

Justice Delayed, Justice Denied

Nowhere is this maxim truer than in the case of 1984 Delhi riots. The Nanavati Commission Report has once again brought the painful memories of 1984 alive. Targeted at the Sikh community, the carnage had exterminated over 10,000 ordinary citizens, leaving thousand others mere helpless, mourning and bitterly revengeful. As an eyewitness to the agony of 1984 and a small partner in the relief work that followed the tragedy, it gives me too an immense satisfaction that at least the lie has been nailed.

There are three issues on which this editorial wants to comment. First, how can the civil society become so powerless in cases of such outrageous and obvious criminal behaviour? The studies by civil society organisations and the observations of the ordinary public had already challenged the powers who spread absolutely false data on the cause, spread and aftermath of the crisis. But, no one was able to make a difference or influence the polity to respond in justice. How should we the citizens respond to such callous systems? When criminals are named but action is not taken, the politician-criminal nexus is bound to strengthen, threatening the very core of democracy.

Second, it is amazing that the intelligentia, particularly the academic community had no significant opinion on this either. Or to be more precise, their voices were not heard. Why is it that time and again academics forget that they have a duty to speak the truth to those in power. Dispassionate study and research can and should become the basis for advocacy and activism. On this score, there is a double failure: the academics fail to come out with objective and unbiased research reports and the politicians, even when some objective reports do come out, allow them to gather dust in the shelves of the secretariat. The academics need to be reminded that if they can speak the truth to those in power with the authority that comes from knowledge and understanding, there is at least a chance that they will be listened to and followed upon.

Third, is the distressing question: when will our system become sensitive to such dastardly acts of criminality abetted by those in power? A number of essential moves have to be taken. A concerted attempt on the part of academics, civil society organisations and those concerned to collect and disseminate factual data on the criminal activities, particularly of those in power must be initiated. There should be

dispassionate and informed debates on such events and issues. Public opinion has not yet become a powerful instrument of social change in Indian democracy. It is surprising that even in States with high levels of educational achievement, informed debates are becoming less and less popular. A human rights perspective has to dominate the debates on such issues. Amartya Sen and others have rightly highlighted: discourses on development, justice and freedom all go hand in hand. There can be no development without justice, or freedom.

The renewed debate on the 1984 riots is an appropriate occasion for every citizen of India, to re-commit oneself to truth, justice and freedom. Any relenting on these values can further awaken the already fragile democratic edifice.

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