

A brief fact-finding report of communal violence at Trilokpuri, Delhi

Trilokpuri in East Delhi is a resettlement colony set up around 1975 mostly with 22 yard plots for residents, and slum areas interspersing in between. Trilokpuri and nearby areas have seen a long systemic discrimination of both oppressed communities –Dalits and Muslims who reside there. Unemployment is stark across communities and on the rise. Water and other civic amenities are also scarcely available. Rising land prices compounded by new metro line being constructed has made Trilokpuri a focal point for the land sharks.

The population is comprised mainly of Dalits from the Balmiki community, who had also been settled here after forceful eviction from other slum settlements. Many Dalits are safai karamcharis, working either privately or with the government. There is a substantial Muslim population too. Trilokpuri has a huge section of young unemployed population. Both communities are engaged in work in the informal sector as rickshaw and auto drivers, carpenters and painters, daily-wage labourers in insecure jobs. Many also go to nearby Noida to labour in the garment export houses. The resentment towards lack of secure livelihood also gets articulated along community lines over competition for these meager jobs. Organized communalization plays on discontent of both the communities.

Beginning of violence: We visited the area on 27th October - some of us were also present in the area on the 26th, 28th and 29th. We interacted with several residents of both Muslim and Balmiki community. The whole area was under curfew and section 144 had also been imposed. On the basis of our interactions, as well as observations, we have been able to draw the following picture of the communal tension, which started on 23rd October. Starting with Block 20, the violence spread to several blocks. Blocks 15-20-27 are the most affected during the riots: the tension spread from Block 20 to 27-28, 15-9, 6-8, Kalyanpuri Block 13; and Indira and Sanjay camps.

The so-called starting point was a small altercation between some miscreants in Block No. 20 on 23rd November. At a spot earlier used for garbage disposal, a '*mata ki chowki*', a small pandal (temporary structure) was set up since Navratri. A few metres away is a mosque which was used for worship by local Muslims. Tension is said to have been building up when loud music from the mata ki chowki and the azaan at the mosque clashed daily. The pandal was supposed to have been removed after Navratri but stayed till Diwali. We came across different narratives of the incident. Most residents testified to the long presence in the area of several miscreants from both communities who indulged in drugs and alcohol and involved in unruly activities often in public. These petty criminals are involved in and are supported by organized gambling. The initial incident was resolved soon but the matter was later taken up and blown out of proportion, and allowed to escalate into communally charged tension and rioting where the Muslims were blamed as a community.

Meanwhile several members of BJP or affiliated organizations are said to have been present at the residence of Sunil Vaidya, local BJP leader to celebrate his birthday. According to a few

locals, Vaidya, who is an Ex-MLA, “intervened” on the night of Diwali when the fight broke out, but only to fuel the religious sentiments of the majority community by saying that they will build a temple in place of the temporary pandal.

24th October, Friday: It was said that in the evening, an unruly crowd barged into block 20 and started stone pelting and random firing. Soon the situation got out of control and police and Rapid Action Force were deployed. Two boys from Block 28 got wounded in firing and several youngsters got hurt with bricks and stones. The tension spread to other blocks too. The same night, more than 20 youth were picked by the police without any legal proceedings. An atmosphere of fear and tension prevailed.

That same evening, Block 27 was attacked. Block 27, whose residents are almost entirely Muslim sandwiched between other blocks, narrated to us how they were encircled from all sides starting 6-7 pm, by a big mob, with stones, bricks and bottles in their hands. The Block was gripped in fear due to the sudden attack. As Salma, a young mother residing at the edge of one side of this block told us, most men were out at work and it was mostly the women, children and young boys who were home at that time. She and her neighbours, middle-aged Nazreen, Parveen and Sultana (names changed), said they had starting calling the police immediately. The police only told them that they have already received several such calls. They did not seem to take the matter seriously. Eventually the police came two hours later, by which time the rioters had already created terror. Salma recalled shouts of 'Har Har Mahadev' from the crowd. She said if the 15-20 boys from Block 27 had not got together, the residents of their colony would have also become victims, in a repetition of 1984 anti-sikh riots. *“woh log 100 the, aur humare yahan sirf 10-15 ladke hee ikkhata ho paye..agar wo bhi nahi hote toh hum toh phunk gaye hote us din. 1984 jaisa haal hota..”*

When asked what the police did when they arrived at the scene at around 11 in the night, Salma recounted that the police had stood only in the area between 27 and 28, which meant that the attack from the other side continued on Block 27. Noorjehan Begum told us that several older women from Block 27, both Hindu and Muslim, had pleaded the attackers to stop, but to no effect. The stone-throwing continued the next day too. Some children were also injured. The residents of this block experienced discrimination from the police several times over these few days. Earlier the police stood as mute spectators, and the next day onwards, they started picking up men arbitrarily. Both sons of Nazreen Begum were taken away by the police. She recalled how her younger son was picked up when he had gone out to buy milk. When she went to the police station along with her other son, he was also dragged away. Nazreen Begum was inconsolable as she recalled the brutality with which her sons had been beaten up in custody. While her sons were released, several others were not. She said, “They were beating all these young boys so brutally in front of my eyes. When I tried to send food to my son, the policemen refused. What kind of a justice system is this?” Parveen, a young woman, asked, “Does law not say that one is innocent until proven guilty? Then, how can they torture these men? Why is the law unjust to Muslims?”

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According to a resident of Block 34, prior to the incidents of 24th October, Prempal, a Bajrang Dal activist had come there and enquired about the Muslim residents of the block. 'Haathi', a local resident helped him identify Muslim houses of the locality. Three young boys of Muslim community were picked by the police while they were dining at their home. Police barged in their house after breaking 4 locks and cutting the grills of windows. Their mother was hit with a rifle butt as she offered some resistance. While two of them were released on Saturday night, one was still in custody. They were badly tortured in custody. One of them got his hand fractured while other is unable to walk as he was hit repeatedly on his feet by lathi.

25th October, Saturday: According to residents, the police came to Block 27 at night. They accuse the police of breaking several vehicles which might have been marked as belonging to Muslims and then entered the Sanjay Camp. Here they broke open all locked doors saying men had been hidden in them. Broken doors could be seen when we went. Two shops (one garments showroom, one dhaba) owned by Muslims were burnt down on the dawn of 26th. This must have happened in the presence of police as both were situated on a prominent crossroads, next to block 27, and since there was a curfew was imposed in the area which limited movement of citizens. We saw a police picket at the crossroads. Fear of arbitrary arrests had forced many residents to flee their houses. We met several women with injury marks on their bodies and with visible lathi marks. Wahabuddin, a 16 years old boy who had gone to a shop on 25th October was beaten so badly that blood stains could still be seen on his shirt. He has received injuries on his face and head. His wounds still appeared fresh when a member of our team met him.

It is being alleged that round 50 youth who were taken into police custody were brutally beaten up. When arrested youths were produced in Karkardooma Court on 26th October, activists observed that many of those produced came limping, some have broken limbs and a few others have open wounds. The FIR shows that Sections 147, 148, 149, 307, 353, 186 have been imposed on them. Though people from both communities are in jail (mostly Muslims), it is curious that the Muslims are the only named community in the FIR - it does not mention any other participants/instigators. It leaves the space open for any individual from Muslim community to be targeted in the future.

Aftermath: The imposition of section 144 and threat of police aggression had caused people to be shut within their houses for 3-4 consecutive days. At the time of our interaction, many families had run out of food supplies and mothers were complaining of starving children. Further, a government van that was supposed to distribute milk was selling it, as claimed a mother returning with an empty vessel. Losing days of employment had affected the people adversely. All shops were shut in this Block and Camp, and residents of the Camp have either fled or were in need for food. Some even asked the team to ask the police to allow them to collectively cook food. The injured were not going to government hospitals for the fear of false cases being framed against them. Everyone we spoke to said that the MLA of the area, belonging to Aam Admi Party had not visited the area since the violence broke out.

Several residents, especially the Muslims, accused local BJP leaders of instigating, planning and participating in the attacks. Names mentioned include that of Sunil Vaidya, (Ex MLA of the area, BJP), Ram Charan Gujrati, and someone called Cheena (we could not confirm his exact position. Some said he is the councilor of the area). Some people told us that Cheena used to run 'satta' tables in this area, which was closed down about a year ago. About hundred unemployed youth, who were beneficiaries of organized gambling, were in the forefront of the attack on the 26th. This once again shows how unemployed youth are being criminalized and communalized by the ruling classes.

Members of our team witnessed a curious situation while walking in Block 21. Talking to some women, we were pointed towards the house two doors away. The woman, a member of the Balmikis residing in the lane, told us that a meeting was taking place there. It was the house cum office of BJP leader Sunil Vaidya. A few minutes later, about 15 men and young boys came out of the house looking charged up and agitated. A policeman was also standing at the door with a man who looked like Vaidya (we recognized him from the big board that hung outside the house). Another young man was video graphing them. Going closer, we heard the boys say to the camera, "*hum kasam khate hai ki BJP ko vote karenge!*" ("We pledge to vote for the BJP!") Why was an obviously politically-motivated meeting being allowed to happen so openly with police approval at the house of a BJP leader whose name had come up the very next day as the main instigator, is anybody's guess.

We witnessed how the usual rumour mongering and hate machinery of communal forces was at play in breeding hatred among people. There was constant reference to 'Muslims' urinating or throwing meat and bones at the pandal, or 'Hindu's' throwing pork towards the mosque. But no resident had witnessed this taking place themselves, they were saying this on the basis of hearsay. While there was a certain kind of propaganda prevailing among most of the Balmiki residents, there were a few who did not believe them. "We have lived together since so many years. This kind of hatred never existed among us. It is the work of instigators and outsiders", said Seema a resident of Block 23. Similar opinions were heard from Muslim women too.

The move towards communal polarization of a society where poor Dalits, Muslims and others have lived peacefully for a long time, was and is a highly organized one which vested interests are strongly instigating and encouraging. Not the incidents and instances here and there, but this is the real danger lurking in Trilokpuri. Several residents reiterated the need for unity between different communities who have lived together since very long, and the need to isolate those who have indulged in planned instigation of violence and hatred.

Role of Police:

Specific accusations against the police are as follows:

- Women in Block 27 asked how the police can be partial against them when it is supposed to be a force for the protection of all citizens. When the police intervened and took action on the 25th, it was practicing clear discrimination towards Muslim residents and youth. Several residents in Block 27 told us that the police had forcefully entered the mosque in

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their colony with shoes on, without asking them, and had stayed there for a long time. What was the purpose of this? Not only was this disrespectful of the sentiments of the residents, but also raises suspicions about the motives of the police.

- One resident told us that the police also picked up workers who came for construction work in their house
- People from both communities, especially women, mentioned the use of sexually abusive language and arbitrary assault on women and elderly by the police.
- Torture in police custody was testified by several residents, especially the Muslims, and could also be witnessed by us in the courtroom when they were produced.
- While police presence is urgent and necessary, there seemed to be particular persistence around Block 15 and 27, where Muslims reside. The police was not allowing us to enter these blocks. Some of us were chased away, while no such strict restriction was imposed in other blocks. This can be seen as a way to prevent the media and common citizens and activists from interacting with the Muslim residents. We managed to enter and interact with the residents through someone back-lanes.
- ACP resorted to firing on 25th October in which 2 boys from the Hindu community were injured. The residents of Block 27 also claim that on 25th tear gas bombs were burst and gun firing was heard twice.
- Arbitrary arrests based on religious profiling (30 out of the 44 initially arrested were Muslims).

Demands:

Based on our visit, we demand

- A full and immediate investigation into the eruption of violence, and especially into the role of BJP leader Sunil Vaidya and his associates
- Release of all innocent men, and dropping of unfair charges
- Compensation to all people tortured in police custody
- Strict action and punishment against local instigators belonging to known communal organizations
- Role of police must be probed and those found guilty of conniving with communal forces and custodial torture must be punished

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- Role of land mafia in instigating the riot must be probed

Arya, Anshita (Krantikari Naujawan Sabha), Gopal (Morcha patrika), Sumati (Tootati Sanklein patrika), Siddhi (Nowruz), Nagender (Inquilabi Mazdoor Kendra), Chitra (The New Materialists), Ishan (DSF), Santosh (Mazdoor Patrika), Anirban, Gopika (Sanhati)