

# Book Review

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Roy, Beth, *Some Trouble with Cows: Making Sense of Social Conflict*, New Delhi, Vistaar Publications (A division of Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.), 1996. Originally published in 1994 by University of California Press, 231 pp, Indian Rs. 325.

Social conflict is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The factors that bring individuals, groups and communities into confrontation with each other, and worse still, to physical violence against each other, have engaged social scientists for a long time. Yet, with new dimensions of the problem being exposed from time to time, it seems that the phenomenon still remains unexplored in certain respects. The complexity of social conflict increases when the two communities are Hindus and Muslims located in a trouble-prone area of the Indian sub-continent.

Beth Roy, a sociologist by training and mediator by practice, researches this complex theme in a village in South Asia, to be precise, in contemporary Bangladesh. Interestingly, she picks up an incident that took place in this part of the sub-continent at a time when it was still known as East Pakistan. Its salience lies in the fact that the relations between Hindus and Muslims were still significant in the whole of the sub-continent due to pre-partition politics, partition violence and post-partition adjustments. The importance of the study also lies in the fact that research for it was conducted some years after the incident (Roy does not, perhaps deliberately, specify it). It, thus, reveals the role of individual as well as collective memory in the construction of a rationale for sectarian clashes. Roy seeks to 'explore the steps from neighbourliness to warfare' and 'how people generally "think conflict" (p 126).

The book is divided into two parts. The first part divided into five chapters, is a narrative of the incidents that led to the trouble and an understanding of it from the popular perspective. The second part, again divided into five chapters, is the author's attempt to make sense of the conflict from a theoretical point of view.

'In a remote village somewhere in South Asia, someone's cow ate someone else's crop. Within two days, tens of thousands of men were ranged against each other, armed, hostile, righteous.' (p.1) A matter of fact statement from one of the dramatis personae: ' "There was trouble with cows," said the farmer, "I tied my cow and went home. But the cow got loose and ate the [plants] in their field." 'The problem, it seems, was that the cow belonged to a Muslim and the crop to a Hindu'. The result, 'By the time the "trouble" was over, masses of men had mobilised, several people had died, many were injured, and the life in the village was altered forever after.' (p 13)

For students of South Asia, it has been a familiar scenario of communal and ethnic conflict over several decades. The question, then is, whether Roy studies a common place problem in a routine manner. The answer is no. She approaches communal conflict, an event that took place several years back, at a locale where there was a rationale for altering and redefining Hindu Muslim relations, with a rare insight of a sociologist and a mediator. Her journey to comprehend this phenomenon reveals stereotypes, perceptions and biases of the two communities against each other, as well as the significance of individual and collective memories in case of such tragic events, which may and, in fact, do become a trigger for the next round.

As suggested earlier, individual and collective memories not only play a significant role during such conflicts, they are operative later as well. In fact, they define 'self' and the 'other', the two parties that are embroiled in conflict. The portrayal of the role of the two parties in accordance with the prevailing biases and stereotypes follows. Naturally, the role of the 'self' not only has to be defended, but has also to be portrayed in a clean and at times in somewhat glorified fashion; and the 'other' must be the erring party, if not demonised. Memories lay down the nature of the relationship between the two communities for a long time to come. Roy highlights the role of memory in communal relationship, collective behaviour and communitarian recollection efficaciously.

In the village Panipur (pseudonym) in contemporary Bangladesh a cow of a Muslim farmer ate plants from a Namasudra (a low caste) Hindu farmer's field. The Hindu farmer objected and a fight ensued in which both communities were soon embroiled, leaving several dead and injured and the relationship between the two communities scarred for ever. Many of the Namasudra peasants, who had defied the tumultuous happenings during partition of the British India to stay on in 'East Pakistan' hoping that their class allegiance to the peasantry (p 42) would serve them better than their religious identity, were shaken by the event and migrated to India. Obviously, identities re-crystalised and were re-

defined even in the localised context of a village in East Pakistan after partition. The partition of the Indian sub-continent on the basis of ethno-religious nationhood was accorded a rationale by each of the contending parties. The Muslim League countered the Indian National Congress's secular pan-Indian nationhood with its concept of religion-based nationhood and the British rationalised their partition proposal on the basis of pragmatism in the face of increasing communal violence. While the Congress had indeed carefully constructed a multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic social coalition, the Muslim League too, it appears, attempted some social coalition. The alliance with the Scheduled Caste leadership in East Bengal was such a coalition. But the coalition was absolutely unequal. No wonder it broke down within a few years of the creation of Pakistan. The recollection of incidents by the villagers in Roy's study clearly brings out that 'we' vs. 'they', 'self' vs. the 'other' was in full operation during rioting. (pp 46-67)

In this imagery of 'self and the 'other' there is a strong assertion of a changed political scenario and altered social relationship. A Hindu respondent told the author:

This fight was a result of the protest by the Hindus. We complained to the *matabbars*, but the leaders, instead of solving the problem, rather they said, 'What is it?' The Hindus are trying to live as they did in the past. Why are they making such a fuss about it? ...Teach the Hindus a lesson. Call our community together.' So they did, and there was this communal riot. (pp 65-66)

He may not be true about the 'protest by the Hindus', but there was majoritarian logic at work once the trouble started. A Muslim confided to the author:

We had been oppressed by the Hindus forever. Now we thought that we would either die or kill them. This was the common feeling, shared by all Mussalmans.

In the days before Partition, in the days of the British rulers, they did not treat us very well. We had to bow down before them. They caused a lot of trouble to us Mussalmans about our land and property. If our children went to catch fish in the nearby canal, they would beat them. Just the other day, they were still beating our children. (p 64)

There was another polite expression of this logic when another Muslim respondent told the author, 'In the British time we had to obey the British laws. In the Pakistan time, we had to abide by those laws. There was no point in being angry. We felt it, but didn't express our anger. Why couldn't they now accept our rules?' (p 70). Roy effectively demonstrates the transformation of the individual grievance into that of the community. 'It was the mirroring of an individual's encounter with indignity in the lives of others, the slow building of a shared memory of wrongs, that formed a basis for eventual protest... all the myriad injuries from cultures in strained coexistence could leave on the spirit wounds that might suppurate later.' But she rightly points out that the conflict was neither simply a result of 'compounding of individual wrongs', nor had the collective memory suddenly come out in the open. 'Something more interactive was at work. In the telling of other people's tales of woe, the social complaining of a whole community, an atmosphere was created that made the fight possible.' (p 70)

In creating this atmosphere, even in accentuating memories of wrongdoing, rumours played an important role. Roy puts it precisely, but succinctly, 'As news spread, it also changed... From cows and plants, the symbolic background shifted to rumoured burning of villages.' (p 68)

As it has been demonstrated time and again in communal and ethnic conflicts in South Asia, and perhaps the world over, the leadership on both sides played an important and active role. But in this case the leadership was not proactive or playing its own agenda. 'What was said by the leaders was effective because it expressed what people felt and remembered, many years of wrongs and fears accumulated as community... When the decision was at last made and fight truly joined, the manner in which it was engaged was articulated in the extreme. No leaders, however skilled and highly organised, could possibly have orchestrated the scene that followed.' (p 71)

Once the riot started, it became a highly organised activity on both sides. It was not a riot that came and went as a spurt. It was a conflict between two neighbours and two communities who had been living together for years. It was a conflict that was transformed from a local non-issue to a struggle between the two communities for redeeming and asserting self-respect as well as for re-defining relationships under a new political setup and asserting one's social space irrespective of political change. Roy's epigrammatic narration of events brings out the transcending of a spontaneous quarrel into a communal conflict with a high degree of organisation.

The public authority, the police in particular, has an important role in such conflicts. Over the years the partisan role of the state, and of

the police as its most visible arm, in ethnic conflict has come under tremendous criticism all over South Asia, be it a Shia-Sunni conflict in Pakistan, Hindu-Muslim riots in India, or Tamil-Sinhala riots in Sri Lanka. But there are a few questions to be considered. First, is the state expected to be non-partisan in such events? The advocates of the state's majoritarian character, Roy's account brings out, do not perceive a non-partisan role for the state. They normally expect, and at times exhort the state to show, a benign tilt towards the majority. After all democracy rests on the principle of majority rule. The minority community, on the other hand, hopes for a non-partisan attitude from the state, but it either has a cynical disbelief of it, or cries foul to project a victimised image. The way the two parties describe to Roy the arrival of the police, characterise the police officer (a Muslim!), narrate the intervention and talk of their proximity or lack of it to them exposes the popular perception and dynamics of the role of state in such conflicts. In Roy's words, '...the stories map presumptions about power. That Muslims acted as though they anticipated favoured treatment and Hindus as though they anticipated persecution... Both communities assumed that Muslim rights were on the rise. Despite evidence suggesting an equal and nonsectarian intervention, people persisted in seeing the people action as biased.' (p 110)

Three conclusions that Roy draws from the Panipur experience go a long way in understanding of communal and ethnic conflicts:

The villagers chose to riot. They were not swept mindlessly away on tides of passion, nor were they forced by circumstances to behave in ways destructive to their interests, although both passion and circumstances figured into their decisions.

Decision-making was a process located in communities that themselves were chosen and reconstituted for the purpose of action. In the heat of the conflict, why the villagers looked to associations defined by religious identity rather than any of the several groupings available to them is not obvious and must be explained by examining both cultural and historically specific meanings attached to the communities.

The decision to riot was deeply informed by an awareness of history understood in terms of lived experience. The act of rioting integrated the village into a moment of national transformation which until then

had been abstract and distant. In so doing, the rioters brought change home to the village and thus took their place in the making of their won history. (pp 135-36)

*Some Trouble with Cows* is a creditable effort by Beth Roy to 'make sense' of the macro phenomenon of communal conflict on the basis of a micro study of communal riot in a village in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). There is, however, one glaring but avoidable factual error in the book and at one place she makes a sweeping comment. She erroneously describes Jawaharlal Nehru as a 'Leader of the National Congress and first President of India' (p 214). Her conclusion from the observation 'But that is just what the East Bengali Namasudras did, defining their interests on the basis of class, not religion, and confounding expectations that Hindus all over India were united in their desire for undivided nationhood.' (p 42) somehow sounds too sweeping and a lack of deep understanding of the facts on partition. But for these two minor blemishes Beth Roy makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon communal and ethnic conflict not only in a South Asian context but also in a larger one.

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