

Violence on Gurburab in Jammu and Its Aftermath

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The lesson of the communal riots in Jammu in mid-January is that even when relations between communal groups have been cordial for generations, serious trouble can break out due to the special interests of small groups and the abdication of responsibility by the administration and the political leadership. This is a grim lesson for the whole country.

ON January 13, 1989, Jammu witnessed an outbreak of murderous communal violence, on the eve of the birthday celebrations of Guru Gobind Singh. All the 14 who died were Sikhs. Three gurudwaras and one Hindu temple were damaged. Several shops, scooters, cars and an electricity substation were set on fire. The burnt shops, vehicles and scooters belonged to both the communities but most of the looting was directed at Sikh shops and property.

In the first week of February, two of us, representing Nagrik Ekta Manch, went to Jammu to investigate. We were surprised to find that despite the obvious communal character of the killings and arson, the city's population retained a degree of intercommunal respect unusual for a city which had witnessed a major communal massacre. One could not help but make comparisons with the much more vitiated atmosphere in Delhi of November 1984, Meerut of May 1987, or Ahmedabad of the various conflagrations through the 1980s.

The situation in Jammu was significantly different. First, ordinary Hindus reacted spontaneously by coming to the rescue of beleaguered Sikhs. Second, despite repercussions of terrorism in the neighbouring Punjab and of events in the Kashmir region and the near-total collapse of any political leadership committed to help defuse crises, even a single determined individual like Balraj Puri was able to begin building bridges because representatives of the two communities were relatively willing to come together for a dialogue.

ORIGINS OF VIOLENCE

Traditionally, the city of Jammu, like most other north Indian cities with a mixed Hindu-Sikh population, practises a good deal of mutual co-operation in annually celebrating the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh. Though the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee takes primary responsibility for the procession, Hindus too see it as their celebration because Guru Gobind Singh is seen by both Hindus and Sikhs as a defender of Hindus. In Jammu, the procession starts from gurudwara Bibi Chand Kaur at one end of the city, and wends its way through the predominantly Hindu

markets and residential areas. Several markets *en route* have a reception committee and the residents, traders and shopkeepers, most of whom are Hindus, put up welcoming banners, arches and *jhandis*. Members of each reception committee, along with several residents and shopkeepers walk with the procession to the point where the next reception committee takes over.

Many of the Hindu traders we met asserted that since 1984, they have been celebrating Gurburab with greater vigour, as part of their effort to keep Jammu free from Hindu-Sikh tension. According to Vinod Awasthi, general secretary, Federation of Industries and Commerce, Jammu province, there are only two Sikh shops and one gurudwara in Raghunath Bazar where he has his shop. The gurudwara he says, is sacred to all of them. "After the tension in Punjab, we tried to improve the atmosphere in our city and celebrate Gurburab with even greater enthusiasm to avoid any disturbance of communal harmony. As part of that effort we put up lights (*deepmala*) for three days during the Gurburab, plus the usual welcome arrangements for the procession." In their account of the welcome preparations, members of the Federation of Industries and Commerce and local traders' association mentioned that banner raising and other such arrangements were made at the last minute, while the procession was on its way. The Hindu merchants' version was that this happened because the procession came 15 minutes earlier than usual. But the Sikhs say this was not the way arrangements were made formerly. They conceded that the scale of decorations was limited and smaller than usual as the procession arrived 15 minutes earlier than expected. Many Sikhs, however, suspected that the lack of the usual warmth in the reception might not have been unintentional.

There was a degree of tension in the town this year, following the hanging of Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh. A nationwide red alert had been sounded, and hardliners from both communities expected trouble. Local Shiv Sena leader Ashok Gupta said in a press statement that he had warned the authorities two days before the procession of Hindu resistance if "undesirable slogans" were raised.

There are conflicting versions of the size of the procession this year. Estimates vary from 10,000 to 20,000 people. A large number of the processionists were women and children. Among the children, very many were from Hindu families, because in most of the Sikh-run schools Hindu students are in a majority. Seventy-five per cent of the children in the Gurmat Kanya Pathshala, for instance, are Hindus. The presence of a large number of Hindu and Sikh children in the procession indicates that neither of the two communities anticipated widespread violence. Most of the processionists walk the entire route. Each school and locality group is represented in a *jatha*. Interspersed between the *jathas* are a few vehicles, including tractors, trolleys and a few open trucks. Some of the *jathas*, especially those from farflung areas, come in these vehicles, singing *shabad kirtan*.

The ostensible reason for the attack on the procession was the "objectionable slogans" raised by a part of it and the presence of a tractor-trolley with a large banner carrying the pictures of Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh. Between the pictures were the words "Pehlan maran kabool kar jeevan di chadd aas" ("Be prepared to accept death; give up hope of life") followed by a slogan: "Shahidon ki chitaaon par lagenge har baras mele/wattan par mitne walon ka yahi baqi nishan hoga" ("Annual fairs will be held at the martyrs' pyres/This will be the only symbol of those who sacrifice themselves for the country"). Several Hindus maintain that 'antagonistic' slogans were being raised from this trolley. Some witnesses said they could hear only the chorus of 'murdabad' or 'zindabad' to each slogan, but the voice that led the slogans was so muffled that they could not make out what the target of these cries was. Some allege that Khalistan was being hailed, others that Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh were being hailed as martyrs.

However, Hindus, Sikhs and the police agree that at the start, when this trolley appeared, the Gurudwara Committee members succeeded in getting the banner removed with the help of the police. Several Sikhs admit that the slogans for Khalistan, Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh were raised. Most eyewitnesses including a police officer confirm that an elderly Sikh leader made an announcement over the loudspeaker that no slogans other than those relating to the occasion of Guru Gobind Singh's birth anniversary were to be raised by processionists. He managed to get the 'zindabad', 'murdabad' slogans stopped. But, after the procession got underway, the banner was again unfurled and, according to some, the slogans were resumed.

Within a few minutes of the procession's start at 11.45 am, rumours started spreading, with each successive wave sounding more distorted and exaggerated, that anti-national slogans were being shouted and that militant Sikhs were going to attack Hindu property. A large number of Hindu shopkeepers

in the Jain Bazar and Purani Mandi, the two most congested areas, pulled down their shutters; some of them out of protest and others out of fear of trouble from a fall-out of a clash between processionists and the Shiv Sena workers. The presence of a large number of women and children in the procession did not deter them from closing their shops. Many Hindus complained of provocative speeches being made in the procession including those made by a Sikh woman and a Muslim poet.

Comrade Sukhdev Singh (37-year-old) narrates: "There was a peaceful crowd of about 2,000 Hindus at Raghunath Bazar, after the procession had left. A group of Sikhs (not part of the procession) came towards them, shouting peace slogans such as "Hindu Sikh jo ladaya voh desh ka bairi hai/Hindu Sikh Musalman ittehad zindabad" ("Anyone who instigates fights between Hindus and Sikhs is an enemy of the country").

A few Sikh representatives approached a group of Shiv Sena men led by Ashok Gupta, pleading with them not to let the long tradition of co-operation be disrupted. At this, a few Hindu shopkeepers began raising their shutters. But according to some eyewitnesses, "the Shiv Sena people dissuaded them and they lowered the shutters once again. Before the Sikh representatives could return to the procession and attempt to divert its route, a point of confrontation had already been reached."

Between 11.45 am and 2 pm, several phone calls were made to the police by ordinary citizens, both Hindu and Sikh, as well as by some police officers on duty, informing the control rooms of the possibility of a disturbance caused by the 'provocative' banner, the downing of shutters in bazars, as well as the wild rumours that were circulating. However, there was no response. Soon after, along with the collapse of the entire law and order and administrative machinery in the city all telephone lines also went dead. Mysteriously the transformer at the city's power house also burnt down at the same time leading to a city-wide power failure. From 12 noon onwards, a large number of shops downed shutters. Many people had started collecting on the streets and rooftops.

Authoritative sources told us that even before the procession started, an intelligence report on the controversial banner and the challenge issued by Shiv Sena leaders had been flashed to senior officials. In addition to citizens' requests for help and intelligence reports, some policemen on duty also called the control room. One such policeman was SI Kanwal Sharma. DSP Inder Mohan Bakshi called in requesting the presence of SSP Gill and asking for additional forces. Some of these calls were made in the presence of local citizens. For example, at 12 noon, the DSP used the phone in a local shop (S C Sharma, Drapers and Tailors) on Link Road to call the police control room. Fifteen minutes later, the ASI used the same phone, followed at 12.30 by another call

from the same phone by an intelligence person. That is, within half an hour, before the violence erupted, at least three separate messages were sent by officials to the police control room from one shop alone, requesting pre-emptive measures. But nothing was done.

THE CONFLAGRATION

The procession had covered almost three quarters of its route before the trouble began. When it came towards Purani Mandi, people both within the procession and outside of it began to sense trouble. The procession was encountering closed shops instead of reception committees. The banner extolling Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh as martyrs had been unfurled a little earlier. Neither the police nor the leaders of the two communities intervened to have it taken down as they had previously done.

Several senior police officials including DIG S S Ali were present at the entrance to Purani Mandi. Some local residents and police officials urged Ali to stop the procession or to get its route altered. But the police stood and watched as though they were merely spectators. When we asked Ali why he took no pre-emptive measures, his response was "our intervention might have led to the processionists or the other side having a confrontation with the police", implying thereby that they preferred the two communities to fight it out with one another rather than that the police should take any risks itself in order to avert intercommunity violence.

As the procession entered Purani Mandi, stones and soda water bottles were thrown on the processionists from rooftops. This attack from above threw the procession into utter chaos. Thousands of people tried to escape simultaneously from the congested bazar, through the only two available narrow outlets. Infuriated by the violent disruption of the procession, retreating Sikh men began to damage and destroy whatever they could. Mobs of both communities set several vehicles on fire. A congested complex of

Khokhas was also burnt down.

The chief minister, Farooq Abdullah, remained oblivious to the escalating conflict. Till 12.15, he was addressing a press conference, and subsequently, he went to attend a feast organised by the Saini Biradari Bhandara at the secretariat. It was only around 2.30 that he came to know that "some disturbances" had taken place. The Director General of Police was with Farooq at this time as was the DIG (counter intelligence).

There are several noteworthy features of this conflagration:

1 While the intelligence officials exercised due caution by reporting on the mobilisation in each Sikh settlement before the procession, the police were surprisingly lax. This is all the more worrisome since there was a national red alert following the hanging of Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh. Permission for the procession had been acquired two days in advance. Despite this, the police bandobast was woefully inadequate. Even after a DSP and an ASI called the control room requesting reinforcements, after intelligence reports anticipated tensions and had requested intervention (particularly between 12-12.30 pm), after SI Kanwal Sharma and DSP Inder Mohan Bakshi called the control room and asked SSP Gill to mobilise additional forces, and even after dozens of citizens of Jammu informed (or tried to inform) senior administrators and police officials of the possibility of a conflict—in spite of all this, the police remained either critically absent from the sites of conflict or were passive spectators to the arson and looting, or in a few scattered cases, abettors in the looting. Additionally, once permission for the procession had been granted the administration had the legal responsibility to protect it.

2 Even in areas where the procession was attacked, thousands of Sikhs, especially women and children, were given shelter in Hindu homes, and kept there safely till the curfew was lifted (up to four days). Unlike in other riot situations, rioting groups did not dare insist that the sheltered victims be

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handed over to the rioters. This shows that there was no widespread consensus among the Hindus in any part of the city to attack or disrupt the procession. The violence seemed to be the handiwork of a small group of rioters who did not command deep sympathy in the area.

3 The procession was attacked in the most congested, narrow-laned parts of the city. This could well have become a death trap for the processionists. The death toll could have been much higher. But not even one person was killed at this spot, or in any of the other areas through which the procession retreated.

4 There was no face-to-face confrontation between Hindus and Sikhs because the attack came from rooftops. Sikhs could not go up after the pelters because these were Hindu neighbourhoods, nor did the attackers come down.

5 The presence of large numbers of Sikh and Hindu women and children in the procession is an indication that the Sikhs and most Hindus had not come seeking a fight.

6 Despite the fact that some of the processionists carried their traditional swords, as is the custom in such processions, no Hindus were killed. Nor were any serious injuries to Hindus reported. In all, 133 people were taken to hospital; of them 115 were Sikhs. Most Hindus were discharged after primary first aid. All the people with grievous or even semi-serious injuries were Sikhs.

7 Although Sikhs destroyed many vehicles and burnt a few shops, no widespread looting or arson of Hindu shops took place. This was despite the fact that several thousand Sikhs were present. This suggests that processionists were retreating in anger and panic, rather than acting like people who had come prepared for an offensive battle.

8 The general opinion in Jammu was that the All India Radio played a surprisingly constructive role. The hourly bulletins, which were factual and balanced, shunned sensationalism. An instance of this was the importance given to the report that ten National Service Scheme volunteers, incidentally all Hindus, donated blood for those injured.

9 Many of the injured Sikhs as well as those who had lost family members narrated stories of how they were saved by Hindus. Some were carried to hospital or to their homes even while the attack was in progress. Many received shelter in Geeta Bhawan and in the Rajput Sabha building. The 60-year-old Sardar Bhagat Singh of Gol Gujral, who works in the electricity department told us how, after he was left as dead, he was carried to the hospital by some "god loving lala". There were many stories of thousands of Sikhs being given shelter in Hindu homes. This, more than anything else, has prevented communal mistrust and hatred from solidifying. One example of such a story which has assumed near-legendary proportions is that of 17-year-old Daljeet Singh of Gol Gujral.

He was seriously injured and the attackers left him after presuming that he was dead. The story going the rounds was that he was physically carried home by a 'sadhu', who walked miles carrying this grown up boy and deposited him in his sister's house. He left his blanket with which he had covered the boy and is supposed to have mysteriously disappeared thereafter. Later, it was found that when the boy mentioned 'sadhu' it was not an ascetic he was referring to, but the name of the man who had carried him home. The man turned out to be the Hindu owner of a tea stall near the bus stand.

Some Sikhs recounted stories of how Hindus had helped to combat looting and arson of Sikh establishments. A Sikh shopkeeper who, after witnessing a substantial part of the clashes, sought shelter in the house of Jasbir Singh, principal of a Sikh college, narrated the following incident. Some Sikh shops in K C market area were looted, and the goods were being carried away by some women. On the request of the Sikhs, some other Hindu women went and brought goods back and deposited them in Jasbir Singh's house. He then rang up the local ASI and informed him that some of the looted goods had been recovered by the women of his neighbourhood and were kept in his house. Despite such widespread shows of concern, the violence of that day resulted in 14 deaths. The nature and location of these murders provides clue to the real nature of the violence.

THE KILLINGS

A sizeable proportion of the fleeing crowds attempted to make their way to the main bus stand at the B C Road. From there, they hoped to take buses to get back home, to their villages. It is here that a group of bus drivers, conductors and cleaners lay in wait. Armed with long metal rods and similar weapons, they set upon individual Sikhs who got separated from the main crowd. It is suspected that they were mobilised by some Shiv Sena supporters. Had such a group of attackers confronted the main body of the procession they would, in all likelihood, have met with retaliation. But, individually fleeing Sikhs, after the procession had dispersed in panic provided easy targets. Some tried to take shelter in the vegetable fields near the bus stand. They were dragged out and brutally assaulted. Many of those who miraculously escaped with their lives narrated that they could identify the attackers.

A Sikh teenager who was left for dead after being assaulted told us that in response to his question as to why they were out to kill him the attackers said: "Tu hi vadda hoke sadi kaum no vakhta pana hai" ("Kids like you will grow up to create problems for our community"). Others narrated how some of the Bagdis from nearby jhuggi-jhoupris joined the attackers, looted the injured Sikhs, and in some cases, took away even their clothes.

The uniformity in the pattern and mode of attack and the fact that almost all deaths and serious injuries occurred around the bus stand indicates that the violence was not the result of spontaneous anger but part of a planned conspiracy by a small group. One cannot prove that they enjoyed high political patronage. But the way the police stood and watched while Sikhs were being murderously attacked shows the connivance, if not involvement, of the administrative machinery. Between 12 noon and 5 pm, for about five hours, the entire administration went into a deliberate collapse and began to take action again only when the worst was over. Both Hindus and Sikhs agree on this.

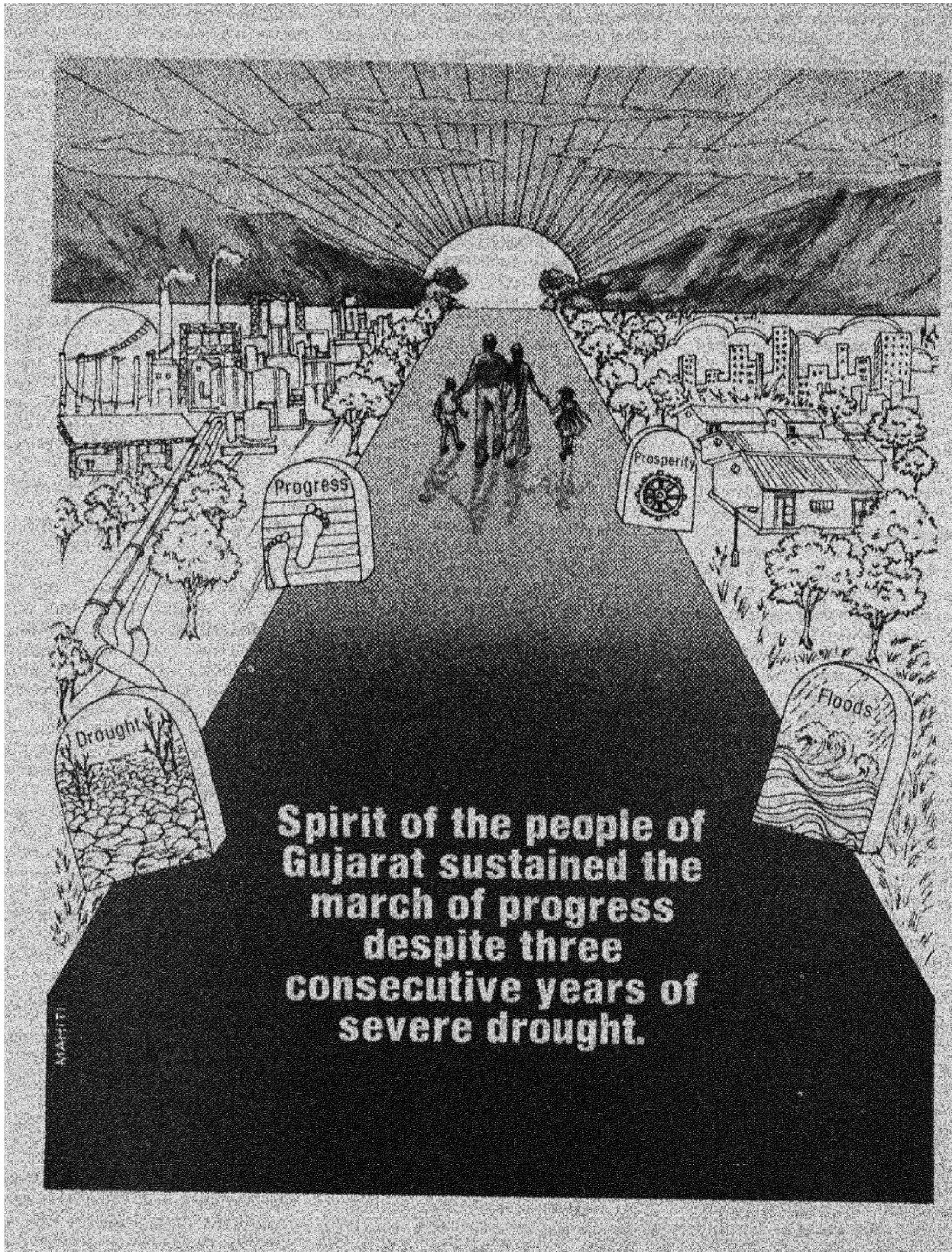
All those who died or were injured had been hit with iron rods on the head. None of this slaughter was the result of an angry confrontation between the two groups. The attack at the bus stand was meant to kill Sikhs. It was obviously the work of a determined group. While many of the Sikhs who suffered minor injuries preferred to get home and then get treated by local doctors, many of the seriously injured were taken to hospital—not by the police, but by ordinary citizens.

However, even the sanctity of hospitals was not respected. In the SMGS hospital, which is not far from the scene of the attack, some of the injured were attacked by gangsters. Surinder Singh who was getting his wound stitched, was stabbed while he was on the operating table. Jasbir Singh, deputy superintendent of the same hospital, was also manhandled. Some of the doctors were harassed and prevented from treating the injured. But the attack on the hospital was not as determined or as brutal as similar attacks in Ahmedabad, where injured Muslims were killed in the hospital premises.

A major confrontation was also about to take place in the predominantly Sikh colony called Nanak Nagar. If it had not been for the efforts of Jammu's most well known academic and social worker, Balraj Puri, this clash would have most likely turned bloody. He stood between the two groups, offering his own life before others were taken. Several policemen stood quietly as spectators. Balraj Puri, through his persuasion, had almost succeeded in forcing the crowds to retreat, but police mishandling led to the death of one person. A young Sikh thrust himself ahead of the Sikh crowd waved his arms, and shouted at the police: "Kill me, if that is what you want!" The police at first ran in panic, then collected and fired straight at the boy, killing him on the spot.

The body was taken to the police hospital where a postmortem was performed which declared that the boy died of a heart attack. The Sikhs had earlier set fire to two Hindu shops on the edge of Nanak Nagar.

Systematic arson, looting and physical assault subsided around 6.30 pm, but tension and sporadic incidents continued. The focus of concern among the Sikhs shifted to locating their missing family members. The



army was called in at that time but was not effectively deployed until 8.30 pm. Curfew was clamped on the entire city at 6 pm. This made the search for those who had not returned home an impossible task. The magnitude of concern can be gauged from the fact that apart from those killed and injured, more than 2,000 people were given refuge in Hindu homes and institutions like temples and dharamshalas.

Over a hundred men had been beaten up by gangster groups at the bus stand between 3 and 5 pm. Nine died on the spot and two succumbed to their injuries later. Four others were airlifted to Chandigarh in a precarious condition and there underwent brain surgery.

CONTINUING APATHY AND TENSION

The way these four were treated tells its own tale of government callousness. On January 25 they were asked to leave PGI Hospital, Chandigarh a week after brain surgery. No arrangement was made for their safe transport to Jammu. The four families at their own expense hired a private bus and brought these critically ill men back to Jammu. Some money was sanctioned for the return of these four but it reached too late. It has now been lodged with the Chandigarh Prabandhak Committee. One of the injured, 55-year-old Hira Singh, died the next day. Apart from post-operational complications, he contracted pneumonia. The condition of the other three when we visited them on February 2 was heart-rending. 24-year-old Surinder Singh lay unconscious. Whenever he regained consciousness, he tried to run in fear and panic. 17-year-old Satinder Singh had regained only partial consciousness. 32-year-old Nirmaljeet Singh was in a coma with a blood clot in his brain. He had lost one eye and his ribs were broken. He too, succumbed to injuries. These families had been given Rs 3,000 each by way of compensation. They had to purchase even medicines from their own pocket at Chandigarh.

Families of the deceased also had harrowing tales to tell. Sardar Kirpal Singh's son Natdeo Singh, who had just completed his class 10 exam, did not return on January 13. "We tried to go and search for him the next day but the military did not allow us to move out. On the 15th we insisted on going to the police station and getting them to lodge an FIR for our missing son. We told them they should either give us a curfew pass so that we could ourselves search for our son, or at least let us go and see the dead bodies kept at the police lines. When we were permitted to visit the police lines, we were utterly shocked to see the condition of the body. We demanded that the body be handed over to us so that we could at least perform the last rites. I have served in the police for 30 years. Yet, they refused to hand over our son's dead body to us. They had taken off his clothes before the postmortem. I tore my turban and covered him with it. Then we bought a sheet from the police canteen to put over the body. They did not even allow us to put proper

clothes on his body before it was cremated."

Sardar Balwant Singh, whose 18-year-old son Balkar Singh was also killed, had a similar story to tell about the cremation of his son's body. Only one member of the family of the deceased was allowed to attend the cremation. Even Balraj Puri a man respected by all shades of opinion for his social and political work in the region, was denied permission.

One of the most noteworthy features of the Jammu riots is that both communities attribute them to similar causes. First, they agree that the failure and mishandling by the police and administration led to the easily avoidable outburst of violence. Second, they agree that the killings were not the result of a whole community's attack on the other, but were masterminded and co-ordinated by a small minority of hoodlum gangs. This distinction between the killers and most Hindus prevented the same degree of polarisation and communication breakdown from taking place as are witnessed in many other cities where communal violence has erupted in recent years. A number of police and intelligence personnel also agree with this version.

DIG Ali gave us a rather confused version of the killings. He was not willing to admit that all the 13 Sikhs died on the 13th. He made it appear that only a couple of deaths took place that day. In fact, it was with great difficulty that he admitted to a total of 13 deaths. He also tried to indicate that an equal number of Sikhs and Hindus had died. He claimed that because some of the Sikhs from the procession were running away, armed with swords, they may have appeared menacing to some Hindus, or may even have attacked some Hindus. In his version, the killings of Sikhs may thus have perhaps been a retaliation occurring in skirmishes between Hindus and Sikhs.

That there was planned co-ordination by gangsters is, however, borne out by the following additional facts. Stray attacks on Sikhs continued even after January 13. These seem to be deliberate provocations by hired miscreants. Two Sikh boys were stabbed when returning home from a tuition class on January 28. There was another stabbing incident on January 30. Around this time, some Sikh truck drivers were beaten and badly injured.

Attempts are also being made to spread communal tension in neighbouring villages and towns. Sikhs allege that Shiv Sena is sending propaganda vans to villages, resulting in Sikh truck drivers being stopped and beaten. On the 14th, there was an outbreak of violence in Udhampur. Eight or nine Sikh shops were burnt down and Sikhs allege that as in Jammu, police connived or participated in the looting. The same day, half a dozen Sikh shops were looted in Akhnour. Curfew was imposed for three to four days. When it was lifted, there was a bomb blast in Poonch which is seen as an attempt to create panic though it is not known who was responsible for it. On the 27th some trucks

driven by Sikhs were stopped near Udhampur by the Shiv Sena workers on the suspicion that the cows carried by them were meant for slaughter in Srinagar. The government, on the other hand, maintains that the cows were being taken under a duly sanctioned permit for distribution among villagers under the rural development programme.

The Sikhs allege that the drivers were beaten up because they refused to pay bribes. One truck was burnt there and the rest were driven to the city of Udhampur and burnt there in full view of the public. The administration did not intervene to prevent these blatant acts of violence. Curfew was imposed only after the damage was done.

Yet the breakdown of communication between Hindus and Sikhs was much less serious than in many other cities.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

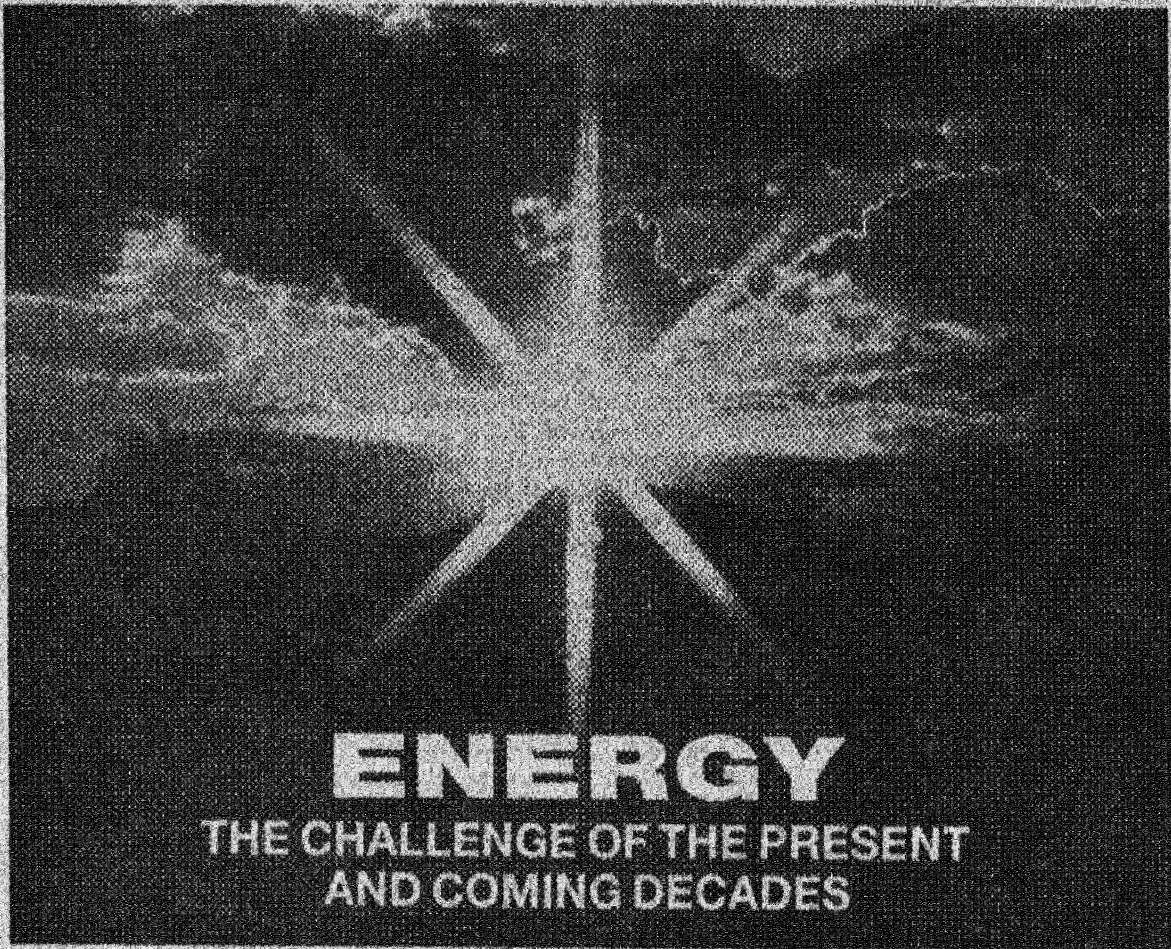
The state government's handling of the crisis gives the impression of covert protection being given to the rioters. Even after the individuals responsible for instigating and leading the attacks were named in statements given to the police, the police registered all the cases as 'mob violence'. Following strong criticism of this mishandling, 150 persons were arrested. But, after a two-day hartal to protest against these arrests, most of the arrested were released unconditionally. This happened at Udhampur too.

The divisional commissioner, N R Gupta, told us that he agreed to release those arrested "as people came and told me that they were innocent". He asserted that once the inquiry implicates the guilty, "the administration will deal with them sternly". Despite eyewitness accounts and FIR reports identifying some of the killers, no arrests have yet been made under Section 302.

Gupta, who as divisional commissioner bears substantial responsibility for the events, was a picture of contradictions. On the one hand, he strongly defended the administration and the "alacrity with which they brought the situation under control". On the other, he indicated the administrative breakdown when he himself volunteered that there "was a failure of the system. There is a need for a total overhaul of the system." He also asserted that the administration was independent of the politicians, and then, a few minutes later, decried the interference of "many in power".

Communication along the chain of command was snapped without rapid attempts to reestablish them. Incredibly enough, the administrative breakdown was grimly underscored by the chief minister himself. In a meeting of citizens a day after the riots, he angrily retorted, "So what do you want me to do? Put everyone on the guillotine? I only came to know at 2.30 pm when I saw smoke from my window. I tried to telephone. It was dead. The wireless was not working. This administration is rusted. I still tried to bring the situation under control in two hours!"

A day after the riot, Farooq announced



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that he would request the chief justice of the Supreme Court to appoint a retired judge to head an enquiry commission to investigate the riots. This was not done. Instead, he appointed M R A Ansari, retired chief justice of the Andhra High Court who had also been a judge in J and K, to head the enquiry. The independence of the commission is in doubt as Ansari is already enquiring into another incident in J and K—a pipe scandal in Anantnag district. Additionally, the opposition has decided to boycott the enquiry demanding that the commission should be headed by a sitting judge. The Sikh leaders have welcomed the commission as it is headed by a Muslim, supposed to be neutral between Hindus and Sikhs.

The central government has often made it appear as if Jammu, on account of its proximity to Punjab, is an important base for Sikh terrorists. This impression was not borne out by our conversations with Hindus and Sikhs in the city. They reiterated that Jammu had retained a very unusual level of communal co-operation among Hindus and Sikhs. Unlike in most north Indian cities, there was no communal violence after Operation Bluestar in Jammu city or even after Indira Gandhi's assassination nor has there been any communal clashes at any time after that.

However, since Operation Bluestar, the Sikh community in Jammu has been a target of intelligence agencies and the police. The J and K Sikh Students' Federation (JKSSF) was one of the main groups that came under government surveillance. The government charged the JKSSF with following the political line of the AISSF. Most Sikhs we met, including JKSSF activists, deny this charge. They point out that JKSSF was formed in 1947. It not only predates AISSF but has a different history. This is not to say that members of JKSSF have had no relationship with AISSF or that there are no political divisions in the group. Prior to Bluestar, several JKSSF activists had attended camps and meetings of Bhindranwale. However, they say that most of them were motivated *not* by Bhindranwale's political challenge to the centre and his terrorist politics but were drawn to him as a popular religious leader. Most of those who travelled in Punjab in 1983-84 were marked and subsequently arrested. Torture, interrogation and lengthy incarcerations followed. Those who had jobs remain suspended even after release from jail, or acquittal by courts. In all, 154 people were arrested during this period. The case of 34-year-old Avtar Singh illustrates the predicament of Sikh youth outside Punjab. Today, he calls himself a social worker and we found him among those most actively involved in reestablishing communal harmony, along with Balraj Puri, who confirmed that Avtar Singh and many JKSSF youth had been providing spirited support for establishing Hindu-Sikh amity.

Avtar Singh, an MA LLB has a diploma in business management. For some years, he taught biology in a high school in Nigeria. From 1978 to 1980 he worked as a technical

assistant for quality control in the Food Corporation of India. He was arrested after Operation Bluestar on September 5, 1984 and was only released four years and four months later on November 2, 1988. He spent these years in different jails—Bhadarwa, Srinagar, Udhampur and then Jammu. He was charged under the Arms Act and for conspiracy against the state. Some time prior to his arrest, he had been all-India advisor of the Sikh Students Federation but had left the organisation before his arrest. He has been acquitted by the courts of all the charges, and declared innocent. But he has not yet been reinstated in his job. He says, on April 18, 1988 the president of JKSSF held a press conference to declare that they have no link with Punjab politics but only religious links. He himself openly stands against terrorist politics. Like most others, he too was tortured, chained, hung up, kept in solitary confinement. His family spend about Rs 65,000 on the court cases. His father just retired as a driver on RTC.

Of the 154 arrested after Bluestar, cases were filed against Avtar Singh and two others. No reason was stated for the detention of all the others. As of now, only five JKSSF members are still under detention. They were arrested in 1988. Those arrested earlier have been released. Needless to say, such detentions have produced an effect similar to that on other Sikhs outside Punjab, the feeling that they are a targeted community.

The irresponsible manner in which the J and K government reacted to the recent crisis may not prove a deliberate conspiracy. But it certainly confirms Sikhs fears about their security. For example, Sikhs in Gol Gujral camp bitterly complained that even though the police did not lift a finger when they were murderously attacked on the 13th, subsequently they were surrounded by the BSF, the military and the CRPF, all together. For 26 hours, where there was no curfew, no local clash occurred in that area, nor was there any retaliation by the Sikhs even though they are in a majority there. Still the curfew was imposed which prevented people from any expression of community grief. They say that when they were going to a funeral ceremony, the BSF tried to intimidate them. The official explanation was that they were trying to prevent a violent Sikh backlash while the Sikhs feel it was meant to harass.

Anger and disillusionment with politicians were symbolically represented by an incident a day after the riots. A minister and an MLA with their security men went to gauge the mood of the community at Gol Gujral and to pacify their grief. Both were summarily forced to leave. Balraj Puri and his colleagues were the first outsiders to be allowed into the area several days later on the 17th and the curfew was relaxed when Balraj Puri took personal responsibility for the peaceful behaviour of the residents of Gol Gujral.

Similar sentiments were voiced in Simbal village, about 15 km from Jammu city. Of

the 15,000 people in this settlement of refugees from Pakistan and Azad Kashmir, 90 per cent are Sikhs. There were apprehensions that this large concentration of Sikhs might attack the neighbouring Hindu villages in retaliation for the murder of some of their young men in Jammu on the 13th. They proudly told us that no such incident was allowed by the community here; not one of the small minority of Hindus in or around the village was even touched. One villager said: "We are not against Hindus or any other community. Our grudge is against the government. We are against injustice even if it is committed by a Sikh." They were bitter about the fact that while the administration had done nothing to stop the rioters, an entire army brigade came and surrounded the village when Balraj Puri tried to hold a peace meeting there on January 17. Their comment: "Those who are in the majority can do what they like, burn our vehicles, kill our young men. They sit on one side with cannons and on the other side with guns. That is why we, the minority, are helpless. We can only die. So we are prepared to die. That is all we have in our hands." This statement in a way sums up the demoralised mood of the Sikh community in Jammu, most of whom, like Punjabi Hindus in Delhi, had come and settled here as refugees from Pakistan or 'Azad Kashmir'. Unlike Sikhs in most other parts of the country they are not a very prosperous community. The largest group in simpal village are agriculturalists, transport drivers, teachers and low level government employees.

Over 40 years after independence, Hindu and Sikh refugees in Jammu have not been granted legal titles to the land they live and work on. The state administration argues that legal titles cannot be given as the Muslim families who left for Azad Kashmir at partition are legally still citizens of India and could at any time return and claim legal ownership of this land. The Indian government still considers Azad Kashmir its territory, so Muslims there cannot be denied their rights in Indian territories. The resulting insecurity of tenure is felt even more acutely by the Sikhs today, who with such attacks taking place in different parts of India after November 1984, are beginning to feel they have no place anywhere. Even though there was a small flow of migration to Punjab immediately after 1984, the idea of migration to Punjab does not appeal to most Sikhs, first because of the economic uprooting involved, and, second, because the atmosphere of insecurity and violence in Punjab is no less threatening to those Sikhs who migrate there.

POLITICAL INITIATIVES LACKING

The fact that Hindus and Sikhs are not absolutely polarised makes it relatively easier to initiate moves for communal amity. That is why a single determined individual like Balraj Puri has been able to be as effective as he has. He has been instrumental in forming a forum of ordinary citizens called the

Citizens Unity Forum. He has also initiated a sustained dialogue among intellectuals, artists and writers (a group called Intellectuals Against Communalism has been formed) and formed a group among the youth called Shanti Sena (Peace Committee).

This was all the more commendable as no political party got involved in the peace effort. They were critically absent in the peace committees, in providing relief or in demanding that those responsible for the dastardly killings be arrested. Efforts at building or sustaining communal amity were left to the citizens. Yet, the political demoralisation which Jammu shares with the rest of the country makes the task a hard one. This demoralisation manifests itself in various ways. Even though both communities are convinced that it was a major failure on the part of the government not to have pre-empted this easily avoidable violence, both are helplessly insisting that only the government can solve the problem. Even Sikhs who allege that the violence was part of a conspiracy against them can think of no better strategy than petitioning the government to do its job properly. When it fails to do so, they have no response but a spirit of disgruntled resignation.

The lack of faith in genuinely community-based initiatives to pre-empt a communal divide was most evident in the response to the 'provocation' provided by the controversial banner in the procession. The Sikhs kept

repeating that the police and government authorities should have taken appropriate action.

We repeatedly asked why, in the interest of self-preservation, the community leaders had not taken a more determined and vigilant stand, since only one contingent had carried such a banner. The answer invariably was that it was the government's job to control such elements who try to make trouble. To our question as to why they expected the wolf to protect the sheep, the allegedly mischievous government to protect them, their answer was a reiteration of helplessness: Government should have taken action.

This shows a demoralisation and absence of effective leadership. The leaders were not sure they could carry the congregation with them, since most Sikhs have some sympathy for Satwant and Kehar. Also, they were not certain how hotblooded young men might react. Their fears kept them from being effective.

Among the Hindus, too, while everyone blamed the government, no one could explain why a small group of Shiv Sena men were allowed to spread panic, get the shops closed and challenge the procession while the majority looked on helplessly, fully realising that such steps were bound to lead to a conflagration.

While there is no denying the relative sanity with which the citizens of Jammu have reacted to this crisis, the city has not totally

escaped the influence of the poisonous propaganda of communal mistrust and hatred. Some of the Hindus who genuinely deplore the engineered nature of the growing communal tension make statements which have a remarkable similarity to Shiv Sena type of propaganda. These include three broad themes:

(1) That the minorities, whether Sikhs or Muslims, are holding the country to ransom. That Hindus, despite being the majority, are a tyrannised community.

(2) That Hindus must 'unite' and become tough so as to put the minorities 'in their place'.

(3) While there can be no real truck with Muslims because they are different Sikhs and Hindus are 'one'—the only difference between them is that Sikhs are keshdharis while Hindus are sahadharis. The continuing *roti beti ka rishta* between Hindus and Sikhs, the fact that the Gurus fought for the defence of Hindus, and the fact that Gurudwaras and the Granth Sahib and the Gurus occupy a place of sanctity in Hindu minds are proof of this oneness.

Unfortunately, this 'oneness' theme has some deadly overtones. It seems to echo the RSS position that everyone living in Hindustan is a Hindu in the modern sense of the term. If any community asserts a distinct religious or cultural identity, it is misled and must be forced to accept its Hindu identity (*Hindustan mein rehna hai to hindu ban ke*

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rehna hoga). This leads to a tendency to justify violence as 'provoked' by Sikh slogans and banners that Hindus find objectionable. Even the burning of gurudwaras and the Granth Sahib, supposedly as holy for Hindus as for Sikhs, gets to be seen as inevitable responses by the aggrieved Hindu community. Those who talk of the 'oneness' of Hindus and Sikhs wish to extend the supposedly historical basis of oneness into the present, implying that instead of fighting each other, the Hindus and Sikhs should unite to put Muslims in their place, as they are supposed to have done against the Muslim rulers. The Sikhs tend to see Hindu aggressive assertion of oneness as further proof that Hindus are determined to suppress minority religious identity and to make them live on terms dictated by the majority.

This violent outburst can also be seen as the frustrated response of demoralised communities. Neither Sikhs nor Hindus in Jammu have any genuine political outlet to express their grievances. Until a short time, both Hindus and Sikhs rallied around the BJP or the Congress to protest against the domination by the Kashmir-based National Conference. The politics of phoney accords has destroyed this outlet, as it has in Punjab. The Farooq-Rajiv accord has hastened an overall political demoralisation. Kashmiri Muslims have been forced to believe that the Congress will not allow any popularly elected front to function in J and K if it does not slavishly toe the line of the Congress government at the centre. The National Conference, which once asserted the Kashmiri identity, is being eroded and its support base is slipping over to parties which channelise popular resentment on communal lines—Muslims against Hindus. There are some parallels between the National Conference and the Akali Dal. The NC, which was an instrument of Kashmiri protest, has suffered an erosion of credibility, as the Akalis did after their accord with the centre, more or less for similar reasons.

In the Jammu region, the accord meant that the National Conference surrendered its political base to the Congress as a *quid pro quo*. The virtual collapse of the political machinery of the Congress all over the country in recent years, especially after the coming to power of Rajiv Gandhi, has contributed to the growth of a political vacuum in Jammu. The Congress is politically discredited for being unable to protest the interests of Jammu against Kashmiri domination. The BJP too has eroded its political base, partly by concentrating on the politics of crumb gathering, and partly by their very dubious role *vis-a-vis* the demand for regional autonomy for Jammu. Jammu nurses the grievance of being neglected. The solution to this is for Jammu to get a more proportional share of political power. But neither BJP nor Congress is able to channelise this sentiment. According to Balraj Puri, the greater political vacuum today than in 1984 is the reason why violence broke out now when there is much less cause for it, as

compared to 1984 when sentiments amongst both Hindus and Sikhs were far more inflamed. Despite the amount of goodwill and respect he enjoys among all communities, he warns: "Individuals however determined lose much of their effectiveness—as was demonstrated on January 13—if institutions and the system start collapsing."

The total collapse of the parties has left a vacuum which is filled by the Shiv Sena and other hoodlums. By all accounts, Shiv Sena does not have a wide political base. Their rhetoric of strong arm methods to protect and unite Hindus may strike a sympathetic chord amongst many Hindus. In the last election their candidate in Jammu city, which is their main base, secured only 700 votes. So the sympathy is not crystallised into support. But they seem to be able to secure political patronage and co-operation from both the Congress and BJP. Shiv Sena, being a more lumpen type of organisation, is readily available to represent sentiments expressed in a crude form—anti-Muslim, and anti-Sikh. It plays on peoples' fears, imaginary and real. The riot shows that a small band of lumpens can hold the city to ransom, with little political or other resistance from any party or even from the government machinery. The local Shiv Sena has recently had discussions with the Shiv Sena in Punjab and Maharashtra. In the recent past Shiv Sena and RSS have held joint protests. A recent example is the protest against the setting up of a meat shop at the Bage Bahu picnic spot. This has dangerous portents.

There is no apparent explanation for the collapse of the administration during the rioting in Jammu. In the absence of such an explanation, a number of alternative theories become credible, though none can yet be demonstrated as accurate. However, certain conclusions are clear, no matter what are determined as the underlying reasons.

(1) The administration collapsed in the face of the rioting, as admitted by the chief minister himself. No contingency plans for such a riot were ready for implementation.

(2) A lack of political support in the administration was evident. Those rioters who were arrested were soon released.

(3) Subsequent developments show a lack of political will and political support for a rapid and decisive joint political campaign to end the riots. All political parties abdicated their responsibilities to participate in quick action to pre-empt the occurrence of the riot or to end it rapidly before the consequences became so severe.

WHAT THEN DO PEOPLE DO?

(1) In this case, as in most others in most parts of contemporary India, we cannot just rely on the administration or on political parties to handle the communal situation that precedes the rioting or the subsequent riot. Non-political voluntary organisations exclusively devoted to this task become a vital precondition to a peaceful resolution of the conflicts that results in riots as well

as in mitigating their effects and bringing them to a rapid halt with minimal loss of lives and destruction to community property. In this administrative and political vacuum, full of unreliable and sometimes duplicitous officials, every effort has to be made to make government accountable. However, contingency plans should be carefully prepared through continuous efforts at increasing the awareness among citizens' groups as to why citizens have a basic responsibility for maintaining communal amity, not the politicians and administration.

(2) A mere increase in the size of the police force does not necessarily help. The usual result of such an expansion is an increase in tension, unclear loyalties, a more complex chain of command and a subsequent lack of accountability for keeping the peace. However, an active citizenry may demand co-operation from intelligently informed and directed police to play a limited role in keeping a dispute from getting out of hand once it has reached a violent stage. Such forces should be called only when the citizens' committee feels no further efforts will avert the confrontation, and only at their recommendation. Such special personnel should be mobilisable on short notice and contain a balanced representation of the contending groups.

(3) If such a riot nevertheless takes place and the administration acts ineffectively, the senior most police and administrative officer of the area should be immediately suspended, and held accountable along with all his men if they have been identified as having committed communal or illegal acts. Determination of responsibility for their part in riots should be via an open judicial enquiry, not an administrative enquiry. Strict time tables and publication of results should be mandatory.

(4) Additionally, in such a situation, the home minister should offer his resignation. In the case of proven incapacity of unwillingness of the administration to take the necessary preventive actions and immediately confront the situation, the chief minister should also be required to hand his resignation.

(5) The lesson of Jammu is that even when relations between groups have been cordial for generations at the ordinary people's level, trouble can nevertheless break out due to the special interests of small groups and the abdication of responsibility by the administration and by various communities. This is a serious warning signal for India as a whole. Sustaining communal peace requires vigilance and a fight against complacency all over the country.

There is need to establish local community-based active peace groups which can evolve timely meaningful strategies of mutual assistance, not just after conflagrations, but also in areas where there is potential for conflict. The Jammu experience further underscores the need for continuous work at the community level to sustain and strengthen communal amity.



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