Religion, State, and the Articulation of Political Violence: The Case of Islampur of Murshidabad District in West Bengal, 1984

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Abstract:

The relationship between religion and politics is complex, and can be viewed through many angles. It becomes important when the question of violence steps into it. There are possibility that violence can take the form of collective violence as to religious feelings and state violence with respect to politics. These two forms of violence act in certain way if they get articulated. The event of political violence in Islampur of Murshidabad district in 1984 is a case in point. This article therefore seeks to understand the causes and functions of such violence through the concept of articulation.

Keywords: *Religion, Politics, Political Violence, State, Articulation, Murshidabad District.*

1.   Introduction

The pervasive tendency of toppling of political violence over religious discord is one of the most momentous manifestations of an antagonistic relationship premised upon the 'friend-enemy distinction' where the conflict between the state and the society can overturn to the animosity between the communities marked by religious identities. The interaction between the religious communities and the state thus comes to acquire political import within a certain socio-political context. The state violence as political violence, for it 'emanates from the state' **(Khanikar 2018: 15)** against its so-called perceived 'other' – be it society, organizations, religious community or social movement, often takes place in accordance to the conviction that the state would function neutrally 'between the religions' **(Varshney 2010: 56)** in India. Yet, the political violence of the state, i.e. the police and administration, can have a more specific socio-political condition to happen as it did in Islampur in the Raninagar –I Block of the *bagri* region of the district of Murshidabad in 1984 – a case in point here - which was revealed through 'a specific kind of sociability' incipient at that time in the district concerned in particular and in West Bengal in general called the 'party society'. **(Bhattacharyya 2016:126)**

2.   A Brief Historical Backdrop of Relationship between Religion and the State in the District of Murshidabad.

History being a continuity of human experience in time can point to the 'local' too as its spatial domain of

affairs as it can do to the 'universal'. History's aim, Collingwood (1993: 9) has argued, is to find out *'res gestae'*: 'actions of human beings' done in the past with respect to society, economy, politics and culture through changes that make and remake the fettle of human lives over time both individually and collectively. Religion and the state intermingled into an antagonistic relation of *us* versus *them* had always been conflictual by nature resulting from collective *res gestae* in the district of Murshidabad as both a local domain of politics and a geo-administrative unit in the post-independence democratic period (of India). The active presence of both Muslim League and Hindu Maha Sabha since the colonial times propelled the narratives of *religious nationalism* against the *liberal-national nationalism* was one of the chief causes of the Hindu –Muslim schism in the Murshidabad district. The introduction of the 'separate electorate' in 1931 was regarded to be responsible for the Hindu - Muslim adversity in Murshidabad during the Raj **(Gupta 1992: 155)** in the undivided Bengal and even after independence. It was therefore the struggle for political power between the elites of the Hindus and Muslims in Murshidabad which had been at the heart of communal division in this Muslim majority district.

The tradition of communal violence in the district of Murshidabad from colonial period to Left Front rule was therefore quite familiar. Major incidents, as examples, can be mentioned here which occurred before the partition of which two happened in the Jangipur Sub-Division **(Gupta 1992: 154).** As it is evident that a communal clash may be triggered even by a little reason, the cases of communal disturbance caused due to objection to the emersion ceremony of the Hindu deity (the 'Raj-Rajeswari deity' of the Bangasabati village of Suti police station) by the Muslims in 1924-25 and 1942 -1943 respectively in the Jangipur sub-division. This particular issue as to immersion ceremony had continued to exist there even in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, the processions leading to the river had been precluded repeatedly there: in the Chhota Kalia village **(JS, 22-10-1986:1)** in 1986 and Bahora village in 1997 **(JS 15-10-1997:1,4)** respectively Raghunathganj – II block. Both of the incidents attracted communal mistrust and panic among the local inhabitants of both communities. Although the incidents were motivated by the vested interest of some of the communal fiends, as the reports have disclosed. Communal riot on the day of Muslim Festival had also been common in the district of Murshidabad. Examples are many. The slaughter of cow (Korbani) on the occasion of the Bakar Eid in Hariharpara block in 1939 leading involvement of the local Hindu zamindar named Kalachand Roy in resisting it by force, and the most serious of all took place at Kaliaganj where a Moharrum processionists 'looted and damaged some of the Hindu shops' **(Gupta, 1992: 155).** The police were attacked too; three were killed and eleven injured in return firing ordered by the Sub – Deputy Magistrate.

The incidents of communal political violence seen as consequence of the Hindu-Muslim antagonism in the Left Front regime were also taken place occasionally, if not frequently. Here are some of the prominent instances of such violence in chronological sequence: The communal commotions in the vast area of Beldanga – II block in the year of 1982, Jhaubona riot in the Nawda block and communal violence in Sahajadpur of Hariharpara block in 2009.

One. The death of Sonababu Sheikh of Salar by a group of people suspecting of him a thief in the Narkelbari Hat on 11 August, 1982 and its retaliation in the next day by looting and setting fire in the village of Manikyahar of Beldanga- II block caused to spread communal riot in the areas of Dopukuria, Sombazar, Shaktipur, Satui. The police was able to manage the situation by issuing article 144 and applying much effort on 14 August. Twenty seven persons were injured and eighty one were arrested in police action. **(ID 25-8-1982: 1, 4)**

Two. The communal riot in the areas of Jhaubona and Trimohini originated on account of performing *namaz* and *worship of the Saraswati idol* inside the school premise (Jhaubona High School), which resulted in murder, clashes between the people of both communities, and their respective villages. There were arson, looting of shops and houses, police firing and death on 10 July, 2009. **(MBN 25-7-2009:1)**

Three. In Sahajadpur village of the Hariharpara Block communal furore was broke because of the demolition of a temporary structure of a mosque illegally constructed with bamboo, loose bricks and jute ropes close to a Laxmi Mandir by the police and the block administration on 23 August 1999. As it was Monday in which *Haat* (village market) was going on, the fury of the mob on the news turned into violent action – the neighbouring Hindu houses, shops, cattle were randomly plundered and damaged even at night as it had full moon. **(Interview: 25-05-2017)** The situation was taken under control by means of force.

The issue of the Mosque was, however, at the core of two of the most significant events of communal political violence that were taken place in Islampore in 1984, and Karbala – Kossimbazar area of Berhampore (Sadar) block in 1988 which are representative of all cases to put forward in comprehending how communal political violence operate in the form of articulation at its best in the Murshidabad district. All the above cases (One –Three), however, witnessed a common attribute irrespective of time and place: the intervention of the state in the form of political violence to curb religious violence – a *vertical violence* (between state and other social groups) over *horizontal violence* (between the social groups, i.e. Hindua and Muslim communities here, themselves) to borrow the concepts from the context of the post-Suharto Indonesia. **(Sukma 2005:3)**

3. The Concept of Articulation and Functioning of Political Violence

To understand the functioning of the state (political) violence relating to religious issue in the event of Islampur then is to focus as much on the complex interplay among the administration, the political parties and leadership, the supporters and the opponents to the same as on the issue itself. In an interview, Basar Ali, an elderly inhabitant of that area, has commented that 'the incident had its before and after grounds' ('*ghotonar aagu pichhu karon chhilo*') **(Interview 2017)** to happen linking with each other: the event of political violence thus articulated in a way that allowed it to take its shape. The concept of articulation is, therefore, indicative of the fundamental ways political violence tends to work in Islampur. Initially developed in the study of 'Structuralist Marxism', the concept of articulation has gained its celebrated currency from the works of Stuart Hall (1932-2014), the director of the 'Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' (1968-1979) at Birmingham (UK). Articulation is not just 'mere juxtaposition' **(Hall and Schwarz 2019: 201)** of two independent similar kind of things, rather apart from its *speaking element*, is a *linking element* like an 'articulated' lorry [truck]: a lorry having the front [cab] and back [trailer] 'can, but need not necessarily', be joined to one another. Articulation to Hall is therefore meant to consist of a *linking of* two different elements, moments, of practices each having its own specific condition of existence and peculiar traits yet always carry possibilities of transgressing their known boundaries for creating something newer than before keeping their own idiosyncrasies up by working as autonomous parts within a set of integral whole.

Hall's assertion that an event and its effects are real **(Hall 1988:27)** thus questions and controverts the post-Structuralist surmise that 'all reality is texuality' by shedding new light on the articulation as practice in making out how events, with *facticity* inherent in them, occur involving the relationships, the *linking of* between the practice and the effects, and context and the focus. Now such articulation in the case of Islampur political violence can further be looked at through a combination in congruity with the typology (of collective violence) that Charles Tilly has put forth in his book 'The Politics of Collective Violence' (2003): 'broken negotiation' and 'coordinated destruction' between the categories of religion and the state. For Tilly, *'broken negotiation'* refers to 'various forms of collective action' which generate 'resistance or rivalry' to which one or more parties 'respond by actions' **(Tilly 2003: 16).** '*Coordinated destruction'*, on the other side, denotes 'organizations that specialize' in the 'deployment of coercive means' undertaking a 'program of damage to persons / or objects' **(Tilly 2003: 14)** In the event of political violence happened in Islampur - metaphorically the *tuck itself* - **'**broken negotiation'' and 'coordinated destruction' came up as front / cab

(*aagu*) and back / trailer (*picchu*) formation connected with each other in it. Drawing on Tilly's postulations, whereas popular 'demonstrations' **(Tilly 2003: 16)** (i.e. the Muslim community in Islampur) is specifically taken *inter alia* other forms of '*broken negotiation'*, the *'organization'* – 'the programmed annihilation' of a 'political category's members' **(Tilly 2003: 14)** (i.e. the Muslim community in Islampur) here refers to *'coordinated destruction'* to be executed by the state, i.e. the police and administration of the district concerned – the practice and effect, the context and focus articulated wherefore.

4.   A. The Event of Political Violence in Islampur: Cab / Practice / Public Demonstration

There was an issue of dispute over a one and half *kuttha* of *khas* land situated on the side of the Islampur - Seikhpara high road nearby a public place where a *haat* (village market) was run under the jurisdiction of Raninagar-I Panchayat Samiti and Islampur police station. The issue was trapped and tempered by the purposive involvement and interactions among three opposing political camps having different interest as to the same: the first two were the local factions of the CPI (M) and the third one, obviously, was the Congress (I). One of the left party factions (F1 hereafter) had Aatahar Rahaman (M.L.A. of that assembly constituency), Samsul Huda (the President of the Islampur Panchayat Samiti) and Khalilur Rahaman in it, whereas the other (F2 hereafter) comprising Nirmal Banerjee (the Pradhan of Islampur Gram Panchayat) along with popular leaders Jadab Ghosh and Mahadeb Das. **(JR 5-6-1984:1)** The F2 wanted that piece of land to be registered as *patta jami* in the name of Mahadeb Das to start a laundry for (personal) living and a CPI (M) party office at the same time on the same venue. The intension of F1, however, was to establish a Co-operative society there keeping basically the easy employment of the party cadres in mind. The disagreement nevertheless had finally been resolved with imposed consensus in favour of private - public venture of constructing both laundry and party office **(JR 5-6-1984:1)** – a need felt more immediate and necessary than that of the party members' placement in the Co-operative .apparently thought to be a much safer option for the time being by which the demands and the discord as its outcome among the aspirant members or cadres could have been prevented within zonal branch and its committee of the party itself.

The relative state of peace through the coming to the terms between F1 and F2 by way of the process of the democratic centralism's local variant would but soon be disappeared for Congress (I)'s strategic stance to the matter by taking advantage of the factional division against its archrival CPI(M) to its fullest. The propagation for building a *masjid* instead of what F1 and F2 of CPI (M) proposed in this Muslim majority area of Isampur by the local leaders of the Congress (I) had meanwhile already caught the attention of the people in gross. An unlikely yet reticent factor within such political opportunity structure took hold when the rising expectation of constructing a mosque was allegedly fanned up by the members of F1 against F2 making reprisal of its political loss. The Congress (I) leadership was accompanied by Forward Bloc, Muslim League and Jaamat-e-Islami **(JR 5-6-1984:1)** supporters too – a shift in identity from party politics to religion community in no time was to meet the fate of state violence soon. The power configuration further saw a dramatic irony amid such muddle: the F1 reunited with F2, the CPI (M) to be precise, because of the understanding that the credit of building of the masjid was to be bagged by the Congress (I) and its associates would have damaged their popular political image and electoral worth (in the next Assembly election to be held on 1987). The CPI (M) consequently stood against the construction of the pukka (permanent structure of) mosque in a body.

A all party general meeting over the issue was first called on by the SUCI to resolve the same **(JR 5-6-1984:1)** peacefully which failed; a second meeting then was held on administrative level arranged by the Panchayat Samiti led by the CPI (M) in which disagreement persisted as the Left leaders and office-holders objected against the construction of any religious structure on the *khas land* occupied by the state government. It ended obviously with much ado without any concrete decision. A kancha (temporary structure of) masjid was however built out of this complex context by the anti-CPI (M) leadership a couple

of days later. Both the CPI (M) and the administration were silent as to it for the reason that it was, 1983, the year of second Gram Panchayat Election in West Bengal, and most surprisingly, this ad hoc mosque remained open year-long, till May 1984, to perform *namaz*. .

A formal notice issued by the The Raninagar –I Panchayat Samiti to remove or relocate the *kancha masjid* form the khas land in May 1984 had revived the contention. In an official meeting held in the Gram Panchayat Bhawan on 23 May differences of opinions between the supporters of the mosque and the CPI (M) leadership allegedly turned out to be violent: the Congress (I) camp attacked on the Left leaders, and a huge street meeting was organized by them at Islampur ghat on 25 May condemning the Congress (I) violence tagged it conspiracy. **(JR 5-6-1984:2)** The CPI (M) now, on the one hand, had taken decision of demolishing the temporary structure of the mosque with the help of the district police and administration, and the supporters of the mosque, on the other hand, had decided to construct the same for always in response. The kancha masjid was finally razed to the ground at midnight of 31 May, 1984. Thousands of people from various areas – Berhampore, Domkal, Sagarpara etc. – assembled in Islampur upon spreading of the news. They protested, trying to block the roads and construct the pukka masjid themselves on the ruins of demolished one in the morning of 1 June. One of the reasons the mob therefore acted as a community against the political authority of the state interwoven with the power of the political party in an emerging of party society was, as Gustave Le Bon has noted, the crowd thus gathered 'demands a god before everything else. **(Le Bon 2002:40)**

4. B. The Event of Political Violence in Islampur: Trailer /Effect / State Organization

A large police force had reached in Islampur around eight o'clock in the next morning. The demonstrators hurled bricks and other throwable materials on the police first, and only then the administration started action – a so-called bureaucratic explanation of violence is found with usual contradiction in it against the statements of the eye-witnesses who claimed that the mob became reckless after the arrest of two persons and random police throbbing. **(JR 5-6-1984:2)** The 'Murshidabad Barta', a weekly news tabloid and a political mouthpiece of the CPI (M) of the Murshidabad District had, nonetheless, mentioned that the police force took refuge in a house in order to protect themselves from the armed attack of the agitated mob, and compelled to resort violence – opened fire - when the house were raided by crowd. **(MB 07-06-1984:1)** The police**,** the legitimate coercive force of the state, it is evident, would behave in the same manner being 'one body of violent specialists' **(Tilly 2003: 110**), opened fire, one twenty five rounds approximately, just after releasing a small amount of tear gas, in which six persons were killed, some injured. An 18-year old from Chhayghari named Montu, a 22 year old Abu Said of Islampur, and a young man from Nolbata were killed according to a report. **(JR 5-6-1984:3)** The crowd plainly dismantled and run away.

But what is more to it was that of the BSF's involvement in atrocity in the afternoon of 1 June, alongside the police, using naked force and violence beyond the boundaries fixed by the 'rule of law' at random. They had ransacked the shops in the Islampur – twenty five in number, rice, meat, sound box, utensils, soap and oil, cloths, to mangos and sweets. **(JR 12-06-1984:2)** As to induct ultra-state forces with local police in dealing with such kind of civil disturbances may function fuzzily as an observer of communal political violence writes about the Moradabad riot in 1980s that, 'the local police and the Border Security Force' that had been induced in aid of the local authorities failed to 'cooperate and coordinate their respective operational responsibilities'. **(Rajagopal 1987: 104)** The event thus could not escape the widespread fact of state's unreasonable violation of the law in attempting to maintain or restore order to a certain extent had in itself been violent.

The primary moment of articulation here between *broken negotiation - coordinated destruction*, that is between 'the programmed annihilation of a political category's members' and mass protest 'demonstration'

against the former, had further been supplemented by a secondary moment of articulation between *coordinated destruction* and *opportunism* **(Tilly 2003:15)** in the form of *looting* (of the shops by the BSF): 'cab – *trailer / cab* – trailer' manner in which the trailer turns into a (new) cab in the second moment that had created another articulation, *re-articulation*, to put it another way – *lorry* - as a result when another report has confirmed a list of twenty five persons whose shops in the surrounding area of the event was broken and looted by the BSF personnel on the same day. **(JR 12-06-1984: 2)** Some of the shops had moreover been smashed down unsparingly as well. The negatively active role of the BSF in dealing with such a sensitive religious issue tended to uphold the same to a matter of special status which in turn had fashioned *articulations* in relation to the acts of political violence in this case.

5. Conclusion:

There occurred no communal riot between the Hindus and the Muslims in Islampur in 1 June – midnight or morning. The CPI (M)'s propagation after the event was criticized in the political circle of Murshidabad district for attempting to label it being an incident of communal violence *as such*. The police and administration of the district concerned could but resort to violence in order to control the commotion had then hardly any validity other than an apparent false political imposition on behalf of the ruling party for seeking popular approval for damage control. The intentions were to hide the local factional politics that was at work from the very beginning and to weaken the Congress (I)'s base by accusing them to be responsible for the violent mishap at the same time. The political importance of the masjid, both kancha in reality and pukka in imagination, was an undeniable fact to all political camps involved. But the demolition of the mosque in the darkness of the night had inevitably propelled the circumstance to the worst. The Hindus living in the vicinity might have consequently been attacked by the Muslim crowd the out of impulsiveness, a more serious situation of communal conflict might have hence been arisen too, but it would not be possible for the Congress (I) and its minor allies alone to bring the whole community of the Muslim masses together in protest against the vile act of demolition of the temporary structure of the mosque by the district police and administration. The event of political violence in Islampur thus demonstrates a complex play of interest and interaction among the religious community, political parties, factions, and the state which hints at the presence of the key elements, if not fully and clearly, that would prepare the socio-political and cultural ground for the party society to take root in coming years. The neutrality of the state as to the question of religion is diluted in violence it ensued in the course of power struggle between the political and social institutions at odds. The articulation of political violence in Islampur of the Murshidabad district in 1984 can therefore be viewed as the manifestation of the practices and effects of politics in its microcosmic form in a protean democratic society.

Abbreviations

BSF   : Border Security Force

CPI (M)   : Communist Party of India (Marxist)

ID   : Idaning (Weekly Tabloid published from Berhampore, West Bengal)

JR   : Jhar (Weekly Tabloid published from Berhampore, West Bengal)

JS   : Jangipur Sambad (Weekly Tabloid published from Raghunathganj, West Bengal)

MB   : Murshidabad Barta (Weekly Tabloid published from Berhampore, West Bengal)

MLA   : Member of Legislative Assembly

MNB   : Murshidabad Bikkhan (Weekly Tabloid published from Berhampore, West Bengal)

Glossary

Haat   : Village market

Kancha   : Temporary

Khas land   : Government – owned land

Katha   : A unit of area

Patta jami   : Ownership of land

Pukka   : Permanent

Masjid   : Mosque

Namaz   : Islamic payer

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