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Rumour to Riots in Bengal: Who do we blame and what do we do?

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In the first week of July, an inflammatory Facebook post by a teenage Hindu boy set off several days of communal violence in West Bengal's Baduria-Basirhat region. Several senior BJP leaders blamed the violence on policies of minority appeasement they say Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamul Congress (TMC) have instituted. The TMC Government, on the other hand, blamed malicious rumour-mongering by digital warriors and leaders affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), of which the BJP is the political wing, for fanning the tension. In fact, Derek O'Brien, the TMC member of the Rajya Sabha, minced no words in denouncing the RSS as the "Rumour Spreading Society".

Many academic studies have pointed to the role of rumour-mongering in instigating riots. Donald Horowitz, in his 2001 book, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, has presented a wealth of empirical evidence to illustrate how rumours mobilise ordinary people into extraordinary actions everywhere from Ireland to Indonesia. Particularly potent, he noted, are false stories of sexual assault on Hindu women by Muslim men, which almost always incite the most primeval belligerence among Hindu men. The resulting paranoia is indeed expected to benefit the BJP.

However, even though incendiary rumours are circulated with unfailing regularity, riots are rare. Why do some rumours escalate into riots but others do not? From reading Steven Wilkinson's *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*, it is clear that there are two levels at work: local electoral incentives account for escalation of rumours to riots, and State-level electoral incentives of the ruling party determine the duration and intensity of the riots.

Baduria, the epicentre of the recent violence, has voted for the Congress in 11 of the last 15 Assembly elections. The Communist Party of India-Marxist won in the remaining four. In 2016, the Muslim candidate, fielded by the Congress and supported by the CPI-M, won with 53.17 per cent of the vote, beating the TMC candidate, also a Muslim, by over 12,000 votes. Hindus are 35 per cent of the

electorate in this Assembly segment, but the BJP managed to get just 8.9 per cent of the vote in 2016.

In 2011, the Basirhat Assembly segment was split into the largely rural north, which has 70 per cent Muslim voters, and the relatively urban south with 55 per cent Hindu voters. In the Assembly elections of 2011 and 2016, keeping up its long-held dominance, the CPI-M won Basirhat North even as it suffered serious setbacks elsewhere in West Bengal.

In the Hindu-majority Basirhat South, however, after the sitting CPI-M legislator died, the BJP surprisingly won the by-election in 2014. This outcome has to be seen in the context of Narendra Modi's massive victory at the Centre that year. Indeed, in the Basirhat Municipal election in 2015, the TMC won 13 of the 23 wards while the BJP won just three. Subsequently, in 2016, the TMC wrested the Basirhat South Assembly seat with 40.66 per cent of the vote while the BJP polled 29.55 per cent and the Congress-Left combine 26.33 per cent.

In the short run, the only way the BJP can increase its vote-share is by consolidating the Hindu votes scattered among the TMC, Congress and CPI-M into the BJP fold. Polarising communal events like riots can do just that by persuading the Hindu voters to rank their communal identity above other considerations and rally behind the BJP as the political party with the strongest anti-Muslim rhetoric.

The electoral incentives of the TMC vis-à-vis communal riots in Bengal is not as straight-forward. At the State level, by quelling the latest rounds of violence, the TMC has emerged taller. By limiting casualties to one, and by taking a strong stand against the spread of rumours, it is signalling its resolve to protect the minorities. As long as the ruling party in West Bengal, unlike the BJP Government in Gujarat in 2002, continues to depend on minority votes, a bulwark of electoral incentives will prevent the escalation of riots. West Bengal is unlikely to become another Gujarat.

At the local level, however, it is clear that whatever Banerjee has done to appease the minorities has not worked well. The TMC has never won the Assembly seats of Muslim-majority Baduria and Basirhat North. In fact, in the 2016 election, it did much better in the Hindu-majority Basirhat South. It might benefit the TMC to let the violence fester just long enough to remind local Muslims, who had voted for the Congress and CPI-M in the previous elections, that they need a ruling party MLA in the riot-prone areas. Where patronage and symbolism failed to elicit votes, fear of recurrent communal tension might be a game-changer. As the CPI-M, despite lording over the State for over three decades, seems quite toothless to stave off the BJP advance, short, limited, managed violent outbursts with communal undertones can only help Banerjee cement her credentials as the last one standing in the way of communalisation of Bengal.

Over the years, there have been various interpretations of what precipitates communal riots. In a State where painful memories of a bloody partition are still raw, it is not a rocket science that riots are almost always politically motivated. In fact, we argue that the TMC has electoral incentives to contain riots in Bengal. But in the face of vitriolic anti-Muslim rumour-mongering by the BJP and relentless identity politics by the TMC, the resistance to using religion for politics has to come from the people. The TMC

has recommended neighbourhood peace committees. But for these committees to be effective and build bridges, they have to be inter-ethnic in composition and be allowed to operate outside electoral calculations of the major political parties. Else they will only exacerbate the problem. Given the deep penetration of political operatives in these areas, that seems to be a possible risk. Perhaps the other informal associations, like street corner tea shop *addas*, cultural programmes, women's self-help groups, sports clubs, libraries, drama clubs can be the first line of defence against further communal polarisation of Bengal.

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