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Liminal Lives: Violence, Peace, and Urban Belonging in Calcutta, 1946–1992

ABSTRACT: This article examines communal violence in Calcutta between 1946 and 1992 through the analytical lens of liminality to explore how moments of crisis reshaped urban belonging, identity, and spatial relations. Rather than treating riots as episodic breakdowns of order, it conceptualizes them as threshold moments that suspended everyday norms and produced unstable configurations of community, territory, and citizenship. Beginning with the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946 and continuing through the disturbances of 1950 and 1964 to the violence of 1992, the study traces continuities in the forms, actors, and meanings of urban conflict. Drawing on archival reports, press accounts, and secondary scholarship, the article argues that communal violence was embedded in the city's social geography – its neighbourhoods, refugee flows, and labour patterns. Riots transformed familiar spaces such as neighbourhoods and religious sites into liminal zones where protection and threat coexisted. These episodes reveal the ambivalent roles of state agencies and local strongmen, alongside moments of inter-communal solidarity that complicate narratives of inevitable antagonism. By foregrounding experiential and spatial dimensions, the article demonstrates how recurring crises produced a fragile but persistent urban coexistence, where belonging is negotiated in the in-between spaces of memory and interaction.

Keywords: Liminality; Communal Violence; Urban Belonging; Partition; Neighbourhoods and Space; Postcolonial Urban History; Memory and Identity

POVZETEK: Članek preučuje nasilje med skupnostmi v Kalkuti v obdobju med letoma 1946 in 1992 ter z analitično uporabo koncepta liminalnosti raziskuje, kako trenutki krize preoblikujejo urbano pripadnost, identiteto in prostorske odnose. Namesto da izgrede obravnava kot epizodične zlome družbenega reda, jih konceptualizira kot trenutke, ki začasno suspendirajo vsakdanje norme in ustvarjajo nestabilne konfiguracije skupnosti, teritorija in državljanstva. Začenši z velikimi kalkuškimi poboji leta 1946, nemiri v letih 1950 in 1964 ter nasiljem leta 1992 študija sledi kontinuitetam oblik, akterjev in pomenov urbanih konfliktov. Na podlagi arhivskih poročil, časopisnih zapisov in sekundarne literature članek prikazuje, kako se nasilje med skupnostmi vgrajuje v družbeno geografijo mesta – v njegove četrti, begunske tokove in vzorce dela. Izgredi so domače prostore, kot so soseske in verska svetišča, preoblikovali v prostore liminalnosti, kjer zaščita in grožnja obstajata hkrati. Ti dogodki razkrivajo ambivalentne vloge državnih institucij in lokalnih veljakov, obenem pa tudi trenutke medskupnostne solidarnosti, ki zapletajo pripovedi o neizogibnem antagonizmu. S poudarkom na izkustvenih in prostor-

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skih razsežnostih članek pokaže, kako so ponavljajoče se krize ustvarile krhko, a trajno urbano sožitje, v katerem se pripadnost pogaja v vmesnih prostorih spomina in interakcije.

Ključne besede: liminalnost, medskupnostno nasilje, urbana pripadnost, delitev, soseske in prostor, postkolonialna urbana zgodovina, spomin in identiteta.

The Partition of India in 1947, on the eve of decolonization, remains unparalleled in scale and consequence. It affected so many people when it occurred, and has continued to affect countless lives ever since. The event was not a singular rupture, but a prolonged process, with a deep prehistory and a protracted aftermath. While the communal violence reached a deadly climax along the western border, it happened in waves in the east. It was episodic yet constant, oscillating between fragile coexistence and sudden breakdown. In this context, the present article explores the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, of past and present, of inside and outside, and of inclusion and exclusion. It focuses on the post-partition communal riots in Calcutta, how they were orchestrated, and how one can navigate the questions of complex and polymorphic identities in those fateful days. It also discusses the riot of 1992, which originated in an entirely different context, and asks how some complexities remain ephemeral to the central understanding of contending community relations in an urban setting.

In this context, the article argues that one of the best ways to understand these moments of violence is through the lens of liminality. Liminality, a concept borrowed from anthropology and ritual theory, refers to the stage of transition, ambiguity, and in-betweenness. When applied to urban communal violence, it allows us to see how riots do not simply rupture normalcy but produce threshold conditions where identities, spaces, and relationships are reconfigured. Riots reveal the instability of belonging; they mark the ways neighbours can become enemies, rumours can become truth, and a city can hover between solidarity and breakdown. Within this framework, the present article briefly touches upon major riots (1946, 1950, 1964, and 1992) that ruptured the urban fabric in the latter half of the twentieth century in Calcutta, and particularly explores the question of belonging within the matrix of communal violence. Calcutta's history of communal conflict reveals violence not as an aberration, but as a recurring liminal condition of urban belonging in modern South Asia.

Liminality and Urban Violence

Taking cues from van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1967) as part of the then 'process approach', the concept of Liminality here is identified as a condition of ambiguities and possibilities in which social norms are temporarily suspended, and new forms of identities can emerge (Andrews and Roberts 2012). It has twin possibilities: it can signal dissolution of order, as well as potential for transformation. If this theoretical premise is applied to the social landscape of post-colonial Calcutta, a city ravaged by riots, crisis of housing, refugee influx, unemployment, and social instabilities, it helps to understand the temporality and transience. As will be exhibited in the subsequent sections, this was also a period when the border between India and Pakistan was still in the making in psychological terms. Thus, walls, fences, and borders do not always lead to segregation and exclusion, but also produce liminality (regarding space, identity, culture, and experience), showing the complexity of the phenomenon. It seems like an oxymoron, but borders can unite different sides to develop new identities and cultures beyond any category or definition.

This must be read along with the battles of Liminality and transgression, which always existed at the margins of human existence. As this article specifically deals with two religious communities, the Hindus and Muslims, which underwent huge transformations in notions of us-hood and notions about the other during colonial modernity, liminality also helps to situate the precariousness of such shifting identities. This is more explicitly demonstrated during times of religious violence, which momentarily erases the thin balance of co-existence in the neighbourhoods. While neighbourhoods in a city is always marked by internal borders, riots activate the line of control between the contesting zones.

'Liminal' comes from the Latin 'limen' with plural 'limina' and means 'of, relating to, or situated at a sensory threshold: barely perceptible or capable of eliciting a response and second, of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition' (in-between, transitional) (Tanulku and Pekelsma 2024). Looking at the riots through the lens of liminality, the paper argues that such transgression stays on the borders, going nowhere and belonging nowhere. This is because, during violence, people have difficulty judging and punishing liminality. For example, a peace-loving per-

son can become violent in their own neighbourhood one day, and can also be among the peace-mongers the next. This points to the essential domain of the in-between space of potentials. Unlike the closed space given by its perceived limits, the liminal space or site of the limen is one of opening, unfolding, or becoming. It is a sort of terra incognita, even as it is occupied and transgressed. They are familiar yet unknown, they are secure, yet intimidating (Downey et al. 2016; Lamond and Ross 2020). Keeping the intersectionality of liminal existence, hardening of communal identities, and orchestration of riot violence, the paper traces the trajectory of communal conflict in Calcutta – beginning with the last major riot of colonial Calcutta in 1946, and concluding with the last major riot in post-colonial Calcutta in 1992. A recurrent key theme, then, lies around dissolution of order, where experience shapes communal consciousness, interprets judgements, and forms new meanings. Liminal situations can thus facilitate understanding of technologies shaping identities and institutions in larger social circles.

The Great Calcutta Killings: Partition before Partition in the City

The 1905 Partition of Bengal unfolded in a political moment when a fully consolidated Muslim political identity had not yet taken shape. The anti-partition mobilization was driven largely by *bhadralok*/elite Bengali Hindu efforts to preserve a linguistic and regional identity that was imagined as transcending religious divisions, expressed through the intertwined idioms of *atmashakti*, boycott, swadeshi activism, and strands of revolutionary politics (Sarkar 1973). By the early decades of the twentieth century, however, the terrain of politics underwent paradigmatic shifts. The after-effects of the Khilafat movement, the widening franchise, and the intensification of competitive mass mobilization contributed to a worsening communal climate (Chandra 2008; Das 1991; Roy 2018). While nineteenth-century middle-class cultural modernity had always been marked by latent caste and communal fractures (Joshi 2005, 2010; Chatterjee 1986, 1993), these fissures gradually hardened into more explicit and organized political identities by the 1930s and 1940s (Chatterji 2007; Bhattacharya 2014). Situating the late colonial moment within this longer trajectory

helps explain how earlier idioms of regional solidarity gave way to more polarized forms of political belonging that shaped the conditions of urban coexistence on the eve of Partition.

In Calcutta, riots gradually became more endemic since the end of the 19th century. Suranjan Das (1991) suggests a definite shift in the nature of communal violence in Bengal between 1905 and 1947. While the riots of the first three decades of the twentieth century demonstrated the complex coexistence of class and communal elements, the fusion of the communal with nationalist and class modes of consciousness in the 1940s culminated in relatively more organized and overtly communal riots. This was a liminal moment; collective violence no longer belonged fully to the idiom of class or colonial resistance, nor was it wholly sectarian. It hovered uneasily between these domains and contributed to the crystallization of communal antagonism. Yet, in early 1946, the city jubilantly protested against the trial of Indian National Army's prisoners, rose in solidarity with several anti-colonial upsurges, and it seemed that perhaps, communal peace was not far away. Ironically, despite promising amity between rival political groups and opposing communal parties in February 1946, not an iota of this mutual harmony and love was felt from the morning of 16th August 1946, when the city witnessed an unprecedented scale of communal violence. In the five days of frenzied madness – that has gone down in history as the 'Great Calcutta Killings' – an estimated 4,000 people were killed and another 10,000 were injured (Roy 2018; Batabyal 2005; Mukherjee 2015).

Also, while the participants in the earlier riots were mostly upcountry labourers taking out their anger against upper-class people, both European and Indian, the riots of later years gradually started involving middle-class men, not only non-Bengali but also Bengali. Till the beginning of the 1940s, whatever might have been the immediate trigger for an outbreak – music before a mosque or a firing from a Marwari house or an accidental killing of a Muslim boy – the collective violence, once it spread, came to be directed against symbols of class and colonial exploitation. By the 1940s, crowd violence no longer focused primarily on the richer and more influential sections of the two communities, but was instead directed at any manifestation of the rival community, such as religious centres, clubs, and schools. The riots also indicated a certain degree of planning beforehand

to carry out a uniform method of aggression, arson, and looting. The emphasis now was not on economic gain but on revenge and humiliation of the members of the rival community.

The riot began in the context of Direct Action Day on 16th August, a call given by the Muslim League, for demanding Pakistan, with all Muslim-majority provinces. The urban space of Calcutta was transformed into a land of anguish, with a prevailing sense of insecurity, confusion, and chaos. While a thriving underworld of anti-socials/*goondas* already had a prominent presence in Calcutta as a part of the Bengali political life, they acquired a new importance in the wake of the Second World War (Banerjee 2006). In the mid-1940s, American and British soldiers who left the city disposed of a large amount of weaponry and heavy armaments. These found their way into the arsenal of the *goonda*s. In 1946, during the August Killing in Calcutta, these weapons were widely used by the gangsters of both communities. Hence, here again, the *goonda* can be identified as a liminal figure: at once protector and predator; defender of the neighbourhood and agent of its destabilization. Neither fully criminal nor fully political, his violence was a conflict zone between legality and illegality, blurring the lines between civic defence and civic disorder. Interestingly, these *goondas* were also territorially divided. Extensive regions in Northern and Central Calcutta (Upper Circular Road, Amherst Street, Narkeldanga, Beliaghata, Bowbazar, Muchipara) were particularly infamous due to the fields of operation of these *goondas*. They also had more or less common ancestral lands. The criminals largely belonged to the strata of urban poor and upcountry migrants. But a transgression occurred with the traumatic events of 1946 as many new members entered the underworld. A considerable section hailed from upper-caste affluent families, some even had military connections. Gopal Mukherji (alias Gopal Pantha) in central Calcutta raised a private army called *Bharat Jatiya Bahini* to protect the Hindus, which was trained in explosives and firearms. The middle-class *bhadralok*/ elites like Dinabandhu Dutta, Santosh Pal, and Bhanu Bose joined the 'army' to seek revenge for their sufferings and humiliations by the Muslims. However, after the period of aggression receded, often the 'heroes' were viewed with contempt, and they had no other option except taking recourse to full-fledged involvement in the criminal world. Hence, they

belonged to the domain of inbetween-ness, in the critical and fluid junctures at the performative arena of power and culture.

It is also crucial to study the urban landscape, the site of violence, where riots unfold. In this regard, Nariaki Nakazato (2018) talks about the role of neighbourhoods or *para*. When the unprecedented rioting broke out in Calcutta, many citizens appeared to have fallen back upon the familiar social ties of *para* to render mutual help of various kind to one another. For example, the railway workers who lived in Narkeldanga bustee set up a united Hindu volunteer corps to prevent outsiders from entering their neighbourhood. In other places, local people constructed barricades to defend their '*para*'. On Ripon Street to the west of Park Circus, which was inhabited by a mixed population, Muslims built 'barricades with the help of Anglo-Indians on information of impending attacks by Sikhs' on the evening of 17th August. In north Calcutta, where a minority of Muslims lived in isolated small pockets, neighbourhood solidarity occasionally worked as an effective safeguard to protect them against attacks from Hindu intruders. Hence, while sometimes the neighbourhoods acted as an arsenal of violence, some exhibited discursive areas of liminalities: simultaneously protective thresholds and exclusionary borders. They turned everyday spaces of intimacy into battlegrounds where belonging and otherness were reified at the edges of make-shift barricades.

The Calcutta Disturbances had tremendous repercussions. Not only did they trigger a series of partition riots in East Bengal, Bihar, and other provinces, but they also made it almost impossible for both sides to come to a political compromise for the sake of preserving the unity of India. They generated a deep pessimism that even the euphoria of Independence was unable to heal. The mutual distrust that stemmed from the Calcutta Riots and Noakhali Riots led people to cluster into the 'safety' of their own communities, freezing identities into solid blocs. Thus, territorial separation began even before partition was announced. By August 1947, violence engulfed the western border of the sub-continent on a massive scale. Unlike Bengal, the large-scale communal carnage in the Western border led to an almost complete exodus of both communities, culminating in a near-exchange of population. According to official reports, casualty figures were much less in Calcutta.

The transition of India from colonial subservience to independence on 15th August, 1947, brought severe challenges, anxieties, confusion and conflicts with it. Partition created dispersed, disordered cities across South Asia. Urgency was felt about how best to recognize, accommodate, tolerate, and manage subnational diversity and provide support and mechanisms for managing effects of Partition. Several institutional arrangements based on legal and constitutional mechanisms tried to respond to ethnic and cultural diversities and protect and nurture individual rights, along with substantive provisions for minority rights. Also, the arrival of freedom appeared to different people differently from their own diverse vantage points, such as existing economic privileges, possession of cultural capital, religious beliefs, and caste identities. 'Partition cities' therefore, had multiple, changing structures. Some denizens emerged as winners in these battles over urban space. Others lost their footholds. (Chatterji 2023; Bandyopadhyay 2009; Roy, Sengupta and Bandyopadhyay 2024).

The Violence of 1950: Second Calcutta Killing

If 1946 was a Partition before Partition, then 1950 marked the aftershock. It was the first major riot of post-colonial Calcutta, shaped by refugee flows, contested rehabilitations, and deepening of the liminality of belonging.

According to a telegram sent to Atlee, the Premier of England, from the UK High Commission in Calcutta on 2nd February 1950, horrifying violence was unleashed in Khulna, Barisal and Rajshahi in East Bengal against the minority Hindu Bengalis. However, as per media reports, violence broke out in Dacca on Friday, 10th February, 1950. On 12th February, a crowd of Hindu passengers was attacked at the Karimtolla airport near Dacca by an armed mob and a large number of boarding passengers, including women and children, were killed or seriously wounded. Soon a host of reports of massacres flooded in from other parts of East Bengal such as Sylhet, Rajshahi, Barisal, Khulna, Tripura and Noakhali. While Indian newspapers focused on the atrocities of Hindus by Muslims in East Pakistan, Pakistani media negated them vigorously. *Pallibandhab*, a daily published from Rajshahi, reported how the Muslims were constantly victimized in West Bengal, especially in Murshidabad. Amidst these allegations and counter-allegations, full-scale anti-Muslim

riots started in Calcutta on 8th February, after a gap of nearly two years (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2022, 78). Detailed reports of the riots in Calcutta and the suburbs are difficult to come by, with the government gagging press reportage with prohibitory orders. Only the official briefings were to be reported daily, and no independent investigations were to be carried out. Thus, riots in post-colonial regime demonstrated a contested terrain of representation and accountability. Violence unfolded across a transnational spectrum of mutual accusation, where rumour and reportage blurred, and truth itself occupied a liminal space between competing sovereignties.

The government promulgated legal orders banning all processions and meetings. A curfew was imposed in certain sensitive pockets, and the military was summoned to patrol those areas, and soon even such measures seemed inadequate (Dominion Office Files at British Archives and West Bengal State Archive Files in India). The official reports documented endless events of stabbing, arson, murder, and indiscriminate looting of property and widespread destruction. As was evident from earlier riots, the zones surrounding Maniktala and Beliaghata police stations, the area bounded by Ultadanga Main Road on the north, Gas Street on the south, the railway bridge on the east and Upper Circular Road on the west, the Amherst Street police station, the area encompassing Keshub Sen Street on the north, Mirzapur Street on the south Upper Circular Road on the east, and Amherst Street on the west, remained most tense. The situation seemed to have improved by 11th February, and on 18th February, the curfew was lifted from all areas in Calcutta. But peace was short lived. Reports of stray violence in and around the city never ceased to come.

While streets of Calcutta and Howrah were in flames in parallel with extensive regions in East Bengal, it acted as a super active catalyst for mass migration: to and from East Pakistan to West Bengal and vice versa. Reports of organized attacks on trains bound for Calcutta and harassment of the refugees by East Bengal officials and semi-official agencies led to agitated response in the areas surrounding Sealdah station. Thus, the very act of travel, boarding a train or a steamer, echoed a tension of in-betweenness, where survival hung upon a thin balance. Again, migration patterns remained asymmetrical. While the Hindus had a majorly one-way flow

from East to the West Bengal, the Muslim exodus from West Bengal was not complete. Soon many came back. They represented the unsettling anxieties of Partition's aftermath. They were suspended between departure and return, between inclusion and exclusion. Fortnightly reports in April 1950 suggested various conflicting figures (between 25,000–50,000) regarding the intra-city migration of the displaced Muslims during the riot.

In fact, one of the most long-term consequences of the 1950 riots was jumbling up the existing setup in the city by obliterating the boundaries between the rich and the poor. The latter fled from their dinghy shanties, which were burnt down, to take shelter amongst their relatively affluent brethren. The state administration, too, acknowledged, 'There has been a concentration of evacuees in certain areas, particularly in Park Circus' (Census of India 1951). Additional important local factor was that the Hindu landlords in these partially developed but increasingly valuable areas used this opportunity to instigate the eviction of the minorities to enjoy undisturbed possession of the land under the Tikka Tenancy Act of 1949. Thus, the official police view regarding the riot was that, though the troubles were communal in origin, they were aggravated and protracted by hooliganism and goondaism masquerading as communalism (Ghosh 2018). The 1951 census data also showed, in some of the Muslim majority pockets, the vacuum was filled by the Hindu immigrants. During a survey on the social scene of Calcutta in the 1960s, it was noted in that the refugees had settled in large numbers mostly in the northern and northeastern wards, many of which were formally inhabited by Muslim labourers and artisans (Bose 1968, 14).

In this asymmetrical war, the minority's social and cultural rights over the cityscape were also transforming in many other ways. Increasingly, the Muslim graveyards and *waqf* property were often transformed into residential neighbourhoods by the Hindus. While such transformation was a constant and gradual process, the riots led to more violent and radical restructuring of the living spaces. According to a report created by the Muslim Rehabilitation and Welfare Association (1950), the Chief Secretaries' Conference between two Bengals on 20th November 1950 brought up a concern about the deplorable conditions of existing mosques in and around Calcutta after the recent violence. A large number of them had

been occupied by the Hindu refugees, whom even the police could not resist. Mosques and graveyards thus became liminal spaces, simultaneously shelters, battlegrounds, and symbols of dispossession.

Amidst these spatial transformations, the struggle over responsibility for the riots generated another layer of contestation, as both the Indian and Pakistani governments were busy to establish the perfect chronology of riots to justify and legitimize their roles respectively. The Congress leaders in Bengal put the onus on the restless spirit of the migrants, claiming they were desperate to stir violence due to their victimhood. The Premier Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, the Congress leader, was eloquent about the incendiary role of organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha, being directly responsible. The Mahasabha General Secretary Ashutosh Lahiry spewed venom on the minorities in his speeches, and the Mahasabha Conference in December 1949 asked for the establishment of *Akhand* (undivided) *Hindustan* based on the culture and tradition of the land. Reliable sources mention a 'Commission for Protection of Minorities' in Calcutta, which was supposedly forming and training a civilian Hindu militia. Its founder J. Mitter, an immigrant from Khulna, about 55 years old, published a pamphlet called '*Now or Never*' in which he suggested the creation of a separate territory for the Hindu minorities in East Bengal. They had a sort of training camp in Beliaghata (where the first communal incident occurred in early February). There were 2000 volunteers, trained by Ex-Army Gurkhas. During the early post-colonial years the idea of turning neighbourhoods into militarized liminal zones therefore had popular acceptance.

Hence, the years after the riot of 1950 were a period of reshuffling of population, displacement of residences and establishment of fresh addresses. Religious festivities were moments of examining the strength of secular sovereign democracy. The Delhi Pact (1950), signed between Liaquat Ali Khan and Jawaharlal Nehru, possibly never had a chance of much success. Because Nehru's basic assumption – that migration would stop if overt communal violence could somehow be contained – was wrong as millions of refugees kept crossing the eastern and western borders.

In fact, fresh waves of migration began in full swing in the 1960s. There had been a number of reports of mass migration of Muslims from Assam

and Tripura to East Bengal, as well as huge groups of Garo, Christians and Buddhists who came to those hilly tracts after being persecuted from East Bengal. In such circumstances, the fresh trouble in Kashmir in December 1963 directly led to communal riots in January 1964 in both Bengals.

Riots of 1964: The Hazratbal Incident

The theft of a sacred relic of Prophet Mohammad from Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar on December 26, 1963 evoked considerable tension not only in Kashmir but all over India and Pakistan. While the Indian government was on the verge of restoring the relic, massive violence unleashed on East Pakistani Hindu Bengalis by the Muslims in early January (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2022, 243). Immediately, a fresh chain of migration began to West Bengal with stories of gruesome cruelty. In retaliation, riot erupted in Calcutta and in the border areas on 9th January 1964, and resulted in considerable number of casualty and property destruction. According to official records, the eastern border and Calcutta's Rajabazar, Beliaghata, Entally, Jadavpur, and Sonarpur witnessed mob clashes with the police. The frenzy finally subsided with the advent of army and long hours of curfew, which took a toll on normal city life. It was the usual story of chain reactions: starting in the early stages from religious fanaticism, never far below the surface, fermented by horrific accounts of happenings in Pakistan and India and then exploited by *goondas* and the hooligan elements.

While newspapers in West Bengal reported vivid details of atrocities on Hindu minorities in East Pakistan on 4th January, the newspapers of the same day also reported the government's success in restoring the sacred relic in Kashmir, leading to spontaneous celebration by Hindus-Muslims-Sikhs alike. But this bit of news could not stop the impending violence. This very moment proves that it is often unreasonable to find linear causality in communal violence. They do stem from particular triggers, but collective emotions, rumour, and political interests intersect to transform everyday coexistence into crisis. However, this time, more preparedness was demonstrated by the top leadership. The newspapers such as the *Jugantar* reported that the Home Minister G. L. Nanda called up an all-party conference including members from Calcutta Corporation, Lok

Sabha and Rajya Sabha to form three committees to ameliorate the riot condition: the peace committee, the vigilance committee and the aid and rehabilitation committee. Meanwhile, some leading opposition and trade union leaders decided to organize peace squads and met Chief Minister P. C. Sen promising to extend their service. Also, six Muslim leaders from West Bengal issued a statement condemning the oppression of the minority in East Pakistan and hoped that 'the people and government' there would immediately arrange to stop 'this communal orgy'. They assured their co-religionists in East Pakistan that the Muslims in West Bengal were completely safe and secure. Publicly, they confirmed their faith in the constitutional democracy and expressed their admiration for the 'Hindu brothers and sisters' who had stood by them.

Despite continued clashes in areas such as Muchipara, Watgunge, Ekbalpur, and Garden Reach the situation turned for the better and order in Calcutta was completely restored by 17th January. The transport sector, the shops and trade and commerce resumed again, but with the curfew hours, Calcutta was yet to achieve its normalcy. Out of a total of 54,055 Muslim refugees housed across 29 camps, 34,956 had safely returned to their homes by 22 January. Like the earlier events of violence, India proposed a high-level ministerial talk, hoping for positive and constructive measures essential for the creation of a favourable atmosphere to discuss Indo-Pakistan differences. India suggested that the meetings must take place in Calcutta or Dacca and not in Delhi or Rawalpindi, which were 'distant land' from the places of trouble. Such diplomatic gesture once again highlights liminal politics: the borders between the states were not merely a fixed demarcated line, but a proximate reality. Calcutta and Decca were more than cities, they were liminal venues where the immediacy of violence, migration, and negotiation converged.

Meanwhile, 16th January was a historic day for Calcutta, as the government and intellectuals called for a mass peace march for all citizens. The rally was to cover the riot-hit areas through S N Banerjee Road, Wellesley Street, Eliot Road, Lower Circular Road, Beniapukur Lane, Phulbagan, CIT Road, Moulali, Sealdah, Rajabazar, Keshab Sen Street, College Street, and would disperse at College Square. Notably, more than forty thousand people assembled at the meeting point, while many were waiting to join the

procession through its course with spontaneous slogans such as '*No more riots, we want peace*', or '*Hindu Musalman Bhai-Bhai*'! When the procession reached Janbazar and Wellesley Road, the Hindus stood by the Muslim residents and cried out slogans of solidarity, which reminded of the spirited celebrations on Independence Day. All major media houses and official information agencies captured the rally in detail. Thus the urban space, within few days, turned from a battle-field to a festival ground, from exclusionary barricades to inclusive processions.

The ideological battle to 'find' the truth behind the perpetrators of violence was, however still going on. An article in *Anandabazar Patrika* talked about social 'peculiarities of this metropolis where seeds of violence lie unnoticed in the shaded lanes and by-lanes and often behind neon lights. The seeds sprout in different forms now as a violent political demonstration and also as a communal riot.' Another daily, *Jugantar* (19/1/64), came out with a revealing report entitled 'Whose Hands Were Operational in the Riots?' in which, it stated that the non-Bengali Muslims had provoked the Bengali Muslims to take up arms. In February, the Working Committee of Bharatiya Jan Sangh in West Bengal directly accused the 'pro-Pakistani' Muslims for provoking the riots as huge Muslim mobs were noticed in areas like Garpar, Entally, Beniapukur, Park Circus, Metiabruz and Tiljala, raising slogans like 'Pakistan Zindabad' (*Hindusthan Standard* 6/2/64). The members of the Jan Sangh further alleged: 'The West Bengal government tried to play down the part of Muslims who had played their roles in riots, and their entire secular wrath was turned against the Hindus. Later, when the riots subsided, the Raj Bhaban was converted into a Langar-Khana where the Muslim sufferers were feted and feasted in royal style, while the Hindu sufferers were left to shift for themselves.'

The retrospective reports in *Jugatntar and Anandabazar Patrika* were no less provocative. They gave out personal stories of Hindu households facing onslaughts and braving inhuman cruelty in almost pictographic details. A few months later, Professor Sankhaninad Guha and Arabinda Datta, on 25th May, commented that growth of communalism in Pakistan leading to Hindu migration together with an 'ungovernable' Muslim minority in India, was responsible for all religious conflicts. Complete migration from East Bengal and a restriction on the 'geometric' rate of growth

of population among the minority were necessary steps to be taken by the government ('Secularism and Reality', *Hindustan Standard*, 24/5/64). On the other hand, the Congress expressed its opinion regarding the riot as simply a Pakistani creation and criticized the mentality of blaming any particular religious group. Thus, each version redrew the boundaries of 'us' and 'them,' showing that communal violence in Calcutta was as much discursive as it was physical.

It is true Calcutta did not experience riots of a similar scale of violence in the years following that of 1964. But sporadic localized clashes over such as immersion of Hindu idols in Muslim neighbourhoods managed to find its way. According to the official voices, such disturbances were purely communal and *not unusual* on such occasions. These episodes, dismissed as routine communal quarrel, revealed the city's lingering liminality. Everyday practices could at any moment tip over into violence, keeping coexistence suspended between fragile normalcy and sudden rupture.

Babri Riots of 1992: Beyond Hindu Nationalism

Almost three decades passed in Calcutta after the 1964 January Riots, without any major communal disturbances. While Bengal witnessed a continuous rule of Left Front government since 1977 with relative stability, the national political landscape was changing rapidly. By the 1980s, there was a renewed shift of the Hindu Right Wing agenda, especially led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, with tacit support from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the RSS. It revolved around a controversial mosque in Ayodhya, a place traditionally believed to be the birthplace of Lord Rama. This mosque, by Mir Baqi, an associate of Mughal emperor Babur, was built at the site of a temple of Rama back in the sixteenth century, and is known as the Babri Mosque. The Hindu Right Wingers reinvigorated the issue in the 1980s, demanding its demolition, along with the mosques of Kashi and Mathura, where Hindu temples had also been 'victims' of Muslim fundamentalism. Finally, on December 6th, 1992, a large Hindu mob, famously known as '*karsevak*', destroyed the historic monument in Ayodhya, with obvious support from the BJP-ruled government in Uttar Pradesh. This restarted a bloody chain of riots in major parts of India, including Calcutta. However, the casualties and destruction were

on a much smaller scale here than in other Indian cities like Bombay or Delhi. Whereas the riots in earlier periods were fallout of Partition, and engaged cross-border migration, this time, it emerged majorly out of post-independence urgencies, through majoritarian Hindu activism, which was positioned in the wide domain of competitive populism. It implied a complex network between state power, electoral politics, popular mobilization, mass media, and collective emotionalism (Ludden 2005; Zavos 2000; Kanunga et al. 2020; Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 2007). The new communalism of the 1980s is intricately woven into structural changes in India, which is driven by forces that circulate in the world economy and also hide in the private spaces of family life.

Apparently, Bengal enjoyed a different political climate around this time. The whole theatre of Ayodhya dispute and the manoeuvrers of the Hindu extremist wings were reported by the press in Calcutta in a rather distanced manner, and the police did not anticipate any local violence. As per media reports, The VHP members and the *karsevaks* were portrayed quite critically for assembling at Ayodhya in increasing numbers, defying court orders (*Ananda Bazar Patrika/ABP*, 3.12.92). However, when the news of demolition on 6th December reached Calcutta, minor feuds erupted in certain localities, especially around the port areas (*The Statesman*, 8.12.92). The ruling Left Front Government called emergency meetings. Both the Congress and the Left parties individually carried out peace marches across several localities. It was declared that, though public transport would be off, many other essential sectors and the media would be allowed to operate freely.

However, despite the strikes and the peace rallies, on 7th December, an 'orgy of violence' was unleashed at Lichu Bagan and Kashyap Para in Metiabruz. Houses in Mominpur and Garden Reach were ransacked, their inhabitants' belongings were looted and burnt and the police were nowhere to be seen. The police fought a pitched battle with the miscreants. Further in Park Street, at Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road, public and police vehicles were attacked and bombs were hurled from the rooftops prompting the police to fire tear gas shells in retaliation. Curfew had to be imposed in Calcutta and the army was deployed (*ABP* 8/12/92). The political parties, religious leaders, and intelligentsia came out in numbers requesting to keep harmony and peace.

In Metiabruz and Garden Reach, the places of worship were under the *goondas*, so were the medical clinics (Report by *Nagarik Mancha* 1993). 852 arrests were made, with accusations such as arson, looting and rioting. What the reporters found appalling was the complete absence of political leaders in the riot-affected areas. By 9th December, when the city was regaining its balance, the situation in East Calcutta suddenly deteriorated from midnight onwards (*ABP* 10/12/92). The earlier decision to limit curfew hours was to be withdrawn as East and South Calcutta including Tiljala, Tangra, Entally, Beniapukur, Kareya and Taltala regions witnessed widespread looting and arson since 10pm. Finally, from 12th December onwards, violence was quelled and the city heaved a sigh of relief. Due to this four-day disturbance, at least 35,000 had been displaced and sought shelter in 13 camps (*ABP* 13/12/92)

Unlike the earlier riots, where the Partition led state borders became a site of liminal contestations, the 1992 violence was different. It emerged from long-standing psychological enmities between Hindus and Muslims, irreconcilable even after so many years. The demolition of Babri did not touch Calcutta spatially, stems of refugees did not arrive as it happened with Hazratbal incident, nevertheless it fractured the city through media transmission, rumour and political mobilization. Yet, resistance to violence and a determination to keep up the secular spirit were not lost completely. The Press reports diligently brought out a number of snippets where 'good senses' prevailed. For example, when a group of Muslim rioters assembled to demolish an old temple dedicated to Lord *Shiva* at Zakaria Street, the local Muslims resisted them spontaneously and saved the temple from destruction (*ABP* 9/12/92).

'The demolition of Babri Masjid has caused excruciating pain in the hearts of all Muslims but we should not cause pain to others as a consequence' – said Md. Nazim, the Imam of Nakhoda Mosque – 'What happened at Ayodhya was a shame. Yet all of us should work together for peace and help to cool down passions.' He appealed for communal harmony, for that is what Islam teaches.

Suranjan Das (2000) posits a comparison between the three cases of riots in Calcutta. Like in the 1964 outbreak, the emphasis of rioting in 1992 was not on physical assaults but on looting, arson, and destruction of proper-

ty. Molestation of women was not reported, and 'brutalization of human consciousness', which dominated the 1946 carnage and manifested in the recent post-Ayodhya outbreaks in Bombay (Maharashtra) and Surat (Gujarat), was not characteristic of the last Calcutta outbreak. It is equally revealing that the 'traditional' riot zone of Calcutta – Rajabazar, Khidirpur, Kalabagan, Zakaria Street, Keshab Sen Street, Chitpur, and Moulali remained outside the parameters of the 'unsettled zone' in 1992. Instead, the violence was concentrated in the city's south-west and eastern sectors comprising Metiabruz, Garden Reach, Park Circus, Tangra, Tapsia, Tiljala and Beniapukur slums. Who was behind this conspiracy is difficult to identify. But it appears that real estate 'promoters' played a crucial role in inflaming the riot, whose victims were mainly slum-dwellers. Their apparent aim was to clear the slums/*bustees* for construction projects, especially in the context of rising land prices since the 1980s.

The Left leaders also particularly targeted the Hindi and Urdu-speaking Muslims as the main perpetrators, while the Bengali Muslims had protected their Hindu Neighbours (*The Statesman 15/12/92).* Indeed, in tune with all preceding Calcutta riots, the upcountry Hindu and Muslim alike – were particularly restive in 1992. Das (2000) suggests these up-countrymen failed to integrate with the ethos of Calcutta. Discriminated as 'intruders', and denied opportunities for secure employment, the Muslims among them could find solace from *mullas* (Muslim religious preachers) and sought strength from strong kinship bonds, which only religious loyalty could provide.

Despite the repeated emphasis on not so communal character of the Babri riots, a communal distemper was certainly present during those turbulent days. Stories of desecration of places of worship or a likely attack on the police headquarters of Lalbazar, heaps of dead-bodies lying on the streets, and cutting of women's breasts were systematically circulated to excite sentiments of both communities. The police control room had a tough time managing the rumour-mongering. One journalist overheard a middle-aged man once he finished browsing through the newspaper at his neighbourhood *adda/*gossip, 'These newspapers don't write anything nowadays. They haven't even mentioned that Nakhoda Mosque had been demolished already!'

A fact-finding report by an NGO states that the Muslims faced victimization even by representatives of government officials. The police arrested many Muslims from Metiabruz; they were detained unlawfully for more than 90 hours before they were produced before the court. They were tortured in the lock-up and abused by the police. Curiously, in Badrtala Lions Club Area, when a temple was harmed, the local army constable raised funds and renovated it with chants of *Jai Siyaram*!

A riot changes the texture of the city in many ways. Apart from the mere calculations of causalities, the media reports can be an excellent source of understanding the city-life and its people. In the places where the brunt of violence was not directly felt, the citizens found it hard to suppress their excitement and curiosity once they saw the army trucks in their neighbourhoods. Many of them were curious about what it meant to be 'under curfew'. Hence, they came out of their homes and peeped through the street corners, only to be nabbed by the army officers. However, for those who were pavement-dwellers, curfew hours presented a great predicament. They did not have the warmth of a closed enclosure which they could call home. They were shifted by the police from one footpath to another; the march of the heavy army boots simply terrified them beyond limits (*The Statesman* 13/12/92). The meaning of curfew was different to the elite *bhadralok* as well. They lamented how the bustling city lost its playfulness during the curfew hours, especially during the day (*ABP* 12/12/92).

The situation was different in the localities where violence was felt terribly. In the temporary relief shelters, insecurities and anxieties among the victims were felt even after a week. Yet in those places too, life was becoming routinised. The reporters found how in the camps of Metiabruz, the men were trimming their hair and beard at the local barber's (*ABP* 13/12/92). Indrani Bagchi, a journalist in *The Statesman* (19/12/92), humorously described how the city reacted during the riot, and brought up lesser known anecdotes. For example, she wrote: 'On one of our visits there (Kalighat), we were hard put to believe that it was part of the same riot-torn city we all lived in. The prostitutes were at work; the policemen were peacefully munching *phuchkas* (local street food). The Goddess Kali was in her temple, and all was right with the world!'

Beyond Violence: Liminality, Memory, and the City

Incidents of unexpected solidarity, even at the level of sacrificing oneself to save others, were not altogether absent in moments of violence. Yet, these moments of human solidarity existed alongside immense suffering. Blaming British colonial policies for communal violence only externalized the responsibility. The deeper reality was that communal distrust was endemic, and few were ready to grapple with its embeddedness in postcolonial politics and quotidian life. Hindu refugees, instead of being treated as human beings, were often mobilized as propaganda material: senior officials inspected camps, blessed their inhabitants, and left them to misery. Shunted around like cattle in trucks, uprooted families were made to embody the failures of both states. And always, in these fragile spaces of survival, someone was present to incite violence, knowing that a hungry, uprooted man is most vulnerable to his worst impulses.

On the other hand, the Muslim minority in Calcutta bore the major brunt of direct, as well as systemic violence in post-colonial years. Muslim leaders were kept under surveillance, cast as potential 'fifth columnists,' a label that transformed citizenship into suspects. The commonsensical understanding of peacekeeping – where responsibility for restraint during communal tensions was placed on minority communities – was reflected in both bureaucratic and political responses. Despite limited electoral presence in Bengal, Hindu communal parties were active in the 1950s and 1960s, repeatedly inciting for complete exchange of population with the eastern border. Another recurrent aspect across the riots was the role of the *goondas* – the underclass of the city who had been the major 'fire-tenders' since the late colonial period. Also, the pockets where mobs assembled and rioted were typically Muslim-majority neighbourhoods. This pattern reveals how communal violence in Calcutta was always enmeshed with the city's spatial politics. It particularly targeted the weaker spots, the poorer Muslims, living at the margins, easy to evacuate, under the pretext of orchestrated violence.

Here, the lens of liminality help us see beyond mere causality. The riots unfolded in threshold spaces, such as the stations, refugee camps, curfewed streets, or contested neighbourhoods and mixed domicile – zones that were neither stable nor chaotic, but always in-between. Here, on

every occasion, violence acquired a strange duality. One day, the streets could become perpetual battlefields, on the other, spontaneous peace rallies could be organized in the same place. Similarly, the refugees too embodied liminality, their existence hovered in precarious journeys made to their 'promise-lands', and then between citizenship and statelessness.

The incidents show that each of these elements of prejudice, conflict and violence are inter-related, one leads to the other, and yet these three sociological expressions of inter-community relations have an autonomy of their own. Conflict is transformed into violence, if the sense of relative deprivation is high, legitimacy of the government is low, chances of communication are blocked, sense of insecurity is intense, beliefs and traditions sanction violence, and instruments of violence are readily available (Brass 2011). With repeated violence since 1947, Calcutta, thus, emerged in a new mould – a pot-pourri, where the social space came to be contoured along communal, ethnic and linguistic lines.

Hence, it is important to view violence not as an isolated act, or a series of isolated acts, but rather as a total social phenomenon. The antecedents, the enabling conditions, the cycle of violence that a violent act initiates or reinforces, the forms that it takes, the wide sections of society that it involves, the consequences that it has both near and far – all these must form part of the study of violence. There is violence involved in the unrelenting construction of enemies of the nation, and the concomitant denial of equal rights or respect to the latter. Seen from this perspective, the violence is unceasing, partly unconscious, and often disguised. What remains is not a linear history but a set of threshold moments—times when ordinary life trembled between intimacy and hostility, when neighbours became enemies, and when enemies occasionally turned protectors. Memory, however, is uneven and selective: despite archival evidence of recurring tensions, many residents retrospectively described their own neighbourhoods as having remained peaceful, displacing violence onto adjacent spaces – 'the bomb fell in the next *para*.' Such dissonances reveal how the afterlives of riots were inscribed not only in demographic patterns but also in the moral geography of the city, where certain neighbourhoods came to be imagined as unsafe, inhospitable, or perpetually vulnerable. Attend-

ing to these layered recollections underscores how communal violence reshaped Calcutta's spatial imagination, producing enduring cartographies of fear, distance, and negotiated coexistence.

Liminality thus weaves through the streets of Calcutta. The neighbourhoods are neither zones of safety nor of pure chaos, but in-between spaces where identities and actions are reversible, and undecidable. Violence in Calcutta arose in moments when the city itself became liminal – it was at once a home and a battlefield, a terrain of belonging and exclusion, a site where the promise of secular coexistence collided with the spectre of communal collapse.

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