

Small Town News

TARAN N KHAN



When I was eleven years old, I attended the university-run Girls High School in Aligarh. It was December 1990, and Advani's *Rath Yatra* was on the move. Too young to follow the debate that raged around the Babri Masjid, we were nevertheless acutely aware of the scale of the violence and the tension that permeated our everyday lives. School had become an intermittent affair, to be attended between spells of curfew. In a geography lesson, our teacher let us out to enjoy the winter sun. There was freshly shorn grass lying in the courtyard, and she asked us to help collect it in a corner. We pushed it with our feet to a large mound, and she gave us sweets in red wrappers as a reward. The next day, or perhaps many days later, we found her upset, protesting her innocence, calling on us as

witnesses. A local Hindi newspaper, it transpired, had printed an account of our afternoon, claiming that a Hindu student had been humiliated in the *Musalmaan ka* school for participating in the *kar-sewa*.¹ She had been forced to shear grass of the entire courtyard while the school watched. Despite the fact that I never saw the report myself, for many years after that, to my mind, this was how it worked. Local papers told lies, took sides, caused trouble.

Similar ideas apparently prompted the District Magistrate of Aligarh when he ordered a complete news blackout in the city soon after it became plain that the 'reaction' to the Godhra incident was actually genocide. Satellite news channels were blocked, newspaper taxis turned away at city limits and hawkers chased and beaten by the police. Even phone lines went dead. But that, we were told, was routine. His order rested on two common sense notions that have many takers in administrative machinery: one, the power of the media (especially television) to cause unrest and violence; two, the intent and ability of the local media to cause mischief, print rumours and instigate riots. This formulation is not baseless – at that very moment it was available for observation in the vitriolic writings of sections of the Gujarati press – but it grossly underestimates the complexity of the relationship between the city, communal violence and local newspapers. I will examine this interface by looking at the manner in which the vernacular press in Aligarh reported the Gujarat genocide. I suggest that their representation of a current crisis is intimately linked to collective memory of past crises and specifically to memories of (and representations of) the *Rath Yatra* riots, which were the last widespread and protracted cycle of violence in the city. We are thus looking for resonances that the themes and occurrences of Gujarat found in Aligarh's memories, and the manner in which this fragmented, collective memorialization (that often differed diametrically across communities) mediated its representation in the local press.

Here I use Benedict Anderson's conception of the newspaper as a cultural product. Newspapers create imagined linkages between 'communities'; their reading is a mass ceremony that knits together a community, anonymous yet confident of its existence (1991:33). Such a conception adds a layer of meaning to the identification of the newspaper with the community – the Hindi newspaper being synonymous with the Hindu community and the Urdu paper representing the Muslims. The newspapers examined for this analysis – the *Dainik Jagran* (DJ) in Hindi and the *Qaumi Awaz* (QA) in Urdu, while differing greatly in their circulation, clout and editorial policy, do serve this essential function. Aligarh is an interesting place to raise such questions, peculiarly poised as it is between various fault lines of identity and conflict. Part mofussil town and part overlarge industrial centre, it has a sizeable Muslim minority. It is also home to the Aligarh Muslim University, a source of intellectual leadership for Indian Muslims since its inception. AMU is thus a potent symbol of the Muslim renaissance and a past flowering, as well as present attempts at development and empowerment. It is also one of the eight most communally volatile cities in India (Varshney 2002: 7). All this makes Aligarh a visibly Muslim town, targeted by the Hindu Right as a 'hotbed' of trouble and sedition (especially the University), and also explains why the Gujarat genocide caused such immediate and electric tension in the town.

The attack on the Sabarmati Express formed the locus of all initial comment and most reportage in the DJ. It provided an immediate connection with a number of highly evocative,

recurrent themes of Hindu nationalism, which dominated coverage of the actual events that followed the incident. The very first report ran under a banner headline; "57 *Ram Sewaks* Burnt Alive in Godhra",² the emphasis being on the Hindu identity of the victims, and the fact that they were attacked because of their status as 'servants of Ram'. The chain of memory clearly extends to the *Ram Janam Bhoomi* (RJB), or Birthplace of Ram Movement, and the *Rath Yatra*. For the DJ, the *Yatra* marked an awakening, a resurgence of the latent might of Hindus and a time when many nascent ideas about *Hindutva* coalesced to their present forms. The RJB movement is represented as a continuing, heroic struggle to recover the "manifest inheritance of *Hindutva*" (Jaffrelot 1996:403). The attack on *kar sewaks* returning from Ayodhya thus represents an attack upon both the memory and the process of realization of a resurgent *Hindutva*. In many ways, this initial report set the parameters for subsequent comment and reportage in the newspaper, in particular, the tone of moral outrage and justifiable rage at an "unprovoked assault" that characterized majority discourse on the issue.

"What was the crime of these *Kar Sewaks* that they were burnt alive? Was it that they went to perform a pilgrimage in their own country?"³ The Godhra incident was thus interpreted as a grave betrayal of faith, an indication of how "pitiable the situation of Hindus is in their own country. If we are not careful, the day is not far off when we will be forced to flee our homeland".⁴ Such apocalyptic visions rest on the construct of an inherently (over) tolerant Hindu tradition being systematically undermined and subverted by the proselytizing zeal of Christianity and Islam. They also resonate with the popular imagery of the 'angry Hindu' that gained currency during the *Rath Yatra*. "Our patience should not be tried any further. *Hindutva*⁵ is a symbol of tolerance, but even tolerance has its limits".

Simultaneously, the DJ avoids open exhortations to violence against the Muslims as revenge. "Muslims are our brothers ... we must not lose our balance in our grief". Significantly, the same editorial reads, "We must strive to remember that the Muslim of today cannot be compared to the invaders who inflicted terrible trials upon the Hindu populace in medieval times".⁶ This appears to be an important admission, since it is upon this rectification of historical wrongs that the RJB movement significantly depends. In Aligarh, it is all the more dramatic since it seems to mark a radical departure from the extremely militant editorial stance and provocative nature of its content during the *Rath Yatra*. The DJ was one of the participants in the media wave that propagated the cause of the *Yatra* in 1990. Its activism for this cause led it to such lengths as to earn a rebuke from the Press Council of India for "gross impropriety and irresponsibility" (Abrar 1993:212), along with three other Hindi newspapers. These newspapers routinely carried news that was either fabricated or distorted in a manner to serve a divisive communal agenda. This included an overt mauling of form, such as drawing prison bars on the photograph of an arrested mahant (religious leader).⁷ The *Jagran* printed death tolls of *kar sewaks*. These fluctuated wildly over the days to create an illusion of massacres. Some stories even tended towards the bizarre, like a report about a thousand police officers who planned to quit their jobs in order to form a brigade with the aim of cutting off the hands and feet of Mulayam Singh Yadav (Nandy 1998).

Specifically in Aligarh, there were several incidents of violence that were held to have been 'instigated' by reports in these newspapers. A lengthy and emotional account of these

was published in the *Qaumi Awaz*.⁸ “The Hindi press has repeatedly acted as the spark to the powder in Aligarh...on December 7th, many such newspapers [unspecified] wrote that the Muslims were planning to launch an attack from mosques after their Friday prayers. On December 8th, Aligarh was transformed into Lebanon. The streets echoed with the cries of blood crazed mobs, and within a few hours, there were over fifty people dead...On December 10th, the Hindi daily *Aaj* printed a completely false story, that twenty-eight Hindu patients and seventy-four attendants had been killed in the AMU-run hospital”. This was accompanied by a story in the DJ, which claimed that a mob (of Muslims) had stabbed twenty-seven persons outside the University medical college.⁹ While discounting the emotional stress of the QA article and ignoring its mechanistic connotations, these reports were followed by periods of extreme tension that erupted into fierce violence.

In contrast, the tone and editorial policy of the paper during the Gujarat genocide seemed restrained and, if not neutral, at least not overtly sectarian. There were periodic appeals for peace and calls to “help rehabilitate our Muslim brothers”.¹⁰ At the end of a month of sustained violence, the paper was moved to comment that “Modi’s claim that the situation was under control within 72 hours is difficult to swallow. Why didn’t the government display the speed it employed post-Godhra later also, when people were taken over by monsters of hatred”.¹¹ This change of stance seems to hint towards a shift in ideology, or at least in editorial policy.

Several interesting issues are thrown up by this sketchy juxtaposition of the pages of the *Jagran* over the years.

First – the cause behind this shift. Possible explanations include the physical and emotional distance from the events in Gujarat, which could not match the flow of raw emotion of the RJB movement in UP. More convincing is the view that the change in the demographic composition of its audience had also made it imperative for the DJ to adopt a more open editorial policy and carry news from different sources representing various viewpoints.¹² The bait of increased circulation which was behind the ‘competitive sensationalism’ of 1990 was served better in 2002 by avoiding divisive discourse.

I argue, however, that this apparent and seemingly dramatic shift is neither radical nor a departure from the paper’s previous stance. A reading of the reportage and editorial comment on Gujarat reveals a consistent pattern of news selection, skewing and presentation that is subservient to the same agenda of communal/identity politics that motivated editorial policy in 1990. While the pitch and tenor of the language may have been toned down, there is no evidence of an ideological shift behind this change. To my mind, it is essential to recognize this fundamental ideological continuity between the *Jagran*’s reportage of Gujarat and Ayodhya. For instance, the *Jagran* established a clear chain of causality between the Godhra incident and the subsequent violence. The first forty-eight hours following the carnage at Godhra saw virtually unchecked targeted violence against Muslims across the state, particularly in Ahmedabad. This violence was reported by the paper as “Anger and outrage at the Godhra massacre shakes Gujarat”.¹³ A related report on thirty Muslims being burnt alive in a village adds, “It is noteworthy that the village is in the same district where *Kar Sewaks* in the Sabarmati Express were burnt alive”. The chronology is thus one of cause and effect. The culpability of the Muslims tempers their being targeted

during the 'subsequent violence' and their guilt as the 'instigators' of the cycle of violence legitimizes the 'Hindu reaction'.

Simultaneously, this legitimizing discourse established the genocide as a spontaneous outpouring of Hindu anger. "The lava of anger burst forth in several places in the state today", read reports.¹⁴ This bursting forth was thus essentially unplanned and eminently justifiable. "As any psychologist will testify, such a reaction to (a provocative) action is only natural, though unfortunate".¹⁵ Nothing in the entire body of reportage suggests that the 'riots' bore evidence of planning or state/administrative complicity. The encounter was between "Hindu and Muslim mobs" who "confronted each other" as equal participants in the riot. They thus become stories from yet another set of riots – gruesome and regrettable, yet no different from the regular pattern of violence in times of communal tension.

The *Jagran* also constructed narratives/causes that explained away the symptoms of an unusual riot. "The police, armed only with *lathis* (sticks) could merely watch helplessly as the mobs clashed". Early reports also stressed that various cities were "handed over to the army," creating the image of prompt, impartial action at a time when the forces were only standing by. The attempt was to rationalize the role of the police and the administration by obscuring even the suggestion of a pattern of complicity or sustained violence.¹⁶

Crucially, this present avatar of the *Jagran's* values does not preclude the presence of news stories representing divergent viewpoints. Most of the incidents that serve as proof of minorities being targeted and massacred are reported in the newspaper.¹⁷ The manner of their reproduction, however, is fragmented and de-contextualized so that their essential nature as acts of violence serving a system of beliefs is glossed over. An agency feature on survivors in relief camps, for instance, was edited mid-sentence, truncating narratives of victims that revealed the nature of the genocide. This failure to communicate critical aspects of 'other view' stories indicates the superficial nature of the *Jagran's* apparent objectivity and indicates the moral vacuity of the belief that the mere presence of news stories advocating a different chronology/victimology represents balanced and objective reportage.

Also, the attachment of the newspaper to the illusion of being neutral and fair is not new. The crude propaganda in the Hindi press in general and the DJ in particular during the *Rath Yatra* "went hand in hand with an almost pathetic attempt to establish the non-sectarian nationalist credentials of the movement". For example, a number of papers foregrounded the fact that the driver of Advani's *Rath* (chariot) was a Muslim, who was persuading other Muslims to offer *kar sewa* (Nandy 1998: 35).

Thus, as I have tried to illustrate, the apparent shift in the Hindi press is neither radical nor fundamental. The apparent dilution of the DJ's militant language does not represent an ideological realignment, but a time honoured survival strategy. By mainstreaming itself, by creating a space for diverse viewpoints on its pages, it will survive and grow in the present context. This expansion of its base is not, however, at the cost of alienating or opposing the interests of its core constituency of middle-class Hindu traders (incidentally also the core supporters of the BJP).

Second – it provides clues to the manner in which the Muslim community perceive the linkages between communal violence and the local media. While this has been previously mentioned, I would like to point out that this interplay is not viewed in isolation. In an article

titled “How a Riot is Created”, the QA Aligarh correspondent mapped the genealogy of a riot. “First there is circulation of rumours to create tension. Pamphlets are then distributed to increase it to fever pitch. Misleading reports are then published in newspapers”,¹⁸ sparking off the riot. The next link is provided when “these riots are written about in an exaggerated way in newspapers again”. This demonstrates the circular movement of the violence from its representations in the media to its manifestation in reality. There is also concern over the ‘unchecked’ proliferation of audio/video tapes containing instigatory speeches and militant songs, “which are being played all over in Hindu neighbourhoods, creating a fever of anger and hate”. The eventual impression is thus of multiple engagements with a hydra-headed media, diverse and often hostile.

Further, these outbreaks are so contrived that the blame can be pinned on Muslims. “Pamphlets urging Muslims to *jihad* were distributed, signed by non-existent Islamic organizations”.¹⁹ This diction of “pre-planned conspiracy to malign the minority community” finds resonance post-Godhra. A more complex resonance lies in the idea of minorities as targets of planned violence. More than any actual correspondence of detail, it is the deliberateness of the creation of violence which resonates across the contexts. A crucial distinction is the identity of these engineers of violence. In 1990, these were ‘outsiders’, persons external or at least removed from the immediate community of ‘ordinary citizens’. After Gujarat, this innocence of the mythical every Hindu has become impossible to maintain.

In one sense then, the echoes between Gujarat and Ayodhya are clearer in the *Qaumi Awaz*, particularly in reports dealing with the complicity of police and institutional apparatus in targeting Muslims, and in a general sense of being victims. This suggests that the trend in academia and journalism of treating the genocide in Gujarat as an entirely unparalleled (or unexpected) occurrence is flawed and counterproductive. Readings of Urdu newspapers reveal the tremendous resonance the events of Gujarat have for Muslims who have lived through riots in other parts and recognize in the former an ‘evolution’ of ‘their’ violence. While there were many aspects of the violence that were refined or emphasized to an unprecedented degree, it would be myopic not to recognize the genocide as the latest link in the chain of communalization of Indian social and political life.

Significantly, the two newspapers use near identical language when discussing the pitiable situation of their community, its dwindling security, and its need for protection from the Other. The declaration of the QA that “the oppressors should not push us too far, lest we reach the end of our patience – the vengeance of the oppressed can be truly awful”,²⁰ bears striking resemblance to the idiom used in the DJ while issuing similar warnings to Muslims, indicating a mirroring of persecution myths in both communities. Simultaneously, the resonance of the genocide with the RJB movement is diametrically opposite for the QA to that for the DJ. “Mr. Advani is familiar with how easy it is to stoke communal passions and how difficult to get them back in control”.²¹ This memory of the *Rath Yatra* and evidence of the cyclic nature of the aggression plays an important role in the manner in which (north Indian) Muslims choose to react to Gujarat; it is in fact an active and articulated element in strategizing by Muslim organizations and associations.

Thirdly – based on this analysis I suggest that these vernacular newspapers essentially replicate the tensions and themes that define inter-community discourse and engagement.

By locating the newspaper (or the media) in the realm of the social, this view complicates the arguments that claim newspapers 'cause' riots by publishing provocative reports. Instead, newspapers need to be conceptualized as a cultural construct which reflect social processes as much as they mould them. This is especially true in a communally charged situation like what occurred in 1990, where the role of newspapers was to reinforce already existing social impulses. It thus follows that changes in media attitudes need to be examined with reference to the context in which they operate. In Aligarh, they tend to reproduce the social distance between the communities, the 'back to back intimacy' of those who live in spatial proximity but with limited civic engagement (Varshney 2002:149). The mapping of patterns of continuity and change in reportage of the two newspapers thus needs to be viewed in the context of their setting of relative calm. In more fraught situations, it is entirely possible that they revert to their more extreme forms of acting as resources for serving identity-driven agendas.

Finally, this analysis argues for language as a significant domain where such conflicts are played out, and as an indicator of social tensions and structures. This approach draws from Barthes' understanding of the difference between a message alone and what can be read from the language (or discourse) it is expressed in. "Through the same message, we read (several) choices, commitments, mentalities... On the level of the simplest message, language explodes; society, with its socio-economic and neurotic structures, intervenes, constructing language like a battleground" (Barthes 1986:106).

As an indication of how clearly language can provide an insight into the complex, nuanced and fragile relationship between the communities, consider this example of usage of a common vocabulary by the two newspapers. Of the three common words I found were used most often in both newspapers, two are *halaak* (killed) and *tandav* (the dance of destruction). The third, *aman*, is peace.

NOTES

1. Literally, 'Service with the Hands' – a cluster of programmes aimed at involving people in the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (World Hindu Council's) campaigns to build mass support for the construction of a temple to the Hindu god Ram at the alleged site of Ram's birthplace in the North Indian pilgrim town of Ayodhya, as a key part of the mobilization of Hindu Fundamentalism in contemporary India. *Kar sewa* roughly translates as any activity that helps 'build' the temple.
2. *Dainik Jagran* (1 March, 2002).
3. Mohan, Narendra. "How Long will *Hindutva* Have to Suffer Insults?", *Dainik Jagran* opinion piece (3 March, 2003). Narendra Mohan is the editor-proprietor of the paper.
4. *Ibid.*
5. The repeated use of the word *Hindutva* instead of Hinduism has possible roots in Savarkar's demands from Hindus to "profess *Hindutva* rather than Hinduism as the first defining characteristic of themselves". See Nandy (1998: 68)
6. *Dainik Jagran* editorial (2 March, 2002).
7. *Aaj* (October, 1990).
8. "Aligarh Newsletter", *Qaumi Awaz* (19 December, 1990).
9. *Dainik Jagran* (10 December, 1990).

10. *Dainik Jagran* (17 March, 2002).
11. 'Human Rights Commission's Warning', *Dainik Jagran* (25 March, 2002).
12. From the late 1990s, Hindi and other regional language newspapers grew considerably, particularly in small towns like Aligarh. The *Jagran* benefited from this trend to emerge as the second widest read Hindi daily in the country. It is also the most popular newspaper in the Hindi heartland (UP, Bihar, Haryana, Delhi), giving it additional clout. Its total readership stands at 12,670,000 (NRS 2002). There is also a web edition aimed at NRI audiences. In Aligarh the paper is read across communal lines, partly due to the relative accessibility of Hindi and also for its coverage of local news.
Annual net paid sales in the city stand at 11,8584; the Aligarh office is staffed by nearly fifteen people including an AMU correspondent. Local affairs are thus covered in relative detail; the scale and heterogeneous audience of the paper is reflected in a relatively wide pattern of news selection from diverse sources. The period from 1990 to 2002 has seen attempts by the DJ to reposition itself as a 'brand'—this is linked to the post-liberalization affluence of the middle class. There has been a corresponding dilution in its strong communal/parochial associations to win new markets. A number of syndicated columns by established journalists with broadly anti-Sangh opinions have also been introduced.
13. *Dainik Jagran* (1 March, 2002).
14. "An Unforgivable and Heinous Crime", *Dainik Jagran* editorial (1 March, 2002).
15. Misra, Dinnath. "Godhra and Jaundiced Secularism", syndicated column, *Dainik Jagran* (8 March, 2002).
16. The closest the *Dainik Jagran* got to mentioning the genocide was in reporting the accusations of the Opposition members in Parliament and the statements of the NHRC (National Human Rights Commission) indicting the police and the Administration for involvement in the killings. (Various reports, 1-23 March, 2002).
17. This includes potently symbolic incidents like the murder of a Congress-allied politician, Ehsan Jafri, with his family in his home, and the burning of a family of eight in a car who were attempting to flee from Ahmedabad. The car was bound with barbed wire and the family burnt on the state highway. (Various reports, 1-15 March, 2002.)
18. *Qaumi Awaz* (20 December, 1990).
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Qaumi Awaz* (8 March, 2002).
21. *Qaumi Awaz* editorial (7 March, 2002).

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991).
- Barthes, R. *The Rustle of Language* (Billy and Sons Ltd., 1986, Worcester).
- Dainik Jagran*: Issues from 28th February to 30th March, 2002.
- Haqqi, S. and Abrar, R. eds. *Secularism Under Siege* (Uttar Pradesh Rabita Committee, 1993).
- Jaffrelot, C. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics* (Viking Penguin India, 1996).
- Nandy, A. *Exiled at Home* (Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Qaumi Awaz*: Issues 28th February - 30th March, 2002 and 1st to 30th December, 1990.
- Varshney, A. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life Hindus and Muslims in India* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Vilification Campaign Against Aligarh Muslim University: December 1990 Communal Riots at Aligarh* (Issued by Aligarh Muslim University Aligarh, A.M.U. Press).