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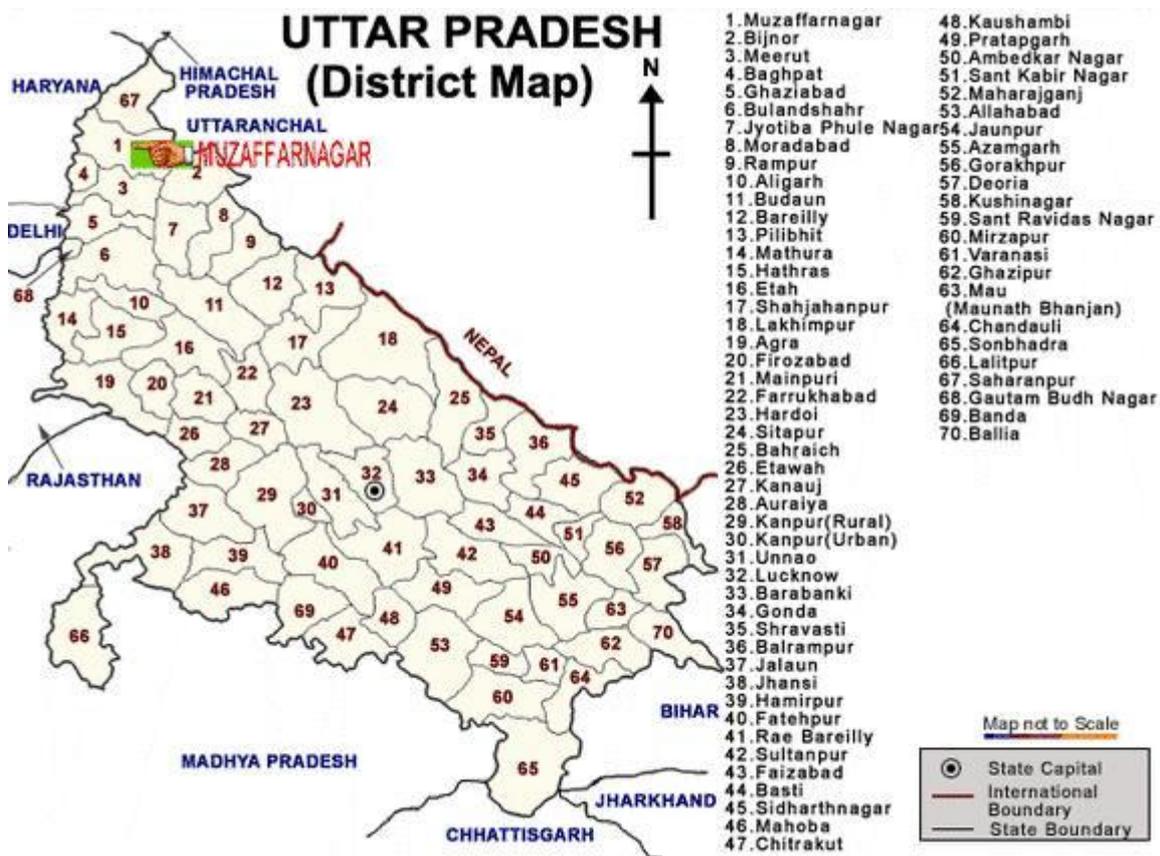


Secularism

The Consequences of Playing with Fire in Uttar Pradesh

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Source: Official website of Muzaffarnagar District, Government of Uttar Pradesh.

The 2013 violence in Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh was unique in that the so-called secular forces were not averse to fanning the fires started by Hindutva communal elements. Though this underhand collaboration was aimed at harvesting votes for both sides through a Hindu-Muslim polarisation, it was the BJP that benefited from it. The Samajwadi Party, which might have calculated that Muslims would flock to it in fear and distress, looks set instead to lose the community's trust and its votes, says **Mujibur Rehman**, who teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia Central University, New Delhi, and is the editor of the recently published book, *Communalism in Postcolonial India: Changing Contours*.

Electoral defeats, like victories, are often multi-causal. If we go by various media reports, it is plausible that the Samajwadi Party (SP) would not return to power on its own in the forthcoming Assembly election to be held in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) in the early part of 2017. And the dominant reason for this could be the manner in which the U.P. government dealt with the 2013 Muzaffarnagar violence and its aftermath.

The response of the government led by Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav, son of Mulayam Yadav, once known as Maulana Mulayam, has been deeply frustrating for secularists and Muslims causing almost unprecedented alienation from the Yadav dynasty and its party, which was formed with Muslim support in 1991. Some scholars would perhaps name the ongoing family dispute as a key factor in its declining fortunes but, in my view, Muzaffarnagar would remain its dominant cause.

In the words of Sudha Pai, a very accomplished scholar on U.P. politics:

“Their (Muslims) support enabled the SP to win elections, particularly to obtain a majority in 2012. However, there is much anguish within the Muslim community following the Muzaffarnagar riots that the SP failed to prevent or help rehabilitate the riot-affected. Statements of the old guard regarding the amount and nature of compensation and on the relief camps were particularly controversial¹.”

At the time the party was formed, Mulayam Yadav had earned the title **Maulana** Mulayam for his rather brave decision to take on the *kar sevaks* during their attempt to storm the Babri Masjid. He was seen as the most popular leader among Muslims in U.P. or even perhaps in India at a time when the community was asking why it had not thrown up a national leader after Maulana Azad. Should the community have its own leader or not is another significant question, though it does not directly fall within the scope of this analysis.

Genesis of the Muzaffarnagar riots

Muzaffarnagar is a district located in the western part of India's largest State that has a long and tragic history of ethnic violence involving Hindus and Muslims. This region of the State is also called the “Sugar bowl of India.” Its economy is mainly agriculture and sugar cane is one of its main products.

What is striking to note is that the Muzaffarnagar riots erupted at a typical juncture, and yet in many ways it appeared to be quite unique. What is worrying is the possibility that the violence has become a precursor to a pattern of politics that has deep consequences for U.P., as well as other parts of India that are witnessing increasing saffronisation and consequent confrontations between Hindus and Muslims.

The Muzaffarnagar riots erupted against a backdrop of rising communal incidents in U.P., more so after the SP took power in 2012. In 2013, U.P. topped the all-India list as a State that had the highest number of communal incidents.

In a reply to a question in Parliament during the Manmohan Singh government, the Union Home Ministry said there were 247 incidents in U.P. in 2013 and 118 incidents in 2012, and there was an increase of up to 30 per cent at an all-India level in 2013². According to the Ministry, 133 people died and 2,229 people were injured in such violence against 94 dead and 2,117 injured in 2012.

In addition to U.P., Bihar and Gujarat saw an increase in communal violence. In fact, the Centre had issued an advisory to the States to forthwith check communal polarisation.

The Muzaffarnagar violence is traced to a case of eve-teasing of a Jat girl by a Muslim boy named Shahnawaz in Kawal/Kaval village. When, Sachin, the brother of the Hindu girl (a Jat by caste)—who was the target of eve teasing—and his friend Gaurav, confronted Shahnawaz, it led to a conflict between the two communities and finally all three of them—Shahnawaz, Sachin and Gaurav—were killed. This situation created enough tension in the region in which political leaders of different parties saw an opportunity to be exploited.

Two major independent meetings by Muslim and Hindu leaders respectively created the context for large-scale violence. The first was a meeting on August 30, 2013, after Friday prayer in which leaders such as Qudeer Rana of the Bahujan Samaja Party (BSP), Raseed Siddiqui of the SP and Sayeed UI Nawaj of the Indian National Congress (INC) addressed the gathering and gave provocative speeches. This was followed by a major gathering by the Hindu community in violation of section 144 of the CrPC on September 7, 2013, in which people from western U.P., Haryana and Delhi came to take part. Some of them came with swords, axes and lathis. The Hindu leaders made provocative speeches. On their way home, the people who had come to the meeting attacked Muslim villages, triggering a riot for the first time in many years, giving the impression that it was pre-planned. Indeed, in February 2016, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) executive committee member, Umesh Mallick ³, publicly attributed the massive victory of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in UP to the Muzaffarnagar riots.

Significantly, he said this in the presence of central minister and local MP, Sanjeev Balyan, who was also an accused in the 2013 violence. Mallick's specific words were that "the embers [of the riots] led to the victory of Modi in Uttar Pradesh" ⁴. He also admitted it was all planned in the jail where Balyan was detained as a preventive step after the tension in the region increased.

The 2014 electoral outcome clearly suggests that the results of this polarisation profited the BJP. This Hindu-Muslim polarisation first took concrete shape during the Ayodhya movement in the late 1980s and the 1990s, and slowed down a bit with the decline of electoral fortunes of the BJP in State politics, though its infrastructure remained intact.

Prior to this, the politics in the region was dominated by former Prime Minister Charan Singh, who had stitched together a coalition called MAJGAR, consisting of Muslims, Ahir, Yadav, Jats, Gujjars and Rajputs. The political churn after the death of Charan Singh saw the birth of new political formations in the State. The SP's core vote was formed by Yadavs, while Gujjars and Rajputs moved in the direction of the BJP; some of them did move towards the SP. The remnant of Charan Singh's party, led by his son, Ajit Singh, enjoyed the loyalty of Muslims and Jats.



Sanjeev Balyan

But the BJP was very eager to attract the Jat votes for which it was necessary to polarise the situation between Muslims and Jats/Hindus. In time, the Jat-Muslim issue enlarged into a larger Hindu-Muslim conflict. This trend was noticed by various political parties. The then Prime minister, Manmohan Singh, mentioned it at the National

Integration Council (NIC) meeting on March 14, 2014 ⁵ . According to Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader, Sitaram Yechury, this riot was the perfect background to anoint Modi as a PM hopeful ⁶ .

A fact-finding team led by Mohan Rao visited Muzaffarnagar on November 9 and 10, 2013, and on inspection of 11 relief camps set up by the government, noted that most of them were in very bad condition ⁷ . The Senior Superintendent Of Police (SSP) placed the death toll at 52, out of which 37 were Muslims and 15 Hindus. The U.P. government said 50,955 people were displaced, though non-official sources estimated the figure to be more than 1,00,000. At the time of the preparation of the fact-finding report, 540 FIRs were registered as against 6,000 cases.



Muzaffarnagar, 2013. File Photo: The Hindu.

An important aspect of these riots is the relationship between the supposedly secular parties and Indian Muslims. While the BJP was a key player in the region and later emerged as a ruling party led by Modi at the Centre, the State was ruled by the SP which at one point enjoyed State-wide support from Muslim voters.

Observers have suggested that the State had enough wherewithal to contain the riots and punish the culprits. The fact that this did not happen suggests an unwillingness by the State government to deal firmly with the situation—both before and after the violence. Various State-run intelligence agencies had reported that the situation in the region was volatile and could explode; but these reports were ignored by the government.

What has, however, ruptured the relationship between the SP and the Muslims is the manner in which it treated the victims of Muzaffarnagar riots. It did open few camps where victims took shelter. It declared a Rs. five lakh compensation each for nearly 1,600 families. There were reports of mismanagement and negligence in the camps. Many victims were reluctant to return to their native villages fearing for their safety.

The Akhilesh Yadav government had to face harsh observations from the Supreme Court in the wake of its poor and inadequate rehabilitation. Finally, it bulldozed some of the camps and closed them down, forcing the victims to fend for themselves. The government also declared to the world that it had solved the riot-related issues in the State.

Obviously, the existence of the camps had become a major source of media attraction and consistent criticism of the government. The unfortunate fact is that the relief camps were closed down not because the U.P. government was able to restore normalcy, allowing victims to feel safe enough to return to their villages or towns; but because it wanted a closure of the subject as it was finding it difficult to handle criticism relating to poor conditions in the camps. In short, the camps were shut down because they had become inconvenient and embarrassing to the government rather than because the government was able to provide alternative spaces for victims to recover and rebuild their lives.



Muzaffarnagar, 2013. File Photo: The Hindu

However, Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav defended his government's pro-Muslim policy. While taking part in the event of a magazine called *Aiena -2013-2014*, he said his government has given "uninterrupted power" supply to weavers in Muslim-dominated areas such as Mau, Azamgarh and Ambedkarnagar [8](#) .

Justice Vishnu Sahai, a retired judge of Allahabad High Court, released a report on the communal violence. He submitted his 700-page report with a 14-page Action Taken Report (ATR) to the government, which presented the same to the U.P. Assembly on March 6, 2016. The Report attributed the escalation of violence to the following reasons:

- 1) failure to arrest 14 Muslim youths involved in the killing of Sachin, brother of the girl who was the target of eve-teasing, and Sachin's friend Gaurav;
- 2) poor local intelligence; and
- 3) transfer of the Muzaffarnagar District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police (SP) which created an administrative vacuum allowing violence to spread without control.

According to the Report, 62 lives were lost and 60,000 people were displaced in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli. In its ATR, it recommended a departmental enquiry against Prabol Pratap Singh, an intelligence officer attached to the local police station, for failing to accurately anticipate the numbers that would turn up at the September 7 *mahapanchayat* held at Nagla-Mandaur, a place 20 km away from Muzaffarnagar. Singh's assessment was that 15,000-20,000 people would turn up, but according to the official report, the turnout was around 50,000-60,000. Many prominent media houses reported three times more than the official assessment. Interestingly, Law and Order falls under the State Home Ministry, which was under Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav. However, there was no reference in the report to the Akhilesh Yadav Government, much less any criticism or indictment of it for failing to contain or prevent the riot.

A Special Investigation Team (SIT) was set up on September 24, 2013. In all, 567 riot-related cases were lodged and First Information Reports (FIRs) filed. As it turned out, in most cases, witnesses turned hostile, and there was virtually no progress on the legal side of the cases. According to a victim, "Despite lodging complaints several times at Fugana and Buhara police stations, no one came to help us. People on behalf of the accused approached us, even threatened us with dire consequences. We are a poor family. There is no one to take care of the family if anything happens to me. We did what we thought was correct [9](#) ."

Muzaffarnagar and Narendra Modi

Even if Modi, as Chief Minister, got a clean-chit on the Gujarat's riots of 2002, the Muzaffarnagar riots offer another opportunity to reflect on his anti-Muslim image. The Muzaffarnagar riots took place in August-September 2013, after which the victims took refuge in various relief camps [10](#) . There is reason to believe that the riots were part of a larger conspiracy to polarise the voters across religious lines in U.P. ahead of the 2014 General Election [11](#) .

Modi has been largely silent on Muzaffarnagar violence. Although he has been visiting a large number of countries since taking charge as Prime Minister, he has not taken the trouble to visit Muzaffarnagar, which is not too far away from the capital. Modi mentioned the Muzaffarnagar riots only to attack Rahul Gandhi who had said that Pakistan's intelligence agency (ISI) was working to brainwash young Muslim victims and recruiting them for terror activities [12](#) .

Mr. Modi expressed his anger at Rahul Gandhi for tarnishing the image of an entire community, and later attacked Mulayam Singh Yadav for failing to help the victims ¹³. In fact, Sanjeev Baliyan continues to be member of the Modi government as a Minister.

Conclusion:

The Muzaffarnagar riots constitute a dark and disturbing chapter in India's history of communal violence, especially against Muslims. The riots stand as evidence that even the so-called secular parties can exploit communal situations for partisan reasons.

In that sense, it has shaken the faith of the minority communities in the secular parties and their politics of governance. This is not to suggest that in the past the response of secular governments at the State or centre had been very encouraging. In fact, one of the reasons Muslims in parts of India felt compelled to vote for the BJP was because they found there was little to differentiate between the rhetoric of the secular parties and the BJP's Hindutva politics. However, the violence unleashed by cow vigilante groups in recent months has hardened the Muslims' attitude towards the BJP and today their distrust and fear of the party are comparable to the community's reactions in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992.

The third anniversary of the riots saw the release of a report titled *Living Apart* ¹⁴, which discussed in detail the conditions of the riot victims of Muzaffarnagar and Shamli. Authored by Harsh Mander, Akram Akhtar Chaudhury, Zafar Eqbal and Rajanjya Bose and published by Yoda Press, this report noted that there was no official record of the new settlement that the victims had moved into, let alone any mention of the official plans to provide the victims access to basic public goods and citizenship entitlements.

According to the report, there are 65 colonies of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) in Muzaffarnagar and 37 in Shamli, housing a total of 29,328 persons. The most striking finding is the absence of the state from the lives of these IDPs. These colonies were settled with assistance mainly from Muslim organisations or, in few cases, from social and political organisations. Particularly inspiring is the story of the work of an alliance called Sadbhawana Trust that worked to rehabilitate 230 households. Their colony is called Apna Ghar Colony.

A recent book on violence in India by scholar Amrita Basu, *Violent Conjunctions in Democratic India*, has argued that Hindu nationalist anti-minority violence is likely to be most extensive when an ideologically driven, well-organised Hindu nationalist political party like the BJP, with ties to aggressive organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) assumes office in a State and is further supported by a national government run by the same party. The Muzaffarnagar example, however, shows that such violence can happen even when a supposedly secular party rules the State imposing endless sufferings on the victims. Such experiences have deep implications for the secular polity.

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The article was corrected for a typographical error on October 7, 2016.

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