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Less Evident Forms Of Violence : Muzzafarnagar Riots

By Sushmita Verma & Jenny Sulfath

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The Muzzafarnagar riots of 7 th September, 2013 have been talked about and covered as communal riots , the most intrinsic brutal one in recent past. However, the questions of women and children have been conveniently sidelined as in any other riot. Even the cases where attention was given were in the cases of brutal rapes, as very sadly such news seems to sensationalize and tantalise the otherwise sleeping consciousness of the Indian nation state. Even though academicians and activists have constantly written about different forms of violence, the one most talked about is the violence which is physical in nature. However, in the case of gender, violence has more than one form, especially in the riot situations. These several other manifestations of violence are equally important and require a thorough examination and attention . We try to delve into some of those through our experience of being a part of a fact finding team. We attempt to explore and unveil some aspects that deeply moved us and compelled us to think. Violence essentially is nothing but the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation. In Muzzaffar Nagar camps, what we saw was a more systemic form of violence. The violence is so common in society that, both at the institutional and individual level, it is practiced and perpetuated everyday.

Physical and Psychological Violence

The most prominent and stark form of the violence that was perpetrated on the women was in the form of the brutal rapes which appropriated the highest levels of sadism humans were capable of. In Lisarh, one of the riot affected village, as was reported by the people, specifically the camp residents, the women were stripped / unclothed and made to dance in a mosque, which was later burnt. As seeing a male body naked was *Haraam* (forbidden) for the unmarried women, the Jatts laid their bare bodies in front of them to play with their consciousness and to traumatise them even further. They further added that women were chopped off with electric saws, which tragically the *Lohars* (Ironsmiths, sub caste among Muslims) had made by their own hands.

Women from Jola camp said that in another instance, a mother who was breast feeding her child was burnt alive while she was in the house. Later when the body was found, the child was attached to the mother's body. Both were burnt together then. In another case it was said that the *Bhaala* (Pointed elongated weapon made of iron) was pierced in a pregnant woman's womb and the foetus came out. The mother and child died immediately. As per a delegation of lawyers sent by the AMU lawyers forum to many as 27 victims had confirmed instances of rapes but even till today only 7 have been reported and arrests have not been executed. The abject and gross violence, killing of husbands and other male family members, rapes, living in difficult situations have left women in a state of major trauma. The women of Malakpur camp narrated the story of Shazia, the woman who ran from her village Lisarh with her children wrapped in a towel. While running through the sugarcane fields she dropped a child and she realised it , it was too late and no trace of the child was to be found. She lost her mental balance and is still missing. In the camp at Dabedi Khurd, a woman said “ *Jee karta hai unko kabar se nikal laaun*” (I feel as if I should bring them (the dead) back from the burial grounds) expressing the trauma and sadness she was going through.. There has been no moving on for her. There are many others who have become destitutes with nowhere to go or no one to care for. The idea of any psycho social intervention and counselling seems far from conceivable in the stark reality of the absence of even the basic necessities of life.

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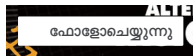
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In the Hamja camp, as conversations flowed , the women said that as the riots had just started in Hasanpur, some women managed to go to the police station and pleaded hastily to the policemen to free their husbands and other family members as they had been trapped as hostages in their own villages. The police responded by saying “ *Tum apne Mardon ko doodh pilaoge kya ?* “(Will feed your men under your bosoms ?) These statements are a stark revelation of the cultural and social context in which we live are a reflection of feudal and subjugative mindsets of our patriarchal society. Such a reaction ensure that no woman, courageous enough to consider going to the police stations to report these instances will ever, in the future make the mistake of doing the same again. Even in the cases where FIRs were lodged, the complaint was written by the constables and policemen available at the station and hence automatically manipulated. Like a Pradhan from Fugana (approximately 34 houses and 2 mosques were burnt here) who himself showed the 26 cases registered against him to the team. These were the copies of FIRs registered against him and reported him to be present at 6 places simultaneously , at the same time. Grave mistakes while recording cases by the policemen, only show the indirect allegiance of the State machinery towards dominant caste groups.

In Malakpur camp, one of the committee members running the camp has clearly told the women that if they report these cases without the support of the community will turn against them and that they will not receive any further compensations (whatever little) from the government. Residents of Hamja camp said that many of the rape victims have fled away from the camps as the other residents would bring all the press and outsiders to compel the rape victims to go through the ordeal once again by keeping on narrating the entire event. They have got tired of this process and fled away from the camps. Even for the FIRs that were lodged there were arrests executed, and there were threats from the Pradhans of the respective villages (where the crime was perpetrated) to either reconcile or face the brunt of the machinery and the circumstances one more time. The women also said that ' *Police biki hui* ' (The police were sold out for money). It must be reiterated that out of the 6000 accused, and around 540 FIRs registered, on about 264 were arrested comprising both of Jatts and other caste members.

Manifestation of Fear into Marriage

Many of the women residing in the camps reported of the incidents of mass and early marriages in the camps. A camp in Loi, many as 27 got married in one day, while 65 got engaged. In the camp in Noorpur Furgan as many as 56 engagements and 80 marriages have taken place so far. There were instances of such marriages in almost all the camps, the numbers varied as per size of the camp. In Jola camp, almost 200 marriages have taken place so far. It was difficult to come up with a sum total of all marriages that took place in all the camps.

Excerpts of an interaction at Noorpur Furgan camp , with a group of 5-6 women in the age groups of 20s to 40s.

Q : “How much land do you have in your village?”

A : “ *Hamare pas kuch nhi hei, sirf hamara gar hei* (We do not have anything, just our houses) ”

Q : “What all things do you have in your house”

A : “ The dowry of 4 *bahus* ”

Q : “Dont you want to go back?”

A : “No”

Q : “But then what will happen to the property?”

A : “We dont want to go back, We lost the trust in them and we dont want to go back”.

The responses were more or less the same with everyone whom we spoke to. Nobody wanted to go back. But what is the fear? The fear is about houses getting burnt, getting robbed or getting beaten up, it can happen anytime when they are there in the camps. Their houses are still there in the village it can anytime get burnt or robbed. The men go out to work, it is not very difficult for anyone to pick up a fight with them at the work place. But there is a much more stronger fear inside them.

Malakpur camp, interaction with a man in late 20s.

Q : “ What do you do for living?”

A : “ I sell clothes, I travel around all the time, Where are you from?”

Q : “ Kerala, but we are coming from Mumbai right now”

A : “ I have come to Kerala also”

Q : “So many of you work outside your village?”

A : “ Most of us work outside the village, we roam around, Our women are left back at the village when we go to different places to work and we don't want to leave them back there again alone.”

The fear about their “women's honor” seems to be one of the main fears which people are facing. And it is very interesting to see how men are specifically talking about this fear rather than the women themselves. Women do have stories of rape, stories where they were shown naked bodies to insult them, comments with inappropriate words. Women's bodies, their honor is very wisely constructed as the threat by the perpetrators of violence. It is also very interesting to see, how this fear leads to some sort of protectionism within the camps. The mass engagements taking place in most of the camps also indicate this fear within the community.

Q : “ But why do you get them married?”

A : “ *Jawan beti ko kahan rakheneghe, sab ek hi tent me sote hain, tent me mard bhi hain* ” (Where shall we keep our young daughters ? All of them sleep in one place. We have threats from the men of our own houses).”

Both , men and elderly married women saw adolescent girls as burdens on the family, primarily because of the reason that all dowry that they had accumulated over the years for the young girls was gone now, with the looting of the riot affected villages; also because it was no more safe for them to live inside the camps. 'honour' had to be protected irrespective of the fact that the threat of such random acts would be another life of slavery and subjugation for the women as no proper investigation was made into the families and backgrounds of the men to whom they were hurriedly tied. There were all the possibilities that they could be exploited again, in different ways and in that case there will be nothing to fall back to. As expressed by the mother of a recently married girl, she was not happy and even sceptical about her daughter's marriage as she accepted that it all happened in a hurried way. The interesting fact was that the families which did not get compensation for displacement were promised to be paid Rs. 1.5 lakhs as informed by the committees on behalf of the State government, if they married their daughters. But all of them complained that even after doing so, they did not receive any compensation at all, rather some belongings like suitcase, a set of twenty one new clothes, quilt, mattress, plastic buckets etc. The people referred to this compensation as ' *Inaam* ' (*Prize*) An elderly woman also complained that her daughter in law was not happy after being married into the camp as the marriage did not take place with the rituals and the desires she had about the marriage. She also said that she was distressed as her education was interrupted.

There were statements by religious leaders to the extent that women should die before men as in case they are left alive (especially in riots), they will become the keeps of Jatts. The concept of honour, *Izzat* is highly overplayed and grossly misappropriated within the communities . And the incidents of mass engagements have been in turn used as a tool by the Hindutwa media to contribute to the stereotypical image of a barbaric community.

Women fear the threat of sexual violence within the camps as well. But it is interesting to see, how it takes the shape of communal honour when it is about a threat from outside. When women's bodies become the community honour, molestation or rape is limited as an act of physical violence, but a political act in itself.

Also, since women do not really participate in any of the production process, or own any property, they are mainly seen as a burden, and a burden which can be passed on to someone. The compensation is mainly given to the male head of the household. Women have no share in this compensation, thus no right in making any decisions on it. The old households are in the name of the male head of the family, and thus it is difficult for the women to access the compensation which is given to the victims. A riot is something which happens once in a while. We have an “Institutionalised riot system” which produces riots each time before elections. We see that women are increasingly being attacked, thus being the victim of the outrageous violence as well as the victims of the protectionism which their own community maintain, but practically having no share even in the nominal compensation the state offers.

Education

Muskan (nine year old. Girl from Malakpur camp)

"Which class are you in"

"5th"

"How many Muslim families were there in your village?"

"300 families, all of us have left our village, I stopped going to school.

The government is giving us nothing, no food no clothes. That is where I live. I have 10 members in my family. It is our fourth month in the camp. And we are scared to go back to our villages, anything else you want to know?" (Speaks without pausing)

" How many interviews have you given till now?"

"6, no..no 7"

Muskan was an extraordinary nine year old, who in normal situations would have achieved so much. She had the brilliance to translate and understand all our questions to the people around and then translate and put forward their replies. She was able to count with numbers and exact with words. But unfortunately she and many children like her will never go back to school for reasons too many. Firstly there are no Government schools in the vicinity of the camps as they are located in areas far from the settlements. Even if some camps were located nearby a Government school, many of the children were denied admission based on the excuse of religion, or money or other reasons. Even in the schools where the admissions were allowed after taking a certain amount of money which the parents were still incapable of paying considering how they were living on the edge, the children were scared to go to school as they had developed a deep fear and scepticism about their Hindu friends. They said children of the Jats mocked and bullied them. Some of the children are going to the Madarsa schools being run inside the camps by locals, camp residents etc. A small girl Razia said she missed her village and the children from neighbourhood. The riot did not just impact the community relations of elderly but have emerged as an exceptional upheaval in the lives of these little ones. Many of them have grown beyond their age. Even the children with disability who could not speak or hear were able to articulate their fears in their own language.

What then, one should say about the future of the children ? There is no clear visibility as to when they will return to their schools or normal life even for that matter.

Structural Violence

Most of the camps have no toilets or sanitation facilities, the bigger ones like Malakpur camp where almost 300 families have been sheltered has two public toilets, one of which is under construction, the other one filled with filth and dirty clothes from women's menstrual cycles making those a site for endemic diseases keeping in view the close proximity of the tents to such toilets. People, especially women have stopped using either. One thing to notice is that this situation is different from that of rural areas where women go to open spaces to defecate etc. There is no such luxury here as many of the camps have been created after clearing forest areas, which means those are surrounded by forests from all sides making it highly unsafe for the women to move to any place apart from the camps. Hence some of them have made makeshift toilets by surrounding very little space with old sarees and others defecate in open and just adjacent to the tent in which they live which makes it an unhygienic space to live in as there is no proper disposal system. Some women residing in camps made on donated private properties in Kandhla also said that they had to hold their urine for the entire duration of the daylight and waited for nights so that they could pass urine or defecate according to their comfort. For this they drank minimal water during the day. This is the terrible state of affairs for women and causes stress and feelings of deprivation on a daily basis. And the callousness of the UP state Government is that it is in complete denial of even the existence of the more than 11 camps that we visited. The camp at Loi had been erased a few days ago and the residents there must have stated that " We are happy. Akhilesh Yadav, Chief Minister of UP, has given us everything. Everyone will get compensation" even though we witnessed from our own eyes that the people who were evacuated from the Loi ground have settled nearby in tents without any real rehabilitation or compensation in near sight.

In spite of the provisions available for ICDS to be implemented in riot affected camps, there were no Anganwadis or Balwadis in the near vicinity. The care for lactating and pregnant women became impossible hence. There were no *Dais* (The lady who helps women during deliveries) and the emergency facility lackadaisical.

.The women gave birth without any supervision or care leading to number of cases of malnutrition as observed in the children in the camps. Because of lack of care and nutrition as many as 38 children died in the camps due to cold and pneumonia, reasons which could have been easily avoided. Also, these are just the official estimates, the approximate numbers are certainly more. There are no vaccination facilities for children . Neither are there any ambulances in case of any emergencies. The rape victims have not been medically examined for Aids, RTIs, UTIs and STIs nor for undesired pregnancy. Restrictions on women have increased manifolds and their social mobility completely obstructed due to many different kinds of fears, further exacerbating their situations.

The Hindutva politics and 'Bahu Bachao Beti Bachao Abhiyan' by BJP

This fear of the 'Other' is created in simple people's minds for many reasons like to gain vote banks and establish the supremacy of right wing forces like BJP which openly propagate fascist and nationalist interests. In a multi religious and multi ethnic country like India the conceptions of Nationalism become problematic as they intend to portray that anyone who does not conform to a certain image of an ideal peace loving Hindu becomes a threat to the security of the nation.

In an interview with noted activist Mr. Himanshu Kumar just before we left for the villages where the massacres had taken place and the Jatts were living comfortably, he said that “ Muzzaffarnagar used to be *Mohabbat ki Nagri* (city of love), There were no riots here. It is all vote bank politics as for years Hindus and Muslims had lived in harmony here. Muslims tried that Hindu nationalist parties never win the election and parties like Samajwadi party have been winning. However, this does not suit the vote bank politics and hence an uncalled for, one sided attack was given the shades of communal riots to ensure that the drift between Hindus and Muslims are created in the area “

The fact of the matter is that the riots have been used by not only BJP but other parties like Congress, Youth Congress and SP to serve their own interests. The polarisation of the communities has benefited all the parties.

To counter the hypothetical, abstract and imaginary phenomenon of “Love Jihaad”, right wing forces like BJP have come up with an interesting phenomenon of “ *Bahu Beti Bachao Abhiyan* (Save your daughters and daughters in law Movement)”.

On our way to the Jola camp, we noticed a huge banner for election campaign of BJP. On this banner was a photograph of Narendra Modi and a local BJP leader. The specific points on the agenda of election were listed, the first one being “ *Bahu Beti Bachao Abhiyan* “ etc. On our visits to the two villages where Jatts had a considerable proportion we attempted to understand the *Abhiyan* . The Pradhan from Lakh Mastane said that this slogan of “ *Bahu Beti Bachao* “ was given in the Mahapanchayat of September which fuelled outrage amongst the Jatt community members present there as to seeing a very abstract threat as a slogan. This instigated feelings of hatred, antagonism and sadist excitement to inflict pain and torture on the members of the other community. When we enquired from the Pradhan about the specific need for initiating such a “ Movement” even though the number of inter religious love marriages were singular in nature, he said “ *Yeh toh unki Rajneeti hai*” (This is their (BJP's) politics).

In the same meeting , while the elderly Jatt members seemed subtle about the Muslim community, a comparatively Middle aged member said “ *Jhagda ladki se hi hua. Yeh to ek Mamla hai. Hindu ladkiyon ko khatra hai. Ye unki galat aadat hai . Aarajak hatao. Unki atankwadi mansikta hai. Gunda gardi karte hain woh* “ (The fight started because of a girl. This is a singular event. Implying that there can be more like this) This is their (Muslim men and boys) bad habit. Remove the corruption, they have terrorist mindsets. They indulge into criminal activities)” while trying to justify the *Bahut Beti Bachao Abhiyan*.

The Pradhan from Fugana, one of the riot affected villages, went one step ahead in trying to justify the same . He said “ *Sama Kuritiyan fail gayi hain. Ladkiyan jeans pehenti hain, mobile chalti hain, ghar ke bahar jati hain, dhak kar nahi rehti. In kuritiyon ka niavaran zaroori hai Yeh sab yahan na chale hain*“ (There are many social evils that have spread over the country over time. Girls have started to wear jeans, operate mobile phones, go outside and do not cover themselves properly. It is mandatory to cure these social evils. All these things will not work here.). **It was clear that honour was being politicised without an agency of the women, to gain control over electorate by ensuring the polarisation of communities.**

In all likelihood , the post riot situation benefits all the political parties. To BJP, it helps in establishing a Hindu regime. To Congress, it helps as it has started distributing relief in some of the camps and people there support it, by saying “*Hum toh usi vote karenge jo hamein madad karega* (We will vote for the people who help us)” . To Samajwadi party, it helps in the areas

where it actually has provided some miniscule compensation when compared with the number of people affected. The polarisation of the communities is at the peak and the people are not willing to go back to the villages out of fear. The sustenance of camps whether officially recognised or not, helps each one of these parties in their own specific agendas.

Justice Verma committee had said “ ***Women should transcend from being victims to survivors*** ”. The larger question being a survivor possible in the pretext of existing political and social situations ? Is it even permissible in the society that we where the social cost of a family is the honour of the daughter? Is it such a simple process or a long and tedious journey with end in sight ? Though this seems very idealistic, where does the question of being a survivor come when one is living in close vicinity to the perpetrators which also includes the representatives of State itself ? Where does the question of transcending the positions of fear come when one sees their perpetrators roaming around, in the same camp ?

The stark absence of women from State machineries and from places of power is also one of the reasons how police can afford to get away with absolutely regressive tendencies against specific sections of society. From constables to DM, we did not come to interact with even a single lady officer. To add to it, as many as fifty percent of them belonged to the Jatt community. Similar committees that were running the camps constituted of men. How then, can one even imagine women's needs and grievances to be redressed ? And let us bear it in mind, we have yet not started talking about the involvement of women in peace processes. This is a far sighted dream as of now.

The complete denial of the mere existence of the camps by the State is shocking. Many of these are run by religious organisations like Jamat-e-Islamia-Hind . Certainly religious organisations will come with their own biases and lack the basic infrastructure required for human beings to survive in such situations. How can the State show this level of apathy for certain sections of people, giving way to further polarisations and leaving a dent so that religious institutions can proceed with their own politics?

A survey sponsored by the state should have been done of all such places where these people have taken shelter, an alternative rehabilitation done and protection and security provided in all the villages affected by the riot and to the people who lodged fear against their perpetrators. The conditions within the camps need to be immediately taken note of and sanitation, water and health facilities provided on an extremely urgent basis. The aspect of education needs to be looked into with immediate provisions of Anganwadis or Balwadis in near vicinity. Protection should be provided to the women and all the unreported cases of sexual violence should be taken cognisance of.

Lastly, the onus is on people to create enormous amount of pressure on UP State government to give a clear message that they can not get away with such gross violations of all the rights that the state itself is answerable for . Whatever said, the ultimate loss has not just been of houses, clothes or even human beings, but that of faith. Years of smooth and harmonious community relations crumbled like pieces of bread . The ultimate loss is that this has scarred the generations to come. Sama, a nine year old said, ‘ *bahut dar laga tha us raat* (We were really scared that night, sister) “ . Even the youngest of children have developed a grave and deep understanding of their religious identity and the reasons for their families' distress. It is tragic that this generation of children in Muzzafarnagar is going to grow with this paramount sense of discrimination and injustices perpetrated on them. A strange feeling of deja vu grips us when we hear these narratives, have we heard these before ? Is it merely a co-incidence or a planned, co-ordinated and systematic process of cleansing of minority groups ? The testimonies of pain, violence and silence have become rhetoric. State's silence and (in)action are an indicator of the fact that State is not a neutral agency here, but an active agent of fuelling such direct and indirect forms of violence. Only with a strong resistance towards this 'Silence of the State' can the people keep alive the spirit of justice, and only with justice can a sense of closure be imagined, until then , there is no moving on..

*“ Come, let us also lift our hands,
We who do not remember the custom of prayer,
We who, except for the burning fire of love,
Do not remember any idol, any god.
Come, let us present a petition that Life, our beloved,
Will pour tomorrow's sweetness into today's poison;
That for those who have not the strength for the burden of the days,
May it make night and day (weigh) light on their eyelashes;*

*For those whose eyes have not strength for (seeing) the face of dawn,
May it light some candles in their nights;”*

-Dua (Prayer), By Faiz Ahmed Faiz from Ghair-Mudawwan Manzumat (A set of uncollected poems)

Sushmita Verma and Jenny Sulfath are Masters students of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai and were part of the finding team from TISS that visited Muzzafarnagar between 11 th to 14 th January, (views expressed in the article are sole authors).

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AMIT KUMAR · 525 weeks ago

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I would like to congratulate you and Jenny for coming up with such an insightful article covering many aspects of subjugation of riot victims in general and women in particular, who have been oppressed into everyone's patsy, more so in recent times.

Yet, like most other well articulated accounts it also leaves us with harsh reality and gloomy future. Is there any way to eradicate majority/patriarchal hegemony ? If not, Are are establishing the fact even more? the more such accounts we read and documentaries we watch the more we start to accept it as just another day of a typical Indian society. Again, I am not saying that the onus, to find the solution, lies on you alone . As a friend I am proud of all your efforts. All the best !

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Report



Sushmita · 599 weeks ago

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