

BOOK REVIEW

REVISITING MUMBAI RIOTS: LESSONS IN HOPE AND DESPAIR

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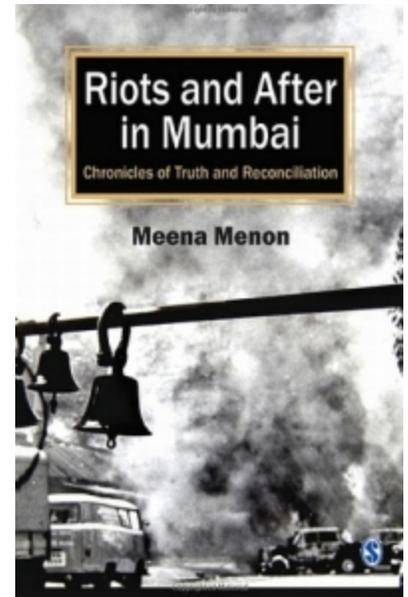
Riots and After in Mumbai: Chronicles of Truth and Reconciliation

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India, the multi-generational land of non-violence (Buddha through Gandhi to Baba Amte), a celebration of cultural 'diversity in unity', and the world's largest functioning political democracy, has also been the most frequent battle-ground of collective violence, riots. Cities - the citadels of civilization - are the sites of most riots, a grim reminder that something is rotten in our state. India's first city (Mumbai) is also the first city of riots, historically. Riots have been most heard of, less witnessed, lesser studied and least remedied. Riot after riot has occurred; numberless families have been traumatized by losses of kith, kin, limbs and livelihoods and are alienated victims. Each community blames the other and takes their own group-help measures - in word or deed, sleeper vigilantes, who would get their own justice. The people have no time for the proverbial 'law's delay'. Communal leaders of both sides openly espouse the Action-Reaction-Counter action-Further Action-Further Reaction thesis. Is the governmental complicity in this one of proactive intention or plain incompetence? Is this why Paul Brass postulated that there is an institutional riot mechanism in India? There are no complete answers.

Yet, these answers will impact the course of Indian politics: secular democratic future or a religiously and communally divisive authoritarian future. The author tackled this big question with a realistically modest hope "to understand some of the complexities of the situation" relating to the "history of riots in the city" within "the context of nationalism, Hindutwa and secularism." The official casualties of the 1993 Mumbai Riots were: 900 killed, 2036 injured and several thousands displaced from their original homes to new ghettos. These riots were followed within months by the 1993 serial bomb blasts perpetrated by the Dawood Ibrahim criminal gang as a reprisal for the riots: 257 murdered, 713 injured. The post-Godhra riots were also answered by a vigilante group, the Indian Mujahedeen, with bombs: one form of collective violence, riots, being answered by another, terrorist bombings. Is this the future that awaits us if we continue to fail to redress a recurrent reality?

Determined to illuminate the studyscape of riots that are darkened by sundry enticing falsehoods and dangerous half-truths with the plain truth, the author has traced, met and written the varied (poignant and defiant) tales of victims of riots. There is a strong human element here, which could have been developed further to better impact laymen readers, the core audience for this book. She narrates tales of ordinary persons who survived the riots in an ordinary language. The unexpected extraordinary resilience shown by so many justice-denied victims, Hindus and Muslims (some who want to just move on instead of wasting more time with the organs of justice, some who persevere to pursue justice in spite of the tribulations in securing justice and yet others, who live with an ordinary mixture of hope and fear), that has been captured by the author represents the best part of the book. As part of her quest for the context to understand the riots, the author has also chronicled previous ones in Mumbai: beginning with the exploitation of religious festivals (Ganesh Puja), religious symbols (the holy cow) by nationalist leader Tilak, and also, interestingly, by Sunni and Shia leaders to settle internecine differences by exploiting festivals (Muharram processions) - all marked by rhetoric (insistence on exercising a sacred right), propaganda (pamphleteering), rumour-mongering (that the 'other' is manoeuvring to deny) and organization (preparing for revenging rumoured insults). Further, by culling select excerpts from other accomplished writers, she has also summed up the conceptual contours of riots in India: divisive communal propaganda by leaders questing for power who exploit tense religious situations (the original cause of riots), the communications revolution that is better exploited by them than civil society and the state machinery, and the initial inaction by the police that is the proximate cause for the commencement and expansion of riots. She also chronicles the utter futility, even inutility, of state measures to provide justice after riotous violence - to rioters, riot managers, riot leaders and above all, the victims and their

bereaved families. Police, CID, CBI, Courts, Commissions of Inquiry have all failed to provide justice. One organ of the state blaming the other is an excuse, particularly in the days of judicial hyperactivism. This is why she sees some hope in the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa.

But most refreshingly, she shows in an ordinary language that there is no difference between the two forms of collective violence (communal riots and communal terrorism) that are racking the fragile unity of the Indian state: "To instigate riots and kill is a serious offence just as terrorism is a crime and it must be treated as such. There can be no excuse for mass murder. The guilty have to be punished." There is a long history of anti-terror legislation in India; but none against riots, although there have been more riots than terrorist attacks. Will the proposed Communal Violence Bill be a solution? Hardly. The truth and reconciliatory approach favoured by the author, but not properly developed, represents perhaps a far superior alternative. More so when one realizes the dismal success rate of the existing adversarial criminal justice system of Anglo-Saxon vintage in respect of riots: few rioters, fewer riot managers (the odd Madhukar Sarpotdar) and no riot leaders (Bal Thakeray) are convicted; and for the victims of riots: they are left on their own with little compensation given belatedly - "shifts in residence, reduction of aspirations and continuing fears of violence." How much one can blame justice-denied groups for their vigilante ways is a matter better left to future historians than those delivering legal justice within the ambit of outdated legislation.

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