

Communal riot in
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Communalism is a pervasive phenomenon in the public life of India and communal riots are the ugliest expression (Gopal Krishna, Communal Violence in India 1985). Communal riots have become an integral part of communalism in India. An event can be classified as a communal riot on two grounds. Firstly, if there is violence. Secondly, if two or more communally identified groups confront each other or the members of the other group, at some point during the violence (Varshney, 2002). The reason behind such communal riots can be superficial and trivial; though deep within there are political reasons behind such events (Varshney, 2002). India is not new to communal riots; the first recorded riots were in the year 1714, 1715, 1716 and 1750 in Ahmedabad (Rajeshwari, 2004). Bipin Chandra in his book "Communalism in Modern India" writes that the maximum communal riots in India took place during 1923-26.

Communal riots in India are not spontaneous and are rarely due to any religious animosity. They usually arise due to conflicting political interests, which are often linked to economic interests (Rajeshwari, 2004). During the 1960s till the late 1980s, the local political and economic factors played a significant role in instigating the riots in major parts of India (Engineer, 2002). However, since then the emergence of Hindutva politics, it has been the major cause of communal riots (Engineer, 2002).

The role of news media in reportage of communal riots in India is a major area of concern. Everything is reported in the media, so are communal riots. The role of the news media has grown in recent years, perhaps because of the centrality of the news media in communal violence and conflicts (Wolfsfeld, 2007). Even the most casual of observers won't deny the

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increasing significance of news media under such crisis situations. The influence of the news media in peace processes is more subtle, in part because what is not reported in the media is in some ways more important than what is reported.

This paper would look at the way Indian media covered and reported the two most horrific incidents of communal violence in India - the 1984 Sikh riots in New Delhi and the 2002 Gujarat (Godhra) riots. On both occasions the media drew criticisms. The paper would discuss if the media has been objective in covering both riots and also as to what should be media's role in coverage of such future communal riots in India, if any.

2. The Changing Face of News Media

The global media sphere is changing with each passing second. New communications technologies such as camera enabled mobile phones and laptop computers are giving journalists an opportunity to gather and disseminate information with normal ease. This digitization of the news industry has led to compression of time and space and thus enabled us to see news and images of conflicts as and when they happen. The images broadcasted in our living rooms are not only informing the global audience of the horrific happenings but might also instigate further violence in an existing violent situation. As a result, the media's reporting of a conflict situation has become as central to the unfolding of the conflict itself. With the evolution in technology the tyranny of distance might have reduced but various hidden realities and factors still affect the reporting of conflicts. This is proved by a study done by Virgil Hawkings, who explains that the conflict in Africa which has been in the post-Cold war world responsible for nearly

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90% of the world's war deaths suffered a complete media blackout. Similarly, the coverage of the massive war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which resulted in over one million deaths in the year 2000, was almost insignificant (Hawkins, 2008).

Since the media has a powerful ability to reach large number of people. It ignites the opinion building process and impacts the political decisions and audience reactions in the society. This eventually shapes the course of prevalent crises and conflicts (Ballantine, 2003).

3. The Media, Religion and Politics

With the planes hitting the Twin Towers on 11 September, 2001 the relationship between media and religion changed forever. Karim (2003) suggested that religion would become an important topic for the media and the way media covers events would be influenced by the religious undertones. It is arguable if the world and its religions have changed or not, but the media coverage of the same surely has.

Within India, religion has a large impact on the personal lives of millions of people. The country practices almost every other religion known to the world and this is one of the most important facets of the country, so is politics. The politicians play on the religious issues every now and then, and media is used as the platform. The politicians communicate with the common mass through the mass media. The way in which we know and find about our politicians is through the media. It is the media that serves as the main channel of communication between the politicians and the public. Religion is

one of the subjects in India which the politicians intelligently use to their advantage.

Academic literature has covered the representation of conflict in religion as well as media and religion but not much has been researched on media, religion and conflict situations in context with each other, especially within an environment like India. It would be difficult to understand the relationship between religion, its construction, presentation and conflict situations covered in the media, without some reference to the broader political context within which it takes place, because in a nation like India, religion is certainly driven by political motives. In order to understand the role media plays and should play during communal clashes in India, let us analyze the two worst communal riots India has ever seen - the 1984 Sikh riots and the 2002 Gujarat riots.

4. The 1984 Sikh Riots in New Delhi

4.1 The Events

On 31st of October 1984, the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards. What followed was a complete mayhem and it led to a lethal anti-Sikh riots in India. Sikh homes were systematically singled out in the capital and brutally destroyed (Tatla, 2006). The Sikhs were hounded, tyres were put around their neck, and petrol doused on their faces and bodies set ablaze to brutal death (Mohanka, 2005). More than 3, 000 Sikhs were killed in New Delhi itself. Two hundred Gurudwaras, the place where Sikhs worship, were burnt down and many Sikh owned shops were looted. 1

The situation worsened when the newly elected Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the son of Indira Gandhi was quoted, “ When a big tree falls, the ground beneath is sure to rumble”. This gave a sense as if Rajiv Gandhi was giving a boost to the killers who were assassinating hundreds of Sikhs in the streets of New Delhi (Mohanka, 2005).

Mrs. Gandhi’s assassins were avenging Operation Bluestar. In the June of 1984, Mrs. Gandhi, wanted to flush out few terrorists, led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who were hiding in the precincts of the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine for Sikhs in India. On the 3rd of June, 1984 a 36 hour curfew was imposed in the Sikh dominated state of Punjab. All methods of communication and travel were suspended. Electricity supplies were interrupted, a total black out was created and Punjab was cut off from India and rest of the world (Brar, 1992).

On the night of 5th of June, the Indian Army under the command of Major Gen. Kuldeep Singh Brar stormed into the Golden Temple. By the morning of the 7th of June the Indian Army had full control of the temple. The militant leaders were killed in the two day battle but along with it a large number of pilgrims, civilians and children were also killed (Ahmed, 1996).

The Sikh community were agitated. Their holiest shrine was turned into a bloody battlefield and innocent lives were lost. Saran Singh, a retired bureaucrat and a famous member of the Sikh community in India quotes “ It was sacrilege to send troops inside, open fire and in the process kill innocent devotees gathered to observe the martyrdom” (Mohanka, 2005).

From June to September 1984 most members of the Sikh community nursed a festering wound only to blurt out in Indira Gandhi's assassination.

4. 2 The Indian Media's Coverage of Operation Bluestar and the Sikh Riots

Media by its nature plays an extremely important role for any socio-political situation irrespective of the boundary it holds (Mohanka, 2005). The media's role in the riots of 1984 is an interesting case. Scholars believe that media can play a role in focussing on a cause much before it takes an ugly turn. In the case of Punjab in 1984, the local media was not supportive of the Sikh causes. Moreover, since of beginning of the problems in Punjab, the government had a strict control on the media and imposed a heavy censorship. Since independence until the invasion of cable television in India, the electronic media has served as the mouthpiece of the government (Das, 2009). Similar was the role of the electronic media in Punjab during the riots. The Government had such tight control over the media that the foreign correspondents trying to capture the horrific events were not even allowed in the local land. The Indian Government acted as a strict visible gatekeeper and made it impossible to approve journalist visas for foreign correspondents. The events of the 1984 riots thus suffered not only from biased media coverage but also selective coverage which projected one sided selected perspective (Das, 2009). The ' media blackout' during the Operation Bluestar is a prime example of the same.

The day before the actual invasion by the Indian Army, the Government ordered all press out of the state and restricted press coverage in Punjab.

The press was allowed only a week later on special organised guided tours.

The aftermath was later described by the press, as involving a small gang of
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criminals disliked by the majority of Sikhs and Indians. The press described the militants as petty political agitators, rather than leaders of a movement for a greater Punjab autonomy, as believed by a majority of Sikhs. Similarly, during the reportage of the 1984 riots there were discrepancy between the press release of data and images and the actual severity of the violent situation that prevailed in the streets of New Delhi (Das, 2009). This usage of selective information in the Indian media only contributed to the ambiguous image of Sikhs throughout the nation and failed to bring out their plight in the light. During the Sikh Movement the Government of India had passed the National Security Act (1980), the Punjab Disturbed Areas Ordinance (1983), The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1983) and the Terrorists Affected Areas (Special Courts Act of 1984). These acts provided the police and army with sweeping powers. They could charge and curtail to the right to life under specific situations. The approach of the media during the crisis had been partisan to take into account all types of multidimensional problem, historical, political, socio-economic and ideological. The media only focussed on special restricted information and ignored a careful examination of all the issues and processes that had led to the mayhem, the riots. During 1984, Indian leaders were free to make up non-existent stories and broadcast through Government controlled radio and television channels. Since there was a major restriction on the foreign press, all foreign news correspondents were left with no choice but to take the twister news of the local government controlled media.

The United States of America, The House of Representatives had a view point on the same. It said:

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“ As a result the outside world receives a biased one side view of what goes on in Punjab because the Indian Government has control over most of the domestic media. This contributes to the stereotype that all Sikhs are extremist radicals who are terrorising the predominantly Hindu nation and that is just not the fact. If the Indian Government has nothing to hide it should remove the news blackout and permit outsiders into Punjab. The free flow of information is essential to the prevention of rights and liberties in a democratic society and India claims to be the world’s largest democracy. So, they should act as the world’s largest democracy. This is the foundation for a democratic nation and is not too much to ask of India to respect the rights of all its people and not just the Hindu majority. It is not right for any government to deny 16 million of its own people the basic political and civil rights. India has a moral obligation to protect the Sikh community”

The national newspaper’s reporting on the Sikhs made no distinction between a regional political party, a handful of militants, and the entire Sikh community. Even the senior editors and columnists of the national newspapers considered all Sikhs accountable for the assassination of Indira Gandhi and provided no sympathy to the community during the riots. Through the critical years of political crisis in Punjab before the horrific riots, the national dailies had not help resolve the issue. The Times of India, one of the leading national dailies and The Hindustan Times did more to incite hostility between Hindus and Sikhs than perhaps any other national English language newspaper (Das, 2009).

The media was a part of the misinformation carried out in the public. The best example of the same would be when a national newspaper carried out <https://assignbuster.com/communal-riot-in-india-media-communications-essay/>

an article reporting that huge quantities of heroin and drugs had been recovered within the Golden Temple complex and the same had been used by the militants to illegally fund their operations. Since, the foreign press was banned in Punjab; they picked up the story based on the 14th June Press Trust of India (PTI) news report from the government sources. This news was carried out in the major international newspapers. One week into the incident, the government retracted the official report on the grounds that the drugs had been recovered from the India-Pakistan border and not the Golden Temple complex. This retraction by the government was not picked up by most international news agencies and the damage done by the initial report falsely remained amongst the mass. 3

Many scholars believed that the Indian media forgot to prioritize issues and failed to act upon them. Senior Indian journalist, Manoj Mitta along with H. S. Phoolka in the book "When a Tree Shook Delhi" writes that the media focussed on the assassination of Indira Gandhi and did not care enough about the Sikh murders during the riots. Mitta says:

"The media by and large went by the official line on the carnage. It focused on the happenings at Teen Murti Bhawan, where Indira Gandhi's body lay in state and where from people around the world had come to pay respect. So photographers were flocking to that place and the killings that were simultaneously going on in the capital did not get recorded at all. It's bizarre but true."

Not all were pleased by the Indian media's coverage of the riots.

5. The 2002 Gujarat Riots

5. 1The Events

On the 27th of February 2002, the Ahmedabad bound Sabarmati Express train reached a small town in Gujarat named Godhra (Yeolekar, 2002).

Instead of the usual stoppage for 5 minutes the train stopped for 25 minutes and then moved out of the platform. Before the train could run at its normal speed, the alarm chain was pulled to stop the train at Signal Falia, a Muslim inhabited locality. No one clearly knows what really happened but after few minutes the compartment S-6 was on flames. 58 passengers including 26 women and 12 children were burnt to death (Yeolekar, 2002). Among the passengers were the Kar Sevaks travelling from Ayodhya. There have been different theories believing that Muslims were behind this barbaric act.

If this wasn't barbaric enough, what followed in the days to come shook the entire secular nation of India. During the next three days, from the 28th of February to 2nd of March, 2002 Muslims were butchered, massacred and burnt alive. Out of the 24 districts in Gujarat, 16 were entangled by organized mob attacks in which over 2, 000 Muslims were killed, 200 mosques and religious and cultural monuments were sent to rumbles (Sawant et al, 2002). The Muslim community of Gujarat suffered an enormous economic blow with an overall loss of Rs 35 billion.

5. 2 The Indian Media's Coverage of the Riots

5. 2. 1 The Television Coverage

For the first time in the history of communal clashes in India, ' violence was carried live' on television (Ninan 2002) as the television cameras brought across the horrific images to viewers' home in Gujarat and elsewhere. There

was no live coverage of the attacks against the Sikhs back in 1984 or the Babri Masjid fiasco in 1992. Those were the era of print media and television was limited to Doordarshan, a state owned channel. It was only in 1996 when, Rupert Murdoch ventured into India with the STAR network and STAR News happened - India's first 24 hour news channel. This addition to the television spectrum of India added a new visual dimension to politics, violence and public sphere in India. In 2005, the television newscape had turned dense with a large number of players entering the market; several 24 hour news channels were launched. This led to intense competitive brand of journalism, which was evident during the Gujarat riots. There were a large consortium of journalists and television crews from various channels on the streets in Gujarat, each trying to outdo each other. When the Gujarat violence happened, the private television in India had been broadcasting for about 8 years and was easily accessible by 40 million amongst the 81.6 million Indians who owned television sets (5 notes). This option offered by the private television gave the Indian viewers unprecedented access to independent broadcasting.

When the first pictures of Gujarat riots were telecast on Indian screens on 27 February, the three major news networks in India - Star News, Aaj Tak and Zee News - did not follow the guidelines formulated by the Press Council of India, a quasi-judicial watchdog organization (Mehta, 2006). The guidelines mentioned not to reveal the identity of victims or attackers in the news reports but all the news networks carried blaring headlines about the killing of the Kar Sevaks. The guidelines were against the mentioning of victims or attackers as Hindus or Muslims because they feared it could inflame passions

and lead to revenge attacks. The television news networks with its striking visual images made this guideline redundant.

While covering the riots in Gujarat, the television journalists openly identified the victims and the attackers. Varadarajan argues for the naming of communities. He states that not naming the communities increases a sense of suspicion and anxiety amongst the ordinary citizens not only in the riot affected area but throughout the nation. Then people tend to assume that the victims are 'their own' while attackers are 'the other' (Varadarajan, 1999).

Famous Indian journalists, Rajdeep Sardesai and Barkha Dutt of STAR News justified their stand of naming the communities. Barkha Dutt stated, "Naming the community under siege in Gujarat was moot of the story. In fact it was the story, revealing as it did a prejudice administrative and political system that was happy to just stand by and watch." (Mehta, 2006).

The bold and independent media coverage by the television media during the riots invited flak from the political actors in powers who were shown in bad light. Criticizing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Hindutva approach in the riots got STAR News and English newspapers like The Times of India and Indian Express bad press (Sonwalkar, 2006?).

The BJP was in power in the state of Gujarat and at the centre in New Delhi. After the initial violence, when the news coverage of the attacks against the Muslims in Gujarat started to reflect badly on the state and central government, the leaders came down heavily on the journalists and media personnel. The Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee addressed the nation a <https://assignbuster.com/communal-riot-in-india-media-communications-essay/>

day after the attacks, regretting the 'disgraceful' violence. He later on added that the news media were presenting an 'exaggerated' account of the situation in Gujarat (The Times of India 2002a - check book).

The BJP and the state government under Narendra Modi singled out STAR News and banned cable operators from showing the channel in the state. The viewers in Ahmedabad, one of the worst affected regions in the riots, were left with blank television screens, unaware from the reality happening on the streets (Mehta, 2006). Cable operators received calls from local officials in Ahmedabad and other cities to completely black out STAR News, Zee News, CNN and Aaj Tak (The Times of India 2002a). Dossiers and 'hitlists' on journalists were reportedly prepared while the channels which dared to reveal the truth and were critical of the Chief Minister and his plan of actions were not invited to the press conferences and hence were denied the basic right to information by the state itself (Sardesai 2004).

The main complaint of the BJP and its allies were that the news media did not cover and criticize those who were responsible for the Godhra train tragedy in which 58 Kar Sevaks were victims. This however remains untrue as the every news channels and major newspaper had covered the Godhra train tragedy exclusively, but the follow ups did not remain as 'the story of the day' because the Union Budget followed on 28 February. The budget coverage was pushed aside when the mass killings and large scale retaliation against Muslims started in various parts of the state (Sonwalkar, 2006?).

Another criticism was that, the national media 'inflamed communal passions' by providing graphic television coverage of the dreadful events. The journalists and the news professional came out against the criticism and said that the level of violence would have been much worse if only the news media brought out the real picture by the graphic images.

The BJP and its allies also christened the media as 'Marxist-Mullah combine' and the 'Secular Taliban' for criticising the attacks against the Muslims. Members of the Editors Guild of India visited the affected regions in Gujarat and were told by a group of Hindutva supporters that the Hindu community has been defamed with the coverage only being from the Muslim perspective: 'They only listen to Muslims and ignore the Hindus' (Patel et al, 2002).

Sardesai explains the predicament faced by journalists in covering the riots:

"(If) any reporter, whether print or television, sees large-scale violence being committed, is the journalist to ignore the hard reality and merely present the facts as seen through the government binoculars? If the Chief Minister says that the situation is returning to normal even while reports are streaming in of continuing violence in several parts of the state, are not the lies to be exposed? And if the government insists that the army is out on the street when the fact is that the army has been kept on stand-by and is waiting for transport trucks, whose version is to be broadcast?"

(Sardesai, 2002a)

5. 2. 21 The National Press Coverage

If the graphic coverage by the television channels hit the headlines and created criticisms, the nature of the press coverage also came under the hammer. The coverage by the print media makes an interesting study. There were two different approaches followed by the local and the national media. The local section of the press, including the Gujarati dailies Sandesh and Gujarat Samachar, covered the events from a pro-Hindutva stand and justified the killings of hundreds of Muslims. While the national media, including The Times of India and the Indian Express, were overtly critical of the channelized attacks against the Muslims (Sonwalkar, 2006?).

The team of Editors Guild of India met several journalists, correspondents, editors, Chief Minister Narendra Modi and others to conclude that the English-language national press played an exemplary role in coverage of the riots. BJP's allegations of media playing an aggravating role in coverage of the riots have been dismissed by many scholars. Patel argues that the allegation was 'specious, self-serving and must be dismissed' (Patel et al. 2002). The Editors Guild of India's team observed that:

" Our finding is that the prompt and extensive portrayal by the national media of the untold horrors visited on innocent people in the wake of the Godhra carnage was a saving grace. The exposure of the supine is not complicit attitude of the State and manifest outpourings of communal hatred, stirred the conscience of the nation, compelled remedial action, howsoever defensively and belatedly...However, the role of the sections of the Gujarat media, specially the Gujarat Samachar and more notably Sandesh, was provocative, irresponsible and blatantly violative of all

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accepted norms of media ethics. This cannot be lightly passed over.” (Patel et al, 2002)

5. 2. 1 The Regional Press Coverage

Gujarat Samachar is the largest selling daily in Gujarat with a circulation of nearly 810, 000 followed by Sandesh with 705, 000 (Sonwalkar, 2006?).

These two newspapers have a large readership and dominate the print market in Gujarat. A study by PUCL in 2002 found that there were several instances of distorted and false reporting in these two newspapers and also the circulation of Sandesh rose by 150, 000 due to its pro-Hindutva stand. The coverage analysis found that when Muslims were at fault, their names were clearly mentioned and the perpetrators identified. However, when the Muslims were the victims of murders, loots, arsons, and other heinous crimes the attackers were unnamed. The study concluded:

“ No sources were quoted for headlines, even when they were simply lifted from speeches by Vishwa Hindu Parishad (one of the Hindutva political parties in the state). Headlines were also misleading, and often followed up by reports that did not substantiate, and even negated the headlines completely...The anti-minority stand was obvious in the slant in news reporting.”

(PUCL, 2002).

Sandesh was extremely provocative in its reporting. PUCL states Sandesh’s usage of headlines was to ‘ provoke, communalize and terrorise people’

(PUCL 2002). On the 28th of February, Sandesh carried a headline saying, “ 70 Hindus Burnt Alive in Godhra”. Another report on the front page read, “
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Avenge Blood with Blood”, which was a quote from a statement made by one of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad leaders, but the newspaper used the words as a headline without mentioning the leader (Sonwalkar, 2006?).

On the 6th of March, the headline read, “ Hindus Beware: Haj Pilgrims return with a Deadly Conspiracy”, when the fact remains that hundreds of Haj pilgrims were terrified by the happenings in the state and had returned under police protection. PUCL emphasized in its study that most news in Sandesh post-Godhra violence began with the sentence, “ In continuing spiral of communal rioting that broke out as a reaction to the ‘ demonic/barbaric, etc Godhra incident....” The comminatory adjectives used in describing the Godhra incident were strikingly absent when covering the post Godhra Muslim annihilation (PUCL 2002).

One of the reports mentioned that the breasts of two Hindu women had been chopped off by Muslim mobs during the crisis. This report turned out to be false and the editor countered by saying that the information had been provided by the police. The paper’s editor told that it was against the policy of the newspaper to carry out corrections and clarifications for previously published articles (Patel et al, 2002). The Press Council of India later censured the newspaper for the fault (Prerna 2003). Gujarat Samachar also heightened the tension through its pro-Hindutva stand in coverage of the events.

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi openly praised Sandesh for its work, which was publishing false and rumoured reports with a pronounced pro-Hindutva and an anti-Muslim stance. In a letter to the newspaper’s editor, Modi writes:

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“ The newspapers of the state played a decisive role as a link between the people and the government. You have served humanity in a big way. It is the state government’s primary duty to restore peace and security.... It is noteworthy that the newspapers of Gujarat gave their full support to the state government in undertaking this difficult task.... I am grateful to you.”

(Varadarajan, 2002: 286)

The one regional newspaper that stood out amidst the Hindutva ideology was the Gujarat Today, notably started by few liberal Muslims in the state. The report suggested Gujarat Today regularly carried out positive news items highlighting interdependence of the communities involved (PUCL 2002). The two English-language national newspapers in India, The Times of India and the Indian Express were critical of the state government in their articles. However, these two newspapers also publish editions from Gujarat and a clear divide was evident between the two English-language dailies and the two regional editions (Sonwalkar, 2006?). While the English-language version was sharp in its criticisms of Chief Minister Narendra Modi and his policies, the two Gujarati dailies propagated the need of Hindutva. Desai, an Ahmedabad-based correspondent of the Indian Express writes:

“ Today, all the people who once used to look at me with respect question me and abuse me. They do this because I represented a publication whose medium is English and because I reported human misery in its right perspective.... A friend said: ‘ All of you from the English language media have tarnished the image of Gujarat’. Today, the ‘ common man’ in Gujarat

hates the English language media. Even a section of the English language media hates the English language media.”

(Desai 2004: 228)

(Need to conclude)

6. The Role of the Media During Communal Riots: An Analysis

The result of multiple and complex interests of regions, states and/or various types of groups within them leads to economic, social and political crises/conflicts. Such crises/conflicts are difficult to handle and requires negotiations between the parties involved and in this amorphous age of media the governments are finding extremely difficult to handle such situations (Terzis, 2008?). Despite the increased importance of communication, very few governments can speak about successful communication during conflicts and crises because they fail to take into consideration the perception of the conflict or the crises in the minds of the common mass, the scientific analysis of the causable factors, the agendas of the parties involved and the changing nature of the conflict itself (Ballantine, 2003).

The role of mass media in covering and resolving conflicts, especially those involving religious differences that leads to frequent communal riots in India, is extre