

Two major riots in Bombay

Dr. V. Murlidhar

Communal riots shook Bombay in two phases, first during December, 1992 (in the aftermath of the demolition of Babari Masjid), and then in January 1993. As a surgeon working in a public hospital which absorbed a large number of casualties during the riots, I could observe distinct differences, between the two. The December riots were 'expected to occur' after the demolition. All of us were ready for the inevitable. Nobody expected the communal frenzy of January.

There were many injuries due to police firing during the December riots mainly affecting the rioting, minority community. During the second phase the injured were mainly from communal clashes. Few bullet wounds were encountered. Injuries were principally from swords, blunt objects and kerosene burns.

The striking difference of course was in the gruesome stories which people came out with during the second phase. Individuals were mentally tortured, beaten, stabbed, tied up and burnt. The victims in their death throes looked up to the hospital staff for some solace.

*Effects on doctors and other **stuff** members in hospitals*

During the second phase no one shaved off his beard initially but after learning of male victims who were stripped naked to ascertain their religion, no one wanted to take a chance. Many on the hospital staff too shaved off their beards.

We expected the first phase to end soon and the police dealt a swift blow to rioters. The second phase dragged on endlessly. All of us working in hospitals were physically and mentally exhausted. The atmosphere was vicious and if it had continued even a day further, communal frenzy would have irreversibly entered into the hospital campus and its operation theatres.

There was total collapse of law and order. Ambulances were burnt within the hospital compound. Killers chased their victims into the sacred precincts of the operation theatre and stabbed them, then walked away coolly. One hapless fellow had his head crushed in front of doctors and other hospital staff.

What impact these happenings had on the medical mind can only be guessed. All staff members of public hospitals stayed scrupulously impartial in treating those sent to them, irrespective of creed. Amidst the general madness that prevailed, there is not a single instance of a doctor, nurse, technician or ward attendant allowing a private sense of outrage to overwhelm behaviour towards a patient.

Charlie Chaplin, in the 'Great Dictator', said that killing of one human being is construed as murder but the death of thousands is just statistics. Such statistics were presented by some doctors in a recent medical conference.

*Our **experiences** in two refugee camps*

After the riots some of us went out of the 'safe' precincts of the hospital into the refugee camps at Goregaon and Malad. We found people huddled together in a terrorised state. By profession they were pullers of carts, construction workers, loaders, weavers and dyers of cloth. They had lived in Bombay for as long as they could remember and were now orphans discarded by the city. Medical help reached them too late and proved insufficient to heal their inner wounds.

Kabir's Doha tells us that the string symbolising love and peace can never be put together seamlessly when it breaks into two. It will always have a knot in it. As doctors we could only try to smoothen the knot a little.

" Ethics
and
Science
need
to
shake
hands "

*Richard Clarke Cabot (1968-1939)
The Meaning of Right and Wrong, Introduction*