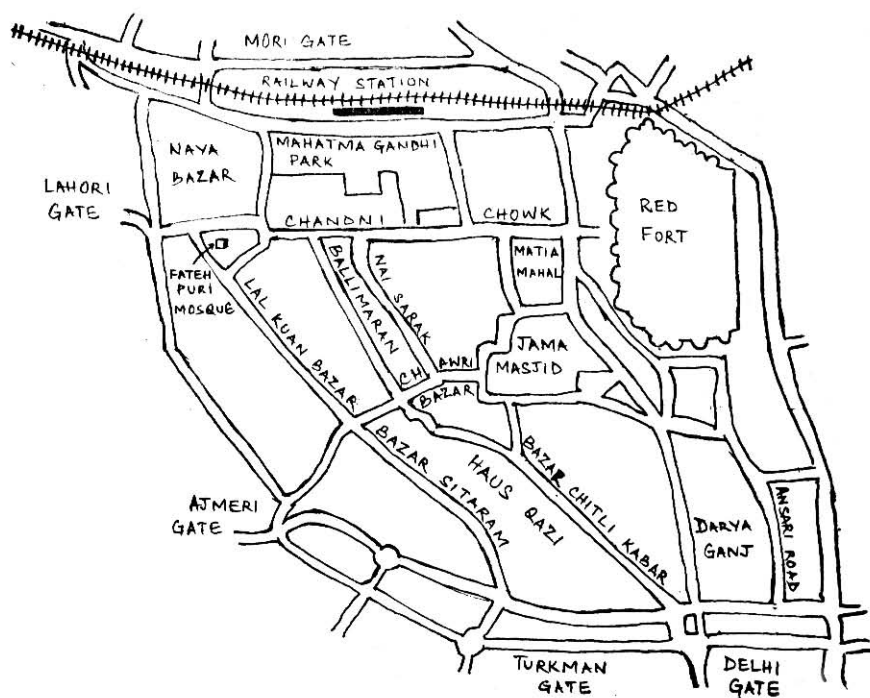


# WALLED CITY RIOTS

## A REPORT ON THE POLICE AND COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN DELHI 19-24 MAY, 1987



PEOPLE'S UNION FOR DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS  
DELHI  
JUNE 1987

उजड़े घर को देखकर  
हर माँ के आँसू चीखते  
बन्द करो अब मौत का  
पैगाम मेरे शहर में

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## PREFACE

The communal riots that rocked the walled city of Old Delhi from May 19 to 24, 1987, were set off by a long and vicious spiral of events and trends that had been warping Hindu-Muslim relations for quite some time ; but, in trying to control the riots, the Delhi Administration, the Delhi police and the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) betrayed not only utter negligence of duty and responsibility, but an aggressive bias against the Muslim population, which was manifested in widespread terrorisation of Muslims, indiscriminate police firing on Muslims, leading to the killing of innocent people, and harassment of thousands of their community who were trapped inside the curfew-bound lanes of the walled city for days together without any access to the basic amenities-a harassment shared by their Hindu neighbours.

A fact-finding team sponsored by the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), Delhi, came to the above conclusion after having toured extensively the riot-affected areas, meeting the residents-both Hindu and Muslim-and interviewing political leaders, government officials and police personnel. The fact-finding team consisted of Sumanto Bannerjee (journalist), Gautam Navlakha (journalist), G. Lakshmi (research scholar), Kulbir Singh, Nandita Haksar (advocate) and Rita Manchanda (journalist), all from PUDR. They were accompanied and assisted by members of PUCL (Delhi), MANUSHI magazine and the Concerned Group for Minorities, Delhi.

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## I. Introduction

The immediate trigger for the riots was a series of innocuous local incidents, often blown out of all proportion by fast-travelling rumours. These initial sparks carried the potentialities of a conflagration since they were taking place in an atmosphere which had already been surcharged by communal dispute over the Babri Masjid—Ram Janambhoomi controversy, and wide-spread communal riots in Ahmedabad, Allahabad, Baroach and other places. The outbreak of riots in Meerut a day earlier (on May 18), also contributed to the fuelling of tensions in the walled city. As a result, while in normal circumstances, a local dispute would have been settled amicably and faded into oblivion, in the present situation it always threatens to assume lasting communal dimensions. Our investigations into the incidents which sparked off the riots on the first day—May 19—confirm the belief that several extraneous factors at the national level like the Babri Masjid dispute, the Shah Banoo controversy and the Ahmedabad riots, have sharpened the alienation between the two communities even in those localities of the walled city, where there have never been communal riots on this scale since 1947. Thus, the soil was already fertile enough to breed the riots.

Our findings also indicated other political and socio-economic factors which could have interrupted the traditional harmonious relations between Hindus and Muslims in these areas. The rise of a younger, articulate generation of Muslims, who voice their grievances against discrimination in educational facilities and jobs, some of whom have made good by competing with the Hindus in modern business enterprises, is often perceived as a threat by Hindus. The traditional Hindu mercantile community which dominates in the walled city is found to be resenting the Muslim intrusion into its commercial enclave, and the Muslim assumption of symbols of upward mobility. Hindus tend to raise their eye-brows at the assertion of an equal status by a community which they have been used to look down upon as their inferiors in the post-Independence era. The Muslims, quite rightly, are offended by this.

In the absence of conscious efforts by secular political forces in the locality to reconcile these growing differences and integrate the two communities, members of both the communities in their political choices are tending to fall back on their respective religious fundamentalist platforms. Hindu communal organizations like the Vishva Hindu Parishad and their Muslim counterparts like the Adam Sena, have been successful to a large extent in rallying their respective followers through the technique of demagogic intimidation, and their ability to ascribe nefarious motives to the other community. We found elderly Muslim politicians and intellectuals who had been traditionally Congressmen, pushed to the wall by the indifference of the ruling party to the genuine grievances of the Muslim population. Similarly, we found elderly Hindu Congressmen, including freedom fighters, who had become disgusted with and alienated from the ruling party because of the growing incorporation into the party of anti-social elements and Hindu communalists. Their retirement from the scene left the walled city an ideal breeding ground for communal and religious fanatics as well as the local underworld—the touts, drug-peddlers, hired killers who swoop down upon any chaos to settle old scores. In such a situation, the sane and secular elements in both the communities, appeared to be rendered immobilized by their inner frustrations as well as by the overwhelming communal frenzy that prevailed outside.

We feel that the mutual distrust and hostility between the Hindu and Muslim residents of the walled city, built up all these days by the changes in the socio-economic scene in the localities, as well as by the estrangement reinforced by the happenings outside, played a large part in the eruption of communal riots that enveloped the walled city during the period (May 19-24) under our review. At the same time, we cannot ignore the role of the administration, including the police, in augmenting the communal tensions by their behaviour during the riots—a behavioral pattern which was marked by a deliberate harassment, persecution and provocation of the Muslim minority.

## II. The background and the sequence of events.

The May 1987 communal flareup in the walled city occurred within a span of little over year, after a similar outbreak in the same area, which indicates the continuity of communal tensions for quite some time in the walled city.

On February 14, 1986, which was a Friday, Muslims at the call of their religious leaders observed the day as a day of protest against the court judgement on the Babri Mosque-Ram Janambhoomi dispute. After the prayers at the Jama Masjid, the devotees were returning to their respective homes, when a dispute arose over the display of a Hindu banner on the top of a temple at Lal Kuan which congratulated the Hindus on the liberation of Ram Janambhoomi. As the Muslims shouted slogans against it, the police overtook them and chased them into Gali Qasim Jan. An SHO, Jag Pravesh Kaushal was alleged to have shot down two Muslim youths—Mohammed Zakir and Subhan Ullah—who were actually trying to persuade the people to go back to their homes to prevent a communal confrontation. At some spots, members of both the communities fought each other and indulged in arson and looting. The indiscriminate firing by the police leading to the death of the above-mentioned youths, combined with the authorities refusal to punish the guilty police officer, had left a bitter trail in the minds of the residents. (See Delhi PUCL report on the incidents, in PUCL Bulletin, April, 1986).

Tensions again ran high in the area in September, 1986, when curfew had to be imposed in Chandni Mahal, Jama Masjid and Haus Qasi, following resentment among the Muslims against the reported entry of some Sunday picnickers, with their shoes on, into the Mosque at Ferozeshah Kotla, on September 7. At least one person was killed in the flare-up. In September again a Bajrang Dal rally, a trishul armed display of Hindu militancy, was held which turned violent, assaulting-people on roads and buses. On the 4th of October, mobs again went on the rampage in the walled city when the Ram Lila procession was not allowed to pass through its traditional route due to communal tensions in that area. At least 50 persons were injured.



In the meantime, the controversy over Babri Masjid—Ram Janambhumi had been hotting up all over India. A massive gathering of Muslims in the Boat Club lawns was addressed by the Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid, Syed Shahabuddin and other Muslim leaders on March 30, 1987. The Shahi Imam was reported to have urged the Muslim Ministers and MP's in a highly emotional speech, to open their eyes and ears to the danger faced by Islam, and warned that otherwise their houses would be looted and burnt. Syed Shahabuddin was found trying to restrain the latter.

Fast on the heels of the Muslim rally at Boat Club came the Ram Navami procession on April 7, organised by the Hindu communal groups. What used to be a peaceful religious demonstration in other years, was turned this year into an occasion for raising Hindu communal slogans and displaying gestures of militancy containing all the potentialities of a violent outbreak.

As passions ran high on both sides in an atmosphere overloaded with mutual suspicion and distrust, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi chose to address a rally of his partymen in the Boat Club lawns on May 16 this year, where he cautioned his followers against efforts of 'destabilization' by foreign powers and their agents in India. Referring to these agents and the US arming of Pakistan, he thundered : "*Unko hum karake ka jawab denge, aisa jawab denge ki unke jo maa baap bane huay hain unki naani yaad kara denge hum*" (We will give them such a fitting reply that those who are their godfathers will remember their grand mother).

(In the course of our investigations and interviews with the residents of the walled city, while the Hindus felt that the Shahi Imam's speech at Boat Club inflamed Muslim passions, the Muslims said that the Prime Minister's Boat Club speech was interpreted as a war-cry against the Muslims by the Hindu miscreants).

In the meantime, in the walled city, religious bigots of both the communities continued to step up their propaganda. A few weeks before the outbreak of the May riots during the Ramzan a three-wheeler scooter was observed moving around Nai Sarak area with a loudspeaker blaring forth the following slogans : "*Ab ki Id Hogi Kaise ? Moradabad Jaise*" (How will

you observe your Id? As it happened in Moradabad, i.e. warning the Muslims about attacks on them during the Moradabad riots); "*Agar Hindustan me rahna hai, To Vande Matram kahna hai*" (If you want to live in India, you will have to chant Vande Mataram); "*Jo mangeka Babri, Uska wakht hai aakhri*" (Whoever wants Babri (masjid) will find his days numbered).

A large number of leaflets were distributed by the Indra-prastha Vishwa Hindu Parishad questioning the patriotic loyalties of the Muslims and urging the establishment of a Hindu Raj.

The May 19 riots came as a climax to these sustained efforts, made by both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists, to stoke communal passions.

Our investigations into the sequence of events on May 19, and later, revealed how rumours, or distorted versions of an incident in a surcharged atmosphere could provoke communal violence.

The first incident occurred in the evening of May 19 when a dispute took place between a cyclist and a motorcycle driver—both Hindus—on Nai Sarak in the walled city. The wife of Vijay Kumar Sharma, the motor cycle driver, complained that the cyclist, Balakrishna, had misbehaved with her, which led to a scuffle between Sharma and Balakrishna. Two passersby travelling in a rickshaw, who happened to be Muslims, intervened to separate the two. Soon the police arrived and took all of them to the Town Hall police station. The woman was reported to have told the police that the Muslim passer—bys had intervened in the dispute to protect her. Within the police station a reconciliation was brought about. But on Sharma's complaint Bala Krishna was detained. Meanwhile, outside the rumour had spread that Muslims had misbehaved with a Hindu woman. Mobs descended on the streets, and soon sporadic clashes between the two communities broke out in different parts of the walled city.

At around 9.30 p.m. in Ballimaran, a Hindu, Om Prakash Kashyap, was shot. Twenty-two year old Om Prakash was standing on the third floor of Dharamshala Bissomal when he received bullet wounds in his stomach and arms. He came down running, and according to his relatives, he cried: "*Ali*

*Mohammad ne mujhe goli mara,*" Om Prakash lived with his mother and five brothers in a small two-roomed house opposite the Dharamsala. His brother, Naunihal informed the police and took him to JP Hospital where he died at 1.30 a.m. the next morning. Ali Mohammad, the person named by Om Prakash is the son of Fazal Ilahi, the landlord of Om Prakash house, with whom he had a long standing dispute over rent. Subsequently, Fazal Ilahi, his four sons including Ali Mohammad, and his brother Ahsan were arrested. But according to the local residents, they were released at the intervention of Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid. When we later asked the DCP (Crime & Railways), Mr Amod Kanth, about the incident, he said that Om Prakash could have been hit by a police bullet, since the police at that time were firing in the air to disperse warring crowds.

Here again, what was presumably to start with a landlord-tenant dispute, took on the ominous colours of a communal discord, the popular mood being what it was.

The next serious incident of the day was however of a more direct communal nature. At around 11.45 p.m., Shauqat Mia, a watch-maker and Imam of masjid Hakim Baqi in Hauz Qazi, was stabbed repeatedly by assailants who raided the masjid. While Shauqat died, and two of his associates were injured, one of them escaped and informed the police, who came and arrested five local Hindus.

As intermittent clashes and arson continued in Ballimaran, the police clamped curfew in the area. The curfew was extended to the Turkman Gate area also, where till then there had not taken place any serious incident. *Residents of the area* later in the course of our interviews with them, blamed the police for "such a reckless action which not only created unnecessary harassment for the inhabitants, but also encouraged to a large extent the riots that broke out there on Friday". It is possible that the curfew was imposed as a precautionary measure in view of the tension already present in other areas. We shall deal later with the Turkman Gate area incidents.

On May 20, which was a Wednesday, the army staged a flag march through the walled city.

Both Wednesday and Thursday (May 20 and 21) were comparatively calm, although tensions prevailed. The curfew was relaxed for four hours—two in the morning and two in the evening—on Thursday. Continuing arrests of people, many among whom were described innocent by the neighbours, news of deaths of those who were injured on May 19, as well as of the escalation of riots in Meerut, fuelled the tensions that were building up among the residents of the walled city, who were already feeling the pinch of the curfew. Shops had remained closed for the last two days. Whatever little foodstuff was available for sale when the curfew was relaxed on Thursday, were sold at nearly twice their usual prices. Children in many areas had to go without milk.

Meanwhile, late on Thursday night, at a meeting with the Lt. Governor of Delhi, where political leaders, local leaders of the riot-affected areas, and police officials were present, it was decided to lift the curfew for the whole day on Friday to allow the Muslims to go out to offer prayers at mosques on Jamat-ul-Vida, the last Friday of Ramzan. This appeared to be a crucial decision in view of what happened later on Friday.

Although the Bharatiya Janta Party later claimed that they had opposed the lifting of the curfew at the meeting with the Lt. Governor, our interviews with many among those who were present at the meeting revealed that the BJP representatives never made any such observation. While one observer at the meeting told us that the BJP representatives might have had expressed some "feeble" opposition to the decision to lift the curfew, another observer said that the BJP was in favour of entrusting the police with the decision to maintain, or lift the curfew.

From our talks with those who attended the meeting it was evident that the decision to lift the curfew was to a great extent influenced by the pressure of the walled city's trading community, which consisted of both Hindus and Muslims, which had been suffering economically because of the disruption in commercial activities due to the continuous curfew. The BJP, apparently did not want to lose their traditional support among the trading community (mainly Hindu) by

opposing the lifting of the curfew at the time of the meeting with the Lt. Governor. But later on, when violence flared up in the streets, the BJP politicians found it convenient to dissociate themselves from what obviously was a unanimous decision at the Lt. Governor's meeting. Taking up an 'I-told-you-so' pose, the BJP picked up the curfew issue as a handle in its political fight against the ruling party.

A few residents of the walled city with whom we talked later, felt that the authorities should have relaxed the curfew for a few hours on Friday to enable the devotees to go to the mosques and return home, instead of lifting it throughout the day. Some others felt that the curfew should have been lifted in phases, instead of continuing it for days together which brought hardship to the residents.

Friday saw the worst of the riots. From what we could piece together after interviewing a cross-section of residents of Ballimaran, Jama Masjid, Baradari and Turkman Gate areas, it appears that the first wave of violence began after the end of the Jamat-ul-Vida prayers in the afternoon, and its epicentre was the Hindu dominated Chawribazar area. As the 'namaazis' (the devotees who offered prayers) were returning from Jama Masjid, trouble broke out in that part of the city. According to one eye-witness, Md. Zahir, a spinning-machine dealer, as the crowd of 'namazees' neared the Standard Sweets shop in Churiwala, stones were hurled upon them from its top, In the melee that followed, Seema Lodge, a Muslim hotel, was set on fire. Lathis, spears and bottles were freely used by both sides.

While most of the Muslims we interviewed more or less corroborated the above account, the Hindus had a different version. A resident of a Dalit Slum in Gali Magazine in Churiwala who claimed to be an eye-witness, said that it all began when one of the 'namazees' picked up a stool outside Baba Dudh Bhandar and banged it, which acted as a trigger. Several shops and restaurants—Rajeev Restaurant, Golden Restaurant, Shivdhan Dudh Bhandar—were attacked, and many were injured.

According to another account, the disturbances started in Hauz Quazi, where the 'namaazees became violent when they reached the spot where the Imam of Masjid Hakim Baqi was killed on Tuesday. The mob looted and burnt shops while the

police stood watching, according to Tarachand Chandelwal of the BJP.

The trouble soon spread to the adjoining lanes and by-lanes, where shops were looted and burnt and people stabbed and beaten-up. Members of both the communities were involved in the incidents. But in our interviews, while the Muslims sometimes acknowledged the participation of hooligans from their own community, the Hindus invariably stuck to the position of being innocent victims. While the Muslims main target of criticism was the police, the Hindus were usually all praise for the police. The failure of both the communities to provide an impartial account—even by those who claimed to be eye-witnesses—of the origins of the trouble, indicates to what extent the wall of prejudice and suspicion separates the two communities. Dalits whom we visited in their quarters in Katra Khawaspura under the Chandni Mahal police station, repeatedly asserted that they had never had any contact with their Muslim neighbours who lived cheek by jowl in Kuchachalan. Similarly, Muslims in the Turkman Gate area described to us the Dalits as “chamars” who did not come from a “good caste.” Caste-Hindus were often too eager to describe the Muslims in the walled city as Pakistani agents. In such an atmosphere of communal divide, versions of incidents were bound to be influenced by the particular bias of respective communities.

We therefore tried to check and cross-check accounts of some of the major incidents that took place during the May 19-25 period, and visited those spots to assess the nature of handling of the problems by the administration and the police, and to examine the impact of police action and curfew.

We began our investigations on May 23, Saturday, when the injured and dead were being brought to hospitals from the riot-affected areas. We interviewed both the doctors who were attending them, and the injured who narrated their experiences.

We followed this up by visiting the area of major incidents on Sunday, May 24. One such incident took place at Kuchanahar Khan, a twisting lane behind the Golcha cinema house on Daryagunj. A predominantly Muslim residential area, it has a couple of Hindu families and one Sikh family. The residents told us that on Friday, following the disturbances

after the prayers, the retreating mob entered the area and set fire to two Hindu shops, belonging to Pannalal and Shambhunath. Zamiruddin Khan, who is a prominent Congress (I) leader of the area, and a special police officer, told us that the miscreants poured petrol from a scooter to set fire. Zamiruddin intervened and saved the Hindu shop-owners by removing them from the burning shops. He rang the police, but they arrived half an hour late.

We visited Baradari where two godowns and a Press belonging to Hindu Businessmen were burnt on Tuesday. We earlier interviewed the Hindu residents of Pandit Kucharam who had been stabbed. These included several women. While the victims of stabbing and arson had been mainly Hindus this time, the victims of police firings and high-handedness were Muslims.

On Saturday, at about 1.45 p.m. a 34-year old Muslim, Shafiquddin, who was washing his hands in the ground floor covered verandah of his house (2060 Kuchanahar Khan), was shot dead by the CRPF. We visited the house of the victim, who was the only earning member of a family of one handicapped brother, one unmarried sister and their mother. The relatives and neighbours told us that before Shafiquddin got hit police appear to be chasing some one in the streets. Shafiquddin came out in the verandah and went to the water-tap to wash before reading his 'namaaz', when the CRPF personnel posted on the roof-top of a school building opposite took aim at him and fired five rounds. One bullet entered his body, and he died. We saw the holes made in the ground by the other bullets, blood stains and a pair of slippers still lying on the floor.

Residents of the area told us that the police had behaved in an extremely high-handed fashion with the Muslims. They accused a police officer of shouting at the Hindu neighbours: "Why didn't you kill a few Muslims?" The police made a house-to-house search, but could not find any firearms. To prevent the police from entering the lane and terrorizing the people, Zamiruddin and the other residents locked from inside the massive iron gate that stood at the entrance of Kucha Nahar Khan at its crossing with Kucha Chalan—the road where police