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***Communal Tension, Communal Harmony
and Social Processes: A Sociological
Study of Baroda City***

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

In India, communalism and its correlated theme secularism, has evoked a large number of studies especially by historians. These studies have different and varied perspectives, and have used concepts of "identity", and "construction". Most of these studies have portrayed that communalism and the problems related with it have emerged with colonialism; and that communal problem is mostly an urban problem. Some scholars like Chandra (1984:34-54) state that middle classes during the colonial rule had interest in being communal owing to the stagnant nature of economy. The partition of the country in 1947 into India and Pakistan had also contributed significantly to the continuance of this problem. However, the situation that prevailed then does not hold true any more. The British have left; and the country when it adopted a Constitution had secularism enshrined in it as the path to be followed.

However, in spite of this we are still plagued by communal tension and riots at periodic intervals. Some scholars like Engineer (1995:106-124) have analyzed various communal riots and even proposed a theory of communal riots categorizing them in terms of macro and micro causative factors. Macro factors include the class nature of society and underdevelopment of society and economy, militant assertion of regional and communal identity. Micro factors include local issues and the nature of political rivalry in medium sized towns. While studies of this type have focused on riots and why they took place, they do not focus on communal harmony and adequately answer issues related to it. Do the "causative" factors of riots cease to play when communal harmony is restored? For instance, Engineer (1984:281-287) mentions that one of the causative factors for riots in Baroda in the early eighties was the business rivalry between Kahars and Muslims

for illicit liquor. Now, that there are no riots, has the rivalry ceased, although illicit bootlegging has not? Or has there been other contributory factor by which harmony was restored? How was communal harmony established? Why did Baroda not explode the way Surat did in December 1992? The maintenance of communal harmony also needs an explanation as much as break out of riots. How is communal harmony maintained when there is tension? There has been no such study of this aspect for a city like Baroda. Equally there is another phenomenon, which is baffling with regard to Baroda. While the city has communal harmony prevailing, communal tension has broken out (in the recent past) in an area in which one least expects, viz. institutions of higher learning. Here communal harmony existed all throughout these years but of late there is emergence of tension along communal lines as reported in the local press and which worries the administrators. Why has this happened? Is outbreak of communal tension like any social tension, an inevitable process of social change like some seem to suggest?

Objectives

1. (a) Why was Baroda rocked by frequent communal riots in the eighties?
(b) How was communal harmony established and maintained subsequently?
(c) What measures were undertaken to build confidence and maintain harmony between communities?
(d) What was the nature of political and social mobilization during that time?
2. (a) Why is it that when communal harmony prevails in the city, certain pockets, considered modern like institution of higher learning, have tensions?
(b) What are the linkages between these pockets and the socio-political forces operating in the city?

METHODOLOGY

This study has adopted an ethnographic and qualitative approach to the study of this problem. Secondary source materials about communal riots about Baroda, and Gujarat, in dissertations and research reports, seminar papers and conference proceedings about communal riots in Gujarat, commission and committee reports, articles from journals (in English and Gujarati), news items from available newspaper records in Baroda, Ahmedabad and Delhi have been utilized.

The eminent persons in the academic world and journalism, social workers and local leaders, were interviewed about their understanding and perception of the reasons as to why Baroda got transformed into a peaceful and communal riot free city in the nineties as in comparison to the eighties. After the demolition of Babri Masjid of December 1992 when many cities in the country, including Ahmedabad and Surat and other smaller cities and even villages in Gujarat, experienced communal riots, but why Baroda escaped from it.

FINDINGS

The study examines the problem in a holistic context - including socio-political, socio-economic and administrative dimensions and explains them in terms of social processes. It examines the issues at three inter-related levels -macro, meso and micro level. The findings of the study under the macro, meso and micro levels are as follows:

Macro level changes: The 1980s were marked by two, factional differences, one led by anti-reservation agitation in the state and the other "pro-backward" which pleaded enhancement of reservation for backward. There were more employment opportunities in the government and in the public sector undertakings

during 1980s. The decade of 1990s was marked by an era of political uncertainty at the national level, heralding the transition to coalition at the centre and at the state. The shifting political alignments at the centre had their political and social repercussions in Gujarat. Besides, the process of globalization, accompanied by rapid changes in communication and information technology has also affected Vadodara city. As a result, the nature of crime itself underwent a change and became more hi-tech and lethal.

Meso level changes: The frequency of riots was more in the old city area where the social ecology was favourable for traditional crimes like acid throwing or stone throwing or even stabbing. Mischievous elements could easily throw stones and acid bottles from roof-tops and escape easily as the houses were and are closely located; thus inciting riots. The old city area also housed the main clearing house for cheques of Vadodara region (in July 1988, however, the clearing house was shifted to the newly emerging commercial area of the city located in the western part). Whenever riots occurred in the city these were followed by curfews for days together, which economically affected the people living in other areas not affected by communal riots.

Communal riots have occurred more in densely populated areas where the poor lived, and the frequency of riots was more at places that have interface between two communities. Housing in the cities follows traditional community pattern where, generally, members of one caste (amongst Hindus) or 'jamat' (amongst Muslims) live in one lane. In contrast, in 'society' area, no one caste predominates and there are certain housing complexes where Hindu and Muslims live together. Certain cooperative housing societies try to avoid having Muslims as members! (But this attitude has not been carried to the Christian community in Vadodara). The numbers of Muslims who are wealthy and upwardly

mobile are few and prefer to live in areas where the members of their community are living nearby; resulting in creation of certain middle class 'Muslim' localities. Hindus do not prefer to live in such areas on the plea that Muslims are non-vegetarian. In 1980s, migration of Hindus and Muslims from areas that were considered 'unsafe' and, 'insecure' started on a large scale to areas that were considered 'safe' and 'secure' by them. This continued in 1990s as well. The continuance of this trend only reinforces communal ideology.

In the beginning of 1990s, there were certain changes in the attitude of the leadership in Muslims. They realized that having low level of education keeps them poor, and makes them vulnerable to be used by politicians; further because of the low level of education, they are ignorant and can be easily provoked. The lack of visible presence of Muslims in high skill professions and in institutions of higher learning in the city has caused concern amongst the leaders of the community in Vadodara. Meanwhile, Ahmedabad based Gujarat newspaper, 'Gujarat Today', considered to be pro-Muslim, started giving prominence to the activities taking place within the community. In Vadodara, it led to formation of the Baroda Welfare Society in 1995, with emphasis on improving the education, economic and social well being of the community so as to help the members compete in the changing world. Further, with the changes taking place in the economy and with the state not being the main employer, the realization of the importance of education has increased.

Micro level changes: People of the city got disgusted with frequent riots and the constant disruption in their lives due to riots. In the areas that were affected by frequent riots, the situation was worse. Trade union workers of the working class, area of Paginate, one of the communally sensitive areas of the city, formed a peace committee in 1987, which was effective in containing communal riots. The

efforts of the trade union workers got a boost with the support of the then Chief Minister of the State, who provided financial assistance for the *Ekta Bhavan*, while inaugurating it in January 1989. Later, police personnel and professional and committed officers also actively participated in such efforts. Other people also actively cooperated. Riots and/ or communal propaganda increased around election time, implying that these were politically organised. Criminals and notorious political leaders came handy on such occasions.

Suggestions to improve communal harmony: The main suggestions for improving communal harmony between communities as per the study are as follows:

- (i) Organizing get together between members of the different communities. This may include cultural programs or programs where participants could bring different dishes and share these together on certain occasions. Programs called' *Balkhan-ji-bari*' and '*tiffin-jiyaffat*' used to take place in the past and need to be revived;
- (ii) improving education level of the minority community. Also, there is a need to make people aware about the negative effects of communal riots;
- (iii) properly training the police force, especially the SRPF (state reserve police force);
- (iv) meetings be organised with community leaders before each festival. If police officials can organize meetings of these leaders before *Moharrum* and *Ganapati* festivals, then peace and communal harmony can be maintained at the time of immersion.;
- (v) members of all the communities may be encouraged to visit each other and call upon each other on festive occasions;
- (vi) politicians and political processes should be' controlled' properly as riots take place because of the politicization of the particular events/ incidents;

- (vii) involving nongovernment organisations and *Quami Ekta Samitis* to maintain peace and forming peace-keeping committees. The local 'tough' or 'goondas' should be made responsible to maintain peace in their respective areas by making them members of peace-keeping committees;
- (viii) checking or perhaps curbing on the newspapers, as these play important role in spreading rumours and raising tension.
- (ix) Other measures include: (a) sensitive points should be patrolled with the help of 'friends of police', a group formed by the police in Vadodara to help them during sensitive periods; (b) there should be no discrimination by the municipal corporation in the cultural sphere, particularly when the city is lit up with floodlights on festival occasions; (c) forming of friendship groups among members of all communities, perhaps at the *mohalla* level; and organizing tournaments among and between the members of different communities. The teams could be mixed and sometimes they could be separate so that they learn to play under a common norm.