

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Butchery in the land of *ahimsa**

**Non-violence; the backbone of India's moralistic foreign policy, betrayed in a new orgy of communal rioting.*

On May 18, three days after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi attacked the foreign conspiracy to undermine India's independence, an orgy of blood-letting between Muslims and Hindus broke out in Meerut, a city of 600,000 in western Uttar Pradesh, and spread quickly to the "walled city" of Old Delhi.

It was the worst communal rioting in 40 years in Uttar Pradesh, home of 25% of the nation's 100 million-strong Muslim minority, and gave another boost to the graph of domestic violence that has jumped sharply in the last two years. Already more people have been killed this year in communal clashes than in the whole of 1986.

But if the pattern of worsening communal and domestic violence is one of the most serious policy problems facing the government, it is also one which the Rajiv Gandhi administration is apparently loathe to confront squarely, as the feeble efforts to float reports of the arrests of several suspicious Pakistanis in Meerut testified.

The arson, looting, and murder that spilled out of Meerut took 10 days to quell, and that, too, with the help of 5 army battalions, 7 divisions of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), and more than 33 companies of the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC), the equivalent of the American state troopers. In the parts of Old Delhi the army took over directly, a round-the-clock curfew was slapped on.

It is impossible to verify the toll of this barbarism, though reported official estimates are 150 dead and 1,000

wounded in Meerut alone. That includes at least 50 from a single village outside of Meerut who were burned alive or shot in the back of the head and dumped into a canal by the PAC themselves! Unofficial estimates of the dead are in the thousands. More than 2,500 were arrested in Meerut city (where prison capacity is only 800). Property damage has been estimated at \$20 million and business losses at more than \$50 million.

Beyond the bodies and lost property is the destruction of trust—between Muslim and Hindu, between the government and the people. The polarization of the police is just one expression of a political process that has been significantly corrupted since the days when Mahatma Gandhi set the standards.

No one takes seriously the claim by Uttar Pradesh Congress (I) Chief Minister Vir Bahadur Singh, "We never expected this." Just weeks before, in April, the city had been put under curfew for 12 days, as rioting flared and more than 10 were killed. And, for at least a year, documented reports had been circulating about the communalization of the PAC.

The immediate issue then, as now, remains unresolved—the fate of a shrine in Uttar Pradesh that is claimed by both religious groups. Precisely because of the inflammatory nature of the dispute, the shrine has been under government lock and key for 40 years. The claim that Faizabad District Judge K.M. Pande did not know what he was doing when he ordered the shrine unlocked on Feb. 1, 1986 is generally

discounted, and rumors attribute the move to a leading politician and the Uttar Pradesh chief minister himself, who reportedly wanted to expand his base from the narrow confines of eastern Uttar Pradesh.

But the Congress politicians are not the only cynics, according to the son of the Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque, and a leader of the militant Muslim group, Adam Sena. "The political leaders and parties don't want to solve it," he told the *Illustrated Weekly*. "They have to fight elections and can use it as an issue for getting votes. Thus, in the Janata Party, Syed Shahbuddin can get the Muslim vote, and the other leaders who are supporting Hindus, the Hindu vote."

As early as 1984, Hindu and Muslim "action committees" had begun agitating on the issue, and on April 5 this year, as a direct run-up to the Meerut riots, 200,000 Hindus were assembled at the site of the shrine to pledge "a fight to the death" to secure it. Days earlier, a massive gathering of Muslims in Delhi had taken the same vow.

The collapse of moral authority in the political process has been paced by a resurgence of communal activity on several levels. According to public reports, communal organizations, which numbered less than a dozen in 1951, now number more than 500. Active membership is estimated at several million, and leadership is being taken over by affluent and articulate individuals.

The Union Home Ministry has also noted an unprecedented spurt in construction of religious buildings throughout the country. In Delhi itself, their numbers have jumped from 560 in 1980, to more than 2,000 today. In Uttar Pradesh, the number of large religious buildings has risen from 4,000 to 6,700.