Communal conflict, NGOs, and the power of religious symbols[1]

Joseph G. Bock

It is one of the worst dreams of development workers. In the course of a major development initiative, conflict erupts and seemingly destroys the fruits of years of intense effort. Chris Roche describes such a situation as a transition from a process which tends to be 'smooth, linear, ordered, and predictable' into 'rapid, discontinuous, turbulent change' (1994). He argues that we must develop a better understanding of how to prevent and respond to such 'wicked' oscillations and that we must articulate a clear picture, using a systems perspective, so that we can better understand patterns of change and feedback mechanisms.

This paper attempts to shed light on communal tension among those with differing religious identities which results in violence.[2] While considerable attention has been paid to intervention by humanitarian agencies and questions of State sovereignty and NGO-military relations in responding to conflict,[3] there has been less of a focus on the role of indigenous NGOs which are attempting to avert incipient conflict, and their relationships with international NGOs.

Communal conflict with religious overtones constitutes a substantial proportion of intra-national violence. According to one quantitative study, 'groups defined wholly or in part along lines of religious cleavage accounted for one-quarter of the magnitude of rebellions in the 1980s' (Gurr 1993). In a more traditional analysis, David Little (1994) argues that 'religion is frequently not incidental as a contributing factor to communal conflict, including conflict related to religious nationalism'. But in analysing communal conflict, it is important to make the distinction between violence among different religious groups about secular issues and violence among such groups regarding explicitly religious matters. It is the latter type of conflict which is considered here to be violence induced by religious symbols.

The manipulation of religious symbols for violent ends can take various forms. It might include, for instance, alleging that adherents

of one religion blasphemed another faith, perhaps with reference to a holy book; claiming that the destruction of a sacred space (such as a temple, mosque, or church) of one religion was carried out by a conspiracy of adherents of another religion; and infringing upon a religious festival of another religious group in a disrespectful, destructive way. Conversely, religious symbols can help to bring about peace and transform conflict. Examples of this might include making reference to a passage of a holy book which emphasises forgiveness; using sacred space as an area of sanctuary during a violent or potentially violent outbreak; or conducting a religious festival in a fashion that accentuates communal harmony rather than division.

The case of Ahmedabad[4]

India is a particularly challenging place to undertake the transformation of conflict which is laden with religious symbolism. As one observer put it, riots in India are often 'incited through religious discourses' (Lobo 1995). Or, to quote Nandy (1995), in using religious symbols, politicians and land developers make '*dispassionate use of passion*'.

The focus of this case study is the Indian city of Ahmedabad, located in the State of Gujarat north of Bombay. Its population has increased considerably (particularly in the 1970s, when it grew by 50 per cent) as a result of rural–urban migration and high birth rates. About 20 per cent of the city's population is Muslim. Roughly 70 per cent is Hindu. Another 10 per cent is composed of Christian, Jain, Sikh, and other minorities. As of the 1991 census, the city's population was 2.9 million. It is estimated that more than 40 per cent of the population lives in slums. Most of the slum-dwellers work as petty labourers, earning a monthly income of roughly $40–$50. Their dwellings generally are very small: about 10 feet by 12 feet for an entire family.

Despite having the honour of being the city where Mahatma Gandhi once lived, Ahmedabad has experienced considerable sectarian rioting. This is partly explained by historical antagonism between the two predominant religions, which is exacerbated by the relatively worse economic condition of Muslims. It also appears that organised crime has had a hand in the riots. Alcohol is banned in Gujarat. Bootleggers operating within Ahmedabad create an undercurrent of illicit activity. They allegedly form alliances with real-estate developers interested in getting slum-dwellers to abandon their properties, hitherto protected by squatters' rights, so that the land can be developed. Finally, sectarian

political parties have combined forces with militant religious groups to foment slum violence, as a means of enhancing their political support by making rival parties appear as if their governance is marked by instability. In the process, Muslim–Hindu bigotry is cultivated in political discourse. This is accentuated by the international acrimony between India, a predominantly Hindu nation, and Pakistan, which broke away from India to provide a separate homeland for Muslims.

Communal conflict is often engineered deliberately by one or more of the groups mentioned above. Even though people of various faiths have co-existed peacefully for years, 'violence engineers' find the manipulation of religious symbols to be an effective way of igniting inter-religious antagonism. Their methods include, for instance, hiring people to throw rocks and then getting 'planted' bystanders to say that the stones were hurled by people of a different faith; distributing inflammatory propaganda in the form of brochures; spreading baseless rumours; and alleging a religious conspiracy behind random acts of violence.

Riots in Ahmedabad have involved both men and women. Usually, it is men who have become violent during the riots and it is they, generally, who commit murder. Nevertheless, some women participated in the fighting, especially in attacking other women and children. Women also tend to be employed by the 'riot engineers' as propagandists, spreading inflammatory messages throughout a slum, either verbally or with brochures.

In some instances, the riots in Ahmedabad have been severe. An estimated 1,000 people, mostly men, were killed during one riot in 1969. Other major riots occurred in 1990 and 1992. The one in 1992 is noteworthy in that two of the slums involved in the riot, Sankalitnagar and Mahajan-no-Vando, were a major focus of development efforts by the Saint Xavier's Social Services Society (SXSSS, or 'the Society' for short), the indigenous NGO which is the focus of this paper.

An indigenous interfaith NGO

SXSSS was formed in 1972 by a Jesuit priest as an agency to reach out to victims of the flooding of the Sabarmati River. Early activities included providing safe havens, often in church-affiliated buildings, for communities of a particular religious identity who were threatened by those with a different religious identity. This meant protecting Muslims from Hindu advances, or vice versa. In 1987, Fr. Cedric Prakash became the director of the Society.

The Society has an annual cash budget of roughly $100,000–$125,000 and handles about $1 million in food commodities received from Catholic Relief Services (CRS, based in the USA), most of which it sends to counterpart agencies in rural areas. It has an interfaith staff of Hindus, Muslims, Jains, and Christians, numbering close to 20. In addition to relief activities, the Society's work in the slums includes community health (with a major emphasis on ante- and post-natal care), non-formal education, human-rights advocacy (especially in protecting poor people from getting evicted from their property and in prosecuting wife-abusers), and the formation of savings societies for women.

There are three flood-prone slum communities on which the Society has focused: Sankalitnagar (with a population of approximately 25,000), Mahajan-no-Vando (roughly 12,000 in number), and Nagori Kabarasthan (with about 18,000 residents). SXSSS started doing community-organising work in Sankalitnagar in 1973 and in the other two slums in 1983. The Sankalitnagar slum was roughly 60 per cent Muslim and 40 per cent Hindu prior to riots in the early 1990s. Since then, it has become almost completely Muslim, with only about one per cent of the population belonging to other religious faiths. The Mahajan-no-Vando slum was almost completely Hindu, with Muslim families who own shops living on the edges. The Nagori Kabarasthan slum was also almost completely Hindu, with some Muslims living in the middle and some on the periphery.

Starting in 1992, SXSSS began reaching out to 20 other slums in Ahmedabad, usually following floods or riots. By providing emergency relief with temporary housing, food, and medical assistance, the Society has used a non-threatening method of entry into these areas.

Cultivating interfaith harmony

The Society became involved in the promotion of interfaith harmony after successive riots had virtually destroyed years of its community-organising efforts. Starting in 1991, the staff began to incorporate explicit measures to cultivate interfaith harmony into their other more traditional relief and development activities.

The approaches used by the Society to cultivate harmony can be divided into roughly two categories: *promotive/preventive* and *pre-emptive*. The former tactics are designed to lay a foundation for harmony by building an appreciation for it, or by creating an organisational infrastructure to respond to community tension. The various methods

used, with an explicit theme of harmony interwoven throughout, have included the following:

- writing and performing street plays;
- sponsoring creative art competitions for children;
- Fr. Prakash's participation in a government-formed civic committee which attempts to avert rioting;
- disseminating messages of peace in their regular programming, such as during health-care training sessions for traditional birth attendants;
- participating in public demonstrations (such as a peace procession) in response to bigotry and violence;
- forming peace committees which meet on an ad hoc, as-needed basis and are composed of the officers of the standing committees (those focused on women, youth, credit, education, and health);
- organising an annual 'people's festival' for slum-dwellers, focusing on a theme of harmony.

The 'people's festival' approach warrants elaboration. It shows vividly how the Society has attempted to use creative methods – in this case, the writing of a jingle – to foster a shift in attitude in the direction of communal harmony. At the people's festival in March 1993, the Society printed one of its jingles on plastic bags which were used in giving out free food. The bags, having intrinsic value to the slum-dwellers, provided an effective mode of dissemination. The jingle, translated into English, loses the rhythm of the version in Gujarati:

> Here is the message of communal harmony
> Allah and Ishwar are one
> Do not fight over a temple or mosque
> Politicians fight for power
> The huts of the poor are set aflame
> The lust for power is the fuel
> Look at what has happened to our city
> For someone's fault someone else is punished
> If we, the people, live in harmony
> Nobody will dare to disunite us
> This is the message of communal harmony.

Pre-emptive tactics are aimed at nipping incipient violence in the bud. They have included providing safe haven to those besieged by another

religious group, for instance in a church building; and 'myth busting' to counter inflammatory propaganda of 'riot engineers', usually by holding a meeting of the community's peace committee.

Results

The Society's approach to building harmony seems to be effective in most instances. Examples of success are multiple. Pre-emptive tactics helped to prevent the slaughter of Muslims by providing them with a safe haven in a Church-affiliated nursing home after an attack by militant Hindus and police in December 1990 in the Miriyam-Bibi Chawl of Gomtipur. Following the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque in the winter of 1992, some middle-class Muslims planned to attack Hindus in the Mahajan-no-Vando slum, but were talked out of it (at Fr. Prakash's request) by some influential Muslims in the community, who convinced the group that violence was ill-advised and undesirable. The peace committee in Shahpur, an outreach slum, was successful during the winter of 1991–92 in preventing a group of militant Hindus from attacking Muslims, when Hindus in the slum stood in their way and said 'You kill us first'. In another outreach slum, after stones had been thrown with intent to harm, both Muslims and Hindus investigated the rumours that people of the other religion had been throwing them, only to find that the culprits had been from outside their community.

Promotive/preventive tactics seem to have resulted in a shift of attitude and in symbolic gestures in the direction of peace. In 1993, Hindu women gave Muslim men *rakhis* (ceremonial bracelets which denote a protective sister–brother relationship) in the Mahajan-no-Vando slum. In various locations, minority Muslims were given food and water by majority Hindus when curfews were imposed by the government in anticipation of a riot.

The efforts of the Society seem to have been most effective when the issues being used to cultivate the violence were of a secular nature. For instance, once, during a cricket match between Pakistan and India, inflammatory brochures were distributed, claiming that the Muslims in the area had been cheering for Pakistan's team. Staff members of the Society responded to the brochures by asking people if they had actually seen Muslims cheering the Pakistani team and saying that, even if someone did cheer, that there was nothing wrong with being 'good sports' and cheering when anyone, including the other team, played well. This myth-busting exercise was successful.

However, the Society's approach seems to have been less successful in instances when religious symbols were involved. The most glaring example occurred in July 1993, when a group of Hindus turned a small shrine near the Shahpur Fire Brigade Station into a large shrine overnight. The people of Nagori Kabarasthan claimed that they would guard the shrine with their lives. Ultimately the police, in a show of force, tore down the shrine. The Society was discouraged by the fact that some of the very people with whom they had sought to cultivate an appreciation for communal harmony for years would clearly have become violent had the police not asserted their authority. Similarly, in Sankalitnagar and Mahajan-no-Vando in December 1992, staff members of the Society were heckled out of the slums – again, those in which they had worked for years – after the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque in northern India created substantial interfaith tension. Rioting in those two slums followed.

The unique challenge of religious symbols

Counteracting violence imbued with religious symbolism may require a different strategy from that employed in a secular context. In the case of Ahmedabad, the solitary instance when a religious symbol was involved and violence was averted was when Fr. Prakash intervened personally and brought the influence of prominent Muslim leaders to bear to prevent Muslims attacking Hindus. He personally met with the potentially belligerent Muslims and then asked influential Muslims to telephone with a plea for peace.

By virtue of his prominence in Ahmedabad and his role as a government appointee on a committee of community leaders designed to prevent and mitigate communal conflict, Fr. Prakash was able to employ a *violence-prevention persuasion tree*. The components of such a tree are as follows:

- a foundation of credibility and respect, complemented by good connections with influential people in the community;
- reliable information about early-warning signs of incipient conflict;
- an active campaign of bringing influence to bear on the people likely to become violent.

The staff of SXSSS and the members of the community organisations with which they work served as Fr. Prakash's eyes and ears in sensing early-warning signs. Their report made reference to specific individuals who seemed to be promoting the incipient attack. Fr. Prakash deemed

it prudent to enlist the help of other people in a process of indirect persuasion. The influential community leaders whom he contacted were successful in persuading the leaders of the incipient violence not to attack the Hindus. In circumstances like this, the use of a religious symbol for peace can be rather potent. For instance, 'You don't need to attack these Hindus for revenge because of what some other Hindus did in Ayodhya. You are right that justice must be done with the belligerents at Ayodhya. But to attack these poor, defenceless Hindu slum-dwellers would be to fight injustice with injustice. That is not what the Koran says we should do.'

This successful instance of preventing incipient violence is in stark contrast to the failure to dispel communal tension regarding the same issue (the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque) with the more general promotive/preventive tactics. In this case, there was no opportunity for implementing pre-emptive tactics, because the staff were heckled out of the two slums involved. This was a bitter failure for the staff members of the Society, causing them to ask themselves: 'What happened to the community organisations which were so carefully nurtured over the years?' (Prakash 1994).

Breaking the cycle of violence

There appears to be an insidious feedback loop at play which makes the use of religious symbols to cultivate violence so potent. Provocative use of religious bigotry – especially during times of religious festivals or the violation of 'sacred space', when passions run high – feeds into fear, insecurity, frustration, and anger. The festivals and violations of 'sacred space' serve to enhance tension, at least in the short term. This creates a greater receptivity to religious bigotry, and the cycle keeps feeding into itself, gathering momentum to the point of a violent frenzy. In the other direction, there is a pull towards communal harmony. If communal good will is maintained, intergroup tension will tend to be handled peacefully. If, on the other hand, it is depleted, intergroup tension can result in violence. The ideal state of communal good will is that of harmony. The difference between harmonious relations and the status of communal good will is the *felt need to invest in peace*. This could be felt by NGO staff members or some other organisation (like a civic or church group); or by residents of the community who feel that something is awry, who have a desire for order and sense that it is in jeopardy, or, if there has been violence already, who feel 'conflict/riot fatigue'. This felt need may yield an

investment in peace, depending on whether the NGO, some other group, or perceptive residents take action. But the investment takes time to become fruitful. People often need time to get their collective emotions under control. So, even though the goal of communal good will is pursued, it is slow in its stabilising effect. The delay in getting collective control of emotions prevents the part of the system which brings equilibrium from engaging effectively when a 'deficit of communal good will' becomes extreme. But if, on the other hand, there is adequate time for people to get their emotions under control, or if the decay in communal good will is not too severe, the system remains relatively stable.

This leads to a troubling question: figuratively speaking, is there parity in the potency of the demon and the dove? 'Violence engineers' have the acute emotions of fear, insecurity, frustration, and anger at their disposal. Those promoting communal harmony, in contrast, attempt to create good will and respect for those of another faith – states of being which can take decades to cultivate.

The critical role of leadership

Compared with the difficulty of maintaining peace, the ease with which 'violence engineers' seem to be able to invoke riots using religious symbols, especially during religious festivals or after 'sacred space' has been violated, might leave one with the discouraging conclusion that religion is more readily used as a tool of hatred and oppression than one of love and liberation. But such a cynical view is ill-founded in the light of many examples of leaders such as Gandhi having success, however imperfect, in minimising violence even when inter-group good will is extremely limited. To the extent that leaders are credible among those of a particular religious identity, enjoy their respect, and are effective in using 'harmony discourse', communal hatred can be averted and collective emotions controlled, apparently just as quickly and powerfully as hatred and violence can be fomented by religious bigots exploiting religious symbols. This is precisely what Fr. Prakash was able to do in collaboration with Muslim community leaders in the instance in which the potentially belligerent Muslims were talked out of attacking Hindu slum-dwellers following the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque. Perhaps this suggests that whereas promotive/ preventive and pre-emptive approaches may provide a helpful foundation, they are insufficient in averting communal conflict without the added component of the effective exercise of leadership.

The phenomenon of the role of leadership in defusing violence induced by religious symbols deserves further scrutiny. This case suggests that it is important to understand in what instances leaders can somehow overcome the delay in the collective control of emotions of a community experiencing a significant deficit of communal good will.

Clearly, a number of agencies believe that the effective exercise of leadership in grassroots peacemaking is an important programmatic focus. Various NGOs, especially those with Quaker or Mennonite affiliations, have attempted for years to encourage the peace-making efforts of indigenous leaders. Now, other NGOs with more traditional emphases on relief and development programmes are starting to focus more substantially on leadership training. For instance, CRS sponsored a conflict-transformation seminar for the Catholic Bishops of Africa, in part because the agency was shocked by the genocide in Rwanda, a substantially Catholic country (*African Church as Peacemaker*, 1995).

Lessons learned

There are at least five lessons to be learned from this case.

1 *The involvement of 'top-level' leadership is not critical to success.* Fr. Prakash was successful in preventing violence by appealing to influential Muslims in the community. It did not require the Prime Minister of India to intervene. Credibility and respect are the two essential criteria for leadership: qualities which are often possessed by less prominent leaders in their given realm of influence. This lesson is consistent with the contention by John Paul Lederach (1994) that focusing on leaders in the 'middle range' may be the most effective and efficient approach for NGOs to employ in transforming conflict: effective in the sense that mid-level leaders have access to the top, as well as to the grassroots, levels; efficient in the sense that there is no leverage at the grassroots level.

2 *Apparently, leaders do not need to share a religious identity with the community in which they are attempting to transform conflict.* It would seem on the face of it that a leader is likely to be most effective in influencing communities with whom they share a religious identity. Fr. Prakash, a Christian, had to appeal to Muslim leaders to talk other Muslims out of attacking Hindus. This suggests that people of a different religion can be effective only to the extent that leaders

with the same identity are also engaged in the process. But this may be an instance when what seems obvious is misleading. During the partition of Pakistan from India, Gandhi, a Hindu, was effective to some degree in convincing the Muslims that fighting with Hindus was demeaning and not in their best interest. As mentioned above, the most important criteria seem to be that a leader should have credibility and respect. Although leadership training by NGOs for conflict-transformation teaches people how to use persuasion trees to engage leaders of the same religious identity when violence seems imminent, it is not essential (though it would probably be desirable) to involve mid-level leaders of all religions in a given target area.

3   *NGOs with a faith identity may have unique opportunities for conflict-transformation.* In the preventive/promotive realm, such NGOs can pursue collaborative programming as a means of fostering a climate of interfaith harmony. For instance, Catholic Relief Services and the International Islamic Relief Organisation (based in Saudi Arabia) are attempting to undertake joint programming, especially in countries in which there is tension between Christians and Muslims. Nevertheless, it would be unfortunate if faith-based organisations restricted their participation to joint programming with symbolic overtones. As this case points out, such preventive/promotive tactics are helpful but insufficient in preventing communal conflict. They must be accompanied by pre-emptive measures and leadership intervention. This suggests that faith-based NGOs should consider seriously the possibility of undertaking leadership training for conflict-transformation. Such training could be interfaith or could focus solely on the adherents of the particular faith of the NGO, provided, in the latter case, that there is adequate emphasis on interfaith bridge-building.

4   *Religious messages are likely to be more effective than secular messages in preventing or mitigating religion-induced communal conflict.* To the extent that violence has been cultivated by the manipulation of religious symbols, 'missionary zeal' of a violent nature tends to be invoked. It follows that using a secular message to try to cultivate peace is like asking people to abandon their religion precisely when their fidelity is held closest to their hearts. As in the example above, the Muslim leaders did not say: 'You need to stop taking your religion so seriously. Try to get along with those poor Hindu slum-dwellers. So what if they believe in multiple gods!' Instead, the appeal was to the Islamic sense of justice.

5 *To the extent that communalism is cultivated either directly or indirectly by a political party, NGOs need to brace themselves for partisan political confrontation if they undertake a prominent programme of conflict-transformation.* It is one thing for NGOs to be political without being viewed as taking sides. It is quite another to be seen as working against a specific political party. Of course, in both cases the NGOs might jeopardise their ability to continue to operate effectively in other programme areas. (Some might, in fact, argue that an agency puts its other, more mundane programmes in jeopardy when taking on a trendy, dubious conflict-transformation role.) When an NGO can reasonably be accused of taking sides against a specific political party, especially if it is an indigenous NGO with foreign support devoted explicitly to fighting communalism, it is particularly vulnerable to a public-relations assault by the accused party. This begs a question regarding the partitioning of strategies. Should explicit, direct efforts at conflict-transformation with partisan political overtones be left to NGOs which specialise in that activity? Should the more traditional relief and development NGOs focus only on indirect approaches (such as having Muslims work together with Hindus on an irrigation project)? If so, how might the two types of NGO most productively co-operate? Would it be best for 'relief and development' NGOs to focus on promotive/preventive approaches and 'peace' NGOs to focus on pre-emptive and leadership approaches? What is the best relationship between international and indigenous NGOs in the pursuit of 'peace' and 'relief and development' roles?

It is in fact difficult to identify an instance in which an international NGO has been accused of partisan political meddling by supporting a politically active indigenous NGO. How real are the risks of an agency's jeopardising its more substantial relief and development activities by supporting an activist, even confrontational, local counterpart? In any case, NGOs need to ask themselves whether it is possible to pursue development without also standing for justice and peace. Even from a public-relations standpoint, if an agency is assaulted with accusations of meddling by a disgruntled political party, as long as the conflict-transformation activities can be defended, what is there to fear? The test which NGOs should use is *can we defend this?* If so, they should not, in my humble opinion, hold back.

Conclusion

NGOs cannot afford to ignore inter-group conflict. It is important that they devise effective strategies of conflict-transformation. The transformation of communal conflict is, of course, no easy task. But we can take heart from the words of Douglas Johnston (1994), who argues that 'reconciliation born of spiritual conviction can play a critical role by inspiring conflicting parties to move beyond the normal human reaction of responding in kind, of returning violence for violence. And therein lies an extraordinary challenge.'

In the world of communal conflict, where religion seems to be a double-edged sword, sharp on the side of violence, but like a butter-knife on the side of peace, NGOs would do well to engage mid-level leaders in the process of transforming violent passion.

Notes

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2 Throughout this paper, the words 'communal conflict' will be used as a general reference to what is sometimes called ethnic, sectarian, or religious conflict. Communal conflict is generally a result of violent passions within the context of 'communalism'. Bipan Chandra defined 'communalism' as 'the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion, they have, as a result, common social, political and economic interests' (quoted in Lobo 1995).

3 See, for instance, Atwood (1994) and Mawlawi (1993).

4 A more elaborate version of this case is presented in 'The Harmony Project of the St. Xavier's Social Service Society, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India', the Local Capacities for Peace Project, Occasional Paper # 1 (1995) by Joseph Bock, available from the Collaborative for Development Action, Inc.

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