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Gujarat 2002: A Turning Point?

Wednesday 18 January 2006, by [SHARMA Rakesh](#) (Date first published: 26 December 2005).

This was written for *India Today's* special issue : " 30 Years : Turning points in recent Indian history". An edited version has appeared in the December 26, 2005 issue.

Imagine Gujarat in March 2002. What if the bloodthirsty mobs in Baroda had found Irfan Pathan or Zaheer Khan? What if Mohammed Kaif lived in Naroda Patiya, Ahmedabad? Would there be a resurgent Team India now? Or what if Sania Mirza's home was Gulberg society, where ex-MP Ehsan Jafri was not just brutally killed, but according to eyewitnesses, "even his body could not be found, just some bones and other parts"? What if Ustad Bismillah Khan was a resident of posh Paldi, home to the prestigious National Institute of Design and the ransacked Delite Apartments? Would his shehnai have been silenced forever and his home reduced to ashes? What if Ustad Zakir Hussain had a home in Gandhinagar? What if...

"We do not want the Muslims to shift to Pakistan. They can live here, as a part of our family, like our brothers, but like younger brothers. They must learn to respect us as there are 800 million of us and they are only 150 million" - Retired Professor Ghanshyam Joshi of the Pavagad VHP, swaying gently on his swing explains his final solution very nicely, during one of the many conversations I had with him in 2002 while shooting my film. Somehow his words are more chilling than the rabble-rousing speeches I first heard from Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Ritambara in 1990-91 and a decade later from the surgeon-turned demagogue Praveen Togadia. The next day, one of his party workers explains even more gently - "we just want these Muslims to first shift out of Gujarat and then we will see what to do with them".

At the Don Bosco school in Ahmedabad, between 350-400 Muslim children are asked to leave. Their teacher, Pramod Kumar Kul, is very matter of fact - "they weren't good students, just interested in somehow finishing school and then learning spray painting etc", summarily dismissing all those young kids who had giggled and smiled the day before while talking to me about becoming a doctor or an engineer or a teacher. At the 'National School' inside a ghettoised part of the city, seven-year old Shahrukh Khan, though has different ideas - " I will study and join the police as then I'd be able to help people during riots". Little does he realise that in Modi's Gujarat, you are most likely to get a punishment posting if you happen to discharge your constitutional obligations to try and curb the slaughter of innocent women and children. Ask R B Sreekumar or the SPs and DCPs shunted out of Kutch, Bhavnagar, Banskantha and Ahmedabad city's zone 4. Invent conspiracy theories

involving Muslims, ignore the Gujarat State Forensic lab's reports that suggest an absence of hydrocarbons (i.e., petrol, diesel or kerosene) inside S-6, allude to flimsy evidence based on confessions by history-sheeters, slap POTA charges on a 100-odd people and possibly earn a commendation for meritorious service! Innuendos and insinuations triumph - but isn't anyone interested in giving us the truth behind the gory deaths at Godhra?

Much of the Gujarat violence is justified in the name of the 59 people who died inside coach S-6 of the Sabarmati Express. But the late Jyotiben's family - husband Bharat Panchal and daughter Shefali do not want any revenge to be taken in their name. Dr. Girishchandra Rawal, retired government servant, who lost his wife, tells me Godhra should not have been used during the elections - "Religion should never be mixed with politics, that's the cause of our recent troubles". He then asks me a question - "Railway is a government body. Wasn't it their duty to protect passengers?" Certainly, Dr. Rawal, more so because media had reported trouble along the Sabarmati Express route a couple of days before the Godhra incident. The Faizabad-based daily Jan Morcha, specifically published a report about violence at the Rudauli station in UP. Intelligence agencies had echoed these concerns. Yet, Nitish Kumar, Advani and Modi failed to bolster security for the train and its passengers along the entire route. Reinforced RPF presence inside the train and on platforms would have helped save the 59 karsevaks who died and prevent the manhandling of Siddiq Bakar, the tea vendor and the 16-year old Sophiya Sheikh at the Godhra platform, the two incidents that triggered stone pelting at Signal Falia. Yet, does any of them emulate the former Railway Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, own moral responsibility and resign?

The Ministers and MLAs deny any involvement in the genocidal violence; yet their cellphones mysteriously make their way into Naroda Patiya and sites of other massacres. Senior Ministers are found directing police operations inside the Police Control Room to ensure their 'mobs' have immunity and in some cases, active help from the cops. The MP from the Gandhinagar constituency does precious little to contain violence in his own constituency. He also happens to be the Deputy Prime Minister and the country's Home Minister at the time. On election results day in 2002, Advani looks into TV cameras and comments on the BJP election campaign - "I think it is unique that the party decided not to raise the Godhra issue...because we did not want to create that kind of climate...it is remarkable". Just a few days earlier, I shoot a speech by Bhupendra Singh Solanki, the BJP MP from Panchmahals. Says he - "This election is not about development...the issue is Godhra...Everyone knows that even in America, England and Delhi!". The Congress remains silent, though there is both scope and precedent for legal action - after all, Bal Thackeray was disenfranchised on similar grounds! Hindutva ideologues first deny any horrific violence, then deny state complicity and finally deny their cynical exploitation of the Godhra tragedy for electoral gains. Haren Pandya, the only Minister from the Modi government to testify before the Citizen's Tribunal provides some

insights into the State's involvement in the carnage. He is shot dead a few months later, under what can only be euphemistically termed as "mysterious circumstances".

Report any of this and earn the sobriquet - "enemy of Gujarat" or "human-rightswallah-out-to-defame-Gujarati-asmita"! NDTV's coverage of the carnage so infuriates Modi that he orders a black out of their signal for several days. "60 Hindu girls abducted from Sabarmati Express" headlines a prominent Gujarati daily on Feb 28, 2002, fuelling sexual violence against Muslim women, only to retract the report a couple of days later in a tiny paragraph buried in the inside pages. Modi personally expresses his high appreciation for the newspaper's restrained coverage in the 'best traditions of journalism'; Times of India, Indian Express and other national dailies do not receive a similar letter of commendation from him.

Prof Bandukwala, whose home was destroyed by the very people who invited him to deliver the Savarkar Memorial lecture on Feb 26, 2002, tells me - "Gandhi was an accident that happened to Gujarat". I attribute it to anger and despair, but it sets me thinking - Would Bapu have embraced Modi as the "chhotey Sardar Patel"? Could the Mahatma have ever imagined that the gates of his Sabarmati Ashram would be shut to those who sought shelter at the height of the carnage? What would he have thought of his Congress - of some of its members equally complicit in communal attacks, of its president who failed to visit her own ex-MP's home, the site of his brutal hacking or of the myriad 'intellectuals' who failed to raise their voice against Moditva? Would he have been proud of Vali Gujarati's flattened mazaar or Ustad Fayyaz Khan's desecrated tomb? Of the kathakars and Godmen who failed to condemn the killings and preach peace? Or of Mallika Sarabhai's persecution? Or the Gaurav Yatra?

At the karsevak anniversary meeting on Feb 27, 2003 in Pavagad, the local leader exhorts the crowd - "Buy only from Hindu shops, use only Hindu rickshaws and raise saffron flags from your shops". He has police protection! In village after village, Muslims are unable to return home, their shops and fields taken over by people who should've been behind bars for driving them away in the first place. In cities and towns, informal ghettos have sprung up, children speak of being afraid to cross the 'border' to go to their schools. Would Mahatma Gandhi himself have been safe in his own Gujarat?

So, who do the people of Gujarat turn to? A partisan Legislative? The Executive - IAS and IPS officers - intent on serving its political masters - the very same bunch of IAS and IPS officers who crawled when asked to bend, barring a few notable exceptions? Or that last bastion of hope - the state Judiciary?

According to the Editors' Guild report on the Gujarat carnage - "Two serving Muslim Judges of the Gujarat High Court, Mr Qadri and Mr Akbar Divecha were threatened and had to flee their homes. The residence of one was attacked and burnt. A Hindu brother judge who offered him a safe haven in his own home was reportedly the recipient of threatening

calls". A senior lawyer insisting on anonymity speaks of hindutva in the Judiciary and cites examples of many BJP or VHP sympathisers appointed as public prosecutors or judges in the last decade! I attend a trial at the Godhra court - a courageous Muslim woman has decided to seek justice for the horrific rape and killing of her daughters. An ace lawyer, an ex-BJP MP, represents the accused. The Public Prosecutor, an erstwhile partyman, seeking justice on behalf of the Muslim woman as her lawyer hasn't seen it fit to even meet her though she is a key eyewitness! Later, many of us read the Gujarat High Court's remarks against Teesta Setalvad and Mihir Desai with a mix of horror and resignation; thankfully, the Supreme Court expunges them. Still later, the Zaheera Shaikh drama is played out, the SC steps in again and terms her a "liar".

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh created history by apologizing to the nation for the 1984 anti-sikh carnage during his speech in the Parliament. But, honestly, do you see M/s Sudarshan, Advani, Togadia and Modi apologizing for the genocidal violence in Gujarat? Instead, they speak of janadesh - the peoples' mandate; Modi is now flying high on the back of his triumph in the Ahmedabad municipal elections and his earlier sweep of the Gujarat assembly elections. But does an electoral victory legitimise evil? After all, Hitler did win the German elections!

Former Prime Minister Vajpayee preached rajdharma to Modi, but himself shunned all advice to practice what he preached, deliberately ignoring counsel from the President of India. Said the late K R Narayanan in March 2005 in an interview to Malayalam monthly Manava Samskriti - "I met him personally and talked to him directly. But Vajpayee did not do anything effective...I feel there was a conspiracy involving the state and central governments behind the Gujarat riots"

Is Gujarat 2002 a turning point in our recent history? Can politics of hate and intolerance be the basis for the creation of a harmonious society and a robust democracy? You decide...

P.S.

* Circulated by South Asia Citizens Wire, 13 January, 2006, Dispatch No. 2202.

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