

The Imminence of Violence: Communal Conflicts in Contemporary Indian English Fiction *

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Abstract

*The paper explores the representation of communal riots in Indian English fiction, focusing on the depiction of the precarity of Muslims in post-2014 India. India has a long history of communal conflicts, starting with its independence in 1947. Indian English fiction's engagement with the concept of India continues to develop, as it addresses grievances arising from an increasingly ethnic democracy characterised by communal tensions. We analyse these novels with help from the literature on riots, especially by Gyanendra Pandey and Paul R. Brass. While many novels have depicted the communal conflicts of the period, Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020) and Devika Rege's *Quarterlife* (2023) expose how the institutionalised riot systems operate with identitarian political parties controlling and making use of the conflicts by alluding to true incidents from India's recent past. These novels also underline the importance of fiction as counter-narratives to the 'official' accounts of such conflicts.*

Keywords: riots, ethnic democracy, institutionalised riot systems, counter narratives

Introduction

The 'reaction', if indeed that is what it was, was neither equal nor opposite. The killing went on for weeks and was not confined to cities alone. The mobs were armed with swords and tridents and wore saffron headbands. They had cadastral lists of Muslim homes, businesses and shops. They had stockpiles of gas cylinders (which seemed to explain the gas shortage of the previous few weeks). When people who had been injured were taken to hospital, mobs attacked the hospitals. The police would not register murder cases. They said, quite reasonably, that they needed to see the corpses. The catch was that the police were often part of the mobs, and once the mobs had finished their business, the corpses no longer resembled corpses. (Roy 45)

Arundhati Roy's second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), recalls the 2002 Gujarat Riots in this passage. Although short, the passage reveals a great deal about the nature of riots in India. It denotes the outbreak as a 'reaction' to a particular incident, the Godhra train burning incident (2002) in this case. The saffron headbands reveal their commitment to Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, and the cadastral lists include households as well as businesses. Lynching people or burning their houses is not enough; businesses, their means of survival, should be taken care of.

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Attacking the hospital is a move to confirm fatalities and wipe out witnesses. The mobs are so vicious that their actions render the corpses unidentifiable. However, the most shocking aspect of the riot described in the passage is the complicity of the state mechanism, which turned its back on the victims and joined the mobs in their horrifying acts. Roy's novel is one among the many literary portrayals of India's communal riots.

We look at the representations of riots in contemporary Indian English fiction published in the period following the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014, which is considered an era of ethnic nationalism by scholars such as Christophe Jaffrelot. Many other terms, including Hindu nationalism and Hindutva, have been used to describe this particular period. We discuss two works that depict the identitarian conflicts in this period, namely *A Burning* (2020) by Megha Majumdar and *Quarterlife* (2023) by Devika Rege, their representation of Muslim lives in India in general, and the portrayal of riots in particular. This paper analyses the representation of riots with the help of social science scholarship, including works by Gyanendra Pandey and Paul R. Brass.

Riots in India

Envisioned as an inclusive democratic nation by the founders of its constitution, India boasts incredible religious diversity. According to the 2011 census, India's Muslims constitute 14.2% of the nation's total population and are the largest Muslim minority in the world (Press Information Bureau). The nation also has a long history of communal conflicts since 1947, when the British Raj ended with the partition of colonial India into a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority Pakistan. The hasty partition led to numerous conflicts, especially in the border regions involving Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities, resulting in the deaths of at least one million people (Brocklehurst). Other horrific incidents of ethnic or religious conflict include the Anti-Sikh riots (1984), the riots that followed the Babri Masjid demolition (1992), and the Gujarat Riots (2002). Mitra and Ray have argued that at least 7000 people died in communal conflicts in the period 1950–2000 alone (230). In the post-2014 period, incidents of lynchings were reported across India, including many led by cow-vigilante groups. The violence in Delhi in 2020, termed the Delhi riots, “led to the deaths of 53 people (38 Muslim victims and 15 Hindus) and left hundreds injured” (Dutta and Tewari). During the incident, there were also reports of attacks on Muslim houses, shops, and mosques.

Social science scholars across the world have studied riots in relation to religious differences, mob psychology, and economic interests. While journalistic accounts describe horrific incidents of violence across India, scholarship has focused on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions. Communal violence in India has roots in the colonial period when the British administration banked on religious differences to weaken anti-colonial resistance (Engineer 69). Gyanendra Pandey (1992) has contested the perception of Hindu-Muslim violence in India as ‘aberrations’ in an otherwise unblemished story of the secular nation. In his opinion, violence is woven into India's political fabric, and accounts from minority communities’ perspectives and literary or local ‘fragments’ are counterarguments to state-centred narratives (27). With the help of statistical analysis, Ashuthosh Varshney (2002) investigated why some cities are riot-prone and others are not, emphasising the importance of interethnic civic engagement (281). Paul R. Brass presented one of the most famous theorisations of collective violence in India in his works *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (2003) and *Forms of Collective Violence in India: Riots, Pogroms, and Genocide in Modern India* (2006); he argued that there are ‘institutionalised riot systems’ in riot-prone cities that work as a network to enable violence. In *Riot Politics: Hindu-Muslim Violence*

and the Indian State (2013), Ward Berenschot used ethnographic data from the state of Gujarat to show how local politicians operated by organising and controlling riots. In his study, which is also based in Gujarat, Saumitra Jha (2014) has shown that mediaeval port cities with interethnic populations are five times less prone to riots compared to other cities. The political competition in states also has a significant role in the occurrence of riots (Wilkinson). Various other studies have come up with intriguing findings on the probability of riots; Iyer and Shrivastava (2018) have argued that the probability of a riot is higher when a Hindu festival falls on a Friday, the holy day of Muslims (3); they have also shown how riots influence the vote share of particular political parties (4). Various scholars from across the world have studied communal conflicts in India from diverse perspectives.

Riots in Indian English Fiction

Indian English fiction has produced volumes of ‘national allegories’ (Jameson 69) and engaged with episodes of communalism in India’s history, starting from the Partition, while also scrutinising India’s political history. Literature and cinema have often successfully expressed what newspaper reports and plain statistics could not: the horror of violence through a subjective and emotional lens. Gyanendra Pandey’s work on partition refers to a poem by a college teacher in Bhagalpur, Manazir Aashiq Harganvi, which emphasises the power of subjective, sectarian experience in literature to portray such incidents (47). The works of Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) and Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) were instrumental in conveying the brutality of the partition of India (1947), a catastrophe to which the history of communal conflicts in India can be traced back. In Indian English fiction, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956) represented the absurdity of partition. While many condition-of-India novels have reflected on the religious divide among Indians, Shashi Tharoor highlighted it in *Riot* (2001), a narrative set in the tumultuous days that led up to the Babri Masjid demolition (1992). Ashfaq (2018) has read fictional works on communal violence in India as radical critiques of the inclusive image of the nation (370).

Indian English fiction has also responded to the communal tension in the political atmosphere of post-2014 India through novels such as *Prelude to a Riot* (2019) by Annie Zaidi and *History’s Angel* (2023) by Anjum Hasan, besides Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. A Burning* (2020) by Megha Majumdar and *Quarterlife* (2023) by Devika Rege, two notable debut novels, feature communal tensions in contemporary India. The depiction of riots in these works demands an analysis with the help of existing scholarship on riots in India.

Post-2014 India

Many political scientists hold the belief that the 2014 elections marked a pivotal moment in India’s political history. Scholars also pointed at trends of ‘democratic backsliding’ (Tudor 122) and an ‘ethnic turn’, a move away from its relatively secular past (Jaffrelot 12). While the nature of India’s democratic trajectory and the question of a radical shift in 2014 are debatable, many factors point to drastic changes in the government policies in the following period, as many of the legislations have been criticised for their anti-Muslim nature, such as the Citizenship Amendment Act, the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, and the revocation of special status to Jammu and Kashmir, all passed in 2019 despite widespread protests. Changes were evident in civil society as well, with the advent of cow vigilantism and other kinds of attacks on minorities leading to them living in a “widespread climate of fear” (Tudor 127). Indian English fiction has responded to this changed atmosphere. Our analysis considers two fictional works that belong to this period.

A Burning

A Burning is the story of Jivan, a Muslim woman falsely accused of a terrorist conspiracy following a suspicious fire incident on a train. While the narrative focuses on how the State, a fundamentalist political party, and a hate-mongering media culture lead Jivan to the gallows, it also works as a general commentary on the state of Muslims in contemporary India. Jivan's family was forced out of their house to make way for a development project. She grows up in poverty and is forced to drop out of schooling after her matriculation due to her economic condition. Her wrongful conviction in the train incident turns out to be another opportunity for the media and political system to vilify Muslims. In one of the most striking episodes, PT Sir, another central character, headlines a meeting of his sectarian Jana Kalyan Party and witnesses a horrifying lynching incident. The crowd, angered by Muslims teaching their religion at schools, declares that they would not send their children there. The gathering transforms into a lynching mob as soon as they hear about the killing of a cow in the Muslim quarters.

In a shocking turn of events, the mob rapes a Muslim woman and lynches a family of five based on rumours. Majumdar's ironic narrative terms the mob 'true people of the nation' (Majumdar 236), which is how they feel as they commit this heinous atrocity. The perpetrators are also eager to assert their difference from the 'other' as the helpless victims fold their hands, begging for life: "Now you have learnt to pray properly?" (236). After the incident, one of the vigilantes ask where the beef is, in a striking reference to the Dadri lynching (2015), when a 52-year-old Muhammad Akhlaq from Uttar Pradesh was beaten to death by cow vigilantes for allegedly killing a cow when, in fact, the meat that he stored was mutton (BBC, "India Man"). Majumdar's description of the riots reveals the nature of communal conflicts, as demonstrated by the case studies mentioned above. The communalisation of the political system leads to and benefits from riots, as evidenced by the Jana Kalyan Party's rise to power in the state in the novel. The crowd were already angry over Muslims in general, revealing the existence of the prejudice of the 'other'. This prejudice, which might manifest as hostility in normal encounters, metamorphoses into a genocidal mindset upon hearing the news about the cattle slaughter. The context is the 2017 ban on selling cattle to slaughterhouses and the violent cow vigilantism by Hindutva fringe groups in this period (Maskara). There are no attempts to verify facts or hesitation to act violently when such sentiments are invoked. As Pandey (1992) has pointed out, "the 'evil', 'dangerous,' and 'threatening' character of the 'other' community or communities come to be widely accepted as a popular dogma," which sets the stage for a conflict. They perceive the victims as "real or potential monsters who have done all this and worse to 'us,' or will do so if given a chance" (42). The rape of the Muslim woman also reminds the reader about myriad incidents of sexual violence reported in communal conflicts across India. The occurrence of a riot exacerbates the vulnerability of the already vulnerable.

In another interlude, a broker reveals how he is benefitted by the riots; he pretends to help the affected Muslims resettle by selling them plots of land different from the ones they were initially shown. He calls himself a broker in the riot economy (208), alluding to Brass's concept of an institutionalised riot system. How frequent and certain do riots have to be for someone to find a living by exploiting the victims? Majumdar's dystopian Kolkata serves as a representative example of the riot-prone cities in India that have been studied by scholars. It also exposes a system that benefits from such incidents, countering the idea that riots are aberrations or exceptions. The novel sheds light on the economic interests behind riots, something that continues to be studied (Bohlken and Sergenti 589-600, Mitra and Ray 229-48).

Quarterlife

Quarterlife takes place in a changing India during and after the 2014 elections. It narrates the tale of a group of youngsters in Mumbai as they navigate through the transformations that followed the elections. *Quarterlife*'s mostly affluent characters debate identity and politics, leading to rifts and realisations. Naren is drawn to the policies of the new government on account of its promises of economic prosperity, and Rohit is attracted to its ideology as a result of his quest for a sociocultural identity. In the group's heated political debates, the identity of Ifra, an upper-class Muslim youth, is constantly poked at, leading to her withdrawal from the bunch. Amanda, an American woman on a self-discovery mission working at an NGO, is baffled by her exposure to the complexities of identities in a Mumbai slum. The slum shelters people who have been displaced by development projects and riots. The characters keep invoking the memories of the Bombay riots (1992-93) that followed the destruction of Babri Masjid. In 1992, Hindutva Karsevaks demolished a 16th-century mosque over claims that the monument was built at the birthplace of Ram, a Hindu god, an incident that political scientist Zoya Hasan called "the most blatant act of defiance of law in modern India" (BBC, "Babri"). This shocking event had immediate repercussions, including riots in cities such as Mumbai, the erstwhile Bombay, and long-term consequences, including the advent of Hindu nationalist politics.

The narrative builds up to a violent day during the festivities of Ganesholsav, a festival that was promoted by Bal Gangadhar Tilak for the political unification of Hindus in Maharashtra (Pati 48). During the festival, violence breaks out, and Amanda, who gets stranded, is sexually harassed by a faceless mob. The novel skilfully depicts the imminence of a riot as the Ganesholsav procession reaches the premises of a Masjid. A character talks about the tension due to the proximity of Ramzan to the event, reminding us of Iyer and Shrivastava's argument about the cruciality of the co-occurrence of festivities and its effect on the probability of riots. A Hindu group refers to a Muslim-majority region in the city as Mini Pakistan (Rege 327). Mobs also throw slippers and petrol bottles at each other, and minor incidents are exaggerated as the news spreads; there are rumours of Muslim women taking a sword out of their burqas (330); a Muslim biker collided with a Hindu woman, leading to agitated Hindu men taking up bamboo sticks to reprimand (344). When the frenzy settles, everyone talks about how they evaded a full-blown riot this time.

A right-wing leader in the novel, when asked about why their reaction showed restraint, responds, "For the sake of one state, we can't afford a bad name. The Bombay riots took us back ten years. I was young and caught up in the fever of those days. Now I have children" (350). The hesitation arises because a riot would damage the government's image, rather than stemming from any sense of morality or guilt regarding past violence in the region. *Quarterlife*'s narration of the build-up to an almost riot shows us how religious and political groups ignite communal passion, leading to commoners getting involved in violence led by fringe groups. Even though the novel does not talk directly about the institutionalised riot systems, it exposes fringe groups that initiate riots. While Pandey's (1992) work features a pamphlet circulated by Hindutva organisations on how Muslims are a threat to the Hindu nation, hatemongering has now migrated to social media platforms such as WhatsApp, as we see in *Quarterlife*. They feed hostility towards Muslims to people through their networks regularly, and when there is a conflict, these networks bank upon the pent-up anger and ignite it with exaggerated information about incidents that can be 'communalised.' The novel also shows a section of people largely unaffected by the riots owing to their class privilege. Manasi, Naren's wife, remarks how they shut their windows during the riots and discuss what car to buy next (370). The exploration of how riots are made and whom they affect turns the novel into an effective fictional representation of the state of minorities in today's India.

Conclusion

A Burning and *Quarterlife*, two novels about contemporary India, recognise the rising identitarian tensions and the precarity of its minorities. They are set in India's globalised metropolises—Mumbai and Kolkata—two cities that also belong to the list of most riot-prone regions according to 1950–95 data (Varshney 7). Both novels show how communalist political outfits patiently set the stage for collective violence that will ultimately serve their political agendas. Rege's novel foregrounds the Mumbai riots and shows how a religious procession that has already been politicised can lead to violence, whereas in Majumdar's novel, a party gathering soon transforms into a lynching mob. The novels show how those in power use and control riots, suggesting that most could be avoided if the state wanted. *A Burning* also illustrates how Bimala Pal, the leader of the party, is least bothered, if not happy, about the violent lynching of a Muslim family by her party members. Her ascent to power shows that violence might have helped her on her path as well. Both novels expose the institutionalised riot system prevalent in two towns at two ends of India, Mumbai and Kolkata, and show riots as a part of a long-term project rather than an odd incident.

Indian English fiction, a body of works that has always critiqued the nation, has engaged with the theme of communal conflicts, which has become a feature of India's political culture rather than an exception, since the gory days of partition. Novels on post-2014 India, an era of ethnic nationalism or Hindutva politics, emphasise the precarity of its minorities, especially Muslims, its largest minority. The portrayal of riots or communal conflicts is especially noteworthy for its allusions to actual events, including the Gujarat Riots and the cow vigilante attacks. In line with the social science scholarship on riots, they reveal the underlying institutional mechanisms that facilitate and benefit from those incidents. In the case of such historic episodes, fictional works constitute fragments of truths (to borrow Gyanendra Pandey's concept) that supplement, if not counter, the mainstream narratives of riots.

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