

The Afrazul Killing Video as a Perfect Anti-Muslim Crime

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The video with the killing of Mohammad Afrazul by Shambhunath Raigar in cold blood, without any immediate motivation or excuse, is a watershed moment in the new-age social-media-driven communal crime in India. Where all such hate crime shared on social media, especially lynchings, builds an ever-present sense of fear for the Muslim, this video does away with all padding, any semblance of rationale, the use of passion as motivator, and mob as executive. This is a radical break from the past where the Hindu right felt a need to justify itself even to the rest of the country.

Even as the facts of the case are yet to fully come to light, I write this piece as an Indian Muslim and an academic in response to the video of the brutal and cold-blooded killing of Mohammad Afrazul, posted by its perpetrator, Shambhunath Raigar (the 48-year-old migrant worker from West Bengal was brutally hacked and the killing filmed by a teenager in Rajsamand district on 6 December). As an Indian Muslim I have grown used to various types of violence against Muslims and other minorities in India not just by being exposed to them through the media, but also experiencing them first-hand, through telling of their dire experiences by friends and family, or even reading the near-lynching experience of a former student in a magazine that combines the two.¹ However, this particular video has shaken me to the core, is unlike anything I have ever seen before and gives me a sense of great foreboding for Indian civilisation, if there is such a thing.

Since independence and partition and with the formation of the Muslim state, Pakistan, as its enemy-state neighbour, secular India has struggled with its Muslim minority with regard to its national identity. With a notional idea of a secular India and the opposing idea of India as a Hindu nation, Muslims have often been direct electoral pawns of the centrist party, or the targeted and excluded other of the Hindu right, which seeks to unite and consolidate not just upper caste, but even Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and lately tribal and lower-caste Hindu votes. Violence against Muslims has been part of electoral politics in different ways. Protection against it is the secular party's claim and appeals to the Muslim or limited secular vote. An instrumental use of the riot itself to advance ideas of Hindu pride serves the Hindu right.

This is my academic understanding of the situation.

Mob Mentalities

As a child growing up in the 1990s, I have personally experienced the ideologically brainwashed ire of Hindu children against Muslims in verbal duels, physical skirmishes, and social shamings. At the same time, I have experienced both the demolition of Babri Masjid and the Godhra riots on tv, while I was still a school student, and lived through curfews in Delhi. What was common in these chains of violent events was that they would often arise and work through mob mentalities. The mechanism of the riot is often understood to be started with a particular rumour/incident after the initial build-up through propaganda and organisation that laid the ground. This has continued in the more recent beef-related lynchings. The perpetrators of the violence have operated in large groups, instigated by leaders, motivated by each other as part of mobs.

With the Babri demolition, Gujarat 2002 riots, and the recent beef-lynchings, notions of pride of the Hindu community being hurt were advanced as reasons for violence against Muslims. The violence that was perpetrated was almost uniformly undertaken by mobs. A mob has its own mentality that can override natural principles of moral justice and humanity. Led by a leader-instigator utilising an immediate occurrence as provocation, powered by ideology, armed by weapons such as *trishuls* or tridents often distributed in an organised fashion by political parties, these mobs serve larger electoral goals, but also maintain smaller gains for their members. Promises of political office, monetary gains offered by parties, material and sensual profits through thieving and rape during the actual rioting, cattle-thieving in beef killings, settling of petty scores, are all gains to be made off the violence for the mob participant.

With Gujarat 2002 began the age of camera mobile phones and social media. We have now come to terms with videos of mob violence and lynchings by large

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groups of Hindu men against one or a few Muslim men, and sometimes also women. There are almost always putative reasons accorded to the violence, and often, immediate material gains for the perpetrators are visible. With the Gujarat videos there was the background of the Godhra train burning. With Muzaffarnagar, there were claims of gender violence across communities to begin with. In beef-killings there are Muslims who are supposedly caught red-handed with cattle/beef. Even with the killings of four men in Jharkhand, allegations of child kidnappings were cited.

The video with the killing of Afrazul by Raigar in cold blood, without any immediate motivation or excuse is a watershed moment in the face of this new-age social-media-driven communal crime in India. Where all such hate crime shared on social media, especially the sporadic but geographically widespread lynching, is to build an ever-present sense of fear for the Muslim, this video does so in a far more generalised manner. It does away with all padding, any semblance of rationale, the use of passion as motivator, and uses the mob as executive. This is a radical break from the past where the Hindu right felt a need to justify itself even to the rest of the country.

Stereotype as Absolute

In this video, ideology and stereotype seem to have become absolute. There is a complete abstraction of the Muslim that is made at the cost of the personal and the individual. The victim in question, Afrazul, may not have been guilty of any crime whatsoever. Neither was he killed in response to any particular incident in the vicinity where other Muslims are under suspicion. Still, his name is reason enough for his brutal and unwarranted execution.

While the Rajasthan police are already trying to investigate the motive, and various reports have come up of different love jihad histories, some claiming Afrazul's own involvement and others of the older Bengali-Muslim-labourer and a Rajasthani woman's connections, Raigar in his own video is not admitting that this is the case. He may say something else under interrogation. In the case of beef-killings too, the immediate investigations were often about the nature of the meat

found. None of the beef-killings, or for that matter, recent caste-violence incidents, have found a strong conviction.

However, this is an aside, only to emphasise the impunity with which a Raigar is now operating. And this too is why this particular video is one step forward in our history of communal blood-spilling in independent India. Whereas, earlier, the mob was also defence against conviction as often there was difficulty claimed in actual identification of culprits, surely here nothing is left to doubt or imagination. And still does one hope for a hanging in this rarest of rare crimes? Or is this the new normal and not rare at all?

It is this absolute rarefication of the murder of the Muslim that is most chilling. No mob was inciting this apparent lone wolf. A 14-year-old boy, his nephew, is filming the act with a steady hand. One can only imagine the dehumanisation of the child.

No immediate or personal motive relates Raigar to Afrazul. There is no passion, this is no hot-blooded act, but cold-blooded and planned in the extreme. Raigar carries at least two implements to bludgeon Afrazul. The killing is not clean, it is messy. And then, carrying on with anti-Muslim-burial-of-the-dead notions of violence, Raigar sets the dead Afrazul on fire.

As Raigar declares, proudly, in the video, the message for Indian Muslims is clear: this is what will be or can be done to you with great impunity. The stereotype, love jihad or any such, attached to your name is enough to target you, without any immediate or individualised cause. This is the perfect anti-Muslim crime. Not in the Hitchcockian sense that it cannot be detected, but that it is brazen and rarefied in the extreme. No scope for any ambiguity. The message is loud and clear. Individual acts such as cattle slaughter were always casual reasons by ways of excuses; now even those are not required. A mob, its diffusion of culpability, and its passion were required to motivate men to inhumanity and allow impunity, now these can be dispensed with.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that the overwhelming Bharatiya Janata Party majority in 2014 was the result of the work of generations. This violent

and chilling video too must be seen to arise from the ideological propaganda and groundwork of generations. Different media reports tell us that there was a Bajrang Dal pamphlet about so-called love jihad that was distributed days before Raigar undertook this act. It has also come to light that Raigar was out of business for about a year, or that he was substance addict and consumer of hate videos. It is yet to be determined whether he was directly indoctrinated by any person or organisation. Still, it must be established that such videos or media or hate speeches that may incite a person to commit such an act are clearly not being sanctioned, at a time when a film director is questioned by Parliament, and a number of individuals have been arrested and kept in jail for a number of days for what have been seen as derogatory comments on a chief minister or the Prime Minister on Facebook.²

This complex nexus of various forces has established a period in Indian history where already the perfect anti-Muslim crime has been realised. Now it is for us to see what the next step is. Will there be holocausts? Or, will it be as the Tripura governor Tathagata Roy quoted Syama Prasad Mookerjee's diary entry of 1946: "The Hindu-Muslim problem won't be solved without a civil war"? For now, we live with the aesthetic of the absolute and distilled murder of not merely M Afrazul but the Muslim.

NOTES

- 1 Malik Abdul Basit: "Say, Pakistan Murdabad!—A Reporter Recounts How a Mob in Delhi Assaulted Him When They Identified Him as Muslim," *Caravan*, 19 June 2017.
- 2 <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/arrested-over-a-facebook-status-7-times-people-landed-in-jail-for-posts-against-politicians/story-ON1jukoStfV6T8aYcJVEVGJ.html>.

Obituaries

The *EPW* has started a section, "Obituaries", which will note the passing of teachers and researchers in the social sciences and humanities, and social activists who have contributed to a just society.

The announcements will be in the nature of short notices about the work and careers of those who have passed away.

Readers could send brief obituaries to edit@epw.in.