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Community Tensions and Failed Reconciliation:

Will Panipur Happen Again?

Erupting in the small, later Bangladeshi, village of Panipur in 1954, the conflict began over the issue of a grazing cow. While there were many root causes to this conflict such as the rebuilding of the economy, conflicts in surrounding areas and across the country, and the effects of Partition in general, the riot at Panipur has a core root cause lying in the religious tensions of the community.

Influenced by Partition in 1947, the group and community aspirations and frustrations are shown in the conflict outburst of Panipur and, until fully addressed and reconciled, will remain an underlying part of the community atmosphere. This essay will analyze the community tensions in Panipur and India leading up to the riot in 1954 using both Roy’s analysis of the events, social traits, and history along with other analyses of conflict and conflict resolution in a broader sense.

Partition ignited the tensions in the region of before-the-division India. The confrontations that ensued across the country in the 1950’s, like Panipur, had been long overdue. The religion-based communities had tensions that had been latent before the actual conflict at Panipur broke out, however, once the cow ate the lentil and the conflict took place, the religious divisions became extremely prominent but only under the public surface: Muslims versus Hindus. They each became a community within a community, subtly against each other over land, control, and status, “…Hindu-Muslim relations in the modern period: culturally both similar and different, socially both friendly and distant, historically both joined and antagonistic.” (Roy 28) On the surface, the Hindu-Muslim relations seem similar, friendly, and joined, but underneath the surface, as shown in the many interviews Roy completes, there are social tensions. These tensions lead to the escalation of the conflict.

The group aspirations for the Muslims had never been addressed in the years leading up to the conflict. Ever since the beginning of the century, Muslims had been making formal complaints about a differing amount of rights given to Hindus—being the majority. According to Ahmad, a group of Muslims in India formed the All India Muslim League in 1906 in order to fight for more rights. They were granted a Muslim state with Partition, Pakistan.

By the time Partition came around, the Muslims that remained in India—as opposed to those that migrated to Pakistan—were still in the same position as they were half a century earlier, “Throughout the twentieth century changes were afoot as the upper classes were threatened by economic reversals and Muslims campaigned for improvements in their status. But the majority of big landlords continued to be upper-caste Hindus, and the majority of poor cultivators were Muslims and Namasudras.” (Roy 20)

As opposed to the Muslims, Roy’s analysis of the conflict shows little historical conflict on the Hindus part. The Hindus for a long period of time had no complaints or major frustrations as they had a higher social status than the Muslims in the community. Due to this, they were unaware of the Muslim’s conflict of interest, thus creating a greater latent conflict.

Adding to these frustrations prior to the outburst, there was the caste system, which created an overall tension in the community, especially for the Hindus. As shown in the introductory pages of Roy’s work, the different levels of the caste system influenced how each individual acted in certain situations, even fifty years after the riot occurred. This highly emphasizes the fact that tensions in the village were high and communication, throughout the community as a whole, was lacking.

Conflict as described by Pruitt and Kim is “perceived divergence of interest, a belief that the parties’ current aspirations are incompatible.” (Pruitt and Kim, 8) According to this argument, one of the two parties involved, the Muslims, had perceived the divergence of interest for decades. When the other party involved, the Hindus, perceived the divergence of interests when “the Muslim cow ate the lentil” (Roy 17), conflict was bound to break out.

It must be taken into consideration that all analysis that Roy has done on the conflict is based on her experiences and may or may not contain any bias. In addition to bias, the author’s worldview may contrast to that of the interviewee and valuable information may be lost in translation. Roy is basing her entire analysis upon the interviews that she conducts which when cross-analyzed can prove to be successful, but in comparison to what? There is no other information on record to compare her analysis to.

Looking at the conflict from a buffer of many decades, it is safe to say that the conflict could have been prevented should Partition have given a set of expectations and norms for those affected by it to live. Had those in charge of the local government, such as Altaf-uddin, addressed all of the issues at hand, and taken control of the situation when it was still relatively small in scale, the escalation wouldn’t have happened so quickly. Roy discusses how the police, government workers, and local authorities were not communicating, nor were they making an attempt to.

Even now, an attempt at reconciliation should be made, as the attempt in 1954 was, “forced…[and] in actuality a restructuring of rights and power.” (Roy 111) For reconciliation to occur the following steps must be attended to: Forgiveness must be given, the truth must be acknowledged, reparations must be paid, and finally, the social fabric must be re-woven (Rinker). In the case of Panipur, the enemies—the Muslims and the Namasudra Hindus—must be willing to forgive each other and see and accept the truth—or the combined account of the truth that Roy provides—of what happened in 1954.

The reparations of the incident are a more difficult “end to tie.” How do you pay amends to someone for this situation today that has been built into so many generations? It becomes a difficult situation for anyone to attempt to pay reparations when the man with cow, who had migrated to India after the conflict, died. One main player in a party is no longer available to pay reparations to. While the family of the man might have been able to accept reparations, would it help to re-weave the social fabric? The conflict and those involved never get the full reconciliation process that it deserves.

The Hindu-Muslim violence carried well into the twenty-first century with the Gujarat riots among others. The conflict in Panipur, which was just one of many religion and community based conflicts across the countries of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, showed the international stresses placed on the two groups of people living in one community.

In conclusion, the riots at Panipur were waiting to happen then, and are still present today. The tensions between the Muslim and Hindu inner-communities had been growing for decades causing the outburst to become violent quickly. The reconciliation process was nearly nonexistent, leaving old wounds latent and festering in the tales retold by generation after generation.

Until the issue is fully addressed, there will always be underlying tensions in Panipur, as in any village affected by a riot to this scale. While the social workings on the surface layer went back to how they were, the latent conflict must be acknowledged, justice given, enemies forgiven, and the social fabric re-woven for full reconciliation to occur.

Bibliography

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