

Nuh-Mewat — old template, new battleground

The recent violence in Nuh district of Haryana, not far from the national capital, has followed a familiar template. Religious events may once have been occasion for affirming a sense of community through shared piety. They are now incomplete without a brazen display of aggression.

Early this year, a group of independent professionals published a report with a self-explanatory title, "Routes of Wrath, Weaponising Religious Processions". With a wealth of documentation, it put in context the violence that spread across nine States like a contagion during Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti last year. Neither the first spark, nor the means through which the flames were fanned, were obscure.

Indeed, as senior advocate Chander Uday Singh put it, the "catalysts" of the violence were the same across the geography of India: "religious processions ... followed by targeted attacks on Muslim-owned properties, businesses and places of worship."

Open collusion

"Culpable amnesia" is the term of art invoked, derived from a judicial commission of inquiry into the Bhopalpur riots which claimed up to a thousand lives in 1989. What is different now is that incompetence is not required as alibi. Where "plausible deniability" was once maintained, local administrations are now in open collusion with riotous mobs.

Violence is the overt intent as processionists carry exposed weapons, and march to the accompaniment of high-decibel music and provocative slogans. Yet, violence is not inevitable since extreme restraint is usually maintained by the other side.

Two incident-free years have passed in Nuh, which has witnessed the birth of an entirely novel religious observance called the Brajmandal Jalabhishek Yatra. This year was different because of the declared participation of a notorious cow vigilante, wanted in neighbouring Rajasthan since February for the murder of two cattle-traders, but moving around with impunity under the active protection of Haryana's police.

In May 1924, close to a century ago, Mahatma Gandhi wrote a pamphlet on Hindu-Muslim tensions, an issue that for him was gaining almost obsessive importance. He was focused as always on inner essences, but devoted great attention to their overt expressions. Just as cow slaughter had become something of a "stare point" for Hindus, music before mosques had become one for



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State power is now accessory to an aggressive programme of religious conquest, not a countervailing force that upholds constitutional principles

Muslims. Neither side could reasonably expect to coerce the other into compliance, though deliberate provocations could cease. "I have heard," he continued, "that in some places, Hindus purposely, and with the deliberate intention of irritating Mussalmans, perform arati just when the Mussalman prayers commence."

Cultural disdain

The nature of that cycle of mutual provocation has since changed dramatically. A cow slaughter ban is now a legislative *fait accompli* in most States. In States ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), these laws are enforced mainly by vigilantes granted the licence to kill on mere suspicion. And to underline the utter disempowerment of the religious minority, their places of worship are becoming focal points for a newly aggressive display of cultural disdain.

Nuh, and the Mewat region more generally, are an unlikely terrain for this display of aggression. Muslims in the region, referred to as the Meo, are a community that draws heavily from the lore of the Brindavan region, with traditions of veneration of a heterodox pantheon of gods. As India's Independence approached last century and bitter communal antagonisms flared elsewhere, the Meo remained ecumenical in their identity and indifferent to the effort at mobilising numbers behind each faith. Dairying is a way of life for the Meo and cattle a revered source of livelihood.

Administratively, the Mewat region was once part of the princely States of Alwar and Bharatpur, and became during the 1930s, the focus of the Congress party's "Muslim mass contact" programme. Jawaharlal Nehru and his associates within the left-wing of the Congress sought a strategy to deal with the embitterment between faiths, by creating identities of shared material interests between peasants, workers and the poor.

Numerous other demands surfaced in this atmosphere of ferment, including better representation for the Meo in the administration, equity in land ownership, and decentralised governance. Though far from the epicentres of Partition, the Meo region witnessed a harsh retribution from its rulers, little else than a "mass extermination campaign", as the social scientist Shail Mayaram has documented.

The statistics about these campaigns have long since sunk into the memory hole. In her book, *Resisting Regimes*, Professor Mayaram attempts a retrieval and finds numbers that are staggering, though the greater significance is in the suppression of memories themselves. The

consolidation of a nationalist sentiment required a sense of "sociability" and after violence on the scale the Meo witnessed, it imposed "silences from the victim".

Mewat lies in an arc southwards of the national capital, though the spillovers of modernity halt at its borders. Millennium city was the appellation that Gurgaon bestowed upon itself when both the millennium and the India growth story were relative novelties. In 2007, Gurgaon rid itself of an unwanted appendage with the formation of Mewat district, subsequently renamed Nuh. Since then, Gurgaon has flourished from a real estate boom, while Nuh has stagnated.

The fifth round of the National Family Health Survey, carried out 2019-21, presents the essential figures. To take just two rather telling indicators: of the female population above age six, only 51.2% in Nuh district have ever been to school, against 80.9% in Gurgaon and 73.8% in the State as a whole. Female literacy in Mewat is 41.9% of the relevant age group of 15 to 49 years, against 85.4% in Gurgaon and 79.7% in the State.

Nuh is Haryana's only Muslim-majority district, with close to 80% of its 1.08 million population in 2011 identifying with the faith. Perhaps that is sufficient reason why it is likely to languish forever in the backwaters of official inattention.

Why would such unpromising terrain become the battleground of faiths today? Partly because the emboldened Hindutva forces think they can do what they want. Even where numbers are not in their favour, it is about establishing the authority of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), as spearhead of Hindutva, to legislate on religious practice all over the country. If the VHP should now pronounce it an essential element of Hindu belief that Nuh is where Lord Krishna grazed his cows, that the region is home to three Shaivite shrines from the Mahabharata era, all others in the Hindu Rashtra have no option but to accept these as undisputed truth.

Hindutva as ideology expresses its expansionist intent in the religious procession, adorned with a symbolism that is under constant invention. State power is now an accessory to its programme, rather than a countervailing force that upholds constitutional principles.

Vigilantism in the scholarly understanding is an ensemble of coercive practices that seek to impose a moral order, an alternate system of legitimacy. This could work in defiance of the writ of the state, but the situation in India is ominously different. Hindutva vigilantism here appropriates and subverts the state's monopoly of legitimate coercion. And in that lies great danger for the constitutional order.

Every act of silence amplifies the horrors in Manipur

The images and graphic accounts of the Kuki-Zo women who were stripped, paraded, and harmed by mobs and thugs have swept across the country and the world. They make us not only deeply ashamed but also angry about the fact that such terrible incidents continue to happen in India, for our leaders spare no moment to inform us of India's world power aspirations, its presidency of the G-20 and growing economy. We are reminded by politicians that sexual violence occurs across the country. Does that make it acceptable? Nothing of the sort.

Ordinary people have joined protests against the incidents, from Goa to Guwahati and Delhi to Shillong, demanding justice, holding placards, lighting candles, singing 'We shall overcome someday', the anthem of the American civil rights movement which fought for racial equality. These may seem small, helpless gestures but they matter; every action for restorative justice matters just as every silence amplifies the harm and horror.

Working for reconciliation

Take Chumukedima, on the edge of the bustling commercial town of Dimapur in Nagaland, where the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) brought together Meiteis and Kukis living in the State in an open field to hold hands and urge peace. That may seem symbolic but it is far more than that when you dig deeper. The FNR has worked for peace and reconciliation along with other Naga civil society leaders over two decades to bring peace and mutual respect among the bitterly divided factions.

There has been much bloodshed in fratricidal conflicts among the latter in addition to their battles with the security forces. Whether this will percolate across the border is not sure but what is clear is that the Kukis and Meiteis in Nagaland have been assured of safety by the political leadership. But ultimately, resolution of such issues must involve the key players perhaps with



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At the same time, the focus must also be on what may seem small and helpless gestures that matter, as every action for restorative justice counts

a little help from their friends. That is a long way away.

Of course there are setbacks, such as the flight of Meiteis from Mizoram after a group of former Mizo insurgents issued a statement warning them of local anger and suggesting that they go home. The State government said the call by the group was consequently withdrawn, but the damage had been done. In this acutely sensitive region, where ethnic fault lines are deep and go back over long years of simmering distrust and unrest, it takes little to kindle a fire. Mizoram says that over 12,000 persons from the Kuki and Zomi tribes, which have ethnic kinship with the Mizos, have taken shelter in the State. This small State is struggling as it hosts another 40,000 plus Chin refugees from neighbouring Myanmar who have fled a brutal military crackdown and fighting between insurgent groups and the Myanmar army.

The issue of accountability

But let us return to the key issue of accountability for the specific incidence of sexual violence. More such cases have emerged as women have courageously spoken to reporters. The Chief Minister of Manipur, N. Biren Singh, who is now seen as having consolidated his hold over the Meitei majority in the Imphal valley, says he saw the horrific videos only on the day that they emerged in the public domain last week. He later told a television anchor, "You have to see the ground reality. There are hundreds of similar cases and that is the reason why the internet is shut off in the state." That is a stark and revealing statement although in the same interview he had said that many had been killed and "there are more than a thousand FIRs [first information reports] lodged".

That is one clarification that the Chief Minister needs to make: was he referring to cases of sexual abuse or the many FIRs that have been filed over death, arson, looting and intimidation?

The Judicial Commission to fix accountability

for the situation was announced two months ago but is yet to start its work. It should take up the case of sexual abuse as one which mirrors many of the issues relating to the failure of the administration to uphold law and order and protect the vulnerable.

There are a few key questions that need review: first, what did the officers do after the incident? Are there records of the action they took such as calls, short messaging services, wireless messages, and minutes of meetings with other police officials?

The incident, as one media account said, took place approximately a kilometre away from Nongpok Sekmai, which was ranked by the central government as the best police station of the country in 2020. The second is how and when did this information reach the heads of the police, the civil service and the political leadership? What we do know is that the FIR on the incident was lodged on May 17 and the first arrest was announced at the Chief Minister's press conference, two months later.

There is the issue of the chairperson of the National Commission for Women who has confirmed receiving detailed complaints of these and other attacks. She says she sent requests to the State authorities and got no reply. She should have gone herself to the State, demanded explanations and asked the State Commission for Women to join her. Another opportunity was missed.

Impact on 'Act East Policy'

These issues are connected to the State's future. There is virtually no talk about efforts to meet Manipur's aspirations through the 'Act East Policy' which is to connect the North East to South East Asia. Manipur was to be a pivot of that approach. But one wonders now, with supply lines disrupted, the conflict in the State, a situation awash with weapons, and allegations of rebels and drugs slipping across the border, if and how this dream can be recovered.