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Hindutva Terrorism in India

Cow vigilantism is pre-meditated, politically motivated, and seeks to build fear in a community. That makes it terrorism.

By Sudha Ramachandran
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In the name of protecting cows, members of extremist outfits affiliated to India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are attacking Muslims.

On June 29, a mob beat up and killed Asgar Ansari, a 45-year-old Muslim trader in the eastern state of Jharkhand, for allegedly carrying beef in his car. Three days earlier, a Muslim dairy owner, Usman Ansari, was beaten up and his house set on fire; a cow carcass was reportedly found near his house.

The two incidents are the latest in a string of attacks carried out by activists belonging to outfits like the Bharatiya Gau Raksha Dal (BGRD) and its regional units as well as organizations like the Bajrang Dal and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) that are part of the Sangh Parivar, a family of Hindu right-wing organizations of which the BJP is a part.

The attacks, which are illegal and being described as cow vigilantism, have surged in recent years.

According to an analysis by IndiaSpend, a public interest journalism website, 63 incidents of "violence centered on bovine issues" were reported between 2010 and 2017; 97 percent of these

occurred after the BJP came to power in May 2014. Twenty-five of these incidents were reported in 2016 alone, the most so far in a single year.

However, 2017 seems poised to break this record as around 20 cow vigilante attacks have been reported in the first six months this year, with the violence showing no signs of abating.

Targeting Muslims

The cow vigilantes claim they are “*gau rakshaks*” (protectors of cows). According to the BGRD’s website, caring for abandoned cattle and orphaned calves by providing them food, medical care, and shelter is the organization’s main objective.

In addition, “we focus on preventing cow slaughter too and hence act to shut down the beef trade,” Bobby Singh, a BGRD activist from Haryana, told *The Diplomat*.

However, protecting cows is not a priority of the cow vigilantes, critics point out, drawing attention to the fact that the groups do little work to prevent ill-treatment of cows roaming India’s streets, for instance. Rather, their main activity appears to be tracking and trapping people transporting cattle and unleashing horrific violence on them.

Many Hindus consider the cow to be sacred, oppose cow slaughter, and do not eat beef. However, Muslims and Christians as well as a section of Hindus are beef-eaters. The beef business in India is dominated by Muslims, and those who skin cows and work with leather are largely Muslims and Dalits.

The beef issue thus comes in handy to target Muslims.

Although Dalits have been targeted occasionally by the cow vigilantes, Muslims have borne the brunt of their attacks. Of the 28 people killed in such attacks so far, 86 percent were Muslim.

The violence, then, seems designed to terrorize Muslims, damaging their livelihood and way of life. The ultimate objective of the cow vigilantism is achieving the goal of the Sangh Parivar: homogenizing pluralistic India and making it a Hindu state.

The Cow as a Nationalist Symbol

It was in the late 19th century that the cow emerged as an important rallying point for mass political mobilization in India. Hindu nationalists sought to unite Hindus against British colonial rule and subsequently, against Muslims amidst the growing Hindu-Muslim communalism in the early 20th century.

The cow has since become a potent symbol of Hindutva, a Hindu supremacist ideology espoused by the Sangh Parivar. Hindutva proponents view India as a Hindu nation, define Indian culture in terms of Hindu values, and seek to establish the hegemony of Hindus and the Hindu way of life.

In recent years, the Sangh Parivar has accelerated efforts to promote its Hindutva agenda and is pushing the cow slaughter issue to the political center-stage. “Cow protection,” the imposition of upper-caste Hindu food habits on Muslims and others, calls for a beef ban. The current wave of cow vigilantism must be seen in this context.

BGRD at the Helm

At the forefront of hundreds of cow vigilante outfits active across India is the BGRD, “a non-profit, tax-exempt organization” that was set up in 2012 and registered as a company by the Union Ministry of Corporate Affairs. Although there are no organizational links between the BGRD and the Sangh Parivar, many activists are members of Parivar constituencies such as the VHP and the Bajrang Dal or in close touch with them.

They are fierce supporters of Hindutva. According to Pawan Pandit, the BGRD’s chairman, India is divided in two, one part that includes “the so-called *kattar* [Hindi for radical] Hindutva people” like himself and the other comprising people who don’t share this ideology.

The BGRD takes pride in its violent methods. Videos and photographs of activists flaunting automatic weapons and swords and beating people with iron rods are available online. Facebook pages of BGRD leaders and activists show them armed with guns, a brazen acknowledgement of their violent tactics.

Police and politicians have often described the BGRD’s attacks as the outcome of mob fury, as though these are spontaneous incidents. However, the attacks are pre-planned and activists even undergo training in how to inflict injuries.

Indian analysts have so far avoided categorizing these attacks as acts of terror.

While acknowledging that the BGRD’s violent attacks are “extreme and deeply insidious” with “potential to cause great harm to India’s stability,” terrorism analyst and executive director of the New Delhi-based Institute for Conflict Management, Ajai Sahni, stops short of categorizing them as terrorism, arguing that they “fall into a pattern of communal mobilization and vigilantism.”

Terrorist violence is “indiscriminate,” Sahni told *The Diplomat*, pointing out that unlike the BGRD activists, terrorists “do not seek out specific individuals purportedly guilty of particular deemed offenses but put bombs in public places or shoot indiscriminately, to kill just about anybody to draw attention to their political agenda, and to intimidate authorities into compliance.”

However, the violent attacks by BGRD and other cow vigilantes are similar to terror attacks in several ways. Both are pre-meditated, politically motivated, and carried out by non-state actors against unarmed civilians. And their target is not so much the immediate victim as it is the larger community.

Cow vigilantism is therefore terroristic in nature. This is Hindutva terrorism.

Hindutva Terror

Hindutva terrorism is not new to India. Hindutva activists have carried out several massacres of Muslims, as in Mumbai (then Bombay) in 1992 and Gujarat in 2002, and set off bombs in neighborhoods and towns that are predominantly Muslim, even in their places of worship.

Yet these attacks have not been described as acts of terrorism. They are part of a world-wide trend wherein majoritarian terror against minorities is not termed terrorism and consequently not dealt with sternly by the state.

Indeed, given the links between cow vigilantes and the ruling BJP, rarely has action been taken against the perpetrators of violence, especially in BJP-ruled states. Often, it is the victims of the vigilantes who are punished.

In BJP-ruled states, existing laws banning cow slaughter have been amended to expand the scope of such bans and to increase punishments for violation. Gujarat, for instance, amended its animal protection law this year to make cow slaughter punishable with life imprisonment. Other BJP chief ministers have endorsed hanging those who slaughter cows and have even exhorted vigilantes to do more and not stop at sloganeering. Little action is being taken to rein in the vigilantes or punish them. Emboldened by such state support, violence targeting Muslims is being unleashed in the name of protecting the cow.

India's reluctance to take stern action against the BGRD's unleashing of violence against Muslims will deepen communal divisions in the country. Its failure to bring to justice those who orchestrated and unleashed horrific violence on Muslims in the Bombay and Gujarat "riots" of 1992 and 2002, respectively cost it dearly. These incidents prompted hundreds of Muslim youths to take up arms against the Indian state.

If the ongoing violence against Muslims in the name of protecting the cow persists and goes unpunished, another generation of angry and alienated Muslim youth will turn to militancy and terrorism again.