The Muzaffarnagar Riots of 2013 and their Aftermath

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Abstract

This article focuses on the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots in India and analyses their enduring effects on the Muslim survivors. It argues that the aftermath of communal violence in India has undergone a notable shift in recent years. Although riots between Hindus and Muslims have been common occurrences in the past, the situation usually followed a trend where normalcy would be restored gradually after the cessation of violence. In contrast, this study shows that normalisation has become more difficult in recent years due to shifting political dynamics involving Hindu nationalism. Drawing on fieldwork in resettlement colonies in Muzaffarnagar during the period between 2022 and 2023, this article analyzes the experiences of riot victims who had to rebuild their lives in the newly established colonies. The study also examines the impact of long-term displacement, inadequate state assistance, and a lack of basic welfare provisions on the survivors' quality of life, which led to socio-economic marginalisation and insecurity for the survivors. The article also explores the response of the institutions involved in dealing with the aftermath of the riots, particularly the police, judiciary, and political figures, and discusses how their actions have facilitated inadequate accountability and injustice to the victims. Consequently, many displaced Muslims find themselves living in a state of constant fear of persecution, resulting in what can be termed as the existence of an "eternal half-other" in one's homeland.

Keywords: Muzaffarnagar riots, communal violence in India, violence against Muslims, internal displacement, Hindu majoritarianism, post-riot rehabilitation, religious polarization

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Los disturbios de Muzaffarnagar de 2013 y sus consecuencias

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en los disturbios de Muzaffarnagar de 2013 en India y analiza sus efectos duraderos en los supervivientes musulmanes. Sostiene que las consecuencias de la violencia intercomunitaria en India han experimentado un cambio notable en los últimos años. Si bien los disturbios entre hindúes y musulmanes han sido frecuentes en el pasado, la situación solía seguir una tendencia en la que la normalidad se restablecía gradualmente tras el cese de la violencia. En contraste, este estudio muestra que la normalización se ha vuelto más difícil en los últimos años debido a la dinámica política cambiante, que involucra al nacionalismo hindú. A partir del trabajo de campo realizado en colonias de reasentamiento en Muzaffarnagar entre 2022 y 2023, este artículo analiza las experiencias de las víctimas de los disturbios que tuvieron que reconstruir sus vidas en las colonias recién establecidas. El estudio también examina el impacto del desplazamiento a largo plazo, la asistencia estatal insuficiente y la falta de servicios básicos de bienestar en la calidad de vida de los supervivientes, lo que provocó su marginación socioeconómica e inseguridad. El artículo también analiza la respuesta de las instituciones involucradas en la gestión de las consecuencias de los disturbios, en particular la policía, el poder judicial y las figuras políticas, y examina cómo sus acciones han propiciado la falta de rendición de cuentas y la injusticia hacia las víctimas. En consecuencia, muchos musulmanes desplazados viven en un estado de temor constante a la persecución, lo que puede denominarse la existencia de un «otro eterno» en su propia tierra.

Palabras clave: disturbios de Muzaffarnagar, violencia comunal en India, violencia contra los musulmanes, desplazamiento interno, mayoritarismo hindú, rehabilitación posterior a los disturbios, polarización religiosa

2013年穆扎法尔纳加尔骚乱及其结果

摘要

本文聚焦于2013年印度穆扎法尔纳加尔骚乱，分析其对穆斯林幸存者的深远影响。本文指出，近年来印度教派冲突的后

续影响发生了显著变化。尽管印度教徒和穆斯林之间的骚乱在过去屡见不鲜，但通常情况下，暴力结束后社会秩序会逐渐恢复正常。然而，本研究表明，由于印度教民族主义等政治动态的转变，近年来社会秩序的恢复变得更加困难。本文基于2022年至2023年间在穆扎法尔纳加尔安置区的实地调研，分析了骚乱受害者在新安置区重建生活的经历。研究还探讨了长期流离失所、国家援助不足以及基本福利保障缺失对幸存者生活质量的影响，这些因素导致了幸存者的社会经济边缘化和不安全感。本文还探讨了参与处理骚乱善后工作的各机构，特别是警察、司法部门和政治人物的应对措施，并讨论了他们的行为如何导致问责不力，以及对受害者的不公正待遇。因此，许多流离失所的穆斯林生活在对迫害的持续恐惧之中，造成了所谓的“永远的异己”现象，即在自己的祖国存在着一个“永恒的异己群体”。

关键词：穆扎法尔纳加尔骚乱，印度教派冲突，针对穆斯林的暴力，境内流离失所，印度教多数主义，骚乱后重建，宗教两极分化

Violence against Muslims in modern India has emerged from multiple sources—both new and old—some of which have proved more enduring than the others. Among all the possible sources of violence, the phenomenon commonly referred to as the Hindu- Muslim riot has been one of the most persistent forms of violence. Even in this case, there have been significant changes, especially under Hindu right regimes or ever since India has become what Christopher Jaffrelot describes as “ethnic democracy” (Jaffrelot 2018). While Hindu-Muslim riots have a long history dating back to the British colonial period, there are notable differences in how the riots are dealt with under regimes associated with the Hindu Right, compared to non- Hindu Right regimes or non-Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) regimes in India. This difference of approach has also contributed to the rise of violence against Muslims, mainly because the new approach towards riots under Hindu Right regimes has created incentives for perpetrators and emboldened them to participate in future acts of violence.

Under Hindu Right regimes, even when a riot formally ends, the fear of violence among Muslims often persists—emanating both from the state and from the sections of the Hindu community, including some Hindu Right groups.[1] This suggests that the broader environment in which the fear and violence operate has undergone a significant transformation. In earlier periods, once a riot subsided, some degree of reconciliation between riot-affected communities would often

follow, allowing for the restoration of a relatively durable peace in riot-affected areas. Furthermore, survivors/victims would gradually build their lives, which appears normal, and the riot would recede into the past both literally and figuratively. In some sense, the post-riot socio-political context would eventually begin to resemble the pre-riot environment, despite the lingering scars of violence. That is no longer the case under Hindu Right regimes, however, this pattern appears to have shifted. The aftermath of riots no longer necessarily leads to normalisation or reconciliation. Instead, the conditions of fear, polarization, and insecurity may persist long after the violence has formally ended. The case study of the Muzaffarnagar riot in 2013 provides a compelling illustration of this transformation in the nature and consequences of violence against Muslims in contemporary India.

My fieldwork in post-riot Muzaffarnagar, particularly in the resettlement colonies, is based on my interviews and conversations with survivors of 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots. The selected resettlement colonies where I conducted fieldwork include: 1) Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind[2] (Asad Madani group) in Bhagwali, Muzaffarnagar; 2) Maulana Abas Colony and Ekta Colony I and II (near Johla village); and 3) Paldi Colony in Shahpur, Muzaffarnagar. These interviews were conducted during February and March in 2022, and later during April, August, and September in 2023. This paper presents a narrative of the lingering nature of violence experienced by these victims/survivors, examining how the aftermath of the riots has shaped their everyday lives. It explores how prolonged displacement, insecurity, and marginalisation have produced a sense of statelessness among them, compelling many to live under conditions of persistent fear and exclusion. This study further highlights how these experiences foster a profound sense of becoming an "eternal half-other" within the very society to which they belong.

Muzaffarnagar Riots, 2013

Muzaffarnagar is a major district in Western Uttar Pradesh (UP), where communal riots took place in August–September 2013. At the time the riots erupted, the state of UP was governed by the Samajwadi Party (SP), with Akhilesh Yadav serving as Chief Minister. The SP has historically enjoyed considerable credibility as a pro-minority, particularly pro-Muslim, political party at the time it ruled and even now, which is not the case with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is widely identified as a Hindu Right political party.

The most noteworthy aspect of this riot is: it was the only major riot that took place prior to India's landmark election of 2014, which brought Narendra Modi-led BJP into power with a single-party majority, effectively ending many years of coalition politics at the national level (Adeney and Saez 2005). The significance of this election is perhaps best captured in the title of a book by noted Indian journalist Rajdeep Sardesai, *2014: The Election that Changed India* (Sardesai 2014). This, however, does not mean that everything

was peaceful or politically stable prior to it. The Muzaffarnagar riots erupted against a backdrop of rising communal tensions in UP, particularly after the SP came to power in 2012. By 2013, UP topped the all-India list as a state that had the highest number of communal incidents in India. In a reply to a question in Parliament during the Dr Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, the Union Home Ministry reported that there were 247 communal incidents in UP in 2013, compared to 118 incidents in 2012, and there was an increase of up to 30 percent at an all-India level in 2013. According to India's Home Ministry, 133 people were killed and 2,229 injured in communal violence in 2013, compared to 94 deaths and 2,117 injuries in 2012. In addition to UP, states such as Bihar and Gujarat also experienced an increase in communal violence during this period.

The 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots are often traced to an incident of alleged eve-teasing involving a Hindu girl (from the Jat community) and a Muslim boy in Kawal/Kaval village. When the brother of the Hindu girl (a Jat by caste) along with one of his friends, confronted the Muslim boy, the altercation escalated into a violent clash between the members of the local Muslim and Hindu communities. In the end, all three of them were killed.

Subsequently, two major independent meetings by Muslim and Hindu political leaders from various parties created the conditions for large-scale violence. The first was a meeting of the Muslim community held on August 30, 2013, after Friday prayers, during which leaders such as Qadeer Rana of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Rashid Siddiqui of the Samajwadi Party (SP), and Sayeed-uz-Zaman of the Indian National Congress (INC) addressed the gathering. Reports suggest that provocative speeches delivered at this meeting heightened communal tensions in the region (NDTV March 8, 2014; *The Economic Times,* June 24, 2014). This was followed by a large gathering organized by the Hindu community, in violation of Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), on September 7, 2013, in which people from western UP, Haryana, and Delhi came to take part. Many attendees reportedly arrived carrying weapons such as swords, axes, and *lathi*s to attend the meeting. Speeches delivered by several Hindu leaders, including BJP's Hukum Singh, further inflamed the situation (Jain 2013). As participants returned from the gathering, groups allegedly attacked nearby Muslim villages, triggering a riot for the first time in many years, giving the impression that it was pre-planned. Indeed, in February 2016, a BJP executive committee member, Umesh Mallick, publicly attributed the massive victory of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in UP to the Muzaffarnagar riots. Significantly, he was speaking in the presence of union minister and local Member of Parliament, Sanjeev Balyan, who was also an accused in the 2013 violence. Mallick's specific words were that "the embers [of the riots] led to the victory of Modi in Uttar Pradesh." He also admitted that it was all planned in jail, where Balyan

was detained as a preventive measure after the tension in the region increased (Bharadwaj 2016, *Indian Express*).

The claim that the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots directly led to the unprecedented electoral victory of the BJP in the 2014 General Elections may be a bit exaggerated. Nevertheless, the riots did contribute significantly to religious polarization in the region.[3] Known as the sugar bowl of India, Muzaffarnagar, falls under the region that has historically provided a strong social base for the Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU),[4] one of the most prominent farmer's organizations in North India, led for many years by the late Mahendra Singh Tikait. The BKU has a formidable social base here with followers among the Jats, both Hindus and Muslims, in this region, which was disrupted due to the riot. One of Tikait's prominent associates was a Muslim leader, Ghulam Mohammad Jhola (Rehman 2022). The riot led to a split in the BKU, and Mr. Jhola eventually set up a separate farmers' organization.

Although it is widely argued that the region has an established history of Hindu–Muslim unity, the Muzaffarnagar riot was an aberration from this pattern. But close scrutiny of the history of this region however presents a very different view. Indeed, the region has experienced communal tensions and episodes of violence in the past, indicating that Hindu– Muslim relations were neither entirely harmonious nor free from prejudice. Though there has been a working relationship among Hindus and Muslims—there were instances of even major violence. One such case was the Meerut riot of 1983, on which an essay is written in Paul Brass's much-celebrated work, *Theft of An Idol* (Brass 1997). The following observation in the chapter titled *Rape at Daphnala*, presents valuable insights into the history of violence in Western Uttar Pradesh. Brass writes:

> Politics in Meerut district, as in several other western UP districts, including Aligarh, has had two prominent features since the 1970s: increasingly frequent and severe communal violence centered primarily in Meerut city, on the one hand, and a rural politics dominated by conflict between the Jat cultivating castes and their allies against the Brahman and Rajput cultivating castes and their allies. (Brass 1997, 97)

It is worth noting that the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali, hailed from Muzaffarnagar. This fact underscores how the region, like much of North India, was deeply influenced by the Partition debates and communal polarization that followed (Brass 2011). In other words, there were strong elements of continuity in the politics of polarization that flared up during the Muzaffarnagar riot of 2013 and the history of the region. Also, insights could be drawn from the results of the 1991 parliamentary elections, in which Mufti Mohammad Sayeed[5] was defeated, although Mr. Sayeed had won the election in 1989 with more than 60 percent votes and had served as India's Home Minister under the VP Singh

government (1989–1991). In 1991, he managed to secure little more than 30 percent of the votes in the same constituency despite being India's former Home Minister. One prominent reason behind his defeat was the withdrawal of support from Hindu Right voters after the BJP ceased to be part of the coalition in 1991. Whereas, in 1989, Sayeed had contested as a candidate of the National Front coalition, in which the BJP was a supporting partner. These developments indicate that the region already possessed a significant social base for the Hindu Right and its affiliated organizations. This base appears to have expanded over time, eventually contributing to the electoral victory of the BJP candidate, Sanjiv Baliyan in the 2014 parliamentary elections.

In September 2013, the communal violence in Muzaffarnagar district in Uttar Pradesh[6] led to the killing of 60 people and the displacement of more than 75,000 individuals, the majority of whom were Muslims. While a small fraction of survivors eventually returned to their native villages, a large number of survivors chose to move out of their villages and instead relocated to newly established colonies set up in various parts of Muzaffarnagar.

When the violence broke out during the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots, nearly 75,000 people fled their homes in fear and took refuge primarily in local *madarsa*s, which served as temporary shelter for several months before they were relocated to newly established colonies. Muslim residents of around 12 villages that were attacked were compensated by a grant of INR 5 lakh per household by the Akhilesh Yadav government to purchase land and construct new homes. Although, Muslims in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli were the most directly affected, many Muslims from neighboring districts such as Meerut, Saharanpur, Baghpat, and Hapur also fled their homes due to fear of violence. While some individuals were direct victims of attacks, others realized that the prevailing atmosphere of hostility and anti-Muslim animosity made it unsafe for them to continue living in their native villages. These displaced persons are commonly referred to as internally displaced persons (IDPs).

According to a survey conducted by Harsh Mander and others between March and July 2016, and published in the report titled *Living Apart*, there were 65 colonies of IDPs across Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts, 28 in Muzaffarnagar and 37 in Shamli—housing a total of 29,328 individuals. Not all displaced persons were settled in formally recognized relief colonies (Mander et al. 2016, 1–24). Many colonies were established through the efforts of various religious organizations, particularly Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (Asad Madani group), Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (Mahmood Madani group), and the All-India United Muslim League (AIUML). Among these, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (Asad Madani group) played the most prominent role in providing assistance. One such settlement, Apna Ghar Colony, houses approximately 250 households and represents an attempt by displaced families to rebuild their lives by choosing their

neighbors and constituting community ties. Among political parties, the Communist Party of India (M) contributed modestly to rehabilitation efforts by providing financial assistance—approximately INR 1 Lakh per household—for the establishment of Ekta Colony I and Ekta Colony II. However, the rehabilitation process across most colonies was marked by a near-complete absence of sustained state support for the IDPs in these colonies.

Conditions in these colonies remain highly precarious. Out of the 28 colonies in Muzaffarnagar, several households in 17 colonies are still unable to construct permanent homes and continue to live in makeshift shelters with plastic roofs (Mander et al. 2016, 1–23). In Shamli, out of 27 colonies, only three have been able to build permanent houses. According to the report, these colonies typically lack basic infrastructure and public services. In Muzaffarnagar, although 82 percent of colonies have access to clean drinking water, 93 percent of colonies lack streetlights, and 54 percent of households do not have personal electricity connections. Conditions in Shamli are even more severe: 97 percent of colonies lack safe drinking water, 76 percent have no streetlights, and 81 percent lack personal electricity connections. Furthermore, 70 percent of colonies have no drainage facilities, and 97 percent lack basic public services. Across the 65 colonies in both districts, there are only 14 Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centers located within the colonies. None of the residents possess job cards under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA).[7] In 27 out of 29 colonies surveyed, no residents hold ration cards under the public distribution system. In the Shamli district, barring a few households, residents in 32 colonies lack ration cards altogether. Access to social welfare schemes is also extremely limited—only two colonies have access to disability or old-age pensions, and women in only one colony receive widow pensions. In Muzaffarnagar district, no one receives old-age, widow, or disability pensions.

Post-Riot Homeland: "Lives of Eternal Half Other"

India has not only a long history of Hindu–Muslim riots, it also possesses considerable experience in dealing with post-riot situations. While the causal factors that trigger riots may vary, the manner in which riots and their aftermath are handled has also undergone significant changes, particularly under regimes associated with the Hindu Right. The 2013 Muzaffarnagar riot offers an important case study for examining how post-riot situations and victims are addressed in such a political context, especially after UP came under the rule of the BJP in 2017 with Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister.

The Muzaffarnagar riots represent one of the first major instances in India where victims were actively encouraged not to return to their native villages but instead to relocate to newly established settlement colonies considered safer. This decision indicates a troubling shift in which the state ef-

fectively withdraws from its responsibility to ensure the basic security of its citizens. Notably, it was not only the state, but also several so-called secular political parties appeared to be eager to encourage the state to abandon its responsibility. In the case of Muzaffarnagar, the SP activists and local leaders played key roles in persuading victims to relocate to a new place and withdraw court cases because it was argued to be the most pragmatic and rationale thing to do. Such complicity of secular political parties in encouraging compromises raises concerns for the functioning of a secular state and for the position of Muslims in India in general.

Field interviews conducted in resettlement colonies reveal a persistent sense of insecurity and marginalization among survivors. For instance, Mr. Rashid, a survivor and also a resident of the Jamiat colony in Bhagwali, Muzaffarnagar described the local administration as broadly hostile toward Muslims.[8] A brick kiln worker by profession, Rashid recounted an incident in which he was arrested during a local altercation. The brick kiln where he worked was owned by a person reputedly close to the BJP. When Rashid attempted to seek his employer's assistance in securing his release, police officials reportedly told him that the only effective way to get out of the police custody was through bribery, remarking that "recommendations do not work for Muslims."[9] Similarly, in an interview with a young daily wage laborer, Mr. Sadab, who resides in Paldi colony near Shahpur, deep frustration was evident. Reflecting on his situation and that of others in the colony, he remarked with visible disappointment that there was little hope for improvement. According to him, "Everything can be bought. They [the Hindu Right] have money, and they can determine outcomes in any situation."[10]

While a small minority of displaced persons report some improvement in their socio-economic conditions after relocating to these settlement colonies, a vast majority struggle to cope with both the economic challenges of relocation and the lingering trauma associated with the violence. Mr. Khalid, a retired school teacher, is perhaps the most resourceful person in the Paldi colony. Having served as a schoolteacher and now with a regular pension, he has a consistent income. He knew many of the attackers personally, but legal cases were not pursued against any of them owing to political pressure. In the post-riot Muzaffarnagar, the BJP indeed drew tremendous political benefits owing to religious polarization which contributed to its unprecedented majority in Lok Sabha in 2014.

At this point, there is a general perception that normalcy has returned in the region. This is partially true after the farmer's movement[11] because a vast majority of Jats chose not to be part of the Hindu Right's politics of religious polarization. The farmers associated with the movement have come to the realization that the BJP's policies are not aligned with the farmers' interests. However, there are visible signs of working relationships among Hindus and Muslims. And yet, some are not willing

to accept that this as part of normalcy. Mr. Habibur Khan, a local politician[12] posed a series of questions that challenge the narrative of restored normalcy: "If there is normalcy, why people are not returning to their villages? Why are the Mosques in the affected villages still abandoned? No namaz has been offered there for years. Is this a sign of normalcy?" It needs to be underscored that Mosques/Masjids are integral to Muslim identity, and their abandonment represents a powerful indicator of continuing displacement and rupture. In all the settlement colonies where I conducted interviews, Mosques/Masjids have been constructed or are currently under construction. In colonies that were set up by Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, building of a Mosque is invariably a priority, but even in the Ekta Colony/ Maulana Abbas colony, the Masjids were also built through donations.

On the one hand, survivors—particularly residents of the newly built resettlement colonies—have faced both indifference from the state and hostility from sections of the Hindu community. At the same time, interactions with local Muslims have also been marked by a degree of ambivalence. In several cases, survivors reported that local Muslims were reluctant to treat them as equals. The prevailing attitude often appeared to be one of viewing them as members of the same community, yet somehow socially inferior or marginal. During the riots, when victims began fleeing their villages, many of them sought refuge in Shahpur Madrasa, which drew lot of attention because prominent political figures such as Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi, and Rahul Gandhi visited this camp. In a discussion with the Maulana who heads this Madrasa, he said "A vast majority of them were not Muslims in practice. They were Muslims just by name. A lot of effort had gone into training them how to behave and conduct themselves like Muslims." He further added sarcastically, "They were all Jai Sri Ram type Muslims."[13]

What has led to the erosion of confidence in the state among the survivors in general is how the various organs of the state, particularly police and judiciary, dealt with victims and survivors of the riot. An impression was formed that these institutions are not serious or were influenced by political considerations. As a result, there is a growing fear of the recurrence of violence in the region. After the riot, around 6,400 individuals were accused of crimes in 534 FIRs filed. The Special Investigation Team (SIT) investigating these crimes reported to the Supreme Court that the number of accused was down to 3,254 within 6 months. The reason given for this decline was that the police concluded many were innocent and some names were repeated. A year later, only 800 of those accused, fewer than one fifth, had been arrested—and most of those arrested were subsequently released on bail. Several factors contributed to the limited legal accountability of those involved in the violence, including weak police investigations, poor documentation of evidence, and procedural shortcomings in the framing of cases.[14]

More interestingly, even without arresting the majority of those initially accused, cases were rapidly closed. Police declared 3,094 accused persons innocent, and charges were pursued against only 1,540 persons. A large number of cases were closed without any proper investigation. A majority of murder cases, in which the accused were listed as "unknown persons" were closed without a chargesheet or trial. There was enormous pressure on the witnesses to withdraw their statements, and a large number turned hostile. Although Indian Criminal Law does not permit compromise in heinous offences, this remains a routine practice after mass communal violence. Most arrested persons were granted bail almost the next day or soon after their arrests. This ignored the gravity of hate crimes, and the susceptibility of the survivors to intimidation because of their vulnerable situation after mass targeted violence.[15]

As expected, a judicial commission was set up, which is almost a standard practice whenever riot erupted under the secular regimes. Such a practice is now stopped under the BJP governments both in the state and in the Centre.[16] In the case of Muzaffarnagar riot, Justice Vishnu Sahai Commission was appointed, and it submitted its report in two years. The report was tabled in the state legislature. The preparation of the report and its presentation in the State Assembly in two years is a rare experience because in most other cases it goes on for years.[17] When the riot took place in 2013, the charge of home ministry of Uttar Pradesh was also taken by the chief minister, Akhilesh Yadav. Given that law and order is with the home minister, the blame should have stopped at the home minister cum chief minister; however, the report does not do so. It gave a clean chit to Akhilesh Yadav.

The 776 pages of this report reflects how such commissions can actually subvert both truth and justice.[18] The Sahai commission report confirmed that the police complaint filed by the Jat boy's family made no allegation of any eve teasing or harassment by the Muslim youth of the Jat boy's sister. The Report recognizes that the video of the lynching of two youths being killed by a mob was false, and it was a lynching video in Pakistan and was mischievously circulated, including a post from MLA Sangeet Som. It also accepts that false rumors were spread before the Maha Panchayat on September 7, 2013 that hundreds of Jats had been slaughtered by Muslims and thrown into canal. Furthermore, communally provocative speeches were made in the Maha Panchayat, and the widespread arson and slaughter of Muslims started after this. Justice Sahai completely ignores that Jats were giving provocative slogans such as "go to Pakistan or *kabristan* [cemetery]." In this way, Commission reproduces the Jat and Hindutva narrative of what caused the Muzaffarnagar massacre, and chose to ignore the role of political leadership.

Conclusion

"Human history, it seems, is often understood as a history of violence," wrote

historian Richard Bessel in his book *Violence: A Modern Obsession* (2015). Bessel further observes that violence, "… like dirt and pollution, is a matter of perception as well as of fact. For this reason, the study of violence should not be confined merely to describing its various manifestations as if it were an unchanging feature of the human condition" (Bessel 2015, 2). Rather, it requires an examination of how violence is perceived, interpreted, and politically managed within specific historical contexts. Although, these observations were made in the broader global context, they can also be applied to the Indian case. In this sense, one could argue that Indian history—including modern history—has repeatedly been shaped by episodes of violence and the ways in which they are politically mediated.

In the Muzaffarnagar riot case, the state and secular political parties chose not to take the law to its logical end when they were in power, and not to let the state establish its supremacy in its fullest sense for a religious minority. It questions the secular credibility of these parties. There was ambivalence and administrative indifference by the secular Akhilesh Yadav government, but the subsequent Yogi Adityanath-led BJP government took an active interest in derailing the justice process. Such an approach has created a climate of fear in the minds of the Muslim minority in the state. It is entirely plausible that the majority of ordinary Hindus have no direct involvement in communal violence. However, a sustained political and institutional effort to address hate campaigns and communal polarization could have helped restore public faith in the secular character of the polity. Instead, the cumulative effect of political inaction and institutional failure has weakened the ability of many citizens—particularly Muslims—to feel secure in their rights to live with dignity and equal protection under the law. With the electoral victories of the BJP in the state in 2017 and again in 2022, the ideological framework of Hindu majoritarianism has come to occupy a dominant place in the political landscape. In this context, the Muzaffarnagar riots have increasingly receded from popular political debate and are often treated as a peripheral issue. Yet the events surrounding the riots and their aftermath must remain central to public and scholarly discussion. Bringing such episodes back into public discourse is essential not only for documenting the experiences of victims but also for safeguarding the principles of a secular and democratic India. Remembering these events is particularly important for future generations, as communal violence poses a profound threat to India's pluralistic democratic fabric.

India once aspired to function as a secular republic committed to protecting all its citizens irrespective of their religious identity. However, the trajectory of recent political developments suggests that this vision has undergone significant transformation under regimes associated with the Hindu Right. The Muzaffarnagar riot and its aftermath presents a gloomy portrait of the abysmal failure of the secular character and conduct of the Indian state. Its most distinguishing aspect is that the

end of the riot not only fails to close the chapter of violence, but creates further incentives to fuel future violence for its victims (in this case, Muslims). Therefore, violence against Muslims risks becoming normalized within the political and social landscape unless stronger institutional and political safeguards are restored.

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Notes

1 The whole phenomenon of *bulldozer justice* is a case in point. Nuh violence is a good example as how it works.

2 Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind is a civil society organization associated with Deoband. It has two groups. One is led by Asad Madani and the other is by Mehmood Madani. Both of them belong to the Madani family. For a good understanding of the Deoband Movement, see Barbara Metcalf (1982).

3 Hindu–Muslim riots have electoral consequences. It is an argument widely made by scholars. Steve Wilkinson's *Voting and Violence* (2004) makes the most persuasive argument for this reasoning.

4 For a good understanding of the BKU's present role, see the editorial, "Farmer's Solidarity in the Wake of UP Elections," in *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 56, No. 37. September 2021.

5 Mr. Sayeed was the founder of the Jammu & Kashmir People's Democratic Party (PDP) and later served as J&K's chief minister twice.

6 Though the riot is generally known as the Muzaffarnagar riot, a neighboring district, Shamli, was also affected. Moreover, there are other districts, such as Bagpat and Meerut, that were also affected.

7 The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was a flagship scheme created by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

8 Mr. Rashid is a brick kiln worker and lives in the colony. Interviewed on 25 Feb 2022.

9 Interview with Mr. Rashid on 22 February 2022, Muzaffarnagar.

10 Interview with Sadab on 14 August 2023, Muzaffarnagar.

11 Farmers' movement itself.

12 Interview with Mr. Khan on 27 April 2023.

13 Interview with Maulana Sajid in September 2023

14 Interview with advocate Islam on 13 August 2023.

15 This is owing to limitations of India's criminal justice system. A similar experience is noted by Vrinda Grover while pursuing legal cases for the victims of anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal region in Orissa (Grover and Uma 2017).

16 For instance, many riots have taken place in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra recently; no commission has been set up to investigate the causes. Major violence erupted in Nuh in Haryana in 2023, but no judicial commission was set up to investigate. Instead, more than 1,200 homes of innocent Muslims were destroyed by a bulldozer, which is now recognized as the bulldozer justice system in India.

17 Justice Srikrishna's commission enquiring the Bombay riots of 1992–93, for example, took many years to submit the report. Most governments barely took the recommendations of such commissions seriously.

18 The Sahai Commission report has been criticized for presenting a relatively lenient interpretation of the events surrounding the Muzaffarnagar violence. See, "Sahai Commission Report on Muzaffarnagar violence: A Soft Report." *www. Indialegallive.com* (online). Retrieved on Oct 20, 2023.

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