

Ways to Combat Communal Violence

Some Thoughts on International Women's Day

by

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I have attempted to make some tentative suggestions to combat the ideology and politics of communal violence. I hope others will improve upon these suggestions so that we can move towards a better, more effective programme of action than has been possible so far.

THIS year a large number of women's organisations in the country will be observing International Women's Day to highlight the issue of growing communal strife and violence in our country. This decision was taken at a national conference held in Calicut in December 1990. It is indeed a welcome step.

The survival of democracy in India is crucially linked to a humane, peaceful and just resolution of ethnic conflicts. The well being of women is also integrally involved because women's position in society deteriorates as the level of violence increases and what was formerly viewed with horror becomes a common occurrence and becomes an acceptable norm in inter-community relations.

However, it is not enough to simply "highlight" the issue, for it is already receiving enough attention. What is far more urgently required is

the working out of meaningful, effective strategies to combat the growing violence. Otherwise our work will stay at the level of offering platitudes on communal harmony, which no one will take seriously, as is already happening. This exercise requires, among other things, an honest and critical revaluation of our own work and our political responses to the crisis.

Why This Paralysis?

Considering the scale at which violence broke out as a result of the Ram Mandir Campaign by the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine, our responses to this crisis situation have been woefully inadequate and even inappropriate.

Mostly they consisted of:

1 Issuing press statements condemning this or that incident.

2 Organising occasional *dharnas* or protest marches that include a small number of women activists and a

handful of sympathizers.

3 Holding conferences and workshops for activists already committed to the cause of protecting human rights.

4 Occasional mass contact activities such as performing street plays, poster exhibitions and leafletting.

All of these are valuable gestures. But they amount to virtually nothing in meeting the challenge posed by the large scale mobilisation of the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine for their politics of hatred and revenge. Apart from the platitudes and sermons exhorting people not to fall in the trap of communal politics, and emphasizing how women are special losers in such situations, we have had very little else to offer by way of political intervention. What is most disturbing is that we failed to organise even token relief work for the victims of riots and massacres. Why did we fail to make

even token gestures of sharing the grief and anguish of those who were maimed and brutalised, those who lost dear ones, lost their houses and means of livelihood?

Relief work had spontaneously happened at the time of anti Sikh riots in November 1984, at least in the city of Delhi. Even as the violence was raging in the city, a new forum called the *Nagrik Ekta Manch* (NEM) came into existence and brought together a heterogeneous and large group of people, including many of the women's organisations and activists. There was no dearth of volunteers. Money and other resources poured in sufficient amounts to allow NEM to function effectively.

Nem As Example

In addition to undertaking relief work on its own, NEM was also able to shame and pressure the government into taking some responsibility for the rehabilitation of the victims of violence. This included provision of alternate housing, pensions and jobs for widows and dependents, as well as other measures. NEM monitored all this,

along with other organisations for several months. As a result, something did reach the victims unlike other times when relief measures are announced by the government, but very little actually reaches those for whom it is meant. Even though no amount of relief or compensation could ever heal the trauma and scars of the victims, NEM work played an important role in preventing a total estrangement of the Sikh community and acted as a bridge of communication between Hindus and Sikhs at a time when powerful political forces were all set to create a permanent schism between the two communities for narrow and temporary electoral gains.

No less significant of the NEM accomplishments were the detailed, first hand eyewitness reports produced by some of the volunteers closely associated with NEM relief and rehabilitation work. Because NEM had responded to the crisis with speed, these volunteers were able to gather information that is hard to get if one reaches the scene several days or weeks later. The involvement with

relief won the confidence of the victims as well as the Sikh community in general. As a result, the quality of information that was collected at that time was far better than the usual kind of riot reports. All this was combined with protest marches, petitions to the court, setting up of a Citizen's Commission and various other activities to mobilize opinion to demand the punishment of those guilty of perpetrating the massacre.

Even though the ruling party and the government managed to thwart proceedings against the guilty, because top level politicians had themselves secured the connivance of the government machinery to unleash the massacre, the success of the NEM lay in the fact that its multifaceted work was slowly able to play a major part in decisively changing social opinion and perceptions regarding the nature of violence in November 1984. Initially, large sections among the Hindu community were willing to condone the bloodshed and looting by saying that it was a "natural and inevitable" reaction to the hurt caused by the



murder of Mrs. Gandhi. They dismissed it as just one more riot, thereby implying that it was a spontaneous outburst of anger and a conflict between the Hindus and Sikhs.

However, within a couple of years, the determined follow-up by NEM and other organisations resulted in a radical change of social opinion. Most people began to openly acknowledge the killings for what they really were: a preplanned massacre of the Sikhs by the Congress leaders with active help from the police and administration. Thus, it could well be said that the people's verdict has been passed against the killers even though the courts failed to do their job. This was no mean achievement.

Another notable achievement was that NEM was able to work closely throughout this period with community based organisatons of the Sikhs.

It is puzzling why the NEM example failed to be repeated, considering that this was among the most effective relief, rehabilitation, reporting, documentation and public opinion mobilising exercise undertaken by human rights groups in recent years. We need to examine the NEM experience more closely to understand what were the factors that allowed such a large, heterogeneous group of people and organisations to come together on one platform and work *efficiently* and *effectively* for a considerable length of time; how it was able to draw support from even the supposedly non-political people, students, housewives, professionals — the kind of people who normally hesitate to get involved in political work. Above all, we need to find out why the present phase of much more widespread violence has failed to evoke a similar response from us? Today, we are behaving like a demoralised lot, unable to think of anything more meaningful than

issuing press statements, organising conferences and occasional ineffective little protest marches and *dharnas*. The situation demands an urgent review of why we have been so politically paralysed.

Too Many Networks, Very Little Work

The ineffectiveness may, in part, be due to the nature of the political space sought to be occupied by most women's groups and human rights/ civil liberties activists.

In recent years there has been an increasing trend towards forming national and international networks with much less attention to community based work. Even the conferences, workshops, seminars and protest marches we organise tend to be confined to a select few spaces and attended by the usual handful of like minded people. In Delhi, for instance, the area between Mandi House, India Gate and Lodhi Estate Complex witnesses most of the activity organised by women's rights and human rights groups. Sometimes, to make the point about our work being non-elitist, we take our protest marches, street plays, poster exhibitions, etcetera to areas inhabited by the poorer sections. So we walk through Jama Masjid, Chandni Chowk or Mongolpuri distributing leaflets, singing songs or shouting slogans and end up with a small public meeting where a few curious onlookers from the area stand at the edges of our meetings listening to our speeches. But since this is seldom followed up by any consistent work in that particular area, the procession, the meeting and the message are forgotten even before we are physically out of sight of those people.

We have consistently shied away from organising such activities in our own neighbourhood and in our own community. This is where the mainstream political parties, especially

the BJP and RSS, score over us. They invariably function through cadres who are encouraged to be active in their own neighbourhood and community, irrespective of whether or not they engage in state or national level politics. They take pride in being respected members of their community and neighbourhoods. Their larger political involvements are based on their having influence at these two levels. However poisonous their overall politics, the image of an RSS or BJP cadre within their own community is usually that of a dedicated social worker who can be relied upon to extend help in moments of crisis. Their political life is integrally linked to their everyday social life and that is why their ideological work is able to acquire such deep roots. It gets woven into the very culture of that community.

In addition, they make it a point to work through the existing social and political institutions even while they may set up new ones. A great deal of their political energy goes into exercising influence through control over *mohalla* associations, *biradari panchayats* and *gram panchayats*. This is not just for the purpose of having a vote gathering machine at the time of elections, but equally for being socially hegemonic and being able to influence various types of decision making at the local level. Their capacity for large scale mobilisation comes essentially from this day to day contact that their cadres are encouraged to consolidate systematically. This contact also provides them with a rich recruiting ground for new cadres as well as the ability to collect vast amounts of funds for their political work.

In contrast, most women's and human rights organisations are more inclined towards "national networks". Very few of us have attempted community based work, starting with our own neighbourhoods and

The Political Space that Matters Most

FOR all their intolerance and goonda politics, the BJP, Congress and other political parties seldom challenge or attack women's organisations or human rights' activists as long as they keep themselves confined to select political spaces. But if by chance, we stray into spaces they consider their own domain, we get to experience the full blast of their wrath. The following account of **Manushi**'s attempt to organise a meeting for communal amity provides a glimpse of how jealously community level politics is guarded by these political parties and their allied social organisations. (A full account of this experience was published in Issue No. 39, 1987)

The meeting, held on June 25, 1985, was meant to pay homage to the memory of Shri Prabhu Dayal who had died while trying to save three Sikh women from a burning house in Ashok Vihar during the anti-Sikh riots of November 1984. As a result of the serious injuries he sustained in the process, he died on Nov 8, 1984. We raised some funds for Shri Prabhu Dayal's family and invited Sant Longowal to preside over the meeting and join us in honouring Shri Prabhu Dayal through his family. The decision to invite Sant Longowal was based on his role in emphasizing the need for Hindu-Sikh amity even at great personal risk at a time when most politicians were busy furthering the communal divide.

We decided to hold the meeting in the *mohalla* in which **Manushi**'s office is situated, instead of holding it at one of the usual public halls in the Mandi House complex where only a small number of already committed human rights activists would come. The idea was to involve our entire neighbourhood. The meeting was fixed at short notice and we had about five days to prepare for it.

We began by approaching the local residents' association. Their first spontaneous response was very enthusiastic and heartening. They offered to take responsibility for the entire function, financially and otherwise. That's when the wheels started turning and both the local Congress and the BJP-RSS leaders got busy in sabotaging the meeting. The *mohalla* association elections are fiercely contested by these parties, and the local leaders stake all their prestige in controlling these associations. They were very upset that **Manushi** had on its own initiative fixed a meeting of this kind in their neighbourhood without seeking their approval or patronage. They began by raising objections to the idea of the resident's association getting involved in organising or assisting a meeting to which a "political" leader had been invited. Many of the members tried to reason that this was not really a political meeting. But these "leaders", whose own political affiliations were well known, remained adamant. To avoid entering into a confrontation, **Manushi** gave up the idea of having the association officially involved in sponsoring the meeting. It was decided that even if the residents' association was not officially involved, individual members could take part and some of them volunteered to collectively bear the entire cost of the meeting for their enthusiasm was still high.

Seeing the enthusiastic support we were receiving from the neighbourhood, these leaders began hectic political activity. At no point did they openly oppose the holding of the meeting. But the manner in which they began to sabotage it was far worse than outright opposition. Within no time, an atmosphere of terror prevailed in the *mohalla* as though a riot was just around the corner. To the Hindus they said: "You

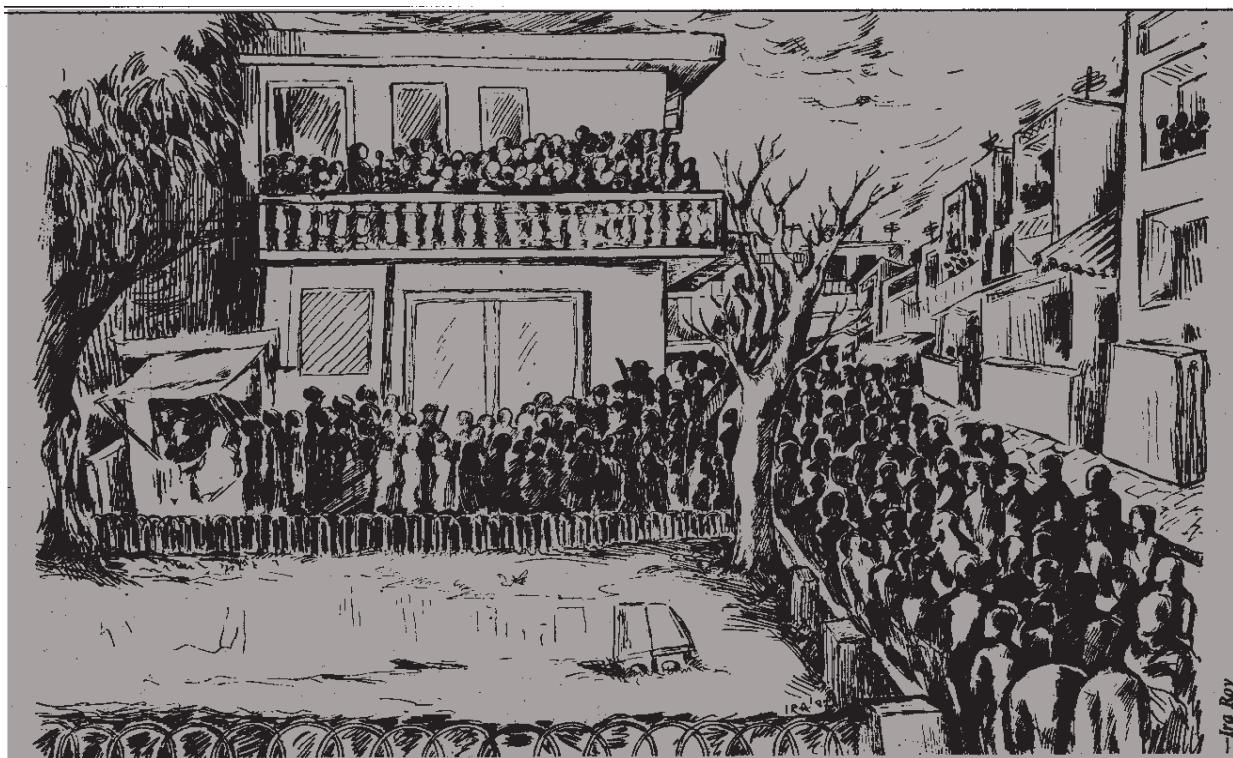
know how hotheaded these Sikhs are. As soon as we allow a meeting

like this to be held, the extremists will descend here with their swords and deliberately provoke a clash with the police. Once that happens no one can prevent a riot breaking out in this neighbourhood." To the Sikhs, the message took the form of a barely veiled threat. They were asked: "Suppose even a couple of extremist elements come here and start shouting pro-Khalistan slogans, who is going to prevent the Hindus from retaliating? If any violence occurs, all of you Sikhs will be held responsible for provoking an attack." The Sikhs were reminded of the November riots and were told that they ought to be grateful for having been spared during that time.

As a result of this fear campaign, both Hindus and Sikhs started expressing doubts about holding the meeting in the neighbourhood. The "leaders" went so far as to tell the police in writing that they deny us the required permission to hold this meeting as it would be a threat to public safety. As a result, we started receiving very aggressive phone calls from the local police station enquiring why we were trying to disturb the law and order situation in the area, and trying to convince us to cancel our programme for which they wouldn't give us permission anyway.

We were surprised to find that throughout this period, the local leaders did not once openly oppose our meeting. Instead they kept persuading us to simply shift the meeting out of the *mohalla*. Their constant refrain was "Why don't you hold the meeting in Sapru House, Vithalbhai Patel House or some such central place?" and they tried to argue that it would then become a big "national" event rather than a small neighbourhood affair and we would get better newspaper publicity.

They obviously understand better



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than we human rights activists do, that as long as we stay confined to certain fashionable locations which automatically ghettoises our politics to a small self selected set of people, the mainstream politicians can easily afford to ignore us. And indeed our meetings in Gandhi Peace Foundation or India International Center are almost never disrupted or challenged by the Con-gress or the BJP. Nor do they bother about the enormous favourable coverage our puny little meetings get in the national press, as long as we don't encroach on the territory that matters to them.

Therefore, no effort was spared to prevent us from holding a meeting in our own block of Lajpat Nagar. With great effort we somehow managed to get the Police Commissioner's permission, but the local police station remained on the side of the "local leaders." They threatened the tent house from providing us with equipment like mikes and lights for the

meeting. The shopkeeper got so afraid that he simply disappeared. On the day of the meeting they went as far as to break the water taps in the park where the meeting was to be held so that it was flooded ankle deep. The gardener was threatened not to help us close those taps. This final act of sabotage left us with no choice but to abandon the idea of holding the meeting in the park. Instead we shifted the venue to our open terrace and used it as a stage with people from the neighbourhood gathered in the street below to witness the meeting.

Since we somehow stuck it out, the meeting was not only held, but was even successful. But that could be done because we did not use the meeting as a show of force, nor got involved in the numbers game. If they would not allow us the use of the park where it would assume the form of a large public meeting, we were willing to hold it on our terrace or even a verandah, that is using private space

in a way that it remained public, even though far fewer people could be physically accommodated inside the house. But despite the threats and terror tactics, hundreds of people from the neighbourhood stood on the streets to participate in the meeting. For long after, this meeting remained a subject of conversation among our neighbours. We had won the sympathy of most of our neighbours even though they were not yet prepared to challenge the sabotage game played by the "local leaders".

The effort, the strain and the risk involved in mobilising our respective communities and neighbourhoods against communal violence and human rights abuses is likely to be much greater than that involved in holding "national" conventions on these issues.

However, difficult this route may prove to be, I am convinced that unless many of us become simultaneously active at the local level, our work at any other level will not have any solid base.

communities. The few who attempt such work usually do so in communities other than their own; usually involving running of “projects” among the poor in *bastis*, slums and villages on behalf of development agencies. That pre-empts the activists being considered an integral part of the community. They are viewed more as outsiders who have come to do a job, sympathetic aliens who come and go as they please and shift from one project to another according to their own convenience.

Thus, we stay alienated not only from our own community and neighbourhoods but also from those to whom we go as helpful outsiders. We have consistently avoided doing political work in our own neighbourhoods or with our own community on the pretext that this would confine us to working with the middle class and elite whereas “real” work is ostensibly only that which is done among the poor and the oppressed.

A large number of women activists come from relatively privileged backgrounds. Like most who view themselves as “radical”, many of the women activists are prone to guilt-trapping themselves into believing that work among the middle class will bring them discredit for being pro-elitist. But since our work with the poor remains sporadic and fitful, we deny ourselves the possibility of being considered “insiders” anywhere. This, in large part, explains our marginalisation and ineffectiveness. It also partially explains why many women’s groups resort more and more to becoming part of national and international networks which take us further and further away from the scene of social tension and

conflict. Lack of community base and support also leads to continual paucity of funds and cadres. Hence the increasing trend towards seeking financial support from funding agencies. That helps in making “networks” abound, while workers become harder and harder to find. Most women’s organisations find it hard to find enough volunteers for day to day sustained work. The kind of activists readily available are usually

November 1984 massacre in Delhi, it came out clearly that wherever neighbours got together to put up joint resistance, killings and burning were almost always preempted. Even a small number of determined people were able to act effectively in resisting killing and looting brigades.

We have not prepared the ground for such mobilisation even in our own immediate neighbourhoods, leave alone city wide. Yet we are constantly

involved in holding “national” level conferences and workshops. While the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine can mobilise hundreds of thousands across the country for their blood-stained politics, those of us who claim to be defenders of human rights are unable to put together ten people in each of our neighbourhoods to stand up and oppose rioting and killing. This imbalance needs to change and hopefully women’s organisations will be among the leaders in this effort.

The Role of the Middle Class

To begin with, neighbourhood based work among the middle class may appear less urgent, or even redundant, given that outbreaks of communal violence take place mostly in areas inhabited by the poor or in bazaars and shopping centres. However, considering

those who are provided paid jobs by social work or development organisations.

For effective work against violence, whether at the domestic level or of the kind witnessed during riots and massacres, we need to have localised, community based work. Voluntary defence committees should be formed to protect their own neighbourhoods. At the time of



projected so favourably in the press and get to dominate important centres of ideological influence, such as, universities, colleges and schools as well as influence and manipulate the government machinery to serve their political ends. For instance, the PAC jawans in UP do not hesitate to unleash violence on Muslims not only because they are assured of protection from their bosses and other sections of the bureaucracy, but also because very large sections of the Hindu middle and upper classes, including most of the UP press, have become vociferous defenders of the PAC's unlawful actions.

Once the middle classes turn fascist, they are mostly successful in using the poorer, oppressed sections as instruments to carry out their hate campaigns. In riot after riot, it comes out that the middle class led pogroms have used sections of the poor and *dalits* to attack Muslims. The endorsement and participation of the middle class makes killing and rioting appear as respectable activities. Without this endorsement, the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine would find it much harder to recruit the poor and *dalits* to indulge in anti-Muslim violence by persuading them to believe that even while looting and killing their fellow citizens they are acting as "defenders of the nation."

Thus we need to review our attitude of dismissive contempt towards the middle class. We need to get over our embarrassment and guilt about belonging to this group. Only then we use our relatively privileged position to strengthen human rights politics.

We cannot combat the ideology of communal hatred and violence without winning over large sections of the middle class and elite groups into endorsing a polity based on respect for human rights. Whether we like it or not, the middle class and elite



groups play a hegemonic role in our society. In India, which has a very large and growing middle class, the ideological influence of this group is truly enormous. By totally ignoring the need for political work among this key segment of our society, we have failed to stop them from leaning more and more on the side of authoritarian hate-soaked communal politics, rather than in favour of humane, democratic rights politics. Very effective challenges to the power of establishment elite groups have often in history come from radical sections within elite groups. The middle class in particular has great propensity for being mobilised for causes not directly connected with their immediate material interests. It is important to ensure that this propensity does not seek destructive outlets, as is happening with the Ram Mandir Campaign. Gandhi's success in large part lay in his ability to channel the idealism of some of the privileged sections of the society into creative outlets. He could inspire them to rise above the politics of narrow self seeking and support the cause of disadvantaged and hitherto despised groups. The spinning and weaving of *Khadi*, getting involved in removal of untouchability and promoting the cause of women's equality, accepting the right of Muslims to stay in India even after Hindus had been driven out of Pakistan after the Partition, demonstrated how sections of the middle class and elite groups can act with some responsibility towards oppressed groups of society. Our failure to take this potential seriously in post-Independence India has resulted in the successful winning over of the middle class to socially destructive causes led by the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine.

Therefore, weaning away of the middle class from the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine through neighbourhood based politics is urgently required.

Our Demands From The Government

It is well known that the rioters, killers and looters almost always get protection, patronage and encouragement from the government machinery and politicians. This has made the battle between Hindus and Muslims very unequal since the government and the political machinery is dominated and controlled by the Hindu majority. This provides a great incentive to the rioters among the majority community. If they are assured of police and other protection, they don't have to fear reprisals. This link can be broken only by making the government machinery more accountable for its actions. This task cannot be performed by the vulnerable sections of the population without help from the middle class intelligentsia. The protests and demands of the oppressed groups are either ignored or met with further repression. However, if large sections among the elite groups were to get organised to oppose the increasing criminalisation of the government and political machinery, they are more likely to succeed in acting as a restraining influence.

For achieving that end it is important to make our demands more specific instead of voicing general protests against the misdoings of the government machinery and in vague terms asking for the punishment of the guilty. If government is to be held accountable for its actions, responsibility has to be pinned down to specific functionaries. Our demands should include the following:

1. Political control of the police force by the people, and accountability of the police to the people. This means that the police in each locality be in the service of the local residents. These personnel should be recruited by, and the power of dismissing them also be held by elected representatives of the local

residents. This will make it harder for the police to subject the local population to arbitrary excesses. At present they are only accountable, if at all, to their district hierarchical police superiors, immune from accountability to the local people.

The centrally controlled police force should only have jurisdiction over offences that operate on a national level. They should only be permitted to intervene at the local level on the specific request of a freely elected local government or where there has been a violation of fundamental human rights by the local police.

2. Disband the PAC and other paramilitary organisations which have a proven record of discriminatory mishandling of violent disturbances and murderous misbehaviour against minorities. These paramilitary forces are currently not accountable to residents of those areas on which they are inflicted.

3. Instead, a special peace force be set up to defer communal and anti-minority violence. In each area, this force should have an equitable representation of the particular minorities that are resident in that area. Thus the representation of minorities will not merely be proportional to their overall proportion in the all-India population, for example, 11 percent Muslims or 7 percent tribals, but will be commensurate with their proportion in the particular affected area, for example, an equitable percentage reflecting the population of Muslims in certain disturbed areas of UP, of tribals in South Bihar or in the North-East. This will ensure that the force does not discriminate against any minority in a violence-torn area. The principle of equitable representation of the minority community should be followed at all levels, including the highest ranks.

4. Suitable changes in the legislatures to ensure that the political

representatives, MLAs and MPs, become accountable for making effective provisions for the prevention of communal killings. There should be legal provision for recall of MPs and MLAs and disqualifying them from recontesting if massacres or riots take place in their constituency. We need to make it politically unrewarding for politicians to instigate riots with a view to strengthening vote banks.

5. Likewise it should be made mandatory for the Deputy Commissioner to give a detailed, community by community description of those killed, injured or maimed, as well as an account of property losses suffered by each community. If it can be shown that the Deputy Commissioner is providing wrong information, (s)he should be immediately dismissed from service. Systematic misinformation by the government has facilitated the task of the RSS-VHP-BJP Combine. In the absence of reliable and accurate information, this Combine can deliberately, through their exaggerated, baseless rumours, foment a siege mentality among the Hindus who are being led to believe that they are the victims of aggression even when majority of those killed and looted are Muslims.

6. Legal changes to ensure that the Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police are investigated whenever such incidents take place in their area of jurisdiction. It should not be possible to drag the case beyond one year.

If specific government functionaries and elected representatives could begin to be held accountable for their acts of commission and omission in case of communal violence, the fearful nexus between criminal politicians, fanatic hate mongers and the government machinery might be broken. □