

The Dimension of Social Cohesion

Social harmony and cohesion among people, is by far the most significant contributor to a Nation's intrinsic strength. While it is imperative that people coexist peacefully it should not be merely due to the laws. For genuine national unity this has to be natural and spontaneous. If discord and conflict are rife for any reason, the Nation cannot be strong enough to fight off external threats.

For a country of such vast diversity as India, inherent religious, cultural, ethnic and economic fault-lines are ever-present. Due to our inherited historical baggage these have left a deep imprint on our psyche. To ensure social harmony they must remain dormant, and no individual, group or political party must be allowed to exacerbate and exploit them.

For centuries our people have lived together in peace despite all the diversity and fault-lines. This has been due to the interwoven social fabric in which people are linked by kinship, commerce, and societal interdependencies. Disruptions were mainly due to wars, imposed either by foreign invaders or by own rulers engaging in internecine conflicts. These affected their livelihoods; indeed their very existence.

A brief overview of the nature and intricacies of the fault-lines is necessary in order to appreciate how those get accentuated.

FAULT-LINES

Religious

Fig 3 shows the percentage of followers of different religions in India as per the 2011 census.

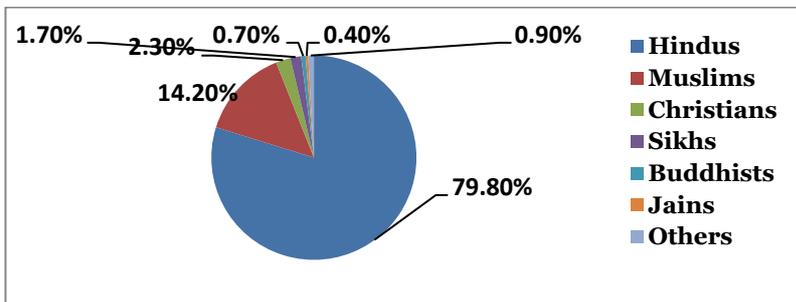


Fig. 3 - Religious composition of India's population

Religion is a very emotive issue in human relations. It is very ironical that even though all religions propound humanity, compassion, and peace, mankind has a long history of committing inhuman violence on its account. Communal harmony therefore is extremely vital to ensure social cohesion in our country, which is home to all religions of the world.

Hinduism, which has over a billion followers worldwide, is practiced by about 80% of our population. Buddhism and Jainism, both of which originated in India 3000 years ago, share many spiritual tenets with Hinduism. Both religions ardently espouse non-violence, and their adherents have lived here in absolute peace and harmony for over three millennia.

After the advent of Islam in India in early 8th Century, relations between Muslims and Hindus have had a mixed record. Mongol invaders such as Mahmud of Ghazni and Timur had inflicted wanton killings during their campaigns of loot and plunder. On the other hand Turkic-Mamluk slave dynasties that settled down here were relatively less violent, and there was a fair degree of religious syncretism and cultural blending during their reign.

The Mughals, although of Mongol descent, came to India not to plunder but to settle down here after the conquest. Except for the extreme religious persecution by Aurangzeb, conflicts were not on religious lines but were mainly to annex kingdoms; Hindu and Muslim alike. Despite some unease due to their following different religions, the common folks lived in relative peace, bound as they were by social and commercial links.

Steadfast Hindu-Muslim unity during the 1857 uprising, had alarmed the British, who then employed their *divide and rule* stratagem to sow dissensions. Deplorably, as has often happened all through our history, personal ambitions of politicians fanned and intensified religious polarization for their selfish ends. This culminated in the tragic partition of the country, which caused over a million deaths and several million being uprooted.

Sikh religion was born around the end of 15th Century and it spread all over northwest and north India. It ultimately emerged as the *sword-arm* of Hindus to fight persecution by Muslim rulers; especially Aurangzeb. There was a long-standing practice in Punjabi families for the eldest son to be baptized to Sikhism, and join the fight against tyrannical Muslim rulers and chieftains.

So, what has been the state of our communal relations since Independence? Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Jains, Parsis and Jews; all have lived in complete harmony. Some Hindu groups have however targeted Christian charities for alleged proselytizing.

Hindus and Sikhs had borne the brunt of communal massacres and traumatic relocation from undivided Punjab during partition. Their common pain and the age-old bonds of kinship and business links ensured that they live in perfect accord. They share a common language and culture, celebrate the same festivals, and visit each other's shrines with utmost devotion.

But, the bane of ugly, self-serving and divisive politics struck again. During the early eighties Punjab witnessed a spate of extremist violence and insurgency by Khalistani militants, who were duly supported by Pakistan. This culminated in Op Blue Star, Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards, and tragic large-scale killings of innocent Sikhs in its aftermath.

Mercifully, wiser counsels prevailed and people realized the futility of such strife. Punjab was brought back from the brink and the traditional harmony between all communities was restored.

Relations between Muslims and Hindus, however have been more tenuous. It is quite a paradox that there is more distrust and antagonism between the two communities now – 71 years after Independence, than there was in the immediate aftermath of the partition when communal frenzy was at its worst. Even though my parents had moved to Delhi as refugees, having lost everything in what is now Pakistan, I never heard even one word of rancour against Muslims. All they said was that a devilish madness had taken over everyone, and partition was due to political reasons.

It is also a paradox that communities that bore the brunt of the killings and losses during partition, are by and large less prone to communal hatred. Having borne the sheer trauma and horror, no one wants to go through it again.

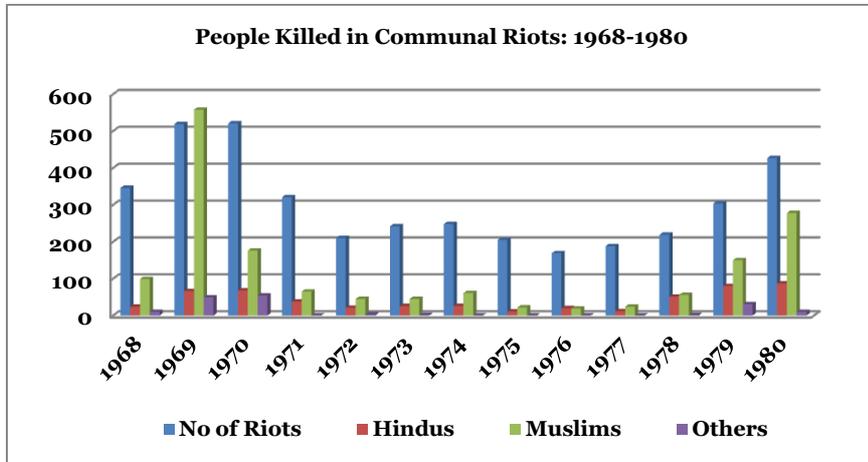
According to data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of Ministry of Home Affairs, communal violence incidents increased 41% during the three years 2014-16. The top three states were UP, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, closely followed by Rajasthan, Karnataka and Gujarat¹.

During the early decades after Independence communities were not as polarized as they are now. Communal riots were generally sporadic, and often triggered by minor incidents such as an accident, eve-teasing or a petty dispute. Some of these did escalate into major conflagrations, and caused a large number of casualties.

¹ Mukesh Ranjan, Tribune News Service, New Delhi, July 26, 2017.

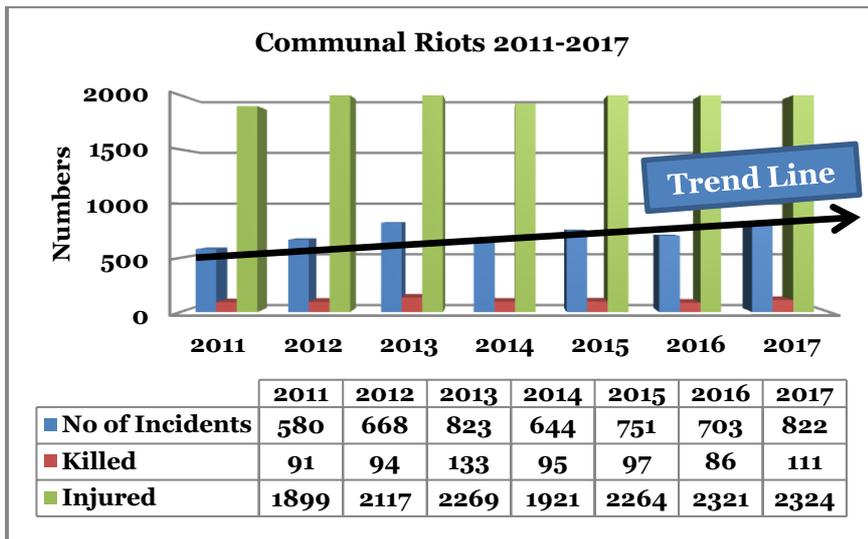
<http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/communal-violence-cases-up-41-in-3-years-ncrb/442925.html>. Accessed April 28, 2018.

Authentic statistics on communal riots and casualty figures are hard to come by. Whatever data are available in the public domain are generally based on local reports, which are often subjective. The following graphic has data on communal incidents in the sixties and seventies, which are extracted from a Case Study in the curriculum of the Lal Bahadur Shastri Police Academy.



Source: Lal Bahadur Shastri Police Academy Case study

Fig. 3 – People killed in communal riots:1968-1980



Source: NCRB, Ministry of Home Affairs

Fig. 4 – Casualties in communal violence 2011 - 2017

Data in the graphic at Fig. 4 are from NCRB, and were given out in replies to Lok Sabha questions.

Large scale communal flare-ups became more rampant when political parties started polarizing communities to reap electoral benefits. In the already communally surcharged atmosphere the series of inflammatory incidents started with Advani's Rath Yatra, which reached a crescendo with the Babri Masjid demolition. It was followed by Mumbai bomb blasts, Gujarat carnage of 2002, and the Muzzafarnagar riots, which have created a deeper chasm.

Construction of a temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya where the Babri Masjid was demolished, is an emotive and contentious issue plaguing Hindu-Muslim relations. The case is *sub judice*, and even though both sides assert that they would abide by the court's verdict, it is quite evident that politicians of all hues will exploit it for electoral gains. As has happened before every election, political parties will only intensify religious and caste polarization in the run-up to the crucial elections in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh later this year, and the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

A more disturbing dimension was added to the communal cauldron, which was already simmering due to terror strikes against the general public in several Indian cities. There were a series of attacks and bomb blasts that apparently had specifically targeted Muslims, such as the Malegaon bombings (8 September 2006), Samjhauta Express attack (18 February 2007), Mecca Masjid blasts (18 May 2017), Ajmer Dargah blasts (11 October 2007) and the Malegaon blast (28 September 2008).

The latter set of blasts took on a more sinister overtone as these were allegedly carried out by militant Hindutva groups, in apparent retaliation of the attacks by Islamist terrorists. Among the accused was a Hindu ascetic Swami Aseemanand, who had confessed his role before a Magistrate, but later retracted it. Investigations and convictions in these cases saw a series of flip-flops by the investigative agencies; all allegedly orchestrated by the ruling parties then in power.

Politics once again had muddied the waters. The general public is now totally sceptical since the Agencies have lost credibility; with even the Supreme Court castigating the CBI as a *caged parrot*. How can the people be expected to have confidence when some investigators and prosecutors have publicly protested, and many others, including even Judges, have been brazenly removed from cases by the Govt?

Aspect of Institutional credibility is being discussed in another chapter. I also must clarify that it is not within the scope of this book to discuss the merits of all these cases. The focus here is only on the consequences of such political and politico-religious manipulations on communal harmony and our social cohesion.

A ranking that hardly does credit to an avowedly secular country like India was released by the Pew Research Centre in its 2017 report. It ranked India at fourth position among countries that saw an increase in communal violence in the preceding three years. Only Syria, Nigeria and Iraq saw more violence than India. Surely, we hate to be bracketed with such dubious company².

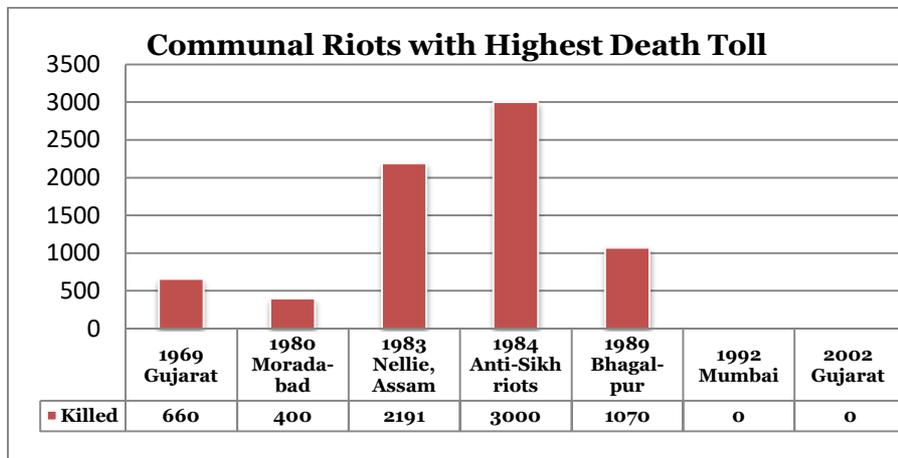


Fig 5 - Post-Independence communal riots with highest deaths

Communal riots since Independence having the highest death toll are shown in the graphic at Fig. 5. However, all three graphics above are only disjointed snapshots, which do not provide a realistic picture of the scale and trends of communal violence. The death tolls too are as per official figures, whereas the unofficial estimates are much more.

No meaningful analysis of the communal violence is possible unless the data are collated based on specified parameters. There is neither a set procedure for reporting casualties, nor uniformity in state-wise collection and collation. Official figures on casualties seldom give the breakdown by communities; perhaps rightly, as it could be misused by political parties to inflame passions further. Even the reports of various Commissions that inquired into major massacres are not put in the public domain for same reason.

Notwithstanding the inaccuracy of data, it is very evident that since Independence more people have been killed in communal violence than the number of soldiers martyred in all conflicts. That is a sad and sordid

² Pew Research Centre Report <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/11/global-restrictions-on-religion-rise-modestly-in-2015-reversing-downward-trend>. Accessed April 28, 2018.

commentary on the state of cohesion and harmonious relations in our society. How can we aspire for a seat at the global *high table*, when our societal turbulence and violence resembles that of a Banana Republic?

And yet, the irony is that left to themselves almost all people wish to live in peace and harmony. All communities have been living together peacefully for centuries, and fully realize that there is just no other option for their mutual well-being. Communal strife harms everyone's livelihood since all communities are interdependent. Trade, vocations and businesses are interlinked upstream as well as downstream in the value chain.

It is always political parties, radical groups of all communities, and *outsiders* that pounce on petty local issues, or even *create* new ones to fan communal passions. Once they have triggered mayhem they quietly sneak away leaving the hapless people to suffer.

Communal strife is not inherent in our society. It is created by political parties, fanatic religious leaders, and other self-serving *interests*. This is the stark reality behind almost every single riot in our country. It is unfortunate that such elements do not desist from their dangerous ploys, which cause immense harm to our social fabric.

Communal riots and the immense disruption caused by them have cost the Nation very heavily also in economic terms, which I will highlight in the next chapter. It is therefore even more unfortunate that the hapless common man; the people who actually suffer, still fall prey to the machinations of cunning politicians and self-styled custodians of different religions.

Have we ever paused to consider if there is any other option except to live in peace and harmony? Muslims that stayed back after partition had made a conscious decision to adopt India as their country. A vast majority of them have served the Nation with distinction in all walks of life. Thus we have had Muslim Presidents, Chief Justices, industrialists, scientists, senior military commanders, entrepreneurs, educationists, artists, sportsmen and administrators. Even the ordinary folk have contributed to the Nation in their own way in respective vocations.

The 175 million Muslims of India are an incontrovertible fact of life. They are as worthy citizens of India as any other community. Being the second largest segment of our population they do not need to be appeased, nor should they be distrusted and marginalized.

Even the most extremist zealots of both communities know that they are here to stay. So, if no other fanciful solutions such as mass deportation, *ghar wapsi* or even pogroms are feasible, then why create polarization and mayhem just for short-term electoral gains? Do we really want to jeopardize our freedom, which we had to wait for thousands of years?