

## RELIGION AND POLITICS: REPRESENTATION IN INDEPENDENT INDIAN DOCUMENTARIES

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**Abstract:** *Among the most prominent threats to the secular and pluralistic fabric of India have been religious or caste fundamentalism and communal differences. Today, most of the chaos and disharmony the country is facing can be credited to the power-play of religion, vote and politics. The situation becomes more deplorable when humans are killed and assaulted, rapes are given communal colour, voices of dissent are suppressed, patriotism is questioned, and unity is disturbed—all in the name of religion, caste and community. This scenario has well been discussed in recent times on various media platforms. Arts and media have in their own way represented religion and related issues in myriad ways. Movies like Garam Hava, Tamas, Firaq had effectively depicted the tragedy and aftermath of communal tensions in situations like the Partition or Gujarat riots. However, what has remained mostly unexplored is the domain of documentaries in representing such sensitive issues. Since this form of cinema is direct, reality oriented, mostly informative or investigative and provides a valuable record for history, it provides an important sphere of research to find answers to certain subjects. Documentaries by independent film makers have keenly focussed on details of religious upheavals and dived into psychology and power-play behind such incidents. These have also explored the impact of identity politics on human relations. The paper uses qualitative analyses to study select documentaries dealing with important communal events in the country in the past and explores their relevance in today's India. Even after decades of development, the study aims to find, that if the mentality about religion, caste and the political play has remained the same in the country and explore the reasons for it.*

**Keywords:** *Documentaries, Religion, Politics, Violence, Psychology*

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### Introduction

As long as humanity exists, there exist some self-imposed and some natural divisions within it. These may be due to caste, community, ethnicity, religion, region or money and status. Apart from the fights over land and resources, the history of humanity is also filled with violence for the protection of this 'distinctiveness'. Especially in a country like India which is a land of countless ethnicities and communities, birthplace of prominent religions and a society identified by prevalence of caste system, chances of conflict rise manifold. What stops peaceful

coexistence? How can religion lead to violence? How can humans be killed in the name of God? These were some of the questions the researcher wished to find answers to. These questions have continued to haunt the world even today, and with each passing year research offers new dimensions to these. Violence is a global phenomenon, taking place in the form of terrorism, riots, ethnic conflicts and an overall sense of disharmony and fear. Religion is not just a conventional sign of difference; it is also often deeply embedded in the sense of ethnic or national identity. It provides each side with a justification for seeing itself as superior and the enemy as inferior (Bruce, 2008). This also means it incorporates in itself dimensions of nationalism, caste superiority, community pride, cultural supremacy and simply, even psychological beliefs which justify violence to protect one's identity, formed on all these parameters (culture, caste, ethnicity, nation and community). Mark Juergensmeyer (2003) mentions that it takes a community of support and, in many cases, a large organisational network for an act of violence to succeed. It also requires a great deal of internal conviction, social acknowledgement, and the stamp of approval from a legitimising ideology or authority one respects. This legitimising ideology or authority is mostly religious or political in nature. There have not been instances, at least in India, when an act of violence based on religion, caste or community doesn't have a direct or indirect political backing. This has been proven time and again in violence during riots in New Delhi (1984), Ayodhya (1992), Godhra (2002) and Muzaffarnagar (2013).

Media describe and report horrible events of violence and also try to explain its certain aspects. However, these explanations seldom contribute to a more thorough understanding of the individuals who are committing and suffering from these acts (Lindgren, 2017). There are numerous cinematic creations and films which have explored the issue of riots, violence and politics. The researcher, however, was keen to focus on alternative and independent mediums of mass (especially visual) communication. Documentaries, in visual communication sphere, most commonly provide for evidence-based depiction of reality which is important to deeply feel and comprehend sensitive issues of religious and communal violence, as compared to dramatic representation in fictional films.

### **Significance of Study**

India is characterised by more ethnic and religious groups than most other countries of the world. An analysis by the Pew Research Centre analysis of 198 countries ranked India as the fourth worst in the world for religious intolerance, after Syria, Nigeria and Iraq (Bhattacharya, 2017). However, one intriguing difference in India and these countries is that India is constitutionally secular than these fundamentally Islamic nation states. Given the global rise of intolerance and the emergence of majoritarian and protectionist notion in the West, India also saw a dramatic rise of a majoritarian government under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, 336 cases related to offences promoting enmity between different groups on the basis of religion, race, place of birth were registered in 2014, which shot up to 475 in 2016, an increase by over 41 per cent (Ranjan, 2017). This is mostly because the ruling party has its ideological roots in Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, recently the organisations of which (Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal) were declared religious militant groups by the US Central Intelligence Agency. All the RSS organisations including the BJP resort to communal polarisation and regularly mobilise the Hindu masses on religious basis (Kumar, 2018). In such a scenario, it becomes necessary for researchers to dwell on reasons to find out how majoritarian and identity politics take a toll on society's harmony and brotherhood, and this especially when we boast of a neo-liberal and globalised era. The study specifically focusses on the use of religion in the political power play, and that how religion and community issues continue to be propagated, manipulated,

exaggerated to create differences, riots and violence. For this, the researcher feels, documentaries provide an invaluable resource to observe and research for answers in history so that the present can be effectively comprehended, and future can be wisely created. For Bill Nicholas (2001), documentary film is one of the discourses of sobriety that include science, economics, politics and history discourses that claim to describe the real, to tell the truth.

### **Literature Review**

In academic research circles especially in India, documentary films have been a neglected area. For documentary representation of reality, Bill Nicholas in *Introduction to Documentary* (2001) and Michael Renov in *Theorizing Documentary* (1993) have offered perspectives on debates surrounding concepts of reality in documentary film making. However, both theorists believe documentaries should be studied to understand the past as well as the future. KP Jayashankar and Anjali Monteiro in *A Fly in the Curry* (2016) list important documentaries depicting caste and communal violence and talk about their investigative approach. For a psycho-analytic approach to religious violence, Mark Juergensmeyer's case studies in the *Terror in the Mind of God* (2003) clearly depict the role of religious groups in turning world affairs into sacred wars, while Tomas Lindgren makes distinction between psychological and cultural factors of religious violence in *The Psychological Study of Religious Violence* (2017).

#### Objectives of study

- To observe socio-economic factors which lead to communal violence at different time periods
- To explore psycho-social factors prevalent at time of riots and study psychology of violence
- To see if problems and narratives covered by these documentaries are relevant even today
- To see how violence and politics are related, as shown in documentary films

### **Methodology**

The researcher has used semiotics to observe different documentaries made on issues of communal violence. The study has mainly focussed on five documentaries made in different time periods on four of the most deadly incidents of communal and religious violence in the country. These have been analysed to explore the psycho-social and cultural reasons behind communal/religious violence and see if these are consistent over different time periods and under different political situations. These include: *Ram ke Nam or In the Name of God* (1992) by Anand Patwardhan, based on Ayodhya-Babri Masjid issue which had caused death of over 2000 people, mainly Muslims; *In Memory of Friends* (1990) by Anand Patwardhan, based on militancy in Punjab after the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi; *Final Solution* (2003) by Rakesh Sharma, based on anti-Muslim riots in Godhra, Gujarat; *Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai* (2015) by Nakul Singh Sawhney, based on 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots which displaced over 50k Muslims; *Father, Son and Holy War* (1995) by Anand Patwardhan which, though not based on riots, explores the psychology behind violence. These documentaries have been popular in this genre, especially for the quality work by the independent directors. Almost all of these, because of glaring depictions of realities—victims' sufferings, mass killings and involvement of local leaders and politicians—had come in direct confrontation with ruling regimes of that time. The issues raised in the documentaries have been observed in the present light.

## **Analysis**

### ***Socio-Economic Concerns***

Lack of adequate employment opportunities for educated individuals fuels support for violent extremism among general population, especially in developing countries (Bhatia and Ghanem, 2017). Towards the end of documentary *In Memory of Friends*, a village lady casually repents how unemployment has affected the mindset of educated youth and they get easily distracted by some violent elements. It was the same situation in Gujarat, when Prahlad Shastri, VHP secretary in Pavagad, says most of the people in those villages were addicts, in documentary *Final Solution*. Most of the affected villages had poor to low-income class groups. Also, the young boys the narrator asks for views in documentary *In the Name of God* introduce themselves just as proud workers of a religious group or are in a minor self-employment business. In most situations, it has been seen that the under-employed or unemployed young people get attracted to provocations to get a sense of worth in saving their religion or community. There have been numerous studies which have explored relations between unemployment and violent behaviour (LexisNexis, 2009; Algis et al. 2013). Even today, unemployment remains the most prominent problem in India. A 2018 data by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) says there are nearly 31 million unemployed Indians looking for jobs. In an environment like this, it becomes easy for political parties to mobilise youth and instill in them a sense of contributing for a 'cause' which can give them meaning in life. However, in this context, the documentary *Father, Son and Holy War* also points to the presence of illiteracy and superstitions and a thoughtless submission to tradition. A woman holding on to a photo of a 'sati' (when a widow is burned in husband's pyre as tradition) and believing her to be a goddess and later justifying the action of religious fanatics to burn her, says it all, in the documentary.

### ***Psycho-Social Factors***

#### ***'Threat' to Religion/Identity***

The documentary *Final Solution* clearly shows how, when a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) unit was established in Pavagad and even other places, the mindset of people began to change. In its programmes, the youth were 'enlightened', as Professor Joshi said, to save their religion. From LK Advani's rath yatra speeches in *In the Name of God* to a provoking discourse by Acharya Dharmendra in *Final Solution*, from bytes of Sikh youth in documentary *In Memory of Friends* expressing danger to their religion to young adults adorning weapons and openly calling for killing other community members to save Hinduism, what comes as an important factor is that most of the violent activities occur due to a fear that the identity of the (assaulting) group is in danger from the (victimised) community. The Kshatriya Rajputs in *Father, Son and Holy War* feel the Western or modern society was challenging their traditions by banning the Sati ritual and thus they needed to unite and retaliate. In the *Final Solution*, a speech by a religious leader with phrases like 'Muslims have many countries, you only have Hindustan, the land of Hindus and Hindu culture. You all must get up to save it' indicates how imposing this sense of danger from other community is important for youth to act. Giriraj Singh, a Union minister in present government declared in an interview that Muslims in India were a threat to society; a BJP leader in UP said that since the country was called Hindustan, it belonged to Hindus; a BJP MLA in Alwar, Rajasthan posted on social media that the rate of growth of the Muslim population was putting Hindus in danger (Bhatia, 2018). Such statements create an atmosphere of fear and sub-consciously affect people.

### *Pseudo-Superiority*

The changing of text books in schools to give place to more Hindu history, saffronisation of historical monuments like Taj Mahal, statements on advancements in science as inspiration from Mahabharata or Ramayana era and on the greatness of Hindu rulers about their 'tolerance' of allowing minorities to live on this land of Hindus, is indicative of how a sense of pride in one's own identity caters to divisions in the society in today's India. This superiority complex slowly takes an aggressive shape that eventually leads to harming the 'inferior' or infidel ones. An article on BJP's website reads: 'Hindu society has an unquestionable and proud history of tolerance for other faiths and respect for diversity of spiritual experiences. The vibrancy of Hindu society was noticeable at all times and despite barbarism from the Islamic hordes of central Asia and Turkey, Hindus never played with the same rules that Muslims did.' This self-belief of being the righteous takes toll on other communities who start fearing the majoritarian fist. This sentiment has been prominently explored in documentaries. The Jat families in Muzaffarnagar were proud of their caste and saw Muslim as outsiders and Dalits as weak. Similarly, in Gujarat, Muslims were seen (as Prahlad Shastri says) to be different in appearance as well as in tradition from Hindus. The religious leaders, during Ayodhya massacre, kept on refuting claims of any violence because 'Hindus, since are full of compassion for other beings and thus vegetarians, will never attack anyone' (Swaroopanand in Father, Son and Holy War). The same documentary also talks about sense of pride in gender. This vision of superiority, it says, has seeds in patriarchal view, that violence is a proof of manliness. The victory slogans like 'We haven't worn bangles, we are not impotent' after incidents of violence are indicative of this mentality. The violence inflicted on women and mass rapes during riots also emerge from this inflated sense of superiority in gender. The words of cycle mechanic in Final Solution 'We will rape all their (Muslim) women once my uncle is out from jail' even after the deadly riots, prove how this religion and gender identity has a role in violence.

### *Justifying Violence*

A taxi driver in Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai tells on camera that almost all homes in the locality were constructed by Muslim labourers who were very dear to the Jat families, who also had Muslims as servants and farm labourers. Similarly, a Muslim man says how he had spend his childhood happily with Hindu friends and neighbours celebrating Eid and Holi together, but now he fears for life from the very same friends. This shows something seriously changes the mind of people that they become ready to kill fellow humans and inflict those they once loved dearly. So that no guilt possesses them it is important that the violence gets justified from reliable sources. For this, religious scriptures are manipulated, historic leaders invoked (as shown in In Memory of Friends, wherein Bhagat Singh's methods are proposed for violent revolution; Final Solution and Ram Ke Nam also shows use of weaponry and a formal Shakti Diksha to VHP youth) and historic battles revisited (examples of Maharana Pratap, Shivaji fighting to protect motherland). It requires an enormous amount of moral presumption for the perpetrators of these acts to justify the destruction of property on a massive scale or to condone a brutal attack on another life, especially the life of someone one scarcely knows and against whom one bears no personal enmity (Juergensmeyer, 2003). The instances of brutal and devilish violence on children, neighbours and insanely inhuman treatment to pregnant women and girls as depicted from victims' and witness' accounts in all these documentaries, is only possible if the mob which carried out such acts had forgot, if only for few moments, that they were humans or that the victims were living beings. This kind of brainwashing rests in justification for militant violence and this psychology is also responsible for terrorism in today's era. The hate speeches visible in these documentaries clearly reflect the pride the leaders associate with violence. This also rests in notion of nationalism. The Hindus in UP could be summoned to a kind of solidarity because the anti-Muslim sentiment was served up

with an anti-Pakistani dressing (Khare, 2017). Analysing speeches in these documentaries gives a fair idea of how everything related to Muslims is termed Pakistani in nature. Thus, in its extremity, this hyper-nationalism calls for violence for saving the motherland, by attacking everything that is anti-national. There are three crucial elements required to stoke the feeling of hyper-nationalism: Pakistan, Muslims and Dalits. It projects anything critical of the ruling party as anti-national. Hyper-nationalism helps to keep the nation perpetually in conflict with everyone at war with the other (Shepherd, 2017).

### ***Political Power-Play***

#### ***Election Game***

One peculiar thing about riots is that they either occur before or are followed by elections. The riots which these documentaries have focussed on (Muzaffarnagar, Ayodhya, Gujarat, Delhi) had a direct relation to vote bank politics. In Final Solution, the VHP leader's words 'These elections are not between Congress and BJP but between Hindus and Muslims' puts a clear light on how these religious sentiments are inflated only with elections in mind, something which is evident even today. A ruling party leader said: the assembly elections were not a fight for good roads, drains and drinking water, but a war between Hindus and Muslims ('It's Hindus v/s Muslims, says BJP MLA', 2018). In UP, the BJP's vote campaign ran on rhetoric of polarisation of Hindus and its leader Praveen Togadia's comment that 'Muzaffarnagar was a lesson for Muslims' also didn't create much uproar after electoral victory (documentary Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai). Similarly, seeing his support diminishing in Gujarat, Narendra Modi had taken out a Gaurav Yatra which had 'celebrated' the rampage in riots that eventually garnered him required seats in the Legislative Assembly as documentary Final Solution shows. After anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, the Congress went for immediate elections to get a sympathy vote of Hindus and emerge victorious. The Congress, at first place, itself had made Bhindranwala a Sikh leader in Punjab to air divisive politics. In Ayodhya (documentary In Name of God states it), BJP's seats rose from 2 to 85 in Lok Sabha in 1990, taking advantage of the Hindu wave after the Rath Yatra. And now, for the upcoming 2019 elections, the BJP's campaign still rests on 'Vote for us if you are Hindu'. Another take: At time when Muzaffarnagar riots happened, the farmer groups and organisations were becoming stronger. After the violence, the payment dues of farmers were hit and due to religious poison, the unity was affected. The documentary Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai reflected on the aspect, that how such issues are just a part of clichéd yet successful policy of divide and rule, and to distract public from real life issues like unemployment, poverty, corruption and lack of development to skip democratic accountability.

#### ***Use of Mass Media***

In the run up to Godhra riots, VCDs circulated by ruling party members and religious organisations showed those died in the Sabarmati blast were Hindus going for performing 'karsewa' at Ayodhya (documentary Final Solution). It was later seen that many of those were just devotees going for pilgrimage and their mourning families didn't retaliate. However, the content in such VCDs had already flamed religious sentiments and Godhra happened. Similarly, the Muzaffarnagar ire was flared through rumours of Muslim men assaulting Hindu girl and then attacking her brothers (documentary Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai). A WhatsApp video of two boys being beaten helped set off the 2013 riots. That the video was two-year old was discovered later. By then at least 60 people were dead and 50,000 homeless in Muzaffarnagar. Also, after a Facebook post that Muslims found blasphemous triggered a clash in Basirhat, images of the 2002 riots in Gujarat were passed off as 2017 Bashirhat on WhatsApp and Facebook to inflame passions (Roy, 2017). The use of mass media, especially the social

media, to spread fake news and disseminate wrong information has been consistent to influence public, create propaganda wars and burn religious passions.

### ***Money Making***

The most important take on this aspect is explored in documentary *In Name of God*, which shows how VHP and Bajrang Dal were created and the political organisations strengthened their foundations through the money received as donations (in the name of temple the party had announced to construct in Ayodhya by demolishing the Babri Masjid). The Revenue officials who tried to check on the forex and illegal donations were suspended or transferred. The words of Pandit Lal Das ‘These politicians and so called religious leaders have created this Hindu-Muslim issue just to fill their own coffers’ in the documentary clearly reflect the power play of money, politics and religion.

### **Conclusion**

It’s not religion that leads to violence, but what we make of it, much like science. As the analysis show, in terms of religion and violence, the statements and policies of political leaders and fundamentalists have remained just what they were: divisive. In all events of violence, the circumstances have not been any different, whether it is 1984 or 2013, the methods to ‘create’ chaos and disharmony are similar, and so do their effect on majority of the people. This, despite when we now live in a world which is more liberal and interconnected with advancements in science, communication technology, education and health. A society grappling with unemployment and illiteracy is more vulnerable to be influenced by such elements which play with psychology of people by calling them to take pride in their own identity (based on religion, caste, nation and even gender), projecting other communities as threat and justifying violence in the name of God and religion. All this is done to gain or remain in power. The study also shows how those signs which eventually lead to a divided, fundamentalist and violent society are visible in India today, thanks to majoritarian and identity politics. It is important for us to learn from the past, and understand how religion is used as a tool of warfare or in fact, to create wars. The society must identify the common tactics used by political and religious leaders as shown in these historical evidences in the form of documentaries which can be effectively used for creating awareness among the masses.

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