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## The Fires of Nuh

By: Harsh Mander

*The recent communal violence in Nuh and the government's punitive measures have further dispossessed its Muslim residents, already victims of cow vigilantes and of poverty.*

A week after Nuh was badly singed with its first major communal clash in three decades, we found this homeland of the proud Meo people reduced to a wasteland.

What we – a team of the Karwan e Mohabbat – encountered as we made our way through this wounded terrain was not just skeletons of burnt vehicles and kilometres of ruins of shanties, street vending kiosks, medical stores, and tall buildings, all felled as though by a fearsome tempest. We found – even more tragically – the wreckage of the spirit of the residents, of their trust in their government, of hope and faith that a better future could ever now be built.

Nuh, with 79% Muslim residents, borders the glittering corporate, financial, and information technology hub of Gurugram, where half of the Fortune 500 companies in the country are located. Formerly known as Mewat, Nuh was identified by Niti Aayog in 2017 to be the district with the lowest development indices in the entire country. Gurugram, in dramatic contrast, that same year was rated by UNDP to have a very high Human Development Index of .889. The average per capita income of Gurugram residents is the third highest in India.

The Meo Muslims of Nuh have conserved tight bonds of goodwill and shared economic, social and cultural life with their Hindu neighbours for centuries. The Meos were part of Hindu Rajput clans four to five centuries back, before they embraced Islam. They retain many Hindu rituals, variously tracing their ancestry to the Pandava prince Arjun, to Krishna, and to Ram. Their social life and livelihood patterns have a great deal in common with other pastoral castes like the Jats and Gujjars. The Partition riots of 1947, when many thousands Meos were slaughtered in Bharatpur and Alwar, were a rare instance of communal strife.

### The rise of cow vigilantes

What began to tear apart these close bonds were a series of lynching and hate killings.

The first of these lynchings was in 2017, of Meo dairy farmer Pehlu Khan. He was assaulted and killed by a mob that claimed that the cows that he was transporting in his van were intended for butchery. It was an obvious falsehood, but it did not restrain the then Rajasthan home minister, of the BJP government then in the state, to stigmatise the Khan as a cow smuggler. The local police registered criminal charges against Khan's kin.

Their investigation into the lynching itself was slipshod and the prosecution in the courts lackadaisical. It was no surprise that the men accused of his killing were acquitted. My colleagues from the Karwan e Mohabbat were in court the day this judgment was announced, and report that the accused men triumphally raised slogans of *Jai Shri Ram* within the court premises itself as they celebrated their acquittal.

|| The close and undisguised partnership of the Haryana police with cow vigilantes incubated intense fear in the Meo community.

A series of gruesome lynchings of Meo residents of Nuh followed, all on the pretext of cows being transported for slaughter. Dairy farmers and truck drivers were murdered by mobs on the pretext that they were transporting cows for slaughter. This string of lynchings, the increased stringency of cow protection laws, and the close and undisguised partnership of the Haryana police with cow vigilantes incubated [intense fear](#) in the Meo community. Almost all dairy farmers have today abandoned their principal livelihood of generations, even centuries, of rearing cows. There is no more dramatic example of the power of hate lynching in fostering community dread of calamitous proportions.

What was it that raised temperatures to near boiling point resulting in the communal fires of 31 July and the days that followed?

The fires were ignited first by the killing by brutal pounding of a young man, Waris Khan, and the burning alive in a car of two others, Nasir and Junaid, earlier in 2023. The killings of all three were explained by vigilantes as punishment for allegedly transporting cows.

Unlike the lynching of Pehlu Khan in 2017, the latest killings were not by a faceless mob with stones and sticks that gathered to beat the man to death and then dissolve. These were by organised vigilantes who carried modern automatic rifles. On Facebook, they would post live videos of themselves shooting at trucks and thrashing its occupants.

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The evidence, including videos initially posted by the attackers themselves, pointed unambiguously to Mohit Yadav, popularly known as Monu Manesar, as a primary suspect for the murders.

Manesar heads the Cow Protection Unit of the Bajrang Dal in Nuh and is part of the Haryana government's Cow Protection Task Force. A member of the Bajrang Dal for over 10 years, he has declared that his "true calling is to protect Hinduism and cows." With massive numbers of followers, Manesar's Facebook page displayed videos of assaults on alleged cow smugglers, sometimes with him posing with badly beaten-up men. (After Manesar was linked with the killings of Nasir and Junaid, several of the videos were pulled off Facebook and his page has been edited.)

Despite this, Manesar was not arrested and remains free. The Rajasthan police, which list him as a prime accused in the 2003 killings, had to return empty handed after they went to Haryana in search for him. The Haryana police say he is absconding and that there are no criminal charges against him. But he continues to surface regularly on social media and has given several interviews to media channels.

As a BBC report observes, it remains a mystery that when the media can locate Manesar effortlessly and he continues to post videos on the social media, he cannot be found by the police. Manesar is clearly a law unto himself.

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During recent visits to Nuh, as part of the Karwan e Mohabbat's works with families of people lynched over recent years, people we met repeatedly expressed deep anguish and outrage that a man who publicly thrashes and shoots at people, often live-streaming his exploits, and who regularly posts videos and photos on social media of shootings and men who he and his cronies have pulped, and a man who is credibly linked to three recent murders of men from Nuh, has not been charged, let alone arrested by the Haryana police.

## The procession and after

Most Nuh residents we spoke to blamed Manesar who for lighting the recent communal conflagration by announcing he would come to Nuh as part of a religious procession.

For a man wanted for murder of many local men, Manesar's audacity was a deliberate insult and affront to the people of Nuh. A close associate of his further taunted the residents of Nuh with a sexualised jeer. "We are telling you (Meo Muslims) in advance that your *jijaji* ('brother in law', pointing clearly to Monu Manesar) is coming to visit. Don't say that we did not inform you. Be ready with flowers and garlands for him," said Bittu Bajrangi, who heads the Faridabad Bajrang Force and who has cases registered against him for provocative videos in which he is "abusing the Muslim community" and allegedly flashing weapons. (Bajrangi was arrested on Tuesday in connection with the violence of 31 July.)

Manesar was threatening to come to Nuh for the Brij Mandal Jalabhishek Yatra, a recently instituted religious journey to a local Shiva temple, with almost exclusive participation by radicalised young men from organisations like the Bajrang Dal. Each year, the participants carry weapons including daggers and assault rifles, and shout hate slogans to insult and instigate Muslims. On an earlier year, they had even destroyed a mazaar in Nuh.

|| The men crossed the borders of Nuh, displaying deadly weapons, shouting incendiary hate slogans, and making lewd gestures at passing women. No one restrained them.

Given this history and aggravated with the social media deliberate provocations of Monu Manesar and his associates, delegations of Meos of Nuh met senior officials of the district administration, urging them to disallow the yatra. The administration refused to bar the yatra, but reportedly assured them that they would not permit weapons or inflammatory slogans and that there would be adequate police presence to prevent any communal violence.

None of these assurances were met.

Rao Inderjit Singh, BJP member of parliament from Gurugram and a member of the union cabinet, [pointedly asked later](#), “Who gave them weapons for the procession? Who goes to a procession carrying swords or sticks? This is wrong. A provocation took place from this side too. I am not saying there was no provocation from the other side.”

Many witnesses confirm that on 31 July, the men crossed the borders of Nuh, displaying deadly weapons, shouting incendiary hate slogans, and making lewd gestures at passing women. No one restrained them. The police force was skeletal. The superintendent of police was on leave and the home minister later claimed that he had not been briefed about the situation.

What followed the entry of the procession is not entirely clear.

Most people who we spoke to in Nuh agreed that whatever might have been the provocations, the violent retaliation by a gathering of young men, many of them in their teens, was entirely reprehensible. They [flung stones](#) on the participants of the yatra at Khedla Mod, a few kilometres from the Shiva temple where the participants were to assemble for rituals. In firing that followed, four lives were lost, including of two home guards. (Many aver that these constables died in an accident during the melee, but this is unconfirmed.) Many of the yatra members took refuge in the temple and were escorted to safety hours later by a large police contingent that was rushed in for their rescue.

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There was then a spate of retaliatory violence which spilt into neighbouring districts in Haryana. Late the same night, Hafiz Saad, a young naib-imam, was stabbed to death in a mosque in Gurugram. Many mosques were vandalised, and Muslim-owned shops and homes were set on fire in that district. The flames [spread quickly](#) to neighbouring Sohna and Palwal, where [several mosques were attacked by mobs](#) and stalls run by Muslims were set on fire. Calls were made for the boycott and expulsion of Muslim workers. Some village panchayats even called for the expulsion of all Muslim residents. Terrified migrant Muslims began to flee Gurugram.

### **Punitive measures**

The Nuh administration responded in two ways. The first was a massive punitive rounding up of hundreds of Muslim youths. Entire villages around Nuh emptied out of young men, who fled to the hills or out of the state in hiding.

Few, if any, members of the Bajrang Dal were arrested. The superintendent of police of Nuh told a PUCL delegation that there was no question of arresting Manesar as he was not charged with any crime, either of murder or for instigating the violence of 31 July. The men who carried deadly weapons and raised hate slogans have not also been charged.

The second move by the administration was to unleash a calamitous retributive assault on the homes and commercial properties of Muslim residents.

The targets of the government bulldozers covered the entire class spectrum: from the small hutments of plastic, thatch, and cardboard of those who lived by rag-picking or street vending, to the large concrete structures of those who had made it good in life.

A total of [more than 750 structures](#) were razed. These included “at least” 50 [shops](#), medical labs and restaurants. In all cases people reported that they were [not given advance notice](#) of the demolitions, and back-dated notices were served if at all just hours before the bulldozers levelled the structures.

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The official defence of the demolitions was in two voices. One was that this was just **routine administrative action** against lawless encroachers. There was no explanation about why only properties of Muslims were razed by the bulldozers, or for the timing of this drive, when the district was reeling after the communal conflagration. Sub-divisional magistrate Ashwani Kumar **noted though, that** “The owners of some illegal structures were also involved in the violence during the religious procession so they were demolished, and this drive will continue.”

The political version was more candid, clearly articulating that this was punishment meted out to Muslims. Jawahar Yadav, officer on special duty (OSD) to Haryana chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar, **said**, “They have disrupted peace and harmony and they will have to bear the cost of it. They have intentionally and with planning attacked the Hindu yatra that involved women and children, they showed no mercy for anyone.”

It required the Punjab and Haryana High Court to call a halt to this punitive state destruction and to call it out for what it was. Judges G.S. Sandhwalia and Harpreet Kaur Jeewan **asked** the state government pointedly if the buildings belonging to a particular community were being brought down “under the guise of law and order problem [...and] an exercise of ethnic cleansing is being conducted by the state.”

Unsurprisingly, these demolitions enjoyed vocal support among members of right-wing Hindutva groups like Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal, which held rallies in Ahmedabad and across Uttar Pradesh. In many rallies, **participants urged** the Haryana government to resort to ‘**bulldozer action**’ similar to what U.P. chief minister Yogi Adityanath had done.

Clearly this counsel was well taken by the Haryana government. Entirely outside the guarantees of the constitution and law, the state accomplished the annihilation of properties of Muslim minorities on a scale that a riotous mob would have been unable to realise in many days.

## Ties that bind

A young man who we spoke to in Nuh was at the edge of tears. “We were already among the poorest people of this country. What little we have struggled to build has been destroyed by the state administration. We have been set back by at least one generation.”

The Meo Muslims are also tormented by how they are demonised by media as violent and hateful. “This is not who we are. We have lived with our Hindu neighbours for centuries with peace and goodwill. Why should this one act of violence by some of our young people who were misled in how they should have expressed their outrage, be allowed to define in the country’s imagination who we are”.

|| Meo Muslims and their Hindu neighbours have lived together with remarkable goodwill and mutual trust, participating across religious identity in celebrations.

After the Partition riots, a historic appeal by Mahatma Gandhi on 19 December 1947 stemmed Meo migration to Pakistan. In the years that followed, the gash in the social relations between Hindus and Meo Muslims mended. Residents do recall a small communal skirmish last in 1992 after the Babri Masjid was demolished. But for the greatest part, Meo Muslims and their Hindu neighbours have lived together with remarkable goodwill and mutual trust, participating across religious identity in celebrations of childbirth and marriage, supporting each other in their economic pursuits, and in their respective religious rituals and customs. Meo renditions of the Mahabharat and hymns of praise of Shiva would hold Hindu rural audiences spellbound until a generation back. Meos often had names that were a hybrid of Hindu and Muslim. (One of the Muslim home guards killed was named Neeraj, the son of Chiranji Lal.)

Residents spoke to me of another religious yatra that was under way at the same time as the communal conflagration in other parts of the district. This is the Chaurasi Kos Yatra, in which thousands of devotees including many women and children walk more than 200 kilometres – of which 50 kilometres are in Nuh. My colleagues of the Karwan e Mohabbat went also to witness this yatra and were moved to observe the ways in pilgrims ate and rested in Muslim homes along the entire route.

“These are true Hindu devotees, not the Bajrang Dal men who come with weapons and hate slogans. And to these Hindu pilgrims we open our homes, kitchens, and hearts every year, as we have for generations”.

## Solidarity

Amidst the darkness of their despair, the people of Nuh take heart most from resolutions of many Jat panchayats.

|| “We dare them to come here and stop our brothers from entering the villages.”

A number of Jat panchayats issued public statements sharply critical of the Bajrang Dal vigilantes for instigating violence, and called for both communal peace and protecting Muslim residents from attacks and calls for boycott. They declared that the Bajrang Dal was absent from the year-long farmers’ agitation, and also the struggle of women wrestlers for punishing the BJP leader who they charged with sexual abuse. They were not their brothers, the Meo Muslims of Nuh were.

News came in also of a mahapanchayat by the Bhartiya Kisan Mazdoor Union in Bas village in Hisar, which gave out a resounding call to strengthen inter-community brotherhood. Suresh Koth, who organised the mahapanchayat, condemned those people who threatened to not allow Muslims to enter the villages. “We dare them to come here and stop our brothers from entering the villages.”

The mahapanchayat passed a resolution calling to restore peace in the Mewat, and also demanding an impartial inquiry and arrest of Monu Manesar, Bittu Bajrangi, and others who made provocative speeches and circulated videos to incite the clashes. Sube Singh Smain, national spokesperson of the Sarvkhap Panchayat, [told reporters](#) that it was their demand that “the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal should be banned in all the villages across the state.”

This gives the Meo people heart. But even this is not enough to pull them out of the gloom and despondency that has enveloped them. Older leaders of the community spoke pensively of how increasingly difficult it had become to keep young men on the path of peace in the face of such heightened provocation. “There is only one lesson that we have learnt from all of this,” a Meo leader said to me, his eyes welling up. “The lesson is this: the next time a Bajrang Dal goon beats me with a stick two times, I must fold my hands to him and plead – please beat me four more times”.

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