Role of Police during the 1984 Riot: A Study of Hindi and Punjabi Short Stories

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Abstract: India is universally known as a land of rich religious and cultural history. Despite a large array of social, religious, linguistic, and cultural differences, its inhabitants have however managed to co-exist with amity and good will. But there have also been certain sporadic episodes of communal discord, clashes and even riots. Communalism is in fact emerging as a big threat to the nation. The anti-Sikh riot of 1984 is one such example of the bitter communal violence which threatens the country from ‘within.’ A large number of reports, newspaper articles and historical accounts have in particular addressed the issue of how the state machinery failed to perform its duty during the four ominous days of the riot. Role of police is bitterly and scathingly criticized in such accounts. In such a context, it becomes relevant to look at the representation of police in the world of fiction. The present paper seeks to study and analyse the representation of police in some Hindi and Punjabi short stories (written prior to 2000).

Keywords: Anti-Sikh riot, Literary Representation, State Machinery, Police, Violence.

The 1984 riot refers to a four-day orgy of senseless violence that took place in various parts of India, with its epicentre in New Delhi, causing the death of nearly 4,000 Sikhs. It followed the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984, the then Prime Minister of India, by her two Sikh bodyguards, in revenge for Operation Blue Star. The violence that this ill-fated assassination unleashed did not however remain confined to the place of its occurrence, that is New Delhi; it went on to consume other Hindi-speaking heartland states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. The nature and the repercussions of the riot were so devastating that it shook the very foundation of the highly-cherished constitutional principles of Secularism, Toleration and National integrity. In the words of Pramod K Nayar, the riot became symbolic of “the collapse of an ideal, or of constitutionally vouchsafed truths” (23).

It is also often argued in literary circles that the 1984 riot was simply not a riot - for the term ‘Riot’ generally implies a clash between two communities resulting in random acts of disorganized violence. The term moreover invokes images of chaos which overpower and incapacitate the law and order machinery of the state. But what happened in November 1984 runs contrary to the above-said understanding of a riot. In the first place, the 1984 turmoil was not a clash between two communities: it was a one-sided onslaught on the Sikh community by the other group, consisting mainly of the Hindus. In fact, any attempt(s) by the Sikhs to counter or even protect themselves by using their licensed weapon(s) were thwarted. Another set pattern observed during the ominous days of November 1984 is that though all Sikhs - children, men and women – were subjected to atrocities of one or the other kind, it was mainly the Sikh males who were the prime targets of the killings. This gendered profiled targeting means that the mobsters were willing to attack Sikh male procreators and Sikh families’ bread-winners – and thereby, destroy the Sikh race.

The violent turmoil was also another spontaneous reaction of the masses nor disorganized in nature. It was rather a systematic, politically engineered action involving certain politicians, Delhi police officers and Hindu civilians as is often asserted by various historical accounts and reports including the several affidavits filed by the victims. The 1984 tragedy is in fact often considered to be a state-condoned attack. Several reports, articles, books and historical accounts have been written to substantiate this perspective. Delhi Riots, one of the first few reports on the anti-Sikh riot, came out with a shocking revelation: “If we introspect with all honesty and sincerity, we are bound to realize that the root cause of this disgraceful violence between the two communities is the mindless opportunistic and selfish politics…”(3). Gurcharan Singh Babbar’s highly censored and banned book Indian Government Organised Carnage goes a step ahead in its critical assertions. It says, “A careful study of the various reports on the carnage and hundreds of different eye-witness accounts make it evident that the anti-Sikh violence was the result of a well-planned conspiracy. The madness and the blood-bath in which the Indian capital drowned in the aftermath of Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination, were not the result of any mass upsurge or emotional spontaneity”(35).

Uprooted from their homes in their very ‘own’ country and subjected to brutal violence, it appeared as if the Sikhs were nobody’s responsibility during the four ill-fated days following Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination on 31 October 1984. The Sikhs in many states of India were attacked in an orgy of violence and revenge. Many homes were destroyed and the mayhem claimed the lives of thousands of the Sikhs. All this signaled a complete breakdown of the state machinery. This breakdown became more painful because now – in the post-independence period - it is the people’s “own” government, and not any foreign rulers, which is entrusted with the task of the safety and security of all its citizens, irrespective of any religious, communal, regional, economic or social differences. And when this very state machinery fails to protect a certain group of its citizens from the other group of agitated and hostile citizens – that is, from internal dangers – it proves its futility and failure.

The role of police in communal clashes has in fact always been a highly controversial issue in the Indian scenario. Especially during the rioting episodes, the agency of police is often accused of the following grave charges: police (1) did not come to the rescue of the needy and the helpless; (2) was itself instrumental in killing; (3) led the mob in looting and burning; (4) arrested innocent persons and fabricated false charges...
against them; and (5) encouraged the culprits to do whatever they liked. In other words, police has time and again been accused of aiding, exciting and even supporting the riot.

Police is furthermore accused of disarming the Sikhs who tried to protect themselves and their relatives by force. The path-breaking work entitled 1984 Sikhs' Kristallnacht reports, “In some areas, the Sikh families grouped together for self-defence. The police officials then arrived to disperse them by force when persuasion did not work. In other areas, police searched the houses for weapons, including the ceremonial daggers, and confiscated them before the mobs came”(8). This can be juxtaposed with how police could not control the misled mob which went on to kill, loot and create havoc all around. Another most frequently depicted criticism is the one pertaining to the problem of police indiscipline.

As far as the representation of this theme in the Hindi and Punjabi short stories is concerned, one finds an adequate space and treatment given to it. Studying and analyzing Hindi and Punjabi short stories written on the '84 riot, the present paper seeks to trace the literary representation of the role of police. The short stories in the present context can undoubtedly be seen as narratives not only about loss – of near and dear ones, of belongings and assets, of good-will and trust, and of the cherished principles of humanity, peace and brotherhood – but also about the shocking inefficiency and degeneracy of the state machinery. Though 'state machinery' is a much broader term - including the political, legal and administrative agencies of the state - perhaps the key and the most riveting component of it is police. This is an agency which is endowed with a task of maintaining public order and safety, detecting, preventing and checking criminal activities. But the tragic irony of the situation is that this very agency has often proved itself to be inefficient, malevolent and a mere political tool.

The short stories written on the present theme seem to have very effectively captured this sad reality. They provide a bitter satire on the apathy, indifference and the corruption of police. In Hridyesh's Hindi story “Afwah”, for instance, frivolity, ruthlessness and the non-serious attitude of police is depicted. The inspector orders a strange punishment – of doing 20 sit-ups - to Jaangi Sahay and derives fun at the expense of the latter’s helplessness. In fact, he believes that the very existence of police is based on the premise that it affrights the public:

(English Translation: He was of a belief that police is there to rule and strictness is required to exercise that authority. Only when police scares the people and from police, people get scared, can it be considered ‘Police.’)

The punishment meted out to Sahay by policemen however ends up disturbing and gnawing him from within. The rough behaviour of police is also noticed against Raj Kishor. The way it enters his house and makes queries is quite unbecoming of its role as a governing agency of the state. The story writer, in fact, makes one mischievous character claim that police is only pretending to be strict. In reality, it supports the disturbing elements during the riot days (Kala November 40). Hopes of Harnaam Singh from the police force also get dashed. Very innocently, he had believed that whenever there would be any disturbance, a curfew would be imposed and police would control the situation. But, when the riot takes place in his neighborhood, police is nowhere to be seen; in fact, he is cruelly mishandled by the mob.

Callousness and non-seriousness of police comes out in Rajendra Rao’s “Vaishnavajan”as well. When the narrator is caught by two policemen on his way from rehabilitation camp, where Pappi has sought temporary shelter during the curfew, they do not only beat him up without adequate interrogation and make fun of his B. Sc (studies), but also make abusive use of language:

(English Translation: Police was unsuccessful in catching hold of the Killers – as it has always been. While living amidst ordinary men, policemen have become like us – out rightly corrupt, immoral, unaccountable and undutiful. They watch every incident as dumb spectators and derive pleasure out of them).

The criticism of the police force however becomes more scathing and virulent in some Punjabi short stories. To quote an instance, one can refer to Gulzaar Singh Sandhu’s story “Murge Da Panja.” Here, police seems to have lost a sense of duty and responsibility towards the nation and its citizens, making the situation much more eruptive and violent. In one incident in the story, a badly-humiliated and hurt Sikh is shown as requesting for water, but the tip of advice given by a policeman is to throw petrol on him and burn him alive.

(English Translation: My uncle’s friend was also the one who became prey to the brutal violence of burning men alive. Lying on the road, he was asking water from a policeman of the ruling government. And the only answer that the policeman gave to the people who were showing compassion for him was, “Leave him, throw petrol over his body and finish him off”.)

In Ajeet Cour’s “November Churasi” too, police no longer remains a force which ensures protection and security to the citizens. When the protagonist and her daughter go to visit the relief camp at Gandhi Nagar School, they come across policemen who behave in a manner as if nothing amiss has happened in the world around them. At the entrance of the camp, the two or three police constables sitting idly in the police truck epitomise the general behaviour of the police force. Sipping tea and sitting in their comfort zones, they remain abjectly indifferent to the wretched condition of the targeted community in general, and the Sikhs inhabiting the Gandhi Nagar relief camp in particular:

Gate de baahar ik police da truck si, te vich de teen policiye aaram naal baiithe chaa pi rahe san (November Churasi 18)

(English Translation: Outside the gate, there was one police truck in which two or three policemen were sitting comfortably and drinking tea).

Later, in the very same story, police appears as a force not simply incapable of doing any good to its citizen but also, quite unfortunately, as one which is itself a source of danger - a dreaded force. It did not simply remain inefficient at handling the sensitive situation of the riot but also condoned, supported and even aided the rioting mob:
Mainu pata si ke sabh to vadham kratha ohni dini police kolon hi si. Khoon de piyaa sa har hazoom de naal police di muhafiz tukri hi turi si. Police de jeepan vich hi petrol de tel de oh kanaster ladd ke bastiyaan vich pahuchne san jinna naal joonde manukh saade gaye san, jinna naal gharan nu saad ke khole bana ditta gya si. Balaatkar karan waliya vich vi police wale khud shamil san (November Churasi 22)

(English Translation: I knew that the greatest fear, during these days, was from police itself. With every group of blood-thirsty mob, it was a band of policemen who walked along. It was the police jeeps in which they carried petrol cans to colonies where living human beings were burnt alive, and with which houses were burnt and made into empty shells. Policemen too were among the rapists).

Police vehicles carried petrol cans which caused massive destruction of the Sikhs and their belongings. Police, in the story, is also condemned of another crime - crime against women; in other words, of raping them. The story is very serious and critical in the charges it levies against this governing agency of the state.

At this juncture, it also needs to be noted that by police, one does not only mean the local police. There are other policing bodies such as PAC, SRP, CRPF, BSF and the Army in the nation. Their role and nature also gets touched upon in the works of the writers. To quote an instance, “Lal Kraas” recounts the anxieties of a Peace Keeping Force Constable (PAC) for his wife and child living in a riot-torn area. Being an insider (a part of the peace keeping force of the state), he is fully aware of the duplicity or the dirt-beneath-the-vein image of police. He knows the degeneracy, immorality and unscrupulousness that police/army can descend to - for they conveniently pass on the crime to the mischievous and notorious elements of the society. Their reality, in this way, remains hidden from the media and the country in general.

A striking example of the degeneracy of police is provided in the person of the ‘fallen’ Amarnath Singh who, in the name of peace and normalcy, kills innocent citizens. After unleashing his destructive energies on the father whom he kills only because he happened to be belonging to a targeted minority community, he strangles a two-years old child just because he was clinging to his mother, and the former could not rape the child’s mother.

The protagonist also gets dismayed when he is reminded of his own behavior in the past when, despite being endowed with the charge of maintaining peace and order in a violent situation, he did not (intentionally) catch a culprit who had stabbed an old man of another place…

When the army comes into action, the situation apparently appears to be in control. The violence subsides. But the question that the story “Lal Kraas” raises is pertaining to the inner turmoil - the one in the minds and hearts of the Sikh community. Can it get some comfort or relief with the coming of Army or Peace-Keeping forces into action?

Shaanti kya hogi, dehsat ke maare log chup laga leta hai, lekin bhitar hi bhitar aag sulagti rehti hain (Kala November 176)

(English Translation: It can’t be peace, if out of fear people stay silent but deep within them are enraged and fiery feelings).

To restore peace, curfew is imposed; army is sent, but the question that the story raises is Can staying quiet because of the terror of the army be considered peace? Deep within the people lie troubled, restless, enraged and disturbed souls.

Keeping in view the sad facts associated with the 1984 anti-Sikh riot, the Indian scenario may appear abjectly dismal and bleak. The Sikh community, undeniably, was a victim of the system and those state representatives who had turned their backs on the afflicted ones. Many members of the political system and police, in particular, appeared blind with selfishness and avarice. The apathy of administration and law too added to the Sikh agony. But, another fact that remains is that still, despite everything, all is not grim and pathetic about this world.

It also needs to be noted that the whole of the police force cannot be condemned of inefficiency or degeneracy. Police may have some corrupt elements within its fold, but it would be completely erroneous on our parts to consider the entire police force as corrupt and depraved. One can also discern a presence of secular and some very committed police officers who tackle the communal situation very honestly and with a sense of integrity. This aspect has also been traced in the short stories. To quote an instance, the railway police in “Kya Tumne Kabhi Koi T” like his own

Another interesting police figure is the D. I. G in the works of the writers. To quote an example of the degeneracy of police as a rescuer...

And without telling him that following Indira Gandhi’s assassination, the killings of Sikhs have started taking place at different places… in Country’s capital, too much of bloodshed is taking place and these policemen have come to escort him safely to his destination.

In other words, police has arrived to rescue this Sikh man to a safe and secure place – so that he can remain unmarrred by the violent happenings following Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination.

Another interesting police figure is the D. I. G in the Hindi story “Curfew Hatke Ke Baad” by Radhavallabh Tripathi. He arrests the P. T. Sir on account of the latter’s alleged crime of burning the Gurudwara near the Nanak colony. The D. I. G is also shown to have dispelled the
rioting mob which stood in the way of the school bus, carrying school kids. But, in this instance, his role is problematized as he is shown to have done this apparently dutiful task not out of any sense of duty or responsibility but to do personal favour to his friend whose son is travelling in the very same school bus. So, the D. I. G’s act of shooing away the mob is actually an attempt to save his friend’s son, the narrator. But, whatever may be the reason, he is shown to have at least aborted some conspiracies targeting the Sikhs.

To sum up, one can therefore say that though the police force of India may have disappointed and defeated the Sikhs in particular and the nation itself in general in maintaining the law and order situation during the 1984 riot, yet all is not abjectly and grimly wrong with this policing agency. Certain police officials did support and help the helpless members of the targeted community. So, all is not wrong and bleak about the governing agencies of our nation. And this blend of good and evil, desirable and undesirable facets of police – with the undesirable dominating over the desirable - gets justified representation in the Hindi and Punjabi short stories. In other words, the short story writers can be seen as not painting the canvas of their stories with morbid and pessimistic strokes alone; humanity and goodness still makes its presence felt. A shade of greyness marks the representation of the role of police in Hindi and Punjabi short stories on the 1984 anti-Sikh riot.

Works Cited: