

### Book Review

## ***Riot After Riot: Reports on Caste and Communal Violence in India***

by M.J. Akbar, Penguin Books (India) 1988.

One of the great paradoxes of the modern world is that India, the land that produced such major world religions as Buddhism Jainism is now torn apart by caste and communal violence. Pakistan and Sri Lanka, like India, face severe ethnic problems. Law and order are to be emphasized. Caste and community must be protected by the executive branch of the Indian Government. This has been laid down in the rules framed by the legislative branch. When this is not done there is a breakdown. No one is safe and no group is secure. In India today this is clearly the case.

This book by M. J. Akbar is a collection of 15 journalistic pieces, written for Akbar's newspaper and magazine, *The Telegraph* and *Sunday* over the last decade. Because it is journalism, the important "burning" issues are covered such as the Moradabad massacre in 1980, the slaughter of the Uttar Pradesh Harijans in 1981 and the ongoing Babri Masjid controversy. It is journalism, but the writing is of high quality and evocative: "It is early morning and a mist lies on the river, making the pre-dawn haze more blurred. A part of the Howrah Bridge looms through the gauze, like a picture deliberately created by a photographer in search of art. The fires are out." (p. 170)

Akbar's material is hard, brittle, compelling stuff. He writes with the passion of the committed and his commitments are to secularism, to humanity, to the truth, as he sees it, on the ground. Here, a brief account of Dr. Akbar's cultural background seems appropriate: He was born in 1951 and has become the English-speaking voice of post-Midnight's Children of India.

The significance of post 1947 independence as a dividing line is generally not fully appreciated. Missing is the literary, sentimental romanticism of the earlier Indian generation of writers. Don Moraes and Ved Mehta already appear as dated figures of the past. Their India is another country. In Akbar's background there is no punting on English rivers, laboring at Oxford intonations, getting drunk after the Oxford-Cambridge boat race nor leisurely reading of the English romantic poets on the banks of the Cam. Akbar lives in the urban nightmare of Calcutta and in his nostrils is the smell of burning flesh and rotting corpses. Missing, though he is aware of the loss, is the romantic vision of Nehru and the religious idealism of Gandhi. Akbar is an Indian writing with a white-hot pen for Indians of today's India.

Over Indian Muslims hangs the uneasy honor of having ruled Delhi for most of the last 1000 years and the traumatic partitioning of India—"History, Pakistan: the myth that has in the subconscious, the myth of the sword-wielding Mussulman, which at times even sends a quiver of doubt into the sanest non-Muslim and which prompts him to ask himself whether the Muslims are basically an unreliable, emotional, anti-national community?" (p. 41).

"Massacre in Moradabad" opens: "Then, suddenly, with the astonishing fury of a violent storm in a calm sky, came the morning of 13 August 1980. Men of the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) opened fire on about 40,000 Muslims while they were at their Id prayers. No one knows exactly how many people died. What is known is that the incident at Moradabad was not a Hindu-Muslim riot but a calculated, cold-blooded massacre of Muslims by a rabidly communal police force which tried to cover up its genocide by making it out to be a Hindu-Muslim riot." (p. 33)

However, not only Muslims are involved in communal hate: "Less than 500 years ago, these tribals of Orissa and Bastar and Andhra ruled over a brilliant empire; today they have been turned into parodies of a cruel fiction. The tribal man is a *mahua* swigging drunk. The woman is an easy lay." (p. 89)

Akbar's point is important. In this climate of violence no one is immune. "The untouchable Jatav is touchable only when a pretty Jatav woman can be raped, or when a whimpering man has to be dragged to a field to do forced, whimsically paid labor." (p. 49) This is stressed by Khushwant Singh in the introduction to *Riot After Riot*: "Our hopes have turned to ashes. Hindu-Muslim confrontations on religious festivals have begun to occur with sickening regularity in riot-prone parts of the country where the two communities co-exist. From being Hindu versus Muslim, they have become Hindu versus Christian, Hindu versus Sikh, upper-caste Hindu versus lower-caste Hindu, Christian versus Buddhist, hill tribal versus plains' tribal. In the massacre at Nellie in Assam, it was just about everyone against his neighbor." (p. 10)

Akbar blames religious fanaticism, Hindu or Muslim. On the Hindu RSS (the Hindu militant fascist organization) he writes: "The RSS is not so much an organization (cultural or political, take your pick) as a state of mind. It is the physical form given to an attitude towards the minorities, particularly the Muslims. It represents Hindu revivalism of the worst sort; in its heart it is still taking revenge against Aurangzeb, the Mughal Emperor." (p. 25)

The nostalgia for the high hopes engendered by independence and into the Fifties is captured in an occasional reference. Those hopes were symbolized by the popular film stars Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand and, above all, by the towering figure of Nehru. The conclusion is gloomy and quite untouched by the hopes of the Fifties: "There is evil abroad, and it seems we are just too embarrassed to recognize the one weapon which has been successful against

it in our history: the philosophy of decency, of goodness, of strength in brotherhood and faith in interdependence.” (p. 125)

Akbar rejects religion seeing it as a symbol of hate. In communal torn India today, this is understandable. But the vacuum is easily filled by further hatred. Sham and bogus religious arguments whip up communal fury. Perhaps the Indian experience ought to point in the opposite direction. We need more not less religion. More Babas of Batala and more Mahatmas. More men of good will and visionaries preaching love and tolerance. “Only connect”. That surely will remain its lasting contribution to human civilization.

This is excellent primary source material for the scholar and politician; it should also be a warning and an edification to the latter. Urgent and compelling, the small book—175 pages—is essential reading for South Asians. Time is running out for them.

Akbar S. Ahmed  
Selwyn College  
Cambridge, U.K.