

GUJARAT, GUJARAT

Obituary of a Culture

The massive carnages at Rwanda and Bosnia have taught the students of genocide that the most venomous, brutal killings and atrocities take place when the two communities involved are not distant strangers, but close to each other culturally and socially, and when their lives intersect at many points. When nearness sours or explodes, it releases strange, fearsome demons. Those shocked by the bestial or barbaric nature of the communal violence in Gujarat would do well to read some accounts of the carnages in Rwanda and Bosnia. In both cases, the two communities involved were close to each other and ethnic cleansing took the forms of a particularly brutal, self-destructive exorcism. And the same thing happened during the great Partition killings in 1946-48. The ongoing death dance in West Asia, with the Arabs and Israelis are locked in an embrace of death is another instance of the same game.

Gujarat was being prepared for such an exorcism for a very long time. It is a state that has seen thirty-three years of continuous rioting interrupted with periods of tense, uncomfortable peace. During these years, a sizeable section of Gujarat's urban underclass has begun to see communalism and rioting as means of livelihood, quick profit, choice entertainment, and as a way of life. Riots have, in addition, ensured temporary status gains for this underclass; they are considered heroes in their respective communities during riots and for brief periods afterwards—an important reward for persons at margins of society. Rioting everywhere is pre-eminently an urban disease. Demographers of riots—from Gopal Krishna to Asghar Ali Engineer, and from P. R. Rajgopalan to Ashutosh Varshney—have shown repeatedly that it is even more so in India. The

icing on the cake is that the urban middle class in Gujarat is now the most communalised in the country; it has become an active abetter and motivator of communal violence. Sections of it participate in the loot enthusiastically, as we have seen doing in the course of the recent riots; those that do not often participate in the violence vicariously. [For the last hundred years or so, the so-called non-martial races of the subcontinent—Bengali babus, Kashmiri Muslims and Gujarati upper castes, for instance—have had a special fascination for violence, particularly, if someone else was doing the fighting and risking their lives. However, in recent years, this fascination and the search for redemptive violence, which bestows heroic stature by being expiation for one's own 'passivity' and 'effeminacy', have often found direct expression in public life.]

Unlike in places like Uttar Pradesh, cities matter in Gujarat. Urbanity is a crucial presence in Gujarat's political life. The state has fifty cities, many of which have already become cauldrons of communal hatred and paranoia. The result is that Gujarat is now a classic instance of the urban-industrial vision decomposing and spitting out in a blatant form the violence that the vision has always hidden in its belly. The state has not only been riot-prone state but a state at war with itself. Even after the present riots die down—available data show that riots last longer in Gujarat than in other states—it would be a temporary truce. Tension and hatred will persist and both sides will remain prepared for the next round. Gujarat is and will continue to be an arena of civil war for years.

This situation has come about not because the Inter-Services Intelligence or the ISI of Pakistan—omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent like God himself, according to many Indians—has planned it that way. Nor because the minorities have been the main victims in the recent riots. This situation of civil war has arisen because minorities now know that they cannot hope to have any protection from the state government. Lower-level functionaries of the state government have been complicit with rioters many times and in many states. But this is probably for the first time after the

anti-Sikh riots of 1984 that the entire state machinery, except for some courageous dissenters among the administrators and in the law-and-order machinery, has turned against the minorities.¹ The minorities of Gujarat are by now aware that, for good or worse, they will have to prepare to protect themselves. This is a prescription for disaster. It will underscore the atmosphere of a civil war and has already created a new breeding ground for terrorism. More than Operation Blue Star, the anti-Sikh riots spawned terrorism in Punjab in the 1980s; the two decades of rioting in Gujarat has by now produced the sense of desperation that precedes the breakout of terrorism.

In the early 1960s, when I went to Gujarat for the first time as an adolescent student, it was difficult to believe that Gujarat could ever have a major riot. People talked of riots that had taken place in the past and the state did have a history of small riots and skirmishes. Many Ahmedabadi Hindus seemed afraid and suspicious of the Muslims, but they were afraid and suspicious mostly of non-Gujarati Muslims, many of them labourers in the huge textile industry of Ahmedabad. They took the Gujarati Muslims, a large proportion of them business castes, as a part of Gujarat's landscape, though there was clear social distance. In retrospect, the picture was remarkably similar to that of Cochin, which I studied a few years ago as a city of religious and ethnic harmony.² The only difference probably was the more than moderate dislike for the Muslim as representing a *tamasic* principle in Ahmedabad's predominant Jain-Bania culture. That dislike was, however, 'balanced' by a similar dislike for the westernised outsiders congregating in the new, fashionable institutions being established in the city. Traditional Ahmedabad kept away both.

The 1969 riots began to change the city radically, though at the time the changes were not that obvious. Like all riots in South Asia, that one too was organised, and it was organised with great managerial panache by the RSS. The violence paid rich dividends. So did the imaginative hate campaigns unleashed by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the RSS. Together they gave a kick-start to the process of ghettoisation of the Muslims and the growth in the power of Mafia-like bodies in both communities, always itching for fight and acting like protectors of the Hindus and the Muslims at times

of rioting. However, the growth of this criminal sector was disproportionately high among the young, unemployed Muslims. Understandably. The existing social distance between the communities had already acquired another tone. Facing discrimination in job situations and housing, many among the unemployed Muslim youth began to take to professions in which slum youth everywhere in the world specialise—illicit distillation, drug pushing, protection rackets, and petty crimes. And they always seemed ready for street violence. The situation worsened once Ahmedabad's famed textile industry collapsed. The changing political culture of the city ensured that this collapse, too, affected the Muslims more.³

The dragon seeds the 1969 riots sowed have sprouted over the years. Gujarat's regular annual harvest began to include gory communal clashes and mob violence. We saw the full flowering of this culture during the Ramjanmabhumi movement. As the great charioteer Lal Krishna Advani moved through Gujarat, he left in his wake a series of riots in which, according to Achyut Yagnik, for the first time, women and children were seen as legitimate targets of attack and atrocities. Riots were now becoming more brutal and barbaric.

During the last decade, Gujarat has kept up with that tradition. In the ongoing riots, women and children have not only been attacked but also often killed with a sadistic glee that will be inconceivable in a civilised society. Even in the attack on *karsevaks* at Godhra, the one that precipitated the riots, it now transpires that the main victims were women and children. The following is an extract from a widely circulated eyewitness account, which some of the readers might not have seen. It is written by an officer of the Indian Administrative Service:

Numbed with disgust and horror, I return from Gujarat ten days after the terror and massacre that convulsed the state. ... As you walk through the camps of riot survivors in Ahmedabad, in which an estimated 53,000 women, men, and children are huddled in 29 temporary settlements, displays of overt grief are unusual. ... But once you sit anywhere in these camps, people begin to speak and their words are like masses of pus released by

slitting large festering wounds. The horrors that they speak of are so macabre, that my pen falters.... The pitiless brutality against women and small children by organised bands of armed young men is more savage than anything witnessed in the riots that have shamed this nation from time to time during the past century.

...

What can you say about a woman eight months pregnant who begged to be spared. Her assailants instead slit open her stomach, pulled out her foetus and slaughtered it before her eyes. What can you say about a family of nineteen being killed by flooding their house with water and then electrocuting them with high-tension electricity?

What can you say? A small boy of six in Juhapara camp described how his mother and six brothers and sisters were battered to death before his eyes. He survived only because he fell unconscious, and was taken for dead. A family escaping from Naroda-Patiya, one of the worst-hit settlements in Ahmedabad, spoke of losing a young woman and her three month old son, because a police constable directed her to 'safety' and she found herself instead surrounded by a mob which doused her with kerosene and set her and her baby on fire. I have never known a riot which has used the sexual subjugation of women so widely as an instrument of violence in the recent mass barbarity in Gujarat. There are reports every where of gang-rape, of young girls and women, often in the presence of members of their families, followed by their murder by burning alive, or by bludgeoning with a hammer and in one case with a screw driver.⁴

Gujarat disowned Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi long ago. The state's political soul has been won over by his killers. This time they have not only assassinated him again, they have danced on his dead body, howling with delight and mouthing obscenities. The Gandhians, in response, took out some ineffective peace processions, when they should have taken a public position against the regime and the Nazi Gauleiter ruling Gujarat. One is not surprised when told by

the newspapers that the gates of Sabarmati Ashram, instead of becoming the city's major sanctuary, closed its gates to protect its properties.⁵

Almost nothing reveals the decline and degeneration of Gujarati middle-class culture more than its present Chief Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi. Not only has he shamelessly presided over the riots and acted as the chief patron of rioting gangs, the vulgarities of his utterances have been a slur on civilised public life. His justifications of the riots, too, sound uncannily like that of Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian Prime Minister and mass murderer who is now facing trial for his crimes against humanity. I often wonder these days why those active in human rights groups in India and abroad have not yet tried to get international summons issued against Modi for colluding with the murder of hundreds and for attempted ethnic cleansing. If Modi's behaviour till now is not a crime against humanity, what is?

More than a decade ago, when Mr. Modi was nobody, a small-time RSS *pracharak* trying to make it as a small-time BJP functionary, I had the privilege of interviewing him along with Achyut Yagnik, whom Modi could not fortunately recognise. (Fortunately because he knew Yagnik by name and was to later make some snide comments about his activities and columns.) It was a long, rambling interview, but it left me in no doubt that here was a classic, clinical case of a fascist. I never use the term 'fascist' as a term of abuse; to me it is a diagnostic category comprising not only one's ideological posture but also the personality traits and motivational patterns contextualising the ideology. Mr. Modi, it gives me no pleasure to tell the readers, met virtually all the criteria that psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and psychologists had set up after years of empirical work on authoritarian personality. He had the same mix of puritanical rigidity, narrowing of emotional life, massive use of the ego defence of projection, denial and fear of his own passions combined with fantasies of violence—all set within the matrix of clear paranoid and obsessive personality traits. I still remember the cool, measured tone in which he elaborated a theory of cosmic conspiracy against India that painted every Muslim as a suspected traitor and a potential terrorist. I came out of the interview shaken and I told Yagnik that, for the first time, I had met a textbook case of a fascist and a prospective killer,

perhaps even a future mass murderer.

The very fact that he has wormed his way to the post of the chief minister of Gujarat tells you something about our political process and the trajectory our democracy has traversed in the last fifty years. I am afraid I cannot look at the future of the country with anything but great foreboding.

The Gujarat riots mark the beginning of a new phase in Indian politics. We talk of terrorism in Kashmir and the North East and proudly speak of subduing the terrorism that broke out in Punjab. The total population involved in these cases, particularly the section that could be considered sympathetic to militancy has always been small. Even if we believe that Pakistan's ISI and the Indian army between them have persuaded all Kashmiris in the valley to support militancy, these Kashmiris add up to only three million, one-third size of the city of Delhi. The forces the Gujarat violence might have released are a different kettle of fish. They seem to have done what the Partition riots did. Also, given that they have been arguably the first video riots in India—riots taking place in front of TV cameras—their impact will be pan-Indian and international. The minorities all over the country have seen the experiments in ethnic cleansing and the attempts to break the economic backbone of the Muslim community. The sense of desperation brewing among the Gujarati Muslims is likely to be contagious.

I wonder what we should do with 120 million bitter Muslims, with a sizeable section of them close to desperation. Will it be another case of Palestine now onwards, at least in Gujarat? Prima facie, Modi has done his job. The Sangh Parivar's two-nation theory is genuine stuff and has already initiated the process of a second partition of India, this time of mind. We, our children and grandchildren—above all, the Gujaratis—will have to learn to live with a state of civil war. The Gujarati middle class will have to pay heavily—culturally, socially and economically—for its collusion with the recent pogrom.

The author is

Notes and References:

¹ This point has been indirectly made by Tridip Suhrud, 'No Room for Dialogue', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 March 2002, 47(11), pp. 1011-2.

² Ashis Nandy, 'Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin', *The Japanese Journal of Political Science*, December 2001, 1(2), pp. 293-327.

³ The Godhra incident, which precipitated the recent riots, was partly a product of this larger process, not a conspiracy of the ISI, as the Sangh Parivar claims. Nor was the incident the result of a provocation by *karsevaks* so severe that the Muslim victims of the provocation had to burn alive scores of train passengers, most of them women and children, as some politically correct secularists have begun to insist. For the moment, I am ignoring the even more inane attempts to explain away the Godhra episode as a non-event. In some ways, the episode is a typical example of the chain of events that have characterised a huge number of communal riots in recent times—deliberate provocation leading to violent reaction from desperate, angry youth in slums and ghettos, followed by fully organised, large-scale attacks on Muslims in general.

⁴ Harsh Mander, 'Cry, the Beloved Country: Reflections on the Gujarat Massacre', unpublished report circulated over the Internet, 21 March 2002.

⁵ Ibid. See also Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth, 'Whither Gujarat? Violence and After', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 March 2002, 47(11), pp. 1009-11.