Chapter VI

Riots In Retrospect

1. Amita, the heroine of Pratibeshi, a novel by Gourkishor Ghosh, was to meet her Muslim lover, Shamim, 16 August, 1946. They were supposed to meet in the afternoon at a College Street Café and take a very crucial decision about their future. Meanwhile, large scale rioting burst out of the Direct Action Programme. Amita could not come out of her house and Shamim was never heard of any more. Their decision remained forever deferred and Shamim was perhaps lost among the hundreds of corpses which lay on the streets of Calcutta that day.

2. I had gone to interview Amanullah Akbar, a former Vice-Chairman of the Burdwan Municipality, on a fine summer evening on 14 April, 2003. We were talking about different aspects of the process of identity formation among Bengali Muslims. A sense of insecurity that pervades the psyche of the minority was an important aspect of this discussion. His nephew’s wife and Commissioner of a Municipal Ward in this town, Najmun Nahar, walked in with the tea. I explained the topic of my research and expressed my desire to interview her. Najmun agreed and joined in the conversation. Soon she said, “Today itself I had fallen asleep in the afternoon and dreamt that some trouble had started between Hindus and Muslims in the bustee (slum) behind our house....when I woke up, I was drenched in sweat.”

I cite these two instances, one from fiction and the other from real life, to show how personal lives and plans of ordinary people are devastated by riots and their peace made uneasy by the very possibility. Although communal riots in Calcutta and Burdwan have been rare since 1964, riots with their macabre violence continue to haunt individual and collective memories. Even though the holocaust of the Partition began in Bengal with the Direct Action Day in August 1946, communal violence has not been a familiar feature in the political landscape after the 1950s. Yet riots continue to agitate the thinking of Bengali Muslims. More important than memories are anxious forebodings even when actual violence has been extremely rare in the state. Fears about past and future mingle to form an integral constituent in the psyche of Bengali Muslims;

2 Statement by Najmun Nahar, Burdwan, 14.04.03.
consequently playing a major role in shaping their identities, even in a plural society. This is why I felt it was necessary to devote a chapter on riots; although the point has been raised sporadically in the context of migration (Chapters II, IV); internal displacement and ghettoised neighbourhoods (Chapter IV) and in the context of political participation (Chapter V).

The ‘fear’ of annihilation by the majority community becomes all the more urgent and inescapable after the Gujarat massacres of 2002. This chapter is not intended to be a historical reconstruction of the post-partition riot events in West Bengal, but it seeks to establish how the eruption of violence elsewhere shapes the lives and sensibilities of Bengali Muslims. It is based on fieldwork among women. The women I interviewed can be classified into four major categories:

a) those who have actually lost property or relatives and friends, or have witnessed violence, i.e., those who have had first hand experience of riots,

b) those who have only heard of such accounts in their families, from older generations, or in the extended family, from more distant relatives. Stories heard within the family are no less important in transmitting terror to future generations who have not directly experienced violence.

The above two are not mutually exclusive categories; some women who have personally experienced the trauma of riots, have also heard of similar stories from other family members.

c) The third major category includes women who have neither personally experienced any communal violence nor have heard of any incident in their families, but are still haunted by anxiety as they anticipate the possibility.

d) There are still a few other women among Bengali Muslims, who, though aware of their minority status and differences with other members of the population, feel secure enough and do not entertain the thought of ‘riots’ in West Bengal seriously.

All the 36 women interviewed in Bamsor said that they have never been through communal riot. Men who were interviewed testified that they cannot recall a single instance of communal disturbance in the village. Bamsor is a Muslim-majority village with a few Hindu houses, which are concentrated in two neighbourhoods (paras). Most of these Hindu families are from the Kayastha caste, with surnames like Ghosh and
They are engaged in business. There are two Brahman families in the village and some temporary residents. They are people who have come to work in the electricity and water works in the village. The majority of the Hindu population, however, belongs to the dalit group of the Mals, who work as labourers along with poor Muslims, on the land of the well-to-do; and, occasionally, as domestic help.

Muslims of Bamsor do not live under the pressures to which Indian Muslims are generally subjected because of their minority status. Nor do Muslim women here feel threatened in any way inside the village. Nine among the 14 women I interviewed in the ‘46 years and above’ age group, affirmed that they have never given a serious thought to the matter. Younger women, who have, ironically, seen and heard more of life than the older women, also think that they need not fear about any communal attack.

Two women mentioned that such an attack can only be possible if it is engineered from outside with the help of hired criminals. That suggests that they do not fear animosity from the local Hindus. Nasiba Bibi, who first introduced herself as ‘Khokon’s mother’, is a lower middle class housewife who cannot read the newspaper (though she is not entirely illiterate). But she regularly watches and hears the news on television. Nasiba Bibi did not explicitly mention the Gujarat riots. She said she had not referred to them, when I requested her to explain what she meant when she said, “Even such things’ are heard of ‘these days’... where hired goondas loot the izzat of Muslim women.” However, she thinks such a situation will not be easy in Bamsor considering the huge Muslim population in the neighbouring village of Bhumsor and Alinagar, who, in such an eventuality, will build up a collective resistance. At the same time, she said that she is convinced that there will be no riots in Bamsor.

I have already explained that to the women of Bamsor, religion forms a very important constituent of their identity, in spite of a considerable degree of a larger socio-political awareness. This, I infer, results from a certain confidence gathered from their numerical preponderance. The numerical strength of the Muslims in Bamsor is the primary reason why Bamsor has never recorded any communal disturbance in the past and why its women believe that there are no chances of it in the near future.

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3 from the Electoral Roll of the village.
4 My interview with Nasiba Bibi, around 55 years of age. Bamsor. 19.10.03.
Secondly, there is no sphere of competitive interaction, economic or otherwise, between the two communities in the village. Competition sometimes leads to a communal situation when the potential rivals are from different communities. I found that throwing of coloured powder or water on Muslims during Holi, or the issue of music before mosques have never been made into issues of communal tension in the village. Everyone agreed that there was no chance of that in the future. Abul Hossain explained, “Their immersion processions never enter ‘our’ paras - nor do our Muharram processions go into ‘theirs’. This is the tradition of this village and we strictly adhere to it.”

Festivities in the village are generally a low-key affair. Nor is there much interaction between Hindus and Muslims at a personal level in the village. Friendships exist but they are restricted to the educational institutions, market places and political forums outside the domestic space. The instance of Bamsor thus explodes the myth of Hindus and Muslims living in peace and in closeness side by side for generations. It reveals a situation of passive mutual tolerance with which they have lived with each other, albeit from a safe socio-cultural distance.

Although Bamsor Muslim women confirmed their sense of security in the village, many of them, nonetheless, are perturbed at the news of communal disturbances in other parts of the country. Everyone said they read about atrocities inflicted on Muslims in other states in the newspapers or watch them on the television. Discussion with family members, friends and other relatives from other parts of the country also enhances their knowledge about communal relations elsewhere in the country. However, all women emphatically denied that such issues are ever raised in religious gatherings - the jamaats. Women attending jamaats in all the three places, Calcutta, Burdwan and Bamsor, said that the occasions are devoted to religious instruction. They impart scriptural knowledge and spell out a ‘proper’ Islamic lifestyle. The necessity of religious unity or slogans like ‘Islam in Danger’ are not raised in these jamaats. Nor do they breed communalism in any way.

I personally attended three such jamaats, two in Calcutta and one in Burdwan. I found discussions were, indeed, limited to Quranic instructions in all the three places, followed by prayers. There is, however, a possibility that confidential issues were not

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5 My interview with Abul Hossain, Bamsor, 22.10.03.
6 16.3.03, 4.5.03, Calcutta and 2.3.03, Burdwan.
raised before an outsider. These meetings are not institutionalised – there is no record of the agenda or the minutes of the proceedings. This makes it difficult to acquire a sense of all the subjects that may be discussed over a long period of time.

Mohini Khatun of Bamsor remembers that there was tension in the village as the news of the 1992 riots poured in. A similar bewilderment was noticed as the news of the Gujarat riots poured in ten years later. The CPI(M), in both instances, had organised public meetings within the villages to restore the confidence of the villagers. Both Bilkis and Mohini had taken an active part in organising the 2002 meetings.7 Most women who were interviewed in the village expressed a deep faith in the secularism of the 'Party'. They and said that they believed there would not be any of ‘those things’ (communal disturbances) so long as the ‘Party’ is there.

Referring to the age data of the respondents in Calcutta and Burdwan, we have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Less than 26 years (a)</th>
<th>26-46 years (b)</th>
<th>46-66 years (c)</th>
<th>66 years and above (d)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>158</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>504</td>
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</tbody>
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[Table- A]

Women included in column (d) are those who have been born in 1938 and before. Some of them, particularly those in Calcutta, therefore, do have a distinct memory of all the major communal riots, including the events of 1946. Those who have been born between 1938 and 1958 have been included in column (c). Some of the oldest women in this category remembered the 1946 and the 1950 riots. They would also have memories of the riots of 1964. That would include the youngest in this category. Those, born in 1958 would have been eight years old at the time.

Women included in column (b) were born between 1959 and 1978. Some of them would remember the 1964 riots, though they were very small girls. Those who were born in 1979 and thereafter have been included in column (a). Some of them experienced the anti-Sikh riots (1984) and the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1992.

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7 My interviews with
a) Bilkisara Khan(b. 1969), Bamsor. 26.10.03.
b) Mohini Khatun (b.1976) Bamsor. 03.11.03.
However, all these were not personal experiences. In many instances, the women narrated the riot experiences of some relative which they have heard. They recounted the stories with such passionate involvement and in such detail, that it was difficult to believe that these were not first hand experiences. The relationship with the family lore is so intense that the notion of first hand experience does not have a great deal of relevance. There were many who said they were ‘fortunate’ that there were no stories of direct riot experience in their families. But one thing was clear. While many of the urban respondents discussed the issues of identity formation of Bengali Muslims at different levels with a great deal of intellectual interest, the majority of them (including those who have never directly faced riots or did not have such family-stories to share) sounded deeply disturbed as they were discussing riots. Pauses in their recounting were long and uncomfortable. This is perhaps because, as Elie Wiesel had noted in the context of recording Holocaust memories, these are “so traumatic and so utterly removed from ‘normal’ human experience that it can never be spoken about directly, it can only be evoked through silence”8. I was also confronted with the implications of the limits of language. Language is a tool for making sense of experience. But it can also violate the meaning of this experience, subverting and distorting what it is used to represent.9 Riot stories and perceptions regarding riots could be recovered in some fullness from my respondents only after a certain point of time, after they had verified my credentials as a prospective confidante. Words were often found inadequate to convey the humiliation they had experienced. Every person narrating the same incident experienced by the family had a different way of telling, not only because people’s experiences varied, but because the individual ways in which they grasped and related to their shared experiences comprise the actual core of their story.

Several rounds of interview with a number of senior citizens of Burdwan and an analysis of the history of Burdwan show that Burdwan was regarded as a peaceful town under the Burdwan Raj. The Punjabi Khatri Raj family, in order to acquire acceptability among Hindu and Muslim subjects, patronised the religious elites of both communities10.

10 This impartiality has been proclaimed in a number of the charters issued by the Burdwan Raj. Mention may be made of the Hukum Am Hujuralir, No.112. dated December 8. 1925 which clearly states:
Attempts at cultural synthesis are clearly noticeable in their architecture,\textsuperscript{11} in the royal emblem and in the Burdwan cap.\textsuperscript{12} This cap was specially designed to incorporate features of the Muslim cap and the Sikh turban.

Another important factor was the foundation of the Burdwan District Congress\textsuperscript{13} in 1921. Many Muslims of local eminence had chosen to join the Congress at this stage. The local Congress was not used as a vehicle for pushing controversial religious ideologies. Rather, it provided an inclusive and interactive platform to the extent that both Hindus and Muslims felt safe to support candidates who did not belong to their own religious community, even for the important position of chairmanship. Thus Syed Md. Yasin was elected as the chairman of the Burdwan Municipality for two consecutive terms during 1924-32.\textsuperscript{14}

This balance of power, as Abul Hashim\textsuperscript{15} has shown, started changing rapidly during the thirties. With the expansion of the activities of the League and the growth of economic prosperity resulting from trade and from the new professions Muslims had acquired, there was a growing importance of Muslims in Burdwan town, which the Hindus failed to accept with grace. Joya Chatterjee\textsuperscript{16} also identifies the thirties as the decade when Burdwan started to show signs of communal tension. The first recorded incident of communal violence in the district, according to her, occurred in February 1935, and within three years, it had reached the town. Communal tension reportedly gripped the area when music was played at a Hindu immersion ceremony in front of a mosque in the town.\textsuperscript{17}

However, there is evidence that communal disturbances were not entirely unknown during the twenties in Burdwan town. A royal proclamation issued on December 8, 1925 stated that, “There had recently been a skirmish between Hindus and Muslims on the issue of music being played by an immersion procession in front of the

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\textsuperscript{11} Although the Burdwan Raj belongs to a Hindu family, it has no bias towards either Hindus or Muslims. The Raj family seeks to extend equal treatment to both, as far as possible.”
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} The unifying factor provided by the foundation of the Burdwan District Congress has also been raised by Indrani Ganguly, The social history of a Bengal Town, 1872 - 1947, Bombay, 1987, p.135.
\textsuperscript{15} Abul Hashim, In Retrospection, Dhaka, 1974, pp. 24-26.
\textsuperscript{17} In the Deora town in Kalna Subdivision, Burdwan district. Joya Chatterjee. op.cit.
mosque located on the western side of the royal stable."18 The royal administration was aware that such trouble was acquiring serious proportions in the 'western provinces', meaning the United Provinces. A circular was sent out among the officials and the public that "music was not to be played within ten yards of any mosque situated within the administrative territory of Burdwan Raj."19

'War over music'20 again assumed serious proportions in 1939 when Kali Puja coincided with Ramzan on November 11 and there was considerable friction between Hindus and Muslims over the question of procession to be taken out by the Hindus. Hindus, through the direct intervention of the Chief Minister Fazlul Haq, were coerced to agree that the immersion ceremony would be completed by 7 p.m. It was reported on the following day that many Muslims regarded it as a matter of victory and "shouted jubilantly that Islamic rule had been established".21

Aditya Majumdar22 (b.1934) used to enjoy watching the Muharam processions with his older brothers in his childhood. He recalls having heard from his brothers that these processions were becoming increasingly militant every year after 1940. He himself remembers slogans like "Ladke lenge Pakistan, Chhinke lenge Pakistan, Zarur lenge Pakistan",23 being chanted in these processions during the early forties. Similar incidents has also been recorded by Syed Sahedullah.24

Riots in Burdwan (both before and after 1947) have never been on an extensive scale. Large scale killings or social anarchy did not happen. But the extent of loss of life and/or property cannot be the only measure of the real impact of riots. Certain common features that, extended across the pre and post-47 period, may be noticed. In all situations of intense communal tension, 'rumours' were rife, breeding fears. Interviews revealed

19 Ibid.
20 Term borrowed from P.K. Dutta. 'War Over Music: The Riots of 1926 in Bengal'. Social Scientist. Vol. 18. No 6-7 1990. Music before mosques was raised as a central point of communal dissension over most of the province by the 1930s. It had as extra-religious dimension and symbolized resistance to the exhibition of Hindu power.
21 Dainik Basumati. November 12, 1939. Goddess Kali had herself become a party of the criminal suit filed against the procession and the name 'Foujdari Kali' persists till date in the worship of this Goddess at this particular site in Khosbagan, Burdwan.
22 My interview with Aditya Majumdar (b. 1934), on 26.02.03, Burdwan.
23 We shall fight for Pakistan, we shall snatch Pakistan, we shall definitely have Pakistan.
that the spread of rumours was effectively checked in West Bengal during the post-Partition period.

Aditya Majumdar distinctly remembers the rumours which were current during the forties. “My father, the legal adviser of the Burdwan Raj, had been quite a wealthy person. Some people used to visit us and say that Muslims were getting ready for an attack.... they would insist that we buy firearms. I am sure they went to the Muslim houses and said the same things. I remember one day in 1946, when we were almost sure about an impending Muslim attack during the night; women were wide awake inside the houses, men had completed their preparations, the major entrance and exit points in our neighbourhood were barricaded and they were out on the street determined to resist any attack. I remember this vividly because I was twelve years old at that time and it hurt my pride as I was not allowed to go with the older boys.....But nothing happened. Everyone felt a little awkward the next morning. This sort of rumour mongering persisted in the town till the fifties. Rumours instantly bred a will to violence.

Nesar Fatma (b. 1934) also mentioned identical fears perpetrated by rumours among Muslims during periods of enhanced communal insecurity and unrest. She said: “During the riots of 1950, many Muslim women and children from the neighbouring slum took shelter in our house because they ‘feared’ an attack. Men guarded the house with weapons”. But again nothing, eventually, happened. Nesar Fatma lives in a house at the junction of two neighbourhoods – one predominantly Hindu, the other predominantly Muslim. Nesar also remembers that right from her childhood she had shared the family fear that in the case of an attack from the Hindus, they would be the first to be attacked. This has never actually happened so far, but Nesar believes this fear has come down through the generations within the family and shall continue to persist in the future. She further added that though relations are outwardly cordial, there is nonetheless, always an undercurrent of suspicion and distrust on both sides. She narrated an incident when I requested her to elaborate the point. “This house to our left, the house of the Bhattacharyas, is the first house in the Hindu neighbourhood. They had, during the riot of 1950, put up a notice, ‘Eta Hindur Bari’ (This is a Hindu house). They did this perhaps to prevent any confusion in case of an attack by a Hindu mob. But they had not

25 My interview with Aditya Majumdar, (b. 1934), on 26.02.03. Burdwan.
26 My interview with Nesar Fatma (b. 1934) on 16.02.03. Burdwan
considered the other part of the story, which my brother pointed out, as he teased their eldest son, ‘Good, Tarakda. It was an excellent thing to do. Now Muslim rioters will not even have to search for your house. They will just walk in and hack you to death. You have almost invited them in. All of us had a good laugh across the terrace but such jokes could not conceal the mutual fear and suspicion’. 27

Rumours had spread to such an extent within the town that they had actually led to police raids on some occasions. Syed Abdul Halim (b. 1930) used to stay with a few other Muslim boys on the ground floor of a house in Ichchlabazar in Burdwan. Halim remembers that in 1950, the police came to search the house on the basis of a complaint from some Hindu neighbours that Muslim boys were all set to create communal trouble. Halim says that the house belonged to a reputed Muslim Congress leader and rich landlord and had served as a free boarding house for Muslim boys for quite a long-time. Hindus had never made any such allegations before. This happened for the first time in 1950. The social structure of the neighbourhood had recently changed very rapidly with streams of Hindu refugees settling down in the area. They came to India with great anger in their hearts about their displacement and they held all Muslims responsible for their misfortune. There was a huge gathering of ‘Bangals’ outside the door, eagerly waiting to spot provocative matter. The police could not find any weapon except some kitchen knives and masonry instruments. Halim explains that the refugees could have had two prime motives: “Either they really feared us from their past experience of Muslims, or they were vindictive about what happened to them in East Bengal and wanted to take revenge on some harmless Muslim boys” 28. He further noted, “Everyone returned very disappointed. We noticed one thing – the police had no intention of protecting us. It was ‘their’ police checking ‘their’ allegations”. 29

There were also a few incidents of communal violence. Many prosperous Muslim families of Burdwan which had not earlier contemplated migration, now went away to Pakistan. The most striking example is the family of Abul Hashim which left in 1950 after their house had been set on fire. 30

27 Ibid.
28 My interview with Syed Abdul Halim (b. 1930) on 25.02.03, Burdwan.
29 Ibid.
30 Discussed in Ch. II before.
Of the 35 women interviewed in Burdwan who are more than 66 years old,31 16 preserve clear memories of passing through all the phases of communal disturbance in the years between 1946 and 1992. Most of them said they used to leave their town homes and move to their villages whenever there were signs of communal trouble. They would stay there until the situation in the town returned to normal.32

Ashrafi Khatun had heard that during the communal disturbances of 1950, her mother who was 16 years old at that time, and her grandmother, who had never stepped out of the house before, had walked several kilometres in the darkness of the night, disguised as Hindu women, wearing vermilion on their forehead. They crossed over to their village home on the other side of the Damodar river, apprehending an attack from the Hindus. They were never attacked, but even years later, Ashrafi’s voice chokes several times as she recounts the agony that her mother and grandmother underwent.33 Ashrafi believes that the situation in the town has definitely improved. When asked to explain why, she said, “The town had become very tense as the news of the 1992 riots poured in. But rumour mongering was effectively controlled and none of us (Muslims) had to leave our homes”.34

During 1992, there was a definite political will on the part of the West Bengal State Government and the situation was never allowed to get out of hand. A survey of the reports in the local newspapers (Natun Chithi, Mukta Bangla, Bardhaman Barta, etc) and interviews confirm that peace committees were formed in every sensitive ward and rumour mongering was strongly handled.

Irene Mustafa Mondal lives in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood. She remembers that for some time there was a rumour that the Siva temple complex with its 108 structures – an old religious and heritage site of the town – has been razed to the ground by Muslims and that Hindus were getting ready for revenge.35 Irene, like many other Muslim women, was satisfied with the role of the local political leaders at that point of time. Tension was not allowed to mount and peace processions were regularly

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31 Table A. column d. Burdwan.
32 My interviews with Jahanara Begum (b. 1939) on 19.02.03, Burdwan and Rashida Khatun (b. 1929) on 27.04.03, Burdwan, may be cited as examples. Both of them along with others, also mentioned that this was the general trend until 1964.
33 My interviews with Ashrafi Khatun, b. 1966 on 22.08.03, Burdwan.
34 Ibid
35 My interview with Irene Mustafa Mondal, (b 1971) on 24.05.03, Burdwan.
taken out. Strict vigil was maintained by the leaders and activists of the CPI(M), and other allies of the Left Front. More than 10,000 people of the town reportedly joined a peace march on 10th December and a report in the Ganashakti, the Party mouthpiece, congratulated the people of Burdwan for resisting the conspiracies of the rioters.

Rumours were widespread during the 1992 riots in Calcutta as well. They were far more effectively handled than in the former instances. A cable TV operator was arrested in Salt Lake on 10 December, 1992, on charges of rumour-mongering. He had addressed the viewers through the screen, warning them that a group of armed Muslims from the neighbouring area of Kestopur was about to attack Salt Lake. On Friday on 11th December, twelve people were arrested from different parts of Calcutta on charges of spreading rumours. The Ministry of Information and Culture of the West Bengal government published a number of advertisements during the fortnight after December 6, 1992: “Do not pay heed to rumours; Do not allow rumours to spread” (Gujabe kan deben na, Gujab ratate deben na). Forty six women, I interviewed in Burdwan, aged between 26 and 46 years, have never experienced any personal loss due to riots. But they have seen the havoc a communally charged mob can wreak. Two hundred sixty five women in Calcutta (76.59%) and 97 women in Burdwan (61.39%), belonging to different age groups and economic categories, talked about the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. Monowara Begum of Burdwan and Sabina Rahaman of Calcutta recounted how they had seen people, who were neither Congress supporters nor great admirers of India Gandhi, suddenly become anti-Sikh during the riots, especially at the time of looting Sikh properties. It is interesting how a shared minority status bred anxieties even though the targets in this case were not Muslims.

Whenever, then, a major riot is heard of in the country, the possibility of attack haunts most women of this community. Memories of past violence start flooding back and the level of insecurity rises, the more so as the women’s body is believed to be easier and more effective targets. The honour (izzat) of a women constitutes the most

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36 Ganashakti, 11.12.92.  
38 Ganashakti, 11.12.92.  
40 Table A, Column b, Burdwan.  
41 My interview with Monowara Begum, (b. 1947) on 02.07.04, Burdwan.  
42 My interview with Sabina Rahman, (b. 1970) on 11.05.04, Calcutta.  
43 Exactly this sentence was used by 35 respondents.
sacrosanct feature of the social ideology of both Hindus and Muslims. Its violation implies a total destruction of the honour of her male relatives. At a collective level, offences against women are viewed as symbolic assaults on the community, whose masculinity, strength and honour are thereby fatally violated. This sense of insecurity was more clearly articulated in the interviews in Calcutta, is spite of the continuous growth of communal solidarity in ghettoised neighbourhoods. Nor was this feeling entirely absent among those who look for additional security through increased political participation and activities.

The first recorded communal outbreak in modern Bengal had occurred in the industrial suburbs of Calcutta in May, 1891. It was followed by the Bakr Id disturbance of 1896 and the Tala outbreak of 1897. The next significant riot in Calcutta during September 9-11, 1918 has been discussed in a variety of historical accounts and memoirs. The horrors of the riots of 1946 have been extensively documented in fiction, memoirs, as well as serious academic research, on the basis of police files and government reports. Manikuntala Sen writes, “Innocent people were killed over 3-4 days; peace-loving people had their dwellings burnt down without any fault of their own. Hindus and Muslims, who had lived side by side for generations, separated and went away to live in different neighbourhoods.”

The Muslim Girls’ Hostel facing the Manikotala Market, at 86 Vivekananda Road, was about to be attacked in 1946. The police brought the situation under control and with the help of Hindu neighbours, the girls could be escorted to the Park Circus area. When it was time to set up new girls’ hostels in Burdwan and Calcutta, that experience was crucial. Muslim Girls’ Hostels are now located in Muslim majority areas. Neither Lailunnessa Begum nor Khadija Khatun knows about the attack on the Maniktala hostel, but both of them share a feeling of added security since these hostels

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45 Mention may be made of
47 West Bengal State Archives. Home /Poll. Report of police on Disturbance and Action taken on August 16-20, 1946, p.8
48 Superintendent, Muslim Girls’ Hostel, Calcutta.
49 Superintendent, Muslim Girls’ Hostel, Burdwan.
are located in Muslim majority areas. Lailunnessa said, “Being the superintendent of a girls’ hostel means bearing the responsibility of physical protection of so many young girls. Dilkusha street is in the heart of the Muslim majority area of Park Circus ... and Khoda na kare (God forbid), if there is a communal riot in Calcutta, I have enough reason to believe that this hostel cannot be easily attacked.”

This shows that not only individuals, but institutions like hostels and factories belonging to Muslims also search for security in Muslim majority areas. Lailunnessa added after a pause, “At least, there will be some resistance.” Such statements made by many other respondents clearly establish that, Muslims are on their guard even when no violence seems likely.

Interviews reveal that the memory of 1946 continues to sustain psychological insecurity in Calcutta. Among the 57 women interviewed in the ‘66 years and above’ age group in Calcutta, only 18 women remembered the riots of 1946. One simple reason for this could be that many of these women have come to Calcutta as brides after 1946. I felt that there were also some who did not want to dig up these memories. Nilufa Rahman, a 73 years old middle class housewife in Park Circus, emphatically said that she does not ‘remember anything’ except that they ‘stopped going to school for some time’. However, horror stories in which individuals were targeted and members of both communities participated, remain fresh in the minds of some women who witnessed the Direct Action Day. Abida Kulsum watched incidents of stabbing from the first floor balcony of their house in Rajabazar. Local hoodlums in this Muslim-majority area chased any Hindu passerby who could be identified from his dhoti. The family of Abida did not incur any loss of life or property but she noticed strange and subtle changes. Her father was an officer in the Railways and was posted at the Sealdah station. He stopped wearing kurta-pyjama and switched over to dhoti whenever he visited non-Muslim neighbourhoods; a practice he retained unto his last days. Abida remembers that her father often used to take the children out in the family car to the bank of the Ganga at Sovabazar during evenings. Sovabazar being a Hindu majority area, this was no longer considered safe after the Direct Action Day. Abida believes this uneasiness continued till

50 My interview with Lailunnessa Begum b. 1952 on 18.08.03., Calcutta.
51 Ibid.
52 Table A column d, Calcutta.
53 My interview with Nilufa Rahman (b. 1931) on 14.4.03, Calcutta.
the fifties. Parts of the city were thus lost to the two warring communities for quite some time.

The riots of 1946 also made a great difference in the life of Miratun Nahar, even though not in a direct way. She was born three years after the event in a village called Gurdaha under Baduria Post office in the Basirhat subdivision, North 24 Parganas. She believes that her early years in a village enriched her in many ways. But they were also a setback. If she could have started her studies in Calcutta she would have been academically better equipped. This was not possible because of the riots. Her father was the Chief Accounts officer in the post and Telegraph Department and the family had lived in Mominpur, Calcutta. Her mother, underwent a severe trauma as she watched the violence. She refused to live in Calcutta any more and went back to the village. Miratun was first allowed come to Calcutta after her graduation. Many women recounted similar anecdotes of subtle changes that the riots had indirectly caused to their personal lives.

Syed Sahedullah mentions a communal confrontation in a village named Tubgan in the Burdwan district on August 15, 1947. But this incident could not be located in official sources. Though I unearthed a full account of the Calcutta riot of September 1, 1947 from newspapers, none of my respondents have any memory associated with that particular conflict. Skirmishes recurred up to the next major riot in February 1950. It was a reaction against the widespread violence on the Namasudra community in the Khulna district of East Pakistan which had caused a large exodus of Hindus. Large scale murders of Hindus on the Chittagong Mail and the Surma Mail trains on February 11 and 12, 1950, led to riots in West Bengal. Communal disturbances during this phase was believed to have been solved with the Nehru–Liaqat pact on April 8, 1950. Asghar Ali Engineer considers 1950 as a turning-point in Hindu-Muslim relations, for the period from 1950 to 1960 proved to be a quieter time and not many riots were reported. Indian Muslims were, according to him, far too subdued during this period to provoke Hindu ire.

54 My interview with Abida Kulsum (b. 1931) on 14.04.03 Calcutta.
55 My interview with Miratun Nahar (b. 1949) on 1.9.03. Calcutta.
57 Referred to in Ch II.
More than a decade later, the Mu-i-Mubarak, believed to be the sacred hair of the Prophet, disappeared from the Hazratbal Mosque on 27 December, 1963. Though the relic was recovered by the CBI on 4 January, 1964, it had already become an issue of communal confrontation. The *Anandabazar Patrika* reported on 5 January, 1964 that “on the pretext of the disappearance of the sacred hair at Hazratbal in Kashmir, a section of non-Bengali Muslims started indiscriminate attacks on helpless minorities at various places of Khulna district last Friday.” There was a fresh wave of migration of Hindus from East Pakistan during this time and trainloads of people once more reached Calcutta with harrowing tales of repression at Khulna.\(^{59}\) The chief causes of Hindu-Muslim conflicts during the pre-47 period had been cow slaughter and Hindu religious processions playing music in front of mosques. The two post-47 instances prove that the cause had shifted: Hindus in West Bengal at this stage were more excited by tales of true and imagined torture of the Hindus in East Pakistan.

The first recorded violent incident occurred on 10 January, 1964 in Calcutta and its industrial suburbs like Chakdah, Tehatta, Barasat. Riots continued till 15 January, 1964. These were settlements of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan who now initiated attacks on Muslims. Maryam Ajij lived in her ancestral villages in Chak Chandul near Batanagar in 24 Parganas, during this time. They had a big joint family business at Batanagar. Maryam Ajij says “After 1947, the entire area was filled with Pakistani Hindu refugees, many of them worked in the factories there. They had always been revengeful and had started the riots of 1950. They became more violent and organised in 1964 and targeted wealthy Muslims. Our storehouse was looted and burnt. Two of our cars were also burnt. At that time, my husband was in East Pakistan, planning the launch of a new literary magazine. We contemplated migration for some time after this ... though it never materialised.”\(^{60}\)

Kiswar Jahan Quader (b. 1938) also confirmed that at least until 1964, Bengali Muslims, whenever they encountered communal hostility, would plan to migrate and seek to East Pakistan. She said, “Even we decided to migrate to East Pakistan after my father’s leather factory at Narkeldanga was set on fire in 1964. But war broke out with Pakistan in 1965 and that disrupted our plan.”\(^{61}\) Such plans, as my survey reveals,

\(^{59}\) *Amritbazar Patrika*, January 5, 1964.
\(^{60}\) My interview with Begum Maryam Ajij (b. 1936) on 07.08.04, Calcutta.
\(^{61}\) My interview with Kishwar Jahan Qader (b. 1938) on 13.8.04, Calcutta.
changed after 1965. After that, Bengali Muslims looked for security in ghettoised neighbourhoods and in increased participation in mainstream political life.

The two instances establish that looting and destruction of minority property as well as land grabbing were an integral part of these riots. Jawaharlal Nehru had written: "There is also a new motive, which, previous to the partition, was not present. This is the lure of property. In the pre-partition days, whatever communal trouble took place, no one ever thought of driving out the other party from their houses or shops. No one even thought of profiting by any such action. Now this element has come in and it is thought that if the Muslims in a particular area are frightened and made to leave, that property would naturally come to the Hindus."62 This observation may not be entirely true because economic factors have also played an important role in the pre-partition riots.63 But these had certainly become more conspicuous in the post Partition riots. In Burdwan too, Muslim business concerns at important market places were targeted during the riots of 1950 and 1964. Golam Jilani said, “The hotel of Ata Rahaman was a big thatched room on B.C Road (the most important business centre of the town) where poor Muslims used to dine. It was set on fire in January 1964: no one died but Ata fled from the town soon after and some new shops came up in its place.”64 In Calcutta, Maitrayee Chattopadhyay65 had seen that Muslim shops were particularly targeted during the riots of 1964. ‘Hindu shops’ stood untouched while shops owned by Muslims were looted and burnt. The ‘Hindu’ shoe stores Radu was in perfect shape while the ‘Muslim’ shoe stores Rex, adjacent to it, had been reduced to a burnt skeleton.

Gulzarilal Nanda, the then Prime Minister, referred to land grab during the riots of 1964. “No one, whatever his position, would be allowed to make any profit from the burning of bustees and no speculation in land prices would be permitted”, 66 he had said. He also announced that the government might take over the affected slum areas and issue orders to rent out those properties67 while at the same time, rebuilding the riot affected Calcutta slums.68 Even during the riots of 1992 in Calcutta, slums in Entally, Tangra,

64 My interview with Golam Jilani on 11.03.03. Burdwan.
67 Ibid.
68 Abadabazar Patrika, 18.01.64.

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Garden Reach and Metiabruz areas were particularly targeted for land grabbing. Riots were used to give a communal colour to situations which were exploited by landlords to evict unwanted tenants from the other community.

But the violence of those decades seems relatively innocuous compared to our present times. Fifty four women in Calcutta (15.61% of the total number of women interviewed) and thirty two women in Burdwan (20.25% of the total number of women interviewed) said that the riots of 1950 and 1964 in West Bengal were a reaction to events in East Pakistan. Many women belonging to the ‘more than 46 years old’ age category, mentioned this to establish that the general communal situation in the country has deteriorated, compared to the fifties and sixties. For example, Jahanara Begum of Burdwan said, “Earlier we used to be alarmed when we heard of torture of Hindus in Pakistan. They were bound to create repercussions and we, as Muslims knew, that at least some Muslims here had to pay the price. But nowadays you don’t even need an excuse to attack Muslims. You are free to ‘think’ that some Muslims have set a train on fire and start killing innocent people.” Rehana Sultana of Park Circus, Calcutta said, “Can you imagine a dirty animal like a pig moving into the site of the Id prayers? And if it does, ... you cannot protest? And if you protest, you get killed?” While Jahanara Begum was referring to the recent Gujarat riots (2002), Rehana Sultana referred to the Moradabad massacre of August 13, 1980, in which one of her distant relatives was killed. Both Jaharna and Rehana, however, agree that they are, at least until now, “much better off in West Bengal than elsewhere in the country.” The opinion of the respondents on security may be represented in the following tabular form:

Table B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>227 (65.61%)</td>
<td>96 (27.75%)</td>
<td>23 (6.65%)</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>122 (77.22%)</td>
<td>27 (17.09%)</td>
<td>9 (5.70%)</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>23 (63.89%)</td>
<td>9 (25%)</td>
<td>4 (11.11%)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>372 (68.89%)</td>
<td>132 (24.44%)</td>
<td>36 (6.67%)</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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69 Ganashakti, 13.12.92.
70 Ibid.
71 My interview with Jahanara Begum (b. 1939) on 27.02.03, Burdwan.
72 My interview with Rehana Sultana (b. 1942) on 24.5.03, Calcutta.
The table shows that 68.89% of the women interviewed believe that Muslims are more secure in West Bengal than elsewhere in the country. Mahzabeen Begum, for instance, enjoys travelling in different parts of India with her husband and children during vacations. She mentioned that of late, she does not feel safe to disclose her religious identity to strangers outside West Bengal because of the hostility they had encountered in a few instances. But she has never felt this insecurity within West Bengal.73

The majority of the respondents warmly referred to the secular atmosphere in the State which is ensured by the Leftist movement. The role of the Communist Party was also specifically mentioned by the some. The positive role of the Leftist movement was mentioned by 148 women in Calcutta (65.20% of the total numbers of women who believed Muslims are more secure in West Bengal), 82 women in Burdwan (67.21%) and 15 women (65.22%) in Bamsor. Of the 132 women who did not consider West Bengal to be more secure for Muslims than other parts of the country, a total of 84 respondents (63.64%) considered the entire country to be unsafe for Muslims, in the face of rising Hindu communalist forces across the country.

It is true that the Left controlled labour unions in West Bengal have always played an important role in fighting communalism. During 1946, they had formed peace committees and taken out peace processions. The Calcutta Tramway Workers’ Union had played an important role in the formation of peace squads.74 Whereas communal riots have rocked the major industrial centres in India like Ranchi, Bhilai, Jamshedpur, Indore, Ahmedabad, etc., in West Bengal Leftist control of the labour movement has effectively checked the growth of communal divide among workers. Communal riots in West Bengal, like those in 1968, have been viewed as a “desperate measure of the reactionary forces in the state” to “check the rising tide of working class struggles”.75

The All India Trade Union Conference in its session in Calcutta, 1976, alleged that “organisations preaching localism, linguistic chauvinism, provincialism are promoted by the capitalists and feudal elements and congress governments in line with

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73 My interview with Mahzabeen Begum (h. 1965) on 09.04.04, Burdwan.
74 Suranjjan Das op cit., p. 181.
75 New Age. 24.03.68.
the traditions of British imperialists”, simultaneously claiming that “the examples of Kerala and West Bengal show that the disrupters and rioters can be defeated only where the class struggle and the common democratic movement is strong”. Scholars like Sunil Kumar Sen confirm that the West Bengal trade union movement achieved a large measure of success in containing the riots. Apart from the labour movement the leftist leadership in the unions of the teachers, the police, the bank employers, etc. during the post-47 period in West Bengal taking up a professional stand have prevented the growth of a communal divide.

The role of the leftist trade unions in preventing the spread of communalism was mentioned by 16 women in Calcutta (10.8% of the women who believed in the role of the Leftist Movement in checking the spread of communalism in West Bengal) and five women (6.10%) in Burdwan. No one raised this point in Bamsor. Neither did any woman in Bamsor raise the point of the Leftist role in the refugee movement in preventing the growth of communalism. Forty three women in Calcutta (29.05%) and 14 women in Burdwan (17.07%), however, raised this point. Areas with a liberal sprinkling of the post-Partition migrants from Pakistan are generally highly combustible. This point has been noted by some of my respondents, like Maryam Ajij, who believed that Hindu migrants from East Bengal were responsible for the riots of 1964. But, those 57 women have also raised the important point that West Bengal would not have been as safe for Muslims, if the refugees had not been drawn into the Leftist Movement. Although the first All Bengal Refugee Conference in September 1948 was convened by the Congressmen from refugee backgrounds who founded the Nikhil Banga Basthukara Karma Parishad, a few communists like Bijoy Mazumdar, Binoy Roy also entered its Executive Committee. West Bengal Communist organizers tried to spot communists among the refugees from the use of distinctive words and certain mannerisms, since the refugees with communist affiliations tried to conceal their identity as a rule. After the launching of the United Central Rehabilitation Council on 13 August, 1950, the Leftist leadership of the refugee movement became more conspicuous. Communists created a

76 Proceedings and Documents of the All India Trade Union Conference Calcutta 1976.
77 Ibid.
78 Sunil Kumar Sen. op cit. p. 143.
79 I have referred to these movements in Ch. II
spate of struggles in the movements launched for food (1952) or against hike in tram fares. Refugees were drawn into them for their survival and this provided a direction for their political energies away from communalised movements.

Another 11 women in Calcutta (7.43% of the women who believed in the role of the Leftist Movement in checking the spread of communalism in West Bengal) and 8 women in Burdwan (9.76%) said that the women’s movement that was inspired by the Left political parties, worked to unite the two communities. However, the majority of the women who believed in the role of the leftist Movement in containing the spread of communalism, did not mention any specific component in the movement as having played a significant role. This number was 78 in Calcutta, 55 in Burdwan and 15 in Bamsor.

The following table represents what Muslim women identified as primarily responsible for communal security in West Bengal:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Labour Mov</th>
<th>Refugee Mov</th>
<th>Women’s Mov</th>
<th>Not Specific</th>
<th>Total number of women who believe in the role of the Leftist movement in checking communalism.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(10.81%)</td>
<td>(29.05%)</td>
<td>(7.43%)</td>
<td>(52.70%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.10%)</td>
<td>(17.07%)</td>
<td>(9.76%)</td>
<td>(67.07%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8.57%)</td>
<td>(23.72%)</td>
<td>(7.76%)</td>
<td>(60.41%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Leftist movement in West Bengal, it was repeatedly mentioned by the respondents, has upheld secular values and riots here have never been as destructive as elsewhere in the country. The Leftist Movement in the state has also successfully created a ‘Bengali’ political culture redefining the ‘Bhadralok’ in the post-1947 period in West Bengal. The ‘bhadralok’ in this new definition, is an educated person who upholds secular values, at least in his public life. Both Hindus and Muslims from the middle class are parts of this category and their women, represent the educated secular ‘bhadramahila’.

It is worth mentioning here that all the 540 respondents were questioned about riots. Though the five girls who were below 18 years old were not asked to give their
opinions regarding political participation, I included their opinion on riots to perceive how the new generation of Bengali Muslim women feel in this regard.

The first point I raised with them was whether they believed that the Bengali Hindu ‘bhadralok’ would take part in riots. Most of the Bengali Muslim women said that they believed riots were perpetrated by antisocial, uneducated criminals. Some mentioned that there may be a handful of educated middle class Bengali bhadralok politicians who were planning riots and spreading communal hatred. But on the whole, the Bengali bhadralok, they thought, would not publicly participate in riots. Sixty seven women in Calcutta, 19 women in Burdwan and 11 women in Bamsor either reserved their comments or said nothing can be said definitely on the issue.

However there had been many past instances where the Hindu bhadralok, had been active in the riots. Suranjan Das notes that a large portion of the crowd which killed Dr Jamal Md., an eminent eye specialist in 1946, consisted of ‘educated youths’.\(^82\) Manikuntala Sen also noted that during these riots she had seen a few medical students beating an old Muslim egg-seller to death with skeletons they used for their studies.\(^83\) My survey, however, shows that Bengali Muslim women today tend to believe that the bhadralok does not take part in riots. This survey may be represented in the following tabular form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No comments/ Not sure</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>30.92%</td>
<td>49.71%</td>
<td>19.36%</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>33.54%</td>
<td>54.43%</td>
<td>12.03%</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>61.11%</td>
<td>30.56%</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30.19%</td>
<td>51.85%</td>
<td>17.96%</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second point was whether they considered that participation of Bengali Hindu women in riots was possible. Many women cited the Gujarat riots and said that the participation of women in riots is becoming increasingly visible. However, many

\(^{82}\) Suranjan Das. op cit p. 183.
regarded this to be a recent phenomenon. Manikuntala Sen recalls that during the riots of 1946, in a lane in the Ballygunge area near Fern Road, middle class women were handing over lathis to their men to fight against Muslims. 84

The majority of the respondents refused to accept that the Bengali Hindu bhadramahila would ever participate in violence. It is noteworthy, however, that after the experience of the Gujarat riots, 33.33% of the women came to believe that even the Bengali bhadramahila can participate in riots. Compared with Table D where 163 women (30.19%) said that Bengali bhadralok may participate in riots, 180 women said that they believed that Bengali Hindu bhadramahila may also do so. Information in this regard may be represented in the following tabular form:

Table E

Opinion on whether Bengali bhadramahila might take part in communal riots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No comments/ Not sure situation may vary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>118 (34.10%)</td>
<td>192 (55.41%)</td>
<td>36 (1040%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>59 (37.74%)</td>
<td>82 (51.90%)</td>
<td>17 (10.76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>3 (8.33%)</td>
<td>29 (80.56%)</td>
<td>4 (11.11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>180 (33.33%)</td>
<td>303 (56.11%)</td>
<td>57 (10.56%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The level of confidence in the police was another point that I particularly raised with the respondents. I have referred to the unsympathetic stand taken by the police referred to by Abdul Halim in his interview. In her autobiography, Sediner Katha, Manikuntala Sen had also noted that the police came form Lalbazar to pick up the corpses during the riots of 1946 and not to stop riots. 85 On the other hand, I have also unearthed the role of the police in protecting the boarders in the Muslim Girls' Hostel at Maniktala. 86 There is a general feeling among Indian Muslims that during communal clashes, the police personnel betray the worst kind of communalism. 87 Such instances are found in plenty in the post-47 period. In Rourkela, in 1964, Hindu communal elements were given a free hand to propagate communal hatred without any objection from the administration. 88

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84 Ibid., p.174.
86 Supra footnote 46.
87 Moin Shakir, Islam in Indian Politics. op cit. p. 51
88 Ibid.
Ranchi, too, they indulged in loot, arson and killing. Curfew was imposed only in Muslim areas during the riots in Varanasi, in 1977. In Moradabad, in August 1980, men in the Provincial Armed Constabulary were alleged to have looted or burnt Muslim shops and houses or helped Hindu goondas to do so. In Jamshedpur, in April 1979, the police, instead of defending those who were being attacked, joined the mobs and looted and destroyed Muslim homes. One of the most outrageous examples about police aggression against Muslims occurred during the Bombay pogrom of January 1993. This has been recorded by a variety of Muslim and non-Muslim, Indian and non-Indian sources. Some conversations between police officers that were tape-recorded by Teesta Setalvad reveal that “law enforcement agencies virtually participated in and in some cases instigated riots against Muslims.” The Amnesty International of London in its report on January 12, 1993 also blamed the Bombay police for the killing of 137 Muslims in December, 1992. Seventeen women in Calcutta and nine women in Burdwan mentioned the Bombay incidents while referring to their conceptions about the role of police during riots.

During the Gujarat carnage of 2002, victims often referred to the police as “Hinduon ke Police”. A larger number of women – 32 women in Calcutta, 16 women in Burdwan and 4 women in Bamsor – referred to the Gujarat events and said that they do not trust the police even in West Bengal. However, 312 women rested their confidence in the police even though 159 women believed that the police, would not attend to the security of Muslims during the riots. This data may be represented in the following tabular form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>They would protect Muslims</th>
<th>They would not protect Muslims</th>
<th>No comments/ Not Sure/ Situation may vary</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>188 (54.34%)</td>
<td>104 (30.06%)</td>
<td>54 (15.61%)</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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89 Ibid.
Among the 312 women who expressed their confidence in the role of the police, many specifically mentioned that they have confidence in the police as an organ of the Left Front Government in West Bengal. They thus drew their confidence from the particular context of West Bengal.

It is true that post-Partition riots in West Bengal have never assumed such serious proportions as elsewhere in the country. All memories and perceptions regarding riots are structured on the basis of two opposed components; one consists of fear, suspicion and trauma undergone, or heard of and transmitted through generations; the other constitutes memories of Hindu concern and care as well as deep faith and belief in humanism. As Urvashi Butalia said, “For every story of violence and enmity, there is a story of friendship and love, and it is as important to recall those as it is to look at stories of violence.”

Many women narrating their not experiences, repeatedly said, “I want to cherish the good memories”. For instance, I had requested Syeda Jolekha Khatun to narrate her experiences in 1964. She said, “We had all left for our village home. Those who had no village home to go to, sought shelter in Muslim majority localities”.

“But why did you have to leave? Since you were in the Party”... I asked. Jolekha’s eyes shone at the mention of the Party as she said, “We were not here but I had kept all my valuables in Bivadi’s house (her comrade) in safe custody. Her brother stayed in our house guarding it from the possibility of any theft or attack”.

Such instances of humanitarian activities have also been highlighted in other accounts. Mainkuntala Sen writes about the Gujarati Muslim leather merchant on Central Avenue who protected his tenants, the Communist Party workers, for three days at great risk during 1946. In another house in Central Avenue, Communist Party worker Abdul Momin and his wife Hasina sheltered Bankim Mukherjee and Pramod Dasgupta for two

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95 My interview with Syeda Jolekha Khatun (b. 1927) on 08.09.2002, Burdwan.
days. Muslim workers who were stranded in the Tramworkers' Boarding House were safely taken back to Park Circus by their Hindu co-workers.96

In a letter to The Statesman, Mumtaz A Toor referred to the 'self less' help and 'boundless human sympathy received from Sikh and other Hindu neighbours'.97 Hamida Khanam also records that her neighbour Maulana Akram Khan, editor of the magazine Azad and orthodox Muslim League member, had sheltered all the Hindu milkmen of the neighborhood in his house on August 16, 1946.98

Similar instances can be unearthed from history where 'humanity crosses the dividing line'.99 A Hindu widow at Tollygunge in Calcutta during the 1964 riots had witnessed an incident of loot. She devised a novel idea. She went out of her house and asked the looters to deposit their booty with her. They did so, perhaps, in the fear that the police might come. When the looters returned to collect their booty, she had them arrested having arranged this earlier with the police.100 A thirty seven year old Muslim organised a volunteer group in Beniapukur and resisted a violent mob of 300 Muslims who wanted to raid their Hindu neighbours. Inquiries at Lalbazar Police headquarter, The Statesman reported; indicated that quite a number of both Hindus and Muslims telephoned warnings to the police against hooligans, belonging to their respective communities. Their information led to many arrests and further violence was prevented. A senior police officer in charge of the rescue work said that the death toll would have been many times larger, had not sane people given protection and shelter to the slum dwellers when the slums went up in flames. These people did not flinch in the face of the threats and even attacks.101

In the Jadavpur area on January 10, 1964 about 127 Muslim women and children were surrounded in their locality by hooligans. When the news reached the Jadavpur University, some professors and students went to the area and escorted them to the house of a fellow professor and then arranged for their transportation to a safer zone. In the 24 Parganas, in many instances, Hindus guarded Muslims against attack by hooligans.102

96 Manikuntala Sen. op.cit., p. 171.
97 The Statesman, August 27, 1946.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
At Garfa in Calcutta on January 10, three families put up organised resistance to protect their neighbours. Some of the rescuers kept the violent crowd at bay, while others contacted the police. A police truck soon arrived under armed escort and removed the threatened families to safety. At Kasba, a suburb of Calcutta, on January 11, 1964, eight Muslim families were sheltered by their Hindu neighbours. A similar incident was recorded at Behala on the same day as Hindus took the responsibility of protecting a large number of people who had take shelter in a school building and watched over them till a police party arrived. Muslims in the Cossipore area reportedly told the police commissioner, P. K. Sen, that when hooligans attempted to raid some Muslim pockets, Hindus stood guard against the attackers.¹⁰³

Letters written by readers in different newspapers during the 1950 and the 1964 riots held that riots are created by a handful of anti-social elements. For instance, G. Basu in a letter dated January 14, 1964 to the editor of *The Statesman* wrote, “It is painful to think how a handful of miscreants can, if they wish, keep a large city like Calcutta under their thumb for some time notwithstanding all the precautions taken by the civil authorities and cause acute hardship to a huge number of innocent people.”¹⁰⁴

J. N. Singhi, another reader, in his letter to *The Statesman* dated January 18, 1964 mentioned, “Some misguided and thoughtless people are decrying the Marwari Relief Society for the food it sent to the hungry people of the minority. An attempt was even made to burn their shops in Barrabazar”.¹⁰⁵ This was a marked advancement from the 1910 situation when after the Calcutta Bakrid riot, the Marwaris had dismissed many of their Muslim watchmen and refused to rent houses further to the Muslim tenants.¹⁰⁶

Along with a great deal of confidence in the sense of responsibility among Hindu middle class, as well as in the police, there still exists a strange insecurity in the minds of most of the women I interviewed. In spite of agreeing that Bengali Muslims are in a comparatively better situation in West Bengal than in other parts of the country, a majority of the women I interviewed said that they simultaneously harbour a deep seated ‘fear’ about the possibility of being attacked in riots, even in West Bengal. Two hundred and fifty eight women in Calcutta (74.57% of the total number of women interviewed in

Calcutta) and 103 women in Burdwan (65.19% of the total number of women interviewed in Budwan) mentioned this. I have mentioned before that the women of Bamsor do not entertain any fear of riots within the village.

This is not unlikely, as history has repeatedly proved. The successful strike call on July 29, 1946, pledges of Hindu-Muslim unity taken on Rashid Ali Day, unity of the Congress, the League and the Communist Party on the issue of the Royal Indian Navy had all received a severe blow within a little more than a fortnight as the Calcutta riots set in on August 16 1946.

There are also instances to prove that individual commitment to secularism does not help in moments of crisis during riots. Hamida Khanam has written about how Dr. Sengupta, a very secular person, had not felt the necessity of moving out of the Muslim-majority area of Park Circus during the riots of 1946. He was killed. During the Jamshedpur riots of April 1979, Professor Zakee Anwar of the Karimia College, had shifted his family away from Daiguttu, a Hindu-majority area in Jamshedpur. But he stayed back, convinced that nothing would happen to a man of his secular principles. He, too, was killed.

With the growth and consolidation of the Muslim middle class and a sharpening in economic and social competition, such fears become more prominent. Riots have often been explained as economically motivated; an assertion of their identity by the elites of the two communities brings about a confrontation, and religious, linguistic and ethnic differences are often used to provide legitimacy to conflict of economic interests. Communal riots have tended to occur in urban areas where the economic condition of Muslims was improving. As K F Rustamji explains, "A riot does not occur in a sleepy little village of UP where all suffer equally nor in a tribal village of MP where all live safely in their poverty. It occurs in Moradabad where the metalworkers have built up a good industry -- it occurs in Aligarh where lock makers have made good -- it occurs in Bhaivandi where powerloom rivalries are poisonous -- it occurs in Hati and Ahmedabad and Hyderabad and Jamshedpur where there are jobs to get, contracts to secure, houses

\[107\] Hamida Khanam, op cit., p. 77.
\[108\] M. J. Akbar, op cit., p. 32
and shops to capture – it occurs in Agra and Ferozabad and in all other towns where there are economic rivalries, and have to be covered up with a cloak of communalism.\footnote{K.F. Rustamji. ‘Basic Factors Behind Communal Riots’. Mainstream, June 7, 1979.}

This relative and growing prosperity theory indirectly accuses Muslims of causing communal riots, since their upward mobility is viewed as provocative and threatening to non-Muslims. Seventy four women in Calcutta (28.68\% of the total number of who actually sustain a deep fear regarding the possibility of riots) and 32 women in Burdwan (31.07\%) actually mentioned this point. Most of them agreed that as the Muslim middle class in West Bengal becomes socially visible, it will possibly incite the jealousy and wrath of the other community, in spite of the pervasive socio-political secular ideology of the Left Front in west Bengal.

Comparing the pre-47 riots with those occurring during the post-47 period, we notice the increasingly organised nature of the riots taking the shape of planned genocide, continuing for weeks and months. Certain Hindu communal bodies like the RSS and the VHP are considered responsible for this. In the absence of any economically constructive agenda to offer to the people, they can succeed as a political force by resorting to communalism. Their leadership and influence weaken if such incidents do not take place frequently.\footnote{Girish Mathur. Communal Violence. A study in Political Perspective. Sampradayikta Virodhi Committee, Delhi n.d. pp. 23-24.} These organised groups spread rumours and hatred, build up tensions and train cadres in killing.\footnote{H.K. Vyas. ‘RSS –Jan Singh have Hand Behind Communal Riots’. New Age. January 26, 1969.} They have systematically created certain stereotypes about Muslims. Muslims are considered suspect in matters of patriotism. They are also portrayed as inherently aggressive and violent. The countrywide rapid growth of Hindu fundamentalism was specifically cited by 67 women in Calcutta (25.97\%) and 36 women in Burdwan (34.95\%) as to why they anticipate riots. Both these points were raised by 20 women in Calcutta and 11 women in Burdwan. Ninety seven women in Calcutta and 24 women in Burdwan, on the other hand, nurtured a deep fear about the possibility of riots. But they could not definitely identify any reason for this apprehension. The above data may be represented in the following table:

\begin{center}
\textbf{TABLE- G}
\end{center}

Causes why Muslim women fear about the possibility of riots:
Let us consider what these women do to overcome such fears. Some scholars argue to show that this is countered by contributing to the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, the Jamaat-e-Islami. They also say that there are in fact, some areas which are neatly divided between the RSS and Jamaat-e-Islami in West Bengal.\textsuperscript{112} But such organisations for communal solidarity did not seem to be viable political options among the women I interviewed. Reinforced communal orthodoxy was only seen in a few areas of socio-domestic life, for example, through the growing use of purdah.

I have already referred to the growth of ghettoised neighbourhoods and increased political participation among Bengali Muslims, including women, in search of greater security. Muslims who are genuinely inspired by the ideals of Bengali secular values and culture, do not ascribe to the ideals of pan-Islamism or Islamic fundamentalism; they thus strengthen the political base of the Left Parties. The political choice is partly a deliberate commitment but another part of it is a strategic move, as a conscious strategy to gain acceptability.

Muslims have also tried to expand their security through a process of acculturation. They have deliberately absorbed Bengali Hindu mores of conduct. Thus Muslim kinship terms like *khala* (maternal aunt), *jufu* (paternal aunt), *chachi* (paternal uncles wife) are dropped in favour of Bengali Hindu terms like *mashi, pshii* and *kakima*. Words, that have long been in daily use, like *pani* (water) and *gosal* (bath) are substituted with *jal* and *snan*. Islamic modes of greeting are done away with in favour of the Hindu namaskar.

It is also out of a search for security from communal riots that the Bengali Muslims, who have rural connections, try to retain them. Of the 275 families interviewed in Calcutta, 162 (58.69%) have strong rural connections. The percentage is much greater in Burdwan. In Burdwan, 78 (70.91%) of the 110 families interviewed said they also

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Place & Growing prosperity of the Muslims & Growing impact of Hindu fundamentalism & Both & Not specific & Total \\
\hline
Calcutta & 74 (28.68\%) & 67 (25.97\%) & 20 (7.75\%) & 97 (37.60\%) & 258 \\
Burdwan & 32 (31.07\%) & 36 (34.95\%) & 11 (10.68\%) & 24 (23.30\%) & 103 \\
Total & 106 (29.36\%) & 103 (28.53\%) & 31 (8.59\%) & 121 (33.52\%) & 361 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

have a ‘village home’. All these families agreed that apart from kinship ties and sentimental attachment to ancestral roots, these connections are looked at as possible escape routes in the event of a communal attack on them in the cities.

Thus, though there is a marked cultivation of ‘Bengaliness’ among Bengali Muslims and though they try to identify themselves with the mainstream culture in a variety of ways; they simultaneously retain a deep seated suspicion about the majority community. This has not been entirely overcome even today. The anxieties are fed from past and present sources; from memories of violence within Bengal and from the growing communalisation of national politics and recurrent anti-Muslim pogroms elsewhere in India.