

Decoding Intolerance: Riots and the Emergence of Terrorism in India¹

M. Asharaf Rizvi

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"Log Toot Jate Hain Ek Ghar Banane Mein : Tum Taras Khate Nahin Bastiyan Jalane Mein". This couplet written by the famous Urdu poet Bashir Badr after his house was burnt in a communal riot in Meerut in 1987 reflects the sentiments of a large number of Indians who have suffered communal frenzy in one form or the other. Communal riots have become a part of Indian psyche; we live with it, albeit with a feeling of pain and remorse.

The Allahabad High Court's judgment on the 60- year-old Ayodhya issue on September 24, 2010 may trigger another round of communal frenzy if we do not bury the past and go ahead to make India a developed nation. What is it about communal riots that, six decades on since independence, the country still suffers due to communal frenzy and we are not able to do much about it. Unfortunately, the problem of communal riots has not been resolved with the passing of the years. People are killed, women are raped, children are burnt alive, houses are set ablaze, and the country witnesses it with a sense of loss. The pain is not confined to a single community. Nor is it simply the sufferings of a few individuals or families. It is the pain of the whole nation.

As such, it is important that this recurring and entrenched problem has attracted the attentions of Sri P K Lahiri, who has had a distinguished career in the civil service as an IAS officer spanning thirty-six years with an earned reputation for being upright, fearless, and honest. As Lahiri has several encounters with communal riots during his career as a civil servant, his personal experiences and a sharp sense of social responsibility in dealing with a problem like this has probably led him to explore the subject with great objectivity but with a sense of personal touch. Thus, *Decoding Intolerance: Riots and the Emergence of Terrorism in India* is a very different kind of book that explores a social reality, which needs to be understood, analysed, explained, and faced.

In an exceedingly readable, stimulating, and exciting analysis and discussion, Lahiri presents the reality and explores answers to many startling questions. From an insightful description of the nature of 'communalism' and its 'use' and 'misuse' in India to a dispassionate description of Hindu-Muslim riots with its various dynamics, the book refuses to shy away from the underside of social co-existence, finding even in an inveterate problem a kind of positive hope. It is that supple movement between gloom and sanguinity that makes this loaded display of a social issue a very exciting book. As an insider, he narrates several archetypal Hindu-Muslim riots in an interwoven narrative that is by turns expressive, striking and shocking. The narrative has a human touch and displays the author's concern for human life and dignity but does not shy away from presenting the reality irrespective of how painful

¹ An earlier version of this book review was published in the *Business Standard* on September 24, 2010 under the title 'Why Civilisations Clash in India'

or shameful it is. As a result the reader gets an insight into how these riots happen, how do they spread, and what lessons we can learn from them to deal with them more effectively.

The book is of interest to all kinds of readers: civil servants, academicians, students, professionals, and businessmen simply because it deals with something that is of importance to all of us. The author does not see the problem of communal riots in isolation and recognizes that it is a multi dimensional issue. As a result he attempts to deal with it holistically. The book talks of the struggle between liberalism and fundamentalism in Islam and clash of civilizations, macro issues related to communal conflict in Indian society, and the emergence of terrorism in India. The book, therefore, presents the issue of communal divide between Hindus and Muslims in a broader social framework that helps the reader to understand the issue with all its associated complexities.

The author deplores the myths created by the far-right politicians and political thinkers about India's largest minority of the country. The myths such as 'the demographic danger due to growing Muslim population', 'the dangers posed by the rising population of Bangladeshi infiltrators', 'the immediate need of a uniform civil code for the social well-being of the nation' are not only exposed, they are plainly rejected on the basis of factual data. Lahiri being a rationalist asks fundamental rational questions and provides acceptable answers, which can not be rejected by anyone who sees and believes in truth and honesty.

However, the most striking feature of the book is not the boldness with which he asserts that the Hindutava political movements have by design damaged the Hindu-Muslim fabric like nothing else before by creating an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and hostility nor his bold assertions about the dangers of narrow and sectarian variety of any religion. The most remarkable feature of the book is, in fact, the hope and positivity that he tries to give us by encouraging us to develop a sectarian consensus and make us understand the need to revive and re-establish harmonious relations between Hindus and Muslims for a peaceful India. His observation that despite the large number of killings in communal clashes, communal violence is still an urban phenomenon gives lot of hope and solace. The fact that the communal venom is not as widespread in the country as is generally believed is soothing.

Thus, *Decoding Intolerance: Riots and the Emergence of Terrorism in India* by Prateep K. Lahiri is a book worth reading for several reasons. At places, it touches the heart but most of the time it explores the issue with great objectivity. It raises pertinent social questions but provides satisfactory answers. Moreover, the style is very engaging. The narrations are expressive and striking. We need to read it to know its worth.

Author's Profile

Dr. Ashraf Rizvi is a faculty in General Management Area at Indian Institute of Management Indore. He has taught courses on business communication, negotiation, leadership, and general management in the Institute's PGP, EGP and executive programmes. In recent years, Prof. Rizvi served as Chair Executive Education in IIM Indore. Rizvi's research focuses on communication and professional effectiveness, and his work has been published in national and international journals. He has also written ten books on these topics. Moreover, he has been consultant and trainer with several organizations, and has designed and conducted a large number of executive education courses.