

AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE MEERUT RIOT

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Meerut, about seventy kilometres from Delhi, has historical importance in that the first rumblings of the 1857 mutiny began here when the Hindu and Muslim soldiers resolved to fight together against the British rulers, unitedly declared war against their British masters and marched towards Delhi. Meerut has had the long tradition of communal harmony and till today the festival of Nauchandi is celebrated with great fanfare by Hindus and Muslims together. Although common Hindus and Muslims have lived and pursued their avocations together, the vested interests in both the communities have often tried to disrupt the harmony. The present riot has not changed the situation. During my extensive tour of the riot-affected areas I did not find bitterness in any one community against the other; on the contrary the sufferers and their sympathisers, bitterly complained against the PAC, the city police and district officials in league with some communal elements.

In Meerut, which has a population of more than five lakhs, the municipality has recently been converted into a municipal corporation. The ratio of Hindus to Muslims in Meerut is 51:49, according to some district authorities. One sees locality after locality exclusively inhabited by Muslims. There are also several localities where the Hindus and Muslims live together in harmony and peace. The corporation elections which people then believed would soon be held also cast an ugly shadow over communal peace in the town.

Most of the Muslims are engaged in handloom work. They are generally weavers and some of them even own looms. The

cloth produced by them is generally sold to the Hindu traders—Baniyas who, interestingly in Meerut, as elsewhere, are the bed-rock of the RSS. These conservative traders finance the local RSS and now also the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). A large section of Muslims are also engaged in producing scissors and brass bands, the latter being the exclusive monopoly of the Muslims. Many Muslims who own brass-band manufacturing units are quite prosperous. While the majority of Muslims are quite poor, one can see a section of well-to-do Muslims in Meerut, unlike in other places.

Recently a number of field studies of communal riots have suggested certain common characteristic features which are as follow:

1. Communal riots generally take place in middle-sized towns.
2. The proportion of Muslims in such towns happens to be high, usually more than 30%.
3. A section of Muslims in such towns is generally well-to-do and tends to be a potential competitor for the Hindu traders.
4. The riots now tend to be well planned and last for several days or weeks; they are no longer spontaneous outbursts they used to be earlier.
5. The core issues, more often than not, happen to be of either an economic or political nature whereas the spark is provided by some trivial incident.

In the Meerut riot all these features are more or less present. It is a middle-sized town with a very high proportion of Muslim population (around 49%). A section of Muslims is quite prosperous and has political ambitions of its own. In 1982 both the MP as well as MLA are Muslims (Mohsina Qidwai and Manzoor Ahmad, both from Congress (I)). Here too, as will be shortly evident, the riots were well planned and lasted for more than four weeks. The pattern of setting fire to houses and stabbing showed special training in both the acts. Another feature of these riots is the large role played by the anti-social elements who are seeking political legitimation and respectability through participation in such riots. They emerge as the saviours of their respective

