

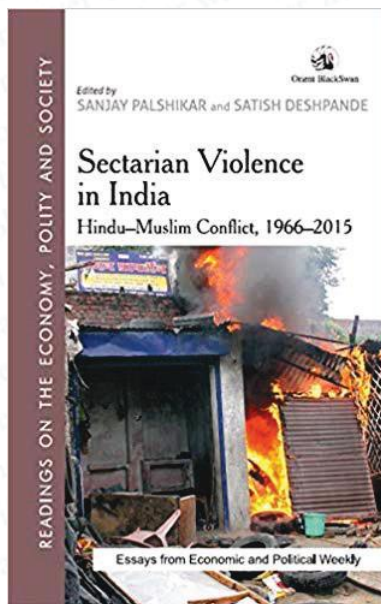
An Endemic Phenomenon

B. Surendra Rao

SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN INDIA: HINDU-MUSLIM CONFLICT, 1966-2015—ESSAYS FROM ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY

Edited by Sanjay Palshikar and Satish Deshpande

Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2019, pp. 488, Rs.795.00



That Hindu-Muslim conflict, either in its simmering presence or in its periodic violent expressions, has been endemic to Indian public life cannot be denied. And, politically, the malady has been routinely attributed to the obnoxious 'other'. There was once a group which used to inveigh against 'communalism' as a frustration of the genuine national project. But of late 'communalism' has been waging war against 'pseudo-secularism' and proclaiming itself as representing true

nationalism. Its political dividends have been spectacular enough to warrant a redefinition of nationalism itself! It is significant that in such an effervescent mood of ideological triumphalism, some serious thoughts of social scientists on sectarian violence in India have been exhumed from the back volumes of Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) and presented to the readers. They belong to the period 1966-2015, and the editors have selected 38 from 430 articles, reports or

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other columns (not counting editorials or letters to the editor). Clearly, even as Hindus and Muslims were snarling at each other and flying at each other's throat, scholars were busy writing about them, not applauding them, but telling them as to what was really wrong in the country. Not that those who manufacture sectarian riots or run amok in the streets care to listen to them. But they have apparently done so because there is yet a sober segment in our society which wants to know what ails the country and want a fair deal for all.

The credentials of the present volume are ensured both by the source from which the scholarly pieces are drawn and the fine selection and editorial exercises and excisions that have gone into them. A whole lot of issues connected with sectarian ideologies, expressions of violence, political stakes that go into them, the economic and demographic arguments that have been put forth to explain away the malaise, are found woven in these pieces that explore and diagnose the subject with 'objective passion'. One of the things that invariably happen after any outburst of communal frenzy is the institution of an inquiry over it, and many 'Inquiry Reports' are available as official narratives of the tragedy enacted. But such reports have been showed to be flawed, with biases of their own, however much they mask them with the statistics they present and conclusions they draw. They invariably become another site for contest and acrimony.

The thirty-eight articles selected in the volume are grouped in four sections, with a brief introduction to each, apart from a general introduction. The sections include 'General Surveys of Sectarian Violence', 'Theoretical and Conceptual Issues', 'Communal Politics' and 'Accounts and Analyses of Specific Riots'. They carry Tables and Figures and a Map to show where riot production has been more or less busy in Independent India. It also carries a tribute to Ashgar Ali Engineer, who had indefatigably written about and against communal ideology and its vicious and violent expressions.

Although any search for the 'immediate cause' would have you stumble upon or grab this or that silly incident, there is no gainsaying that the whole phenomenon of sectarian antagonism has a larger presence in our society. Whether it is an 'essentialist' antagonism in which the two are so constituted as to be in perpetual warfare or as a 'constructivist' fact which colonialism had cynically invented and nurtured to serve its own interest, it has surely stayed with us. They have produced debates but proposed no serious solutions, since their stakes are invariably political. There are, in this volume, articles by Ashuthosh Varshney and Steven Wilkinson, highlighting electoral engineering and dividends, with most of the articles showing politicians and anti-social elements as responsible for riots. But one has to recognize, as for example scholars like Imtiaz Ahmad have done, that the Indian state is committed to the ideology of 'secularism', if the term stands for opposition to 'communalism', although the society is suffused with communal ideology. The one swears by the ideals which went into the making of the Constitution and the periodic invocations of those ideals by politicians, and the

other communally constituted society, both in its outlook and practice, often conflating the ideologies. While the state is called upon to do the fire-fighting wherever or whenever communal conflagration breaks out, which it does with various degrees of sincerity, the society carries on in its wonted ways. Often the state takes the credit for fire-fighting or for ensuring that there are no open communal riots; but that is no certification that the virus which the society is carrying within its body has been dealt with or eradicated.

Many who write about communalism argue that it is not a religious phenomenon but a secular one. But religion gets yoked to it, invariably. When India was crafting its nationalism in the colonial context, it experienced its contradictions not only with the colonialism it hoped to overthrow but also with 'religious nationalisms' represented by the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha, each questioning and repudiating the kind of nationalism which the Indian National Congress represented. After Independence, with colonialism consigned to the pages of history, the latter yet survives, feeding on old memories of triumphs as tragedies and tragedies as triumphs. The Freedom at Midnight is yet being spoken of as the wrong freedom won. Overthrow of the Congress as a political force and the exultations heard about the true new freedom won suggest that the fight is still carried on over the old contentious nationalist project. While the old secularists ruled, a keen sense of discrimination was felt and expressed, either as 'appeasement' or as the minorities getting more than their share of the cake. The newly won 'freedom' promises taking everyone onto the developmental bandwagon. The logic is impeccable, except that it should happen within the framework of benevolence as defined by the victors.

But the articles in the volume deal with the events and track record of an earlier period which our memories go back to. Jan Breman's thoughts on the Gujarat pogrom against Muslims in 2002, of which he was a close, horrified observer, make him look upon it as a resurgence of Social Darwinism. He writes that 'The end of the Hindutva politics of exclusion is not yet in sight' (p. 313). He is right, and the triumph of the Gujarat model seems to attract more plaudits than rejection, as yet. He attributes the triumph of Hindutva politics to the weakening of the trade union movement, a causal connection worth considering.

The editors have confessed to certain important biases and preferences that have influenced the editing and abridgement of most of the pieces included in the volume. Important among them are excision of graphic description of violence and privileging of analyses over description. They have also confessedly left out references to specific individuals and organizations and their alleged acts of commission and omission. Apparently their sensitive character dictated decisions. In fact, social science research should be more than description and attempt critical analyses, which also distinguishes EPW from event-reporting magazines. Although the book and EPW from which the editors have chosen the articles do

refer to specific instances of sectarian violence, they have not subordinated descriptions to analyses. But the catch is, either of them can be accused of subjectivity, particularly when one deals with a subject like sectarian violence. And yet the analysis of rabid violence takes place once the rabidity of the phenomenon abates somewhat, particularly by some sober-minded scholars who want to see through the din and dust that madness is apt to raise. That indeed makes the articles relevant and the book valuable. If, for all our scholarly studies, sectarian violence has not been exorcised from among our midst, the fault does not lie in social science research. Social scientists may quarrel over the meanings of secularism and communalism, but they do not go to the streets to settle issues. Those who do, and those who monitor them, are different sets of actors. Parallel lines do not meet. But sober thoughts should find a place somewhere and insist on claiming a constituency of their own.

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Review Details

Book Name: SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN INDIA: HINDU-MUSLIM CONFLICT, 1966-2015—ESSAYS FROM ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY

Reviewer name: B. Surendra Rao

Author name: Sanjay Palshikar and Satish Deshpande

Book Year: 2019

Publisher Name: Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad

Book Price: Rs.799

Book Pages: 488