It is highly regrettable that such a major riot took place in which 15 persons were killed, more than 12 injured in police firing and 477 persons were arrested. We have

heard many painful stories of people being killed. One Khalil member, a person who was working for peace was called from his house on the pretext of controlling the mob and was killed. Water pipes were broken by the miscreants and Malegaon went without water for a few days. A rumour was also set afloat that milk has been poisoned and many had to go without milk.

In villages and nearby areas it is mainly Muslims who suffered. In places like Rawalgaon (the famous chocolate town), Deola and Kalwan it is Muslims who mainly suffered. In Malegaon alone property worth more than 15 crore was destroyed and in other places property worth more than two crore was lost. Some estimates put the losses much higher.

Election Rivalries

It has been pointed out by some that the riots were caused mainly by election rivalry between the present Congress MLA and Nihal Ahmed of Janata Dal (Secular). There is no doubt both are political rivals and Sheikh Rashid, the Congress MLA even alleged that Nihal Ahmed had provoked the Muslims and thus the riots ensued. However, Nihal Ahmed denies the charge. It is true that Nihal Ahmed had taken out a procession against the bombing on Afghanistan on October 19 in which many Muslims joined and some youth even carried placards with Osama bin Laden's pictures. Nihal, however, maintains, he did not control the youth who carried the placards. It had not he who invited them to join his protest march and carry the placards.

Whatever the fact is that elections to the municipal council is due in Malegaon, and politicians are tempted to cater to the sentiments of their voters. Both Sheikh Rashid and Nihal Ahmed had an eye on the coming elections and wanted to be on the right side of their voters' sentiments. It is however, for all of us to reflect that elections are at what cost? Should we play with the sentiments of our people as our politicians have been doing so far? Can elections be fought only on communal issues?

The BJP is also hotting up on the Ayodhya issue once again since elections in UP are due. It is exploiting the issue of terrorist attacks and by now enacting POTO is strongly justifying it to cater to the Hindu sentiments on terrorism. The Congress-NCP government has also failed miserably in controlling the riots in Malegaon, despite the town being given to the army control.

This itself is a serious thing that the army had to be called out on the third day of rioting.

The charge that when the Congress is in power, more riots take place (already small riots up to more than 40 in number have taken place in Maharashtra since the Congress-NCP government came to power) and when BJP or Shiv Sena is in power, riots cut little ice. Whenever the Congress is in power it is obvious that the BJP or Shiv Sena is out to cause communal trouble to alienate Muslim voters from the Congress, on one hand, and to consolidate their Hindu vote bank on the other.

Thus the Congress has to be doubly cautious while in power to maintain communal harmony. But it is often seen that it miserably fails to maintain communal harmony as has happened in the case of Malegaon. To prevent riots, police machinery on one hand, and administrative machinery on the other, must be spruced up. But the Congress government hardly plays any role and neglects this vital function to maintain harmony. The Congress once again has proved that it is incapable of pulling up the police force. If it has to revive itself and won over Muslims in UP it must play very proactive role in controlling communal situation in the state where it rules. But there are no such signs as yet and as usual it is succumbing to communal pressures.

Though the Congress committee led by Motilal Vohra has given a clean chit to chief minister Deshmukh, in handling riots, it can hardly convince the victims of riots in Malegaon. It also must be pointed out that despite such a vicious communal atmosphere Hindus and Muslims saved each other's lives. Muslims protected four Hindu families in Pawar Gali and Hindus protected Muslims in other areas. This gives us hope in an otherwise politically hopeless situation in the country.

The government initially had ordered only a magisterial inquiry but later on due to pressure from Sonia Gandhi a judicial inquiry has been instituted. So much for the government's seriousness about the Malegaon riots. Chhagan Bhujbal, the home minister, had also turned down any offer of compensation for those killed and injured, saying it would amount to rewarding the mischief makers. Bhujbal should have known that very few miscreants are killed. It is mostly the by-standers who pay with their lives. It is only now that the government has agreed to give compensation though the amount remains to be fixed. **EPW**