

Narratives of Loss in a post-riot society

Narrativizing the event –

This paper is an exploration of the content, expression and nature of loss in the after-math of the episodic communal riot that shook several villages of Muzaffarnagar and adjoining Shamli district of Western Uttar-Pradesh in September 2013. Two of widely circulated versions of events that allegedly fuelled the riots tell us of the death of three youths on 27th August 2013 - Shahnawaz, Sachin and Gaurav in an altercation between them regarding either the eve-teasing of a girl related to Sachin or a motorcycle accident. The role of rumours in riot engineering has been well documented in sociological literature; as the narrative of the former incident (the eve teasing issue) gained ground, opportunities were seized to mobilise members of the Jat community into “Beti aur Bahu-bachao andolons” leading up to a mahapanchayat held on 7 September, in Nagla Mandaur village, not too far from Kawal village where the situation was already tense and pre-episodes of “communal” violence had already taken place. It is reported that “Jats from Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, Bagpat, Budhana, Ghaziabad, District Bijnor and, some reports say, even Haryana, reached the venue on September 7, by and large in tractor trolleys. The mobilization was mainly of Baliyan Jats (corroborated by the fact that no violence took place North of Muzaffarnagar, where these two Jat communities are not dominant). The tractor trolleys had Jats armed with lathis, ballams (lance), swords, tamanchas (country made pistol). Some Jats told our team on November 9 that the tractors carried large stones at the bottom” [Ish Mishra et al, 2013]. The trolleys returning from Nagla Mandaur carried forward the spate of violence to many other villages within the two districts – some of the worst hit areas were Qutba, Kutbi, Lankh, Lisarh, Bahawadi, Phugana, Mohammadpur Raisingh, Kakada, Kharad, Mohammadpur Modern and Atali. The exact timeline of the incidents leading up to the riots have been well documented in several independent and Ngo inquiries into the matter [Anhad report, 2013, Ish Mishra et al 2013]. In retrospect what emerges is the sense that it was through public mobilisations, fiery hate speeches at the panchayats and apathy of the state and police officials, the entire incident was given a communal colour, something which could and should have been avoided. The complicity of the “state” and political actors in engineering riots, especially as a vote consolidating mechanism is has now become common knowledge. Although the incident at Kawal has been isolated as a moment of genesis of the rupture, the

genealogy of communal violence in India can be traced to longer as far back as 1947 and beyond.

Having reconstructed part of the immediate factors leading up to the riots, it must be conveyed that this paper is more concerned with what happens after a riot hits. The official death toll in the riots is estimated to be 53 (approx.) persons, which includes persons from both communities and the numbers of persons displaced from their homes stands around 40,000 or more, along with damages to property and livelihood [Minority Commission Report,2013]. Inadvertently, an atmosphere of great despair, grief and loss clouds the lives of the many who survived.

The main aim of this paper is to then to understand how those affected pick up the pieces of their lives after such a devastating and traumatic event? How do survivors articulate and express loss? In contrast to the official accounts and sanitized statistics of death and damage, one seeks to contextualize such accounting of numbers into an accounting of stories of lived experiences. Communal riots that take place within a localized setting of a village or a district, where the one who attacks is not unknown to the victim tends as an obvious consequence to tear away at the fabric of social life. This study is not only concerned with the way different individuals cope with the losses which they have suffered but also with the sense of loss of a community of ties, security and solidarity. For those who have not only lost their homes, their loved ones but the very thread of continuity of their existence, what does it mean to survive such an event? However the course of our study revealed to us the tension between destruction and resilience, between victimhood and survival, between loss and regeneration. Located within the stories of loss and suffering and victimhood we found a plea for rebuilding lives here and an utterance of hope there. Such voices, although not absent came out but only bleakly amongst a chorus of angst and despair.

The paper is also an attempt at emancipation, for by way of study we seek to lend a space for the voices of the survivors of the riots. The idea of loss is intricately connected to a politics of remembrance and forgetting. What is no longer remembered and is forgotten is no longer a loss. The loss itself is lost. It is absolute [Ophir, 2005].

Methodology –

The paper is based on fieldwork conducted between 23 May – 21 June, 2014, in two specific relief and rehabilitation camps set up at Shahpur and Bassikalan post the riots (2013) in Shahpur and Muzaffarnagar districts. The methodology of this study follows the method of

sociological narrative analysis. Narratives are in the simplest sense stories woven around fact and fiction, between what we sense and experience and what our minds perceive. Griffin defines narratives as the portrayal of social phenomenon as temporally ordered, sequential, unfolding and open-ended stories fraught with conjectures and contingency.

Event and temporality are the two most important elements of any narrative, here the event is located as the riot itself and the concern with temporality lends itself to a concern with aftermath of the riots which unfolds in and within time. The research was conducted eight months after the riot – the narratives thus, must be read within this particular time and location.

The method of data collection was based on semi-structured questionnaires along with intensive interviews consisting of open-ended questions. An important aspect of the study is that narratives are both the object and the method of study. Our entry into the field was provided through a network of ngos, particularly Aman Biradiri and mobilizers working for the Ngos who were also among the survivors of the riots; who later went on to become valuable informants. We took accommodation within the campsite (Shahpur) with a family of two and with whom we developed close relations extending beyond the research. Accommodation within the campsite brought interactions with our respondents to an informal level at a later stage as the people at the campsite got used to our daily presence. And allowed us get a glimpse of their everyday activities within the camps.

Camp Life –

Post the riots, with the displacement of more than 40,000 persons from their homes and villages, several relief and rehabilitation camps were set up in areas near a Muslim majority population. Few of the prominent camps were at Shahpur, Bassikalan, Loi, Malakpura among others.

One report describes the condition of the camps as “pathetic to say the least”. The living conditions in the camps are exceptionally harsh; not only does one have to battle for economic survival and emotional/ mental recuperation, but also battle the elements of nature out in the open camps. Winter bites and the summer scorches; violent dust storms are frequent in the area, and the lack of basic amenities and makeshift residence makes life at the camps more precarious. Following Charlie Hailey’s(2009) typology of camps, one can formulate the camps

of Shahpur and Bassikalan as both camps of necessity and camps of control. These camps although provide a sense of security and sanctuary apart from providing aid and relief as they are close to other high Muslim density areas. However, such spaces also segregate, making them easy targets especially the women to crimes; it also allows for the immediate access of government functionaries and officials to all displaced Muslim populations within the district, where government practices of enumeration, compensation and ordering can take place with relative ease. These camps are also what Hailey refers to as “blue tarpaulin” camps. The Shahpur camp is specifically of this sort, it is spread over a large open and mostly barren land, sparsely vegetated by few mango trees here and there. These trees also lend a sense of direction to both refugees and researchers alike in navigating the camp space. The centre of the camp is marked by a cluster of mango trees around which a few tents are pitched, mostly of refugees from Qutbi. Left of the mango trees, at a certain distance one can locate another cluster of tents, mostly of inhabitants from Kakra and to right, those from Qutba. The barrenness of the land is striking not only due to the lack of vegetation, but also due to the sparseness of the built-form and the poverty of the tarpaulin roofs, many of which had holes in them allowing dust, rain to seep in or would threaten to fly away along with a strong gust of wind. Inside these tents one can see bare minimum of useful items such mats, a bed (charpai) or two, and clothes, precious possession kept in aluminium boxes. Outside, the landscape is dotted with a few, small plaster-less brick houses near some of the tents. These belong to those who had already received compensation from the government and chose to stay put within that locale. Few others such as our hosts lived in small, rented single room arrangements in the periphery of the camp.

Stripped off all elements of excess, superfluity and even necessity, the notion of “bare life” takes on a literal meaning in the camp. At Bassikalan, the conditions were slightly more improved. Much smaller in area, it was inhabited by refugees from Qutba. Qutba was one of the worst affected villages in the riots. As many as riot related deaths are recorded from this village alone. There were more newly constructed and under construction brick houses than tents in the camp, although amenities were still sparse and people had to make do with the bare essentials. Based on the material conditions alone one cannot grasp the nature of the emotional terrain in the camps, and the sense of loss that grips survivors. However, one does observe a difference in addressing loss – while most people at Shahpur focussed more on the economic loss and damage and their demands for compensation and rehabilitation, the narratives that emerge out of Bassikalan are of the nature of lamentation and grief, and demands of justice. A

probable reason for this is the fact that refugees in Bassikalan were witness to death of close and known relatives and friends.

On loss –

According to Adi Ophir –

Loss is a singular type of disappearance. The irreversible disappearance of some irreplaceable thing. Whenever the disappeared is not replaceable and as long as it has no replacement, it is a loss. A loss is perceived as irreplaceable from the viewpoint of an interested person, loss is a disappearance that is “for someone”, not only in its occurrence but also in the way it is present in someone’s world as irreplaceable. [The Order of Evils, 2005]

Following Ophir, we argue that the subject position from which loss is articulated suggest an intimate relationship of loss and the subject for whom it constitutes a loss. Thus, loss continually escapes a complete formulation from an outsider perspective. Through the following narratives, one can arrive at a certain sense of loss, and its expression; the full content of the loss will continuously evade us, those who stand on the outside looking in.

The expression of loss is also an effort of remembrance and forgetting. “To lose means to remember”, states Ophir, “the continuous presence of loss depends on a continuous effort of remembering”. It is to take what once was, that which no longer is and place in a separate realm of memory and representation. In narrativizing loss, what one effectively does is to make what no longer is into a presence of another kind. The presence of loss is to make express the absence of what once was.

“Pare mein toh hum chappal bhi nahin pehne” (We didn’t even get to wear slippers on our feet) – Fleeing.

Our first visit to the camps was a few weeks after the Muzaffarnagar elections, and during which time Ngo activities within the camp of Shahpur had come to a halt and aid and other supplies were down to a trickle. The hired taxi taking us to the camps parked us right in the middle of the campsite, where a couple of people were sitting leisurely under the shade of the mango trees. Within minutes of our arrival our, we were immediately surrounded by men and

women with children, urging us to talk to them. We hear many voices – “Kya layei ho?” (What have you brought?), “Aoa andar, baat kar lo” (Come inside, talk to us), “Kuan ho?” (Who are you?). Our arrival in a van probably alerted them to think that we were carrying supplies for the camp. Once it was settled that we were not, the crowd quickly dispersed and we were led to small cot laid out in the open under a tree, next to a jhuggi where a group of men and women were sitting around. The men quickly got up making space for us to sit, all the while glancing curiously towards us. It is here that we meet Jannati, a frail 80 year old widow, who had lost most of her family members even before the riots. Most of the conversations with the people in the camps mostly developed in such places, in groups. Mehta and Chatterjee in their work point to group dynamic of retelling or narrating events. It is the audience that determines the story, what is to be uttered and what is to be censored [2007]. In many ways we found this to be true. In trying to discern the narratives of particular individuals, what appears alongside are a collective effort at remembering, which itself is selective, thus also forgetting. The details of what might be forgotten by one is added in by another, and when one utters something which the others regard as incorrect, or dramatic, the narrator is corrected, censored or challenged. In this manner, there emerges a collective memory, or narrative of the event, within which individuals seek to locate themselves.

A.C - Aap kaha ke ho? (Where are you from?)

J- Kakre. The others interject – “Hum sab Kakre ke hi hain”. (We are all from Kakra)

A.C – Can you recount to us the details of the day you fled your village?

J - “*Ab hum tumhe kya bataye*” (How do we even begin to tell you?) *Humne sunna ki baki gaon mein mussalmano par hamle ho rahe he, aur daar ke maare hum bhi bhag nikley*” *Ghar baar chor ke aagaye daar se; pao mein chappal bhi nehi pehne*” (We heard rumours that Muslims we being attacked in the other villages nearby, we fled out of fear, we left our homes etc. and ran, without even wearing slippers).

S.S – How did you flee?

Jannati points toward Ruksana, indicating “with her”.

Ruksana – We had been hearing rumours of attacks for some time, but on the eight of September, we received a phone call from my relative, who told us to run. And, we did not think of anything further, *bhag nikle hum to, ghar, gehne samaan sab kuch chor ke, kuch bhi nahin ley aye hum, chappal bhi nahin pehne* (and we just fled, left our homes, valuables everything, we were not even wearing our slippers). *Hum toh kaisey bhi jaan bachake bhag nikle, piche piche sarey Jat chaku aur rod leyke bhag*

rahe they; humara ek lorry hain, use mein uthke nikal gaye. (Somehow, we managed to save our lives and run, we did not even have slipper on our feet, and we were being chased by Jats carrying knives and rods; we have a lorry we just got onto it and ran away).

“Pare mein toh hum chappal hi nahin pehne (we did not even have slippers on)” is a motif of conversation that appears regularly in the narratives of fleeing. Language is deployed in a way to signify the urgency and suddenness with which one had to come to terms with the violence that engulfed them so “suddenly” despite having heard rumours of attacks elsewhere. The lack of slippers is a signifier of a much greater lack. Sitting under the sweltering sun, with nothing but a tarpaulin roof overhead, conversations constantly revert back to the idea of home and possessions or the lack of possessions. Most of the refugees from Kakra fled out of fear, with nothing to hold on to but dear life itself. However, not everyone was motivated to leave in the same way. Azhar, the 17 year old mobilizer who arranged our stay tells us how his family had decided to stay put while others were fleeing out of fear.

“We had lived in Kakra for generations. My father and uncles jointly owned a medical store in the village and a fabric shop. On 9th September news reached us that Muslims in Kawal were being attacked, their homes looted and set on fire; it was feared that the violence would soon spread to other villages. All around us Muslims were fleeing the village and by the night of September 9th they were all but gone. My father had decided that we should stay put, and no harm would come to us. However, early next morning we found out that our fabric shop had been looted and the medical store had been set on fire. We were left with no other choice but to leave”.

Azhar’s family is among those who had received compensation by June 2014. The family had already managed to build a new house near the camp; and slowly assembled the fragments of their life anew, under different circumstances. His mother spent the majority of her time sewing cotton undergarments and shirts. She tells us –

“Per day, I set myself a target of sowing at least 52 garments. It helps to forget where I am now”.

Azhar shares similar sentiments, although for him the memories of loss are best forgotten rather than suppressed. It is interesting to note how language is deployed in the expression of loss. Many times, when one seeks to suppress the sense of loss through censorship of language, it seeps in to conversations through the deployment of metaphors/metonymy and irony. Tajju, a retired military officer puts it thus –

We live in time where the worth of a human being is lesser than that of an ant crawling on the ground. I was in the military service for most of my life.

Where are you from?

A.C – Assam.

Tajju – Oh yes! I was posted in Arunachal for some time; I was even in the Andaman and Nicobar Island. I have travelled over most parts of the country; my wife here is from Bengal. Years of service and what do I get in return? All I do now is to sit and wonder, I cannot even provide anything for my sons, and I have lost all my land. I have nothing to leave behind for myself. Tell me, what do I do?

S.S – What about you? How do you feel here? (to Tajju's wife)

Khursida – “Ab hum kya bataye babbu, Ghar tha makan tha, ab kuch nehi hai.” (Where do we begin our story? From having everything we are left with nothing).

Tears come to her eyes as she becomes reminiscent of her days back in the village-

We had a great two storey house and a garden; my entire day would be spent in household chores. I never had any time to spare. Now, we have nothing left. I barely ever stepped out of my home, it was everything to me. And suddenly I found myself on the streets bereft of everything I associated with home.

The idea of home is an important association for the people at the camps; while the men speak of the loss of land, women talk of the importance of home and its boundaries. The same women at one time before their displacement religiously wore the *burqa* outside their homes, now no longer practice it within the campsite. Only when they stepped out of the camps, onto the highway that runs beside the area do they make the effort of wearing one. The boundaries of home are skewed, and suspended, for there is no home, only a makeshift settlement. Ruksana rationalizes it by stating that within the camps everything is in the open, there is no inside or outside, so one is not required to observe the *burqa* there.

“Hamarey bache raat mei so nehi paatey khauf mein” – Our children cannot sleep.

Being witness to murder and violence leaves traumatic impressions on the minds of the victims and survivors. Many of them were fighting back tears while narrating the violent incidents that they had witnessed. Zubeda, in Bassikalan narrates how the fear has been entrenched in their

minds. While recalling the events she describes the impact it has left on the minds of the children.

The children are still in a state of trauma. Being a witness to all the murder and gunfire has been something that has troubled their peace of mind. They wake up in the middle of the night and refuse to go back to sleep.

“Hum toh apne aap ko samjha liya, bachcho ka kya kare?” (We have acknowledged and accepted the situation but how do we make the children understand?). Kahi bhi ladayi ho jati hain to bache bolte hain – “Ammi kaha looko? Bistar ke niche?” (If ever a fight breaks out here, the children ask me -“where do we hide?”)

While sitting with the women, we notice few of the children in the open ground near the Jhuggis. They had planted a small plant in the ground and were trying with great concentration to hang a bunch of imitation grapes to the plant. The simplicity of the act provoked deep emotions in the parents sitting nearby. They knew the truth, but they didn’t know how to change it and make it better for the children. In a sense the grapes symbolized a hope for the future. Just as the sapling would later come to bear fruit, maybe their efforts to secure a future of their children would also bear some fruit. The feeling loss is associated not only with what once was, but one can also mourn for the loss of what (in their mind) will never be. Loss can also be a loss of potential (Ophir, 2005).

The fragility of the “everyday” –

Violent events such as these prod us into thinking about everyday life as a negotiated space, which is continually orchestrated into existence and maintained for as long as possible until disruptive events dislocate it. There is an abrupt break in the everyday, which for some constitutes years of their existence, involving routines, established patterns of both communication and avoidance. Before the riots the Muslims and Jats had learned to live and negotiate their space within the village along with other villagers. However, in the aftermath of the riots, there is an immense sense of betrayal and sense of loss of trust, for the ones to attack them were none other than those with whom they had learned to coexist and share intimate relations through generations. The state’s inability to act promptly and provide justice along with the complicity of the police in enabling the riots have also led to a loss of trust in the state system and agencies of the state. This comes across clearly when one day talking of

the recent elections Ruksana let us in on the 'fact' that the voting machines were rigged. She laughs with a sour mirth and says –“Is baar to desh mein phool hi phool khiley hain”, alluding to the allegations of the BJP as being a party to the engineering of the riots for electoral profits.

This version regarding the elections and riots seemed to have been in wide circulation among the inhabitants of both camps for it was mentioned by many and on several occasions. The sense of loss of trust and betrayal then leads to a renegotiation within the social space of community. It changes their ideas of community and social relationships almost as if the past requires an overwriting of sorts.

The construction of the everyday becomes clearer as we begin observing the activities of our hosts, with whom we spent most of our time in the afternoons, after returning from the outer field of tents and jhuggis into the inner field of the home of our hosts. On one particular day, Bano, receives news of the demise of a relative and rushes off to Muzaffarnagar early in the morning. We decide to spend our day at 'home' and help out Yamin Ali with the chores such as fetching water from the nearby communal hand-pump, and making tea etc.. The typical day in the Yamin Ali household would begin in after the morning cup of tea, after which he would progress to fetch water for bathing and drinking. Soon he would leave the house for a few hours to take a stroll or go to the nearby markets etc. In the evening he would return and leave once again for *namaz* at the mosque not far away. He would often talk about how back in the village their daughter-in-law and grandson would often visit and stay for prolonged periods of time, making his day fuller. This was no longer a possibility where they now lived, in a single rented room with a small courtyard. In one side of the room, a miscellaneous assortment of material objects such trunks, a flower vase, a washing machine, a mixer etc. were all piled together in no particular order. They had saved and recovered whatever they could before their houses were looted, but these things were no longer significant or useful in their daily lives.

The everyday then becomes a blank canvas, to be redrawn. It is however a displaced and a different everyday. The continuity with the past is dislocated. The evidence of the past lies in a crumbled heap of material possessions and all hopes for the future is morphed onto the future generation, the children and the living members of the family. In the evening Bano returns and between talk she takes down a picture of her grandson to show to us, “I don't get to see him so often now, back in our home, he would play with me all day, he is very naughty too”. She says our presence reminds her of her own married daughter who lives in Meerut. All she wants is for them to have a secure future.

Out in the open camps, the altered meaning of the everyday is marked by an absence, of walls and homes, material possessions, jobs, chores. Throughout the period of our fieldwork, we would mostly find the people sitting idly, men and women smoking beedis (rolled tobacco) and contemplating the future. We asked one of our respondents Asgari, what do u do all day?

“We have nothing to do, we old women especially. All we have been left to do is time-pass. Sometimes you people come along, so we talk to you.” “We have nowhere to go and nothing to do. All that we do is sit and gaze. It is like our entire lives have been taken away from us.”

When asked about future plans they say-

“bekar admi hai hum, hum agey ki kya soche, sochna toh hai apko”. (We have been rendered useless. What can we do? It is you who has to think about our future).

Bereft of their homes and possessions, they not only seek justice but also an amount as a compensation for the losses incurred.

“Kuch bhi mil jayein, makaan ban jayein, ab toh humare liye yehi bohot hain”) (Whatever we get, atleast a house would be welcome.).

Most of the middle aged married women and young daughters get done with the task of cooking early in the morning, for the rest of the day they sit in groups and talk. Where earlier in their homes the women would be busy sending their children off to school or tending after their livestock, it has now been replaced by inactivity. Loss of movement, of mobility is stark in camps; for most parts of the day people would be rooted exactly where they were a several hours ago. It was never too hard to find people we knew at the camps, all one had to do was to walk to the spot where we had met them before.

Furthermore, out in the open, where dust-storms are frequent, resuming the simple task of cooking is also rife with difficulties. On one such stormy evening, as we were sitting with a family while the daughter was cooking on an open fireplace nearby, the wind blew the embers of the wood into huge fire that almost threatened to burn their tarpaulin tents into the ground.

Distorted conceptions of time –

The sense of idleness looming over their lives with also elides into a distorted and disjoint notion of time. We tend to think of time as a linear movement from the here and now to the

then and there. But in the narratives of the victims, a clear disjoint appears between the past, present and the future. The narratives are littered with sharply drawn distinctions between the then and now. The past is referred to with nostalgia, good times, peace etc., and depicted through selective memories of wellbeing and happiness.

Saleem, another mobilizer working in Shahpur, remembers with nostalgia how life back in the village was -

“We had a mango tree, just like this one, right behind our house. During this time of the year when it would bear fruit, we would climb up the trees and pluck mangoes. Sometimes I remember these memories.”

Jannati tells us about how the riots have brought nothing but bad fortune to her –

“Back then (before the riots) I could see so clearly, even from a long distance I could spot a child and recognize it; but now, ever since I have come here (in the camp), I have become blind. Life is terrible here, there is nothing to do. Please help us”.

Here again, one discerns an extraction of past events and their projection into the future. The loss of a way of life in the past looms over the present as a bad omen, causing nothing but problems.

On questions about their life at the camps, Asgari’s reply was prompt and simple,

“That was home, this is makeshift’. Coming out of the village was compulsion for us. *“hum to daar ke maare bhag aye’*. “Pehle toh sab acha tha (between Jats and Muslims)”

Asgari recounts amicable relations between the Jats and Muslims prior to the riots in spite of the economic difference and dependence that was present there. She narrated that post the riots, fear has been implanted so firmly in the minds of the Muslims that no communication is at all possible. Asgari said that losses are more than that can be put into words.

“saalon se hum who gaon mein rehrahe the, ab kabhi wapas nehi na sakteh”(we have been there for years, yet we cant go back).

Reminiscent of the days in their villages, Bhateri and Asgari describe their houses.

They have reached a level of acceptance that there’s probably no possibility of returning back to their villages. When asked about future plans they say

'bekar admi hai hu, hum agey ki kya soche, sochna toh hai apko. Bereft of their homes and all possible immovable possessions, they not only seek justice but also an amount as a compensation for the losses incurred.

“Kuch bhi mil jayein, makaan ban jayein, ...” (Whatever we get, atleast houses).

A bleak view of the life at the camps is not an exaggeration; however, one can sense in the way of retelling their stories of their lives how they have neatly separated the differences between the past and present, the future continues to remain a source of confusion and worry for many of them, especially those who have lost their homes and are yet to receive compensation.

What comes across through their narratives is the idea of the past not as a fixed ontology of hidden truths which can be recovered by the researcher or the historian; the survivors constantly renegotiated the space between the past, present and the future. Their understanding of the past and their sense of loss is continually coloured by their understanding of the present. The relationship with the Jats before the riots are invariably described by all our respondents as peaceful in contrast to the strained relationship that now exists.

It is interesting to see how such strained relationships between the two communities are now quickly normalized; within a few months after the riots the picture that comes across is one of complete insularity between the Jats and Muslims, as though one did not exist for the other. This separation in time is also witnessed in the separation and segregation of Muslims in space, at the camps.

Gupta mentions that any depiction of the new normal is like the unfolding of a story, that is yet not complete, wounds maybe fresh, victims continue to feel vulnerable. The new normal may still be awkwardly positioned. Even as children start attending school, adults begin finding jobs, the new normal one is approaching is quite unlike the old.

Will you ever return?

Everybody we had spoken to said no. They will not go back, mostly because they no longer feel safe or welcome. They have nothing to go back to, even if a few of their houses have been spared the disaster. A woman in Bassikalan puts it thus –

“Unhone hamara masjid ko bhi nahi chora, pura jala dia. Jab us gaon mein hamara din hi nahi raha, toh hum kyu wapas jayein. Ab Allah hi hamein insaf dega.” (They did not even spare our

mosque, they burnt it all. When there is no place for our God, our religion in the village, why should we go back? Only God will bring us justice now).

For those who have lost members of their family, or witnessed murder, the idea of justice becomes more important than both reparation and reconciliation. “We only want justice”, they would say. However, they are also aware that justice is hard to come by in a case where the police itself connived with the perpetrators. They feel their voices are drowning. Thus, they look towards their faith and Allah to keep a count of the injustices they have incurred -

“Allah unhey maaf nahi karega”. (God will not forgive them).

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