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## Religious Cover for Political Power

Narratives from People and the  
Vernacular Press on the  
2002 Riots in Gujarat

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### THE BACKGROUND

Conflicts and riots among Hindus and Muslims in India are not a new phenomenon. They have, however, been less frequent and not as intense in terms of scale and nature of violence as witnessed in some of the recent riots. The Gujarat 2002 riot is one among a series of riots that has perhaps been the most violent compared to riots occurred so far in the state as well as in the country.<sup>1</sup>

Riots in India during the post-independence period have gradually acquired a character qualitatively different from those occurring during the British period. These have no more remained assertions to gain economic and political space by subjugating different minority groups at the local and/or regional level. Instead, they now draw their contents from a new form of political discourse that grew first in a latent and subsequently in an explicit form through a sustained introduction of a

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‘communal’ and divisive ideology. Institutionalised through supportive structures, its components spread wider and, to a large extent, became a pan-Indian phenomenon. Intermediated with the ideology of *Hindutva* (Hinduness), such a form of communalism has encroached upon spaces which could not be guarded well by forces claiming to oppose such formations. Compulsions of participating within the framework of a democratic party representing a wide range of caste- and class-based sectarian interests made several political parties respond to changes through accommodations, alliances and adjustments. To what extent have other political parties in the country been ‘secular’ within the vote-based political arithmetic of gaining, regaining, retaining and reaffirming power is difficult to ascertain. It can be said, however, that the contents of political discourse and their articulation in different forms by parties like the Congress have been quite different as far as the degree of including the tenets of a ‘religio-political’ discourse is concerned. Evidently, such a discourse formed an explicit part of articulation on the part of the ‘Hindu nationalist’ BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and its political as well as ‘non-political’ allies and associates.

Gradual integration of the notion of a unified India—propagated through a sub-text of ‘Hindu nationalism’—emerged as an important component of the BJP’s project of nation-building. And within this context, the state of Gujarat emerged as one of the forerunners where the BJP witnessed a substantial rise in the political arena. This is evident from its having gained progressively increasing number of seats in successive elections since 1989, except for its recent downfall in the 2004 parliamentary election. At the state level, however, the party continues to rule after strengthening its position substantially in the 1990 assembly elections by winning 68 of the 143 seats contested and subsequently gaining an overwhelming majority in the 2002 assembly elections.

## THE CONTEXT

Forming a large part of western India, Gujarat is one of the most industrially prosperous states of the Indian union. With 82 per cent of its Gross State Domestic Product coming from secondary and tertiary sectors and a much higher average annual rate of growth

compared with other states, it has improved its economic position substantially, especially during the last two decades. In spite of a high rate of growth, growing industrial investments and facilitating economic environment for a sustained growth of the manufacturing sector, the state has been witness to a number of large-scale riots and unrest between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that the state has for long been a riot-prone region, though such occurrences became frequent after 1950, reaching a peak during the 1960s with the 1969 riots as the first of such major outbreaks. Subsequently, the initial half of the 1980s witnessed some bouts of intense and widespread riots, especially during 1985, though casualties and loss were less intense when compared with that of 1969.

Quoting Shah (1970), Sengupta and others (Sengupta et al. 2003) write that the riots of 1969 had occurred with the 1965 Indo-Pak war in the background and a host of other events and factors including that of the then chief minister's plane being shot down by a Pakistani war plane during the war; shifting Muslim votes from the Congress to the Swatantra Party; RSS rally calling for a Hindu rashtra as a reaction to certain demands put forth by a section among Muslims; Jan Sangh leader, Balraj Madhok's flaunting the Muslim protests against an attack on a mosque in the Middle East; protests by sections of Muslims and Hindus on incidents of insulting the Quran and the Ramayana by a Hindu and a Muslim officer, respectively; and the Jana Sangh leader's calling for the formation of the Hindu Dharma Raksha Samiti. As against this, the riots of the 1980s can be placed in the background of latent as well as manifest social unrests, the Navnirman agitation of 1974, and the anti-reservation stir of 1980 against the inclusion of socially and economically backward classes within the realm of benefits of such reservations (Sengupta et al. 2003).

The 2002 riots in Gujarat that preceded the assembly elections not only witnessed unprecedented violence, arson and loot, in terms of its nature as well as intensity, but also resulted in the exclusion of Muslims in most parts of the state in a definitive way. These riots occurred when the form of political discourse(s) had already witnessed a notable change, and the BJP had emerged as the dominant power in the state, while also ruling at the centre. The background over the decade of the 1990s was also punctuated by the L. K. Advani led *Rathiyatra* (chariot

tour) from Somnath (in Gujarat) and the December 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid (Babri mosque) followed by communal riots in Gujarat and elsewhere; efforts, debates, actions and reactions on the building of the Ram Mandir (temple for Lord Rama) at Ayodhya, politicisation of the *Ramjanmabhoomi* (birthplace of Lord Rama) issue, and its consolidation through shilapujan (worship of stones) and “knitting” of bricks from across different parts of the country.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the above context and background, the focus of this paper is to (i) briefly narrate how these riots were generally portrayed by two widely circulated newspapers, namely, *Gujarat Today* (GT) and *Gujarat Samachar* (GS) during as well as in the immediate aftermath of the related incidents across the state, and (ii) record the explanation and speculation as expressed by a cross-section of individuals on the causes, intensity, effects, as well as implications of these riots in the near future. A total of twenty individuals were interviewed, which included teachers from different universities in the state and social activists belonging to organisations working for the development of the marginalised sections, especially on rights-based issues, legal aid, etc., in the cities of Baroda, Surat, Anand and Ahmedabad.

## POINTERS FROM THE NEWSPAPERS

### Spontaneity or Revenge and the Role of the State

In broad terms, the following pointers emerge from the contents of *Gujarat Today* (i) whatever might have been the reasons for triggering the Godhra incident, which involved untold misery and massacre of people in the two compartments of the Sabarmati Express, the event was appropriated by the ‘Hindu nationalists’ to legitimise their sustained revenge against the Muslims all over Gujarat. The violent revenge remained unabated for a long period; (ii) the acts of revenge got further legitimacy and strength when the chief minister of the state justified them as a legitimate reaction; (iii) the feeling of revenge being pronounced within the already fragile base of social relations between the two communities, revenge could easily make enough space for itself

almost to the extent of being hyped; (iv) hardly any attempt was made to unearth the immediate cause that triggered the torching of the two compartments in the Sabarmati Express; (v) a possibly spontaneous reaction that was transformed into revenge was followed by systematic identification of Muslims and attacks on their localities across many rural and urban settlements, especially that of select pockets in central Gujarat by Hindu mobs; (vi) the Dalits and Adivasis were encouraged and used in the execution of riots in few parts of the state; (vii) the state lent tacit support to the ongoing happenings, for it supported the *bandh* call, by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in Gujarat and continued to remain soft on the rioters in several parts. Appendix 5.1 to 5.5 illustrate the spontaneity and revenge theory of these riots as seen in *Gujarat Samachar* and *Gujarat Today*.

As against *Gujarat Today*, the tone and contents of the news and editorials in *Gujarat Samachar* were not as critical of the state and of the situation, though it did focus on adverse comments made by the National Human Rights Commission on the functioning of the state. It featured reports critical of the VHP and Bajrang Dal and highlighted the concerns of the BJP MLAs with regard to the deteriorating law and order situation and their emphasis on keeping a strict vigil especially on *madrasas*. It also stated that, ironically, when every religion aims at forbidding competition, conflict, and revenge, man has been hunting man in these riots in the name of religion. That the pseudo-secularists were in support of and biased in favour of minorities is another point that some reports in the *GS* highlighted. Significantly, in some of its narrations, Pakistan, Kashmir, and terrorism were referred to as counters to such groups.

### **Role of Politicians in the Riots**

Both the papers took positions rather opposed to one another while commenting on the political parties and the political leaders during the period of the riots. The *GT* not only linked the killings with the vested interests of select groups, but also emphasised that it was the duty of a democratically elected government to deliver proper governance and not allow emergence of forces leading to loss of

innocent lives. It equated 'Ramrajya' with good governance. While celebrating the central elements of justice and love as parts of such a concept, it was critical of the politicians' apparently indulging in unfair deeds. The essence of its position as well as the contents of its coverage was critical about the visit of the then prime minister, A. B. Vajpayee, to Ahmedabad on 4 April 2002 and his refraining from holding the Modi government responsible for what had happened in Gujarat. Appendix 5.6–5.8 give evidence of the role of politicians in the riots as seen in *Gujarat Samachar* and *Gujarat Today*.

Going along the line of argument that terrorism was implied in the whole incident and that it was difficult to thwart the revenge, the *GS* highlighted the apparently 'neutral' narrative of the tragedy as visualised by the prime minister. At the same time, it drew attention to atrocities perpetrated by Muslims in Godhra from a long time, accusing Muslims in Pakistan of complicity with terrorists in Gujarat, especially by quoting people at high places such as the state home minister (*GS* 5 March). It also expressed an anti-Congress stance by blaming them for their 'soft' and 'pseudo' line in favour of the minorities (*GS* 27 March).

### **Role of Police and Media in the Riots**

That it was possible for the police to control the riots and related events in a more effective way if it had been sufficiently alert was the essence of writings in the *GT*. Projecting the lack of willingness on the part of the police to take a tough stand, it quoted Mumbai based super-cop Julio Rebeiro: 'with appropriate body language five policemen can control a crowd of 5000 people' (*GT* 21 March). On 10th April, Abdul Latif, columnist, wrote in the *GT* that while it was the duty of police to protect the interests of citizens, it appears that the police got involved with rioters, tacitly helping them to loot and kill. The *GS*, however, in some of its reporting, was concerned about why the police was shying away from conducting the needed combing operations in the Muslim localities (*GS* 1 April).

The *GS* commented on the role of the media, emphasising how certain television channels and newspapers were carrying items that were two to three days old in a manner as if they had occurred afresh

with the view of inciting people (*GS* 2 March). The *GS* also wrote about how some of the English newspapers and TV channels were carrying reports equally selective and biased. While being soft to the minorities, such groups in the media were failing to give voice to the sentiments of the majority: this was the essence of such pointers emerging from reports appearing in the *GS*.

### **Impact of Riots**

In contrast with the above, the *GT* focused on the impact of Gujarat riots on the state and the country. Its reports included (i) views on how a sustained communal divide had for long been responsible for eroding and destroying our heritage; (ii) that criminalisation of the polity had got further legitimised by communal conflicts and skirmishes; (iii) how the bandh ended up in more violence resulting in social and economic losses; and (iv) the extent of damage the riots had placed on the image of Gujarat in the country and on the image of India the world over. Pointing out that the social structure of the country was facing severe erosion with widening faultlines, the *GT* also emphasised the aspects related to the country being weakened by these happenings, especially because the minorities had now lost trust in the Constitution and the state. In addition, the paper also emphasised that the image of the country in the international community was fast emerging as a negative one and that it was essential to reverse and halt this process. Appendix 5.9 to 5.13 illustrates the impact of riots as seen in *Gujarat Samachar* and *Gujarat Today*.

The *GT* also covered narrations focused on such questions as: how has the Hindu religion and society called itself generous and non-violent when it could torture and burn its widows, cut open the bellies of pregnant women, and see women die from the fear of being raped. Recalling the Sikh massacre of 1984 by quoting Rajkishor, a columnist, it suggested, on 16th April, that the Hindus had now become violent. The point was further emphasised through other statements, including that of Joseph Macwan in the issue dated 24 April, where he asks what kind of a religion was this where saints were supporting systematic massacre of innocent Muslim women

and children? Congress had its KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi and Muslim) theory to come to power, but the BJP has used religion to destroy it and succeed to power (Macwan, *GT* 24 April). Explicit as well as implicit appeals to secular Hindus to come forward and contest the happenings were also apparent in the tone and slant in some of the *GT*'s narrations.

## A Few General Observations

In addition, the *GT* has drawn the contours that indicate the changing modes of political discourse and the occurrence of the Gujarat riots as being mainly an associated event. It suggests a rising 'Hindu nationalism' that has moved ahead by appropriating a wide range of philosophical and ideological position(s) emphasised and advanced by Vivekananda, Gandhi, Sardar and Ambedkar. Further, there are pointers indicating that the seemingly opposed position of Gandhi and Sardar had been celebrated resulting from its 'hard nationalistic' views by the Sangh Parivar. The paper also tends to highlight the processes leading to propaganda against the Muslims that has the potential of making them more vulnerable, and it indicates that the phenomenon has resulted in the nurturing of fascist tendencies in the state. Quoting M. J. Akbar (7 April) and Ramsuman (14 April) it says that even the top leadership in the Sangh Parivar did not criticise the riots and that the Sangh Parivar wants the prime minister to carry a *trishul* (trident) in his pocket to assert his Hindu identity as Modi does in Gujarat.

What appears from the above is that through the narratives carried by the two newspapers, viz., *Gujarat Today* and *Gujarat Samachar*, they get placed in opposition to one another. Pitched from different vantage points they seem to echo the essence of expressions albeit in a different manner. The 'we' and 'they' remain implied in much of their coverage. The *GT* points at the tendency of Hindu nationalist and allied groups to appropriate conflicts and skirmishes in order to create legitimacy of a majority vs minority—a Hindu vs Muslim politics. The *GS* points to the tendency of minorities having potentials of emerging as anti-nationals at the pan Indian, and aggressive at regional levels.



## PERCEPTIONS OF LEAD INDIVIDUALS ON THE RIOTS AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS

A few knowledgeable persons from scholars, people working in NGOs, social activists and leading citizens of both communities were interviewed on the causes, intensity, spread, impact, and implications of riots for the future.

### **Why Gujarat is More Riot Prone?**

According to many, a change in political discourse with potentials to create communally divisive politics has been a prime factor for the culmination of events into such riots. Responses suggest that (i) in spite of the state being developed in terms of economic parameters, it has always been 'traditional', holding strongly to the identities associated with religiosity, rituals, castes, sects, and a wide range of other similar denominations; (ii) while assertion of an identity or efforts of negotiating a space in the changing social milieu had facilitated the emergence and sustenance of many such groups, projection of an apparent cohesion among them under a broad umbrella of 'Hindutva' had been easy, especially in the absence of any other radical or progressive social and/or political form; (iii) the caste system and corresponding divisions in the Gujarat society have been more rigid and continue to remain so, paving the way to a political discourse that can, unlike in many other states, be mediated by religious tenets having potentials of linking with a variety of religio-political platforms. These factors were able to create an environment where the Sangh Parivar could sustain and reinforce a social divide between the Hindus and Muslims within a decade. The focus, however, remains more on central Gujarat where institutionalisation of the above-mentioned factors and processes has not only been intense but also celebrated through constant delivery of religious discourses, moral teachings, construction of temples and an emphasis on worshipping some of the gods and goddesses.

The second set of factors identified by most of these respondents relates to the rise of the BJP as a political power in the state and, along with it, the growth of activities of the RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal. With the erosion of the Congress in the state, the combined

power of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar, according to them, was able to penetrate the social base of the OBCs as well as the upcoming urban middle classes through different forms and modalities. A section among them emphasised the manner in which the Patidars had prospered since independence and the way in which they were able to use their political and economic strength, which they expressed through different means. The central tendency of such a set of opinions indicates that the Patidars, who have been dominant in terms of money and political power, have often been a part of religious organisations, which together have led towards creating a political base for themselves. That this group has been able to appropriate much of the larger social sphere in their favour facilitated, albeit, by reinvented sanctions and financial supports coming in mainly from the NRIs abroad. This marked tendency is substantiated by a response: 'The Patidars have lately used specific religious structures and sects as platforms to strengthen the socio-political base for themselves, supported by remittances as well as donations meant ostensibly for developmental activities but essentially laced with religious undertones. And the process has led to a kind of insulation among them that has potentials of nurturing opposed positions and may have emerged as factors facilitating the disturbed situations in parts of Gujarat.'

The third set of factors points toward the role of Hindutva forces, especially that of the Sangh Parivar, towards sustaining a communally divisive environment that has, according to many, helped the riots to last for a long time. Differentiating the 1992 riots from the recent ones, these responses tend to place the immediate causes of the former on the inability of the state to respond to the rising aspirations of the middle classes and the related 'reservations' issue, while the latter, according to them, has been affected by a constant rise of communalisation of society across different levels. While emerging as important pointers, the following expressions by some of our lead respondents sum up the above mentioned views

Undoubtedly, the State of Gujarat has not only emerged as a more riot-prone region in the country, but also more riots have actually taken place in this State. The violent riots of 1992 were

mainly caused due to the competing factors linked with the 'Reservation' issue that subsequently turned communal.

The recent riots however have been propelled by the concerted activities and propagation of specific ideology by the Sangh Parivar. Much of the damage caused in the State in these riots has been due to the emergence and growth of these and similar forces.

The overwhelming religiosity expressed often in an outwardly manner is a prominent component that characterizes a large part of the Gujarat society and it is this element that has been appropriated and used by these forces where the idea of Ramjanmabhoomi, shila poojan programmes and different yatras have influenced the common people.

And processes like this have led towards increasing the social distance among Hindus and Muslims that resulted in sustaining the 2002 riots for an unprecedented long duration.

Many expressed that such processes have led to a near complete segregation of Hindus and Muslims and strengthened the feeling of 'living only with one's own group'. According to one of the respondents, 'Pakistan' had now become a metaphor for isolated living by Muslims in Ahmedabad; this denotes a deviation from so-called mainstream norms. Such spatial polarisation has not only got strengthened in the urban areas but also in many villages, where Muslim households had fled out of fear during the riots.

The fourth set of factors points, as the causes of increasing communal riots in the state, to its urban growth rate and the patterns of investment in its 'golden' and 'silver' corridors since the early nineties. Such a growth pattern, according to some, has on the one hand attracted a sizable number of migrants from other regions in the country, and on the other, has raised aspirations of the middle classes. The changing social fabric of these cities has seemingly transformed the 'political demography' in select urban areas, which tend to act as prime nodes of competing interests and which have the potential of sustaining communal and other similar unrests. Some respondents also related the length of the 2002 riots with the closure of textile mills that had retrenched lakhs of workers who could not get alternative employment and/or re-establish their social positions; thereby they became easy targets for being recruited as riot-mongers or looters.

## Differences between the Riots of 1992 and 2002

We present here a few narratives substantiating some of the related observations. About a quarter of our respondents placed the issue in a time perspective and linked the riots of 2002 with the rise of the BJP, irrespective of their varying intensity. According to them, since the last decade and a half, the BJP had been actively pursuing the task of strengthening its base in the country as a whole. Initially the party established close contacts with the upper castes, and having created this base, succeeded in getting elected in some states, while also acquiring power at the centre with help from smaller parties. During this process, they were helped by Hindu fundamentalist organisations. In Gujarat, by organising programmes against reservations as well as the OBCs, they initiated a new form of politics. With the Ayodhya issue at its peak in 1992, the party became very important in Gujarat, but during the post-earthquake period it did not perform well and began to lose ground. Having lost in the panchayat elections, there was a dire need for it to stage a come-back in the assembly elections, and the 2002 riots facilitated their springing back to power. Hence, the BJP might have had an interest in sustaining the riots in order to be able to harness a substantial amount of political capital.

While linking the causes of the long duration of the 2002 riots to the political interests and aspirations of the BJP, respondents highlighted that it was the most violent riot in the state in terms of lives and property lost. To some of them, Hindus had become more violent in 2002, and the VHP more than any other organisation had worked towards the creation of such an environment. What happened after 28 February 2002 could have happened on any other day, for the essential reason for this riot was a concerted effort to gain political mileage. Some respondents went on to say that the complaints launched all over the state had a similar pattern and that this is a clear pointer that political interests were being mediated and articulated through a definite set of machinations. Two of the respondents coming down heavily on the VHP, stated that the

Game plan of VHP was not only dangerous, but also in the long run had the potentials of emerging as harmful to the country

and the society at large . . . . They are bent upon dividing the society on the basis of religion for selfish political gains.

Having participated in the riots, sections among the Hindus think that they are brave and that what has been carried out is worthwhile . . . . But the real aim of such tasks was to safeguard the Hindu vote bank and this is what the BJP succeeded in doing.

A point that found repeated reference in our discussions with most of the respondents had to do with what they labelled as state support to the 2002 riots, something which, according to them, was absent in the 1992 riots. Some of them stated pointedly that the riot-mongers in 1992 were not helped by the government; while in 2002 it was a party to the riots to a large extent. Specifically, it misused the police. Failure of the government to protect people's lives and property has been highlighted by many. They also emphasised that the very act of violence was qualitatively different in the 2002 riots in comparison with that of the 1992 riots. As an extension of this argument, some observers clubbed together the BJP and the VHP, as the *bandh* called by them was supported and facilitated by both of them. This, to the observers, was a clear pointer to their having been in sympathy with each other and being the facilitating agencies in the riots.

That these riots were systematic and planned was another point identified by many. How else, according to them, would the events have been the same from day to day and directed specifically against the Muslims? Specific comments were also made on the speeches and the character of the language used by the VHP General Secretary, Pravin Togadia, meant to incite the Hindus against the Muslims. According to one of the respondents, ' . . . in 1992 they sowed the seeds and in 2002 harvested a bumper crop'. In the words of another respondent

The riots in 1992 were not so violent, but those of 2002 were extremely brutal and rather well spread over the space. Crossing the boundaries of select cities, it went down to the villages. Pre-planned, the methods used in this riot were frightening. Gas cylinders were used for explosions and petrol to fuel the fire further. When, in some areas, Muslims approached the police stations, there were officers saying that they were instructed not to register and/or entertain complaints coming from them. And

these indicate that the *Hindutva* organizations, the BJP, and the bureaucracy were at least in tacit support of these riots.

As victim and witness of attacks, another respondent stated

We had not moved out of here, for we are a big number at this location. Even after a year we haven't been able to forget the way our daughter died in the police firing. We had to plead and then pressurize the police to register our complaint. With no government help coming at all, we remained alive only with the support provided by our own community during the entire period that was full of fear, anxiety and tension. Two among us died and five seriously injured with the fight here between the police and the Muslims. We were fired at without any provocation. The PSI (Police Sub-Inspector) here is himself a member of the Bajrang Dal. Being a *Bhaiya*,<sup>4</sup> he was helping the Bhaiyas and instigating them against us. The Muslims here complained to Gill about his behaviour and he got him transferred. But soon after Gill's departure, he was posted back here. . . . And the 2002 riots were much larger in scale compared to those of the 1992 riots, for ideas associated with Hindutva and Hindu power had been propagated well. There was no one to hear us and the Congress party had become ineffective. Participants in the riots were earlier targeting the government properties but now the Muslims and their belongings had become their prime targets. Most of them have repeatedly been told that Muslims are anti-social and must be taught a lesson.

Another point, though only raised by some, had to do with what they termed as growing economic rivalry between the two communities, especially in the city of Ahmedabad. According to them, the post-1992 period witnessed the flight of a section of Muslim entrepreneurs towards its western suburbs where a section among them invested heavily in putting up restaurants, fast-food joints, other eateries, shops and shopping complexes. Many of these were easy targets because of the vulnerability of their locations, something which was not as easy to target earlier during 1992.

Major differences between the two riots as observed and collated from the narratives and interviews can be put in the following capsule form.

Major differences between the 1992 and 2002 riots as revealed by the interviews

1992	2002
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short-lived</li> <li>• Placed in the context of the reservation issue</li> <li>• Demolition of the Babri Masjid</li> <li>• Less lives lost</li> <li>• Extent of property damage low</li> <li>• Less brutal and not as violent</li> <li>• No state support</li> <li>• Spontaneous to some extent</li> <li>• Less widespread (mainly in urban areas)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-drawn</li> <li>• Sustained anti-Muslim and pro-Hindutva propaganda</li> <li>• Mobilisation towards Hindu unification</li> <li>• More lives lost</li> <li>• Extent of property damage very high</li> <li>• Highly brutal, dreadful, and very violent</li> <li>• State support evident</li> <li>• Systematic and well planned</li> <li>• Very widespread (inclusive of many rural areas).</li> </ul>

### Reasons for Intense Spread of Riots and Participation of Dalits

Villages, indeed, had remained generally untouched by riots or, at best, had experienced only sporadic skirmishes and conflicts. But, the 2002 riots engulfed parts of rural areas in certain regions in the state. A majority of the respondents related the reason for this unusual and intense spread of riots in villages to a sustained anti-Muslim propaganda by the BJP, VHP and RSS combine and to the activities carried out by a variety of religious and quasi-religious organisations. In tribal areas where traditionally the Congress had a stronghold, Muslims were projected as being opposed to Hindus and, by extension, Indian society. In many such villages, the Muslim shopkeepers-cum-moneylenders were projected as exploiters. This helped the Sangh Parviar in weakening the hold of the Congress in certain tribal pockets. Another related propaganda of this type could have become successful mainly in the tribal settlements located in the plains and valleys, because a large section among them was exposed for a long time to Hindu cultural practices and rituals—especially, during recent decades, through the institutionalisation of a wide range of sects, including Ramanandi and Kabirpanthi, and the entry of many Hindu gods and goddesses through a variety of modes. The villages on the hills and slopes had, however, remained farther from such influences, for they had not been included as much in the process of being part of the ‘mainstream’

and the market economy as had been the tribal groups living in the plains and more fertile valleys. In specific pockets, like the district of Dangs, such forces were, however, able to create antagonism between Hindus and Christians, something that had facilitated the assertion of Hindutva elements across select pockets within a short time.

Parts of central Gujarat, where we conducted most of our fieldwork, has been labelled as a region that had a strong institutionalisation of certain factors that led to the articulation of Hindutva. The Patidars, economically and socially the most powerful group in the region, have reasserted their hegemony through their association with organisations such as the VHP, and they have included the other lower-caste and poorer groups within the 'Hindutva umbrella' in a manner that was more discrete and fluid. That directly or indirectly the lower-caste groups were incited by the Patidars to loot the Muslims while remaining backstage was a pointer identified by a few of our respondents. According to one of them

Through new branches of different Hindu organizations, the related ideology has reached the villages where even the last person has not remained untouched by such a process. At many places, teachers at the village schools have been involved and in such activities the Patidars have been the most active—a majority of whom are anti-Muslim and members of the VHP or RSS.

Emphasising the same point, another respondent said

Patidars have facilitated and helped sustaining these riots especially by using the caste groups who have no choice but to depend on them economically across major pockets in Central Gujarat . . . They appear to be accepting them as Hindus—and a part of their own fold through various programmes like offering trishul deekshas and distributing trishuls, but in heart of hearts want to keep them at their present levels—downtrodden and dependent on them economically . . . They do not want them to share political power that could help them gain in terms of social and economic advantages, but the dalits get attracted to such programmes as they have been subordinate and subservient to the Patidars since long and have continued to remain poor as well as under-employed. And with tacit support and cover provided by Patidars, the riots had come to some dalits as an opportunity to derive quick gains through robbery and loot without having done much work.



Participation of the Dalits in the riots, especially in cities was also highlighted by some of our respondents. What emerges from their narratives is that, although the Dalits have been living closer to the Muslims for a long time, during these riots, a section among them was compelled to come out and strike, because of the perception that while Muslims could attack and kill them, they would not be saved by any other group or agency. Because of the closure of textile mills that had rendered more than one lakh Dalits jobless and that had intensified their level of poverty, the next generation, in the absence of any appropriate employment, was easily influenced by the religious-political discourses of the BJP and its allies. Many of them who could take up only illegal and/or other 'underground' jobs were vulnerable enough to be used during the riots. The generation born after 1980–81 knows little about the discrimination faced by their parents and grandparents at the hands of upper-caste Hindus. Sections of such a big contingent of youth, fed on sustained Hindutva propaganda and political expressions could be used easily for reacting to the chain of events unfolding during the riots.

Affirming the role of Dalits in riots in certain villages in certain parts of central Gujarat and in specific urban pockets, four of our respondents linked such a behaviour of the Dalits with the rise in number of what they identified as 'outposts' of the VHP, RSS and Bajrang Dal groups in the villages, towns, as well as cities and their propagation of anti-minority and pro-Hindu biases on a sustained basis. Such propagation, according to them, involved dialogues and discourses that highlighted aspects of Hindu religion, its amorphous nature, and 'all inclusive' characteristics as well as an Indian nationalism and culture rooted essentially on such discrete tenets. Through these routes, they project the minorities as being in opposition to such 'culture' and thereby in conflict with larger national interests.

### **Other Causes of the 2002 Riots**

Two other causes identified by a number of our lead respondents pertain to what they have labelled as the Modi-factor and NRI support. While highlighting the former, their narratives centre on the following. The former Chief Minister, Keshubhai Patel, was not able to deal well with tasks associated with provision of adequate relief to

earthquake victims and also to respond effectively to issues linked with the Narmada Dam. This resulted in a fall in his popularity and eventual ouster, with Modi riding in the saddle. Essentially a front-runner and an organisational activist of Hindutva politics, Modi was able to soon create an impression on a large section of people that he meant business and was alone capable of creating the needed space for the Hindus. Shankarsinh Vaghela of the Congress was no match to him. Modi, through a reorganisation of the state bureaucracy and the much hyped *gaaurav yatra*, was able to rejuvenate a discourse that led to a clear social division between Hindus and Muslims. Thus, the factors for conflict had already crystallised before the Godhra incident, and, therefore, the riots took a violent and brutal form immediately after the incident.

Emphasising the role of Gujarati NRI support, the respondents generally opined that a large proportion of these NRIs endorse the activities of the Sangh Parivar, whose organisations receive huge donations for helping the needy. A substantial part of such money, however, is used for exhibiting and articulating religiosity that tends to emerge as divisive and competitive at the same time, through *kathas*, *pravachans*, and other religious programmes. Most of these NRIs residing in UK and USA belong to upper-caste groups and are members of numerous branches of allied Hindu religious and political organisations. A section apparently transfers money from abroad illegally through *hawala* of which no account can be traced easily. This money is used for a variety of similar programmes. This has led to a visible increase in the rate of popular participation in the state in religious discourses, visits to shrines and pilgrimages. That all these processes have facilitated creation of a consciousness across a large number of caste groups, giving rise to an expression of contest and conflict vis-à-vis the Muslims, has been the essence of these responses.

### **Social Distance between the Two Communities**

It was stated by all our respondents that the 2002 riots in Gujarat have created deep scars on the relations between the two communities, and most of these scars are difficult to heal. A majority of them emphasised that these riots have resulted in a near complete segregation of the two communities and that even villages in many parts of the state

have not remained untouched by this phenomenon. While some of them reflected on the short- and long-term implications of such clear communal divisions, others pointed at the very vulnerability of the situation itself, such that it could be engineered by vested interests for quick political and allied gains. The environment of mistrust between the two groups that generally envelopes the state now, has made it impossible for both the communities to work together in such areas as forming cooperative housing societies, or for Muslims to be tenants to Hindu homeowners and vice versa, or in dealing with enterprises and other business activities. Even the forms and modalities of transactions associated with the delivery and receipt of services at different levels have got communalised. Expressions of boycotting and marginalising Muslim traders, petty shopkeepers and vendors have begun to be articulated in practice, albeit in sectors where it is possible. According to one of the respondents

Depending on the situation as it comes by, the perceived mistrust or trust between the two communities creates anxiety or freedom from it on a day-to-day basis while buying vegetables or fruits, hiring an autorickshaw or even getting a cycle or a scooter repaired, for the general belief that has set in, makes a Muslim service provider likely to cheat his Hindu clients and vice versa. Obviously, hence, both the communities now try to depend on their own people to the extent possible rather than others. And this creates an extreme situation where one does not mind being cheated or overcharged by people belonging to his/her own community.

In the same context, some other respondents highlighted that marginalisation of Muslims by the Hindutva political forces had been on the rise since the early 1990s, and that with the 2002 riots the project of bracketing the community was complete. They have been socially subordinated, economically impaired and culturally pushed out. The net result is manifest in 'ghettoisation' that carries the potential of creating an environment where the minorities can negotiate with their lives without having any anxiety about the majority community.

On the question of whether or not the existing gulf between the two communities could ever be bridged, a majority refrained from responding. A section, however, emphasised that the possibility of the

two communities coming together was continuously being weakened owing to the reinforcement of the process of hardening of the 'we' and 'they' syndrome. Based on how things were being projected, viewed, perceived, and internalised, the majority in both the communities were opting for segregation rather than intermixing, and separation rather than assimilation. According to one of the respondents

The gap now created between the two communities is difficult to close. It may remain for long and perhaps widen further, for the present leaders are not interested in bridging it. They keep inciting people and do not allow them to come together again. The entire Muslim community has been blamed and is so projected for what happened in Godhra that they are constantly under tension and fear. In connivance with allied forces Hindutvavadis are trying to destroy the Muslims economically by boycotting them in business and trade. Social relations between the two groups have deteriorated further. The gap is now so wide and deep that it may not ever get filled, and if it does it may take decades for the same.

### **Future of Hindutva in India**

The Hindutva lifeline was viewed by the respondents in two sets: (i) an intense but short span of no more than five years, and (ii) its overwhelming presence and sustained growth. Responses and narratives related to the former point out that (i) the rise of Hindutva factors could gain much strength only in select states in the country, especially in areas where alternative structures were either weak or had been eroded owing to a variety of internal as well as external factors; (ii) centred around systematic efforts by upper and middle castes to gain and claim newer spaces in the socio-political arena, the concept was used by such forces to strengthen the communally divisive politics for quick political gains, albeit through a reassertion of hegemony over the lower-caste groups and the minorities; (iii) the concept, essentially aimed at gaining political power, has been abridged, edited, and propagated and is, thus, very much a rhetoric. It was successful in the state of Gujarat, for with the growth of a void in the political arena, the religious and political discourses were able to reshape the socio-cultural life. To sustain a formation which itself is an aggregate of discrete instruments, the respondents were of the view that, pitched

from a different vantage point, Hindutva and the related polity will have to face disarray owing to the contradictions that would naturally emerge in such forced ensembles that are neither assimilative nor cohesive. In continuation, some of the respondents also emphasised that the BJP will be compelled to change its modalities, for the absence of claims and counter-claims, contests, and compromises posed and articulated by conflicting interests within its own fold will aid its dissipation.

Narratives related to suggestions of a sustained growth of Hindutva and its associated political discourse remain centred around (i) divisive caste-based society and conflict-ridden politics. Since such a politics has already been shaped in a framework laced with the essentials of opposition between the Hindus and Muslims, the modalities of such instruments will further grow, especially in the context of a vote-based democratic framework; (ii) the likely erosion of regional parties that had grown through the projection of sectarian interests and that are not linked with any pan-national feeling, as that of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism, will make way for Hindutva to enter further, facilitated by the institutional structures of the BJP and its allies; (iii) the possibility that across cities, towns and villages of the Indian union, there exists a wide range of channels, structures and modes, which can be used on a continuous basis to propagate and articulate the religiosity of Hindutva, and the same can be used to harness electoral gains at appropriate times by groups that are working towards legitimisation of a 'Hinduized Indian nationalism'; and (iv) the impact when Hindutva can be placed at the level of such emotions and then mediated through a politics that promises to further it through statements having mass appeal.

## CONCLUSION

The narratives appearing in the two newspapers we have examined are placed differently. While *Gujarat Samachar* seemingly remains critical of the 'pseudo-secularists' and appears to suggest that the Godhra incident and subsequent riots are related to the overall atmosphere of terror and terrorism, *Gujarat Today* highlighted the role of criminalisation of politics and the modalities through which communal divisions were legitimised, which led to systematic attacks

on the entire Muslim community after the episode. In addition, it also focused on the rising Hindu nationalism and its potential for creating the politics of majority vs minority that could further marginalise the Muslims in the state.

Responses and narratives drawn from the interviews point to the state of Gujarat being more riot prone than other states owing to a variety of factors that among others include the social environment where Hindutva forces could sustain corresponding propagation and harness political gain. Seemingly, aided by a conducive social environment and a religio-political discourse, the BJP and its allies were able to use Hindutva as a political mobiliser and capture power in the state. Such rise of BJP had also been facilitated by the erosion of Congress support in select pockets.

With the overwhelming victory of the BJP in the 2002 assembly elections, the communally divisive politics got a further boost. This was also complemented by the nature of the 2002 riots. Unlike the earlier riots, it took a big leap forward in strengthening the already existing divisions among the Hindus and Muslims. The process this time also engulfed the rural areas in a definite as well as intense manner. Whatever lies in future for the BJP and Hindutva or for the political parties in opposition or in alliance with them, given the scenario, it seems that the communally divisive politics may continue to grow, albeit in a latent mode with potentials of it being appropriated by vested interests in times to come.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The torching of bogey S-6 of the Ahmedabad-bound train, Sabarmati Express, at Godhra on 27 February 2002 in which 58 passengers, including 26 women and 12 children were burnt to death, was shocking. The burned corpses of the ill-fated passengers became a justification for armed squads for BJP with its 'brother' organisations—RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal—to launch a pogrom against the Muslims of Gujarat.

Around two thousand Muslims were killed in the post-Godhra riots that continued for months. Eyewitnesses and victims, survivors and observers, put the crowds who terrorised them at less than two thousand; most often, even in remote villages, they were closer to 10,000–15,000-strong mobs,

armed with deadly agricultural implements. Key men carried guns and rifles. A few in the crowd even carried mobile phones to enable coordination of the attacks. Dead bodies no longer resembled human beings: they were reduced—whenever they had not been burned to ashes—to a grotesque and pathetic sight. Rape was used as an instrument for the subjugation and humiliation of a community. Pregnant women's bellies were slit open with swords and fetuses flung in the fire. A chilling and hitherto absent technique was the deliberate destruction of evidence—barring a few cases, women who were gang raped were thereafter hacked and burned (see 'Genocide Gujarat 2002' in *Communalism Combat*, March–April 2002).

Contrary to popular belief, the intensity and main spread of the 2002 riots in Gujarat have been concentrated in areas within its central and northern zones, leaving peninsular Saurashtra, Kutch, and the south Gujarat regions largely devoid of direct clashes and riots between the two communities. This becomes evident from the maps showing the spatial distribution of a large number of related events (data on which were collated by us from reports of two vernacular newspapers, viz., *Gujarat Today* and *Gujarat Samachar* over a period starting 1 March 2002 to the end of April 2002), carefully aggregated, analysed and plotted under the heads of: (i) triggering events; (ii) clashes; (iii) rumours; (iv) damages; (v) other effects; (vi) interventions by agencies towards rescue and relief; (vii) state action, and (viii) extent of the spread of riot. What emerges from these maps is that the cities of Ahmedabad and Vadodara, including their outskirts and talukas of Anand and Chhotaudepur in the central Gujarat and Kadi in northern Gujarat, can be grouped under very highly affected areas. This is followed by talukas of Borsad, Sojitra, Jetpur, Naswadi, Kawant, Halol and Nadiad in central Gujarat: Bayad in the northern and parts of Bhavnagar in the Saurashtra region coming under highly affected category. Moderately affected areas had been in the talukas of Padra, Dabhoi, Khambhat, Petlad, Thasra, Godhra, Limkheda, Mehmedabad, Daskroi and Viramgam in the central zone; Mehsana, Prantij, Vijapur, Meghraj, Modasa, Himmatnagar, Idar, Vadali and Vijaynagar, in the northern zone, and Jhagadia in the southern zone. Excluding the cities of Ahmedabad and Vadodara and, at a much lower scale, Surat and Rajkot, riots, clashes and damages were mainly witnessed in 35 of the 211 talukas or 16 per cent of such blocks in the state. However, of the talukas in the central zone, as much as 31 per cent (19 of the 62 talukas) and those in the northern zone as much as 24 per cent (10 of the 42 talukas), witnessed higher intensity of these riots. For more details and especially maps showing spatial spread of the variables mentioned (see Lobo and Das 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Available data (Joshi, Srinivasan, and Bajaj 2003) indicate that the proportion of Hindus to the total population in Gujarat has remained steady at a little

armed with deadly agricultural implements. Key men carried guns and rifles. A few in the crowd even carried mobile phones to enable coordination of the attacks. Dead bodies no longer resembled human beings: they were reduced—whenever they had not been burned to ashes—to a grotesque and pathetic sight. Rape was used as an instrument for the subjugation and humiliation of a community. Pregnant women's bellies were slit open with swords and fetuses flung in the fire. A chilling and hitherto absent technique was the deliberate destruction of evidence—barring a few cases, women who were gang raped were thereafter hacked and burned (see 'Genocide Gujarat 2002' in *Communalism Combat*, March–April 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> Available data (Joshi, Srinivasan, and Bajaj 2003) indicate that the proportion of Hindus to the total population in Gujarat has remained steady at a little



below 91 per cent since 1951. In 1991, their share was 90.83 per cent followed by 8.73 per cent of Muslims and 0.44 per cent of Christians. Christians form a significant proportion of population only in one district of Gujarat, Dangs—where its proportion has gone up from 1.33 per cent in 1981 to 5.43 per cent in 1991. Surat adjoining the Dangs, has a Christian presence of 0.94 per cent and Kheda near Ahmedabad has 1.48 per cent. In Ahmedabad (including Gandhinagar), Vadodara and Bharuch their proportion is between 0.5 and 1 per cent. In all other districts of Gujarat, their presence is negligibly small.

Distributed in the entire state, Muslims nearly form 5 per cent or more of the population in all districts, except in the Dangs. Their presence is smaller in the north-eastern districts but rises in the southern Gujarat districts, most of which have a Muslim population of around 10 per cent. Among these, Bharuch has an exceptionally high Muslim presence at 16.60 per cent.

In the south-west, within its Saurashtra sub-region, Muslim presence is higher in the western districts of Jamnagar, Junagadh and Rajkot and relatively lower in the eastern districts of Surendranagar, Bhavnagar and Amreli. In Jamnagar their share is 13 per cent followed by Junagadh and Rajkot, where they form somewhat less than 10 per cent of the population. In Surendranagar, Bhavnagar and Amreli their presence is around 6 per cent.

The district of Kachchh in the north-west has the highest proportion of Muslims in the state. In 1991, they constituted 19.64 per cent of its population.

Since 1951, the proportion of Muslims in most districts of Saurashtra and Kachchh sub-regions has remained unchanged, or has declined, while it has shown a slight rise in most districts of the Gujarat sub-region, thus keeping the proportion of Muslims in the state as a whole more or less unchanged.

Corresponding to the all-India trends and figures, a larger proportion of Muslims in Gujarat remains located in its urban areas. In 1991, 58 per cent of Muslims as compared with 32 per cent of Hindus were living in cities and towns of the state. The highest proportion of Muslims at 40 per cent is in Godhra of Panchmahals district, though their proportion in the district as a whole is only 4.6 per cent. Bhuj in Kachchh with Muslim presence of 24 per cent, Patan in Saurashtra with 27 per cent, and Bharuch in south Gujarat with 28 per cent are other towns with high Muslim presence. Jamnagar and Junagadh in Saurashtra and Surat in south Gujarat also have relatively high Muslim shares of 20, 18 and 14 per cent respectively. Of the other major cities in the state, the share of Muslim populations is 12.50 per cent in Ahmedabad, 10.28 per cent in Baroda and 7.55 per cent in Rajkot.

<sup>3</sup> The 1990s gradually witnessed a definite slant in the character of riots, for it was during this period that an otherwise diverse and amorphous basis of Hinduism began to be projected as a monistic and unified system aimed at giving a new religio-political meaning to Hindutva. Manipulating this in the

form of a new religio-cultural nationalism that continued to define the we (the Hindus) vs they (the Muslims and in some cases the Christians) emerged as a major instrument for the BJP and its associates to harness support of the 'majority' community at various levels in the social and political arena.

- <sup>4</sup> A generic way of identifying a person belonging to the states of Uttar Pradesh or Bihar.

## Appendix

- 5.1 Hindu nationalists have succeeded in projecting and legitimizing the post-Godhra riots as revenge by Hindus against Muslims held responsible for burning two compartments of the Sabarmati Express at Godhra on 28 February 2002. The feeling of revenge was so hyped that the few relief camps run for Muslims were threatened to be terminated so that Muslims die of hunger. Isn't it worse than Hitler's gas chamber? (GT 10 March)
- 5.2 No chief minister ever in the past called such madness a reaction and while trying to justify, it gave a free hand to the rioters for 48 hours. Why should the entire community suffer because of the mistake of a few (quote from a former member of Parliament). (GT 6 April)
- 5.3 Referring to Kuldip Nayyar the GT wrote on 6th April that the police were not seriously dealing with the rioters, in fact they were protecting them.
- 5.4 Yashwant Mehta wrote in the GT on 23rd of March that after the attack on the twin towers, America did not allow people to take law into their own hands. Could this not have been done in Gujarat?
- 5.5 The so-called secularists advise the Hindus about tolerance but do not say anything about the atrocities committed in Jammu and Kashmir on Hindu Pandits. . . . They say nothing about the complicity of Pakistan with Muslims of Kashmir and their training camps and the arms. No wonder when the Gujarati Hindu majority expressed their anger these secularists were shedding tears. (GS 28 April)
- 5.6 Politicians misusing their power for selfish motives are not followers of Ram but represent Ravana as they have multiple sets of faces which keep changing in accordance with their changing self interests. . . . Narendra Modi has not fulfilled his constitutional obligations and the PM has only shed crocodile tears. . . . They should realize that the country is more important than the party. (A. Munshi, GT 27 April)
- 5.7 The PM refrained from holding Modi responsible for what had happened in Gujarat and chose to keep quiet on the lethargy of the Modi Government during and after the riots. . . . This is not a

good sign for democracy. Dipankar Gupta and Romila Thapar. (GT 5 April)

- 5.8 What happened in Gujarat is also a kind of terrorism and who was going to stop it. Prime Minister Vajpayee who visited sites at Ahmedabad after a month of the Godhra incident expressed his shock at the tragedy and reasserted on the rights of a citizen for all Indians as per the tenets of the Indian Constitution. He said that he had not come to count the number of corpses. (GS 5 March)
- 5.9 The minorities have lost trust in the Constitution and State. . . . Hindu Communalism has disregarded the courts, the Parliament and the Constitution. (Asgar Ali Engineer, GT 3 April)
- 5.10 By dividing the State along communal lines Modi has succeeded to return into power. . . . If the existing atmosphere of hatred is not halted, it will divide the nation into two. (S. Naqvi, GT 2 April)
- 5.11 While committing crimes with impunity, the criminals and those located at the wrong sides seem to be winning and gaining and their success is dangerous for the country. (Abdul Latif, GT 10 April)
- 5.12 Shubha Mudgal was referred to as saying that those who destroy our heritage are enemies of the country. (GT 14 April)
- 5.13 Hindus must have the courage to say that something wrong has entrenched into their religion and that they are ashamed of it . . . . Brahmins dominated the society for the first thousand years before Christ. . . . Gandhi sacrificed his life to bring Hindus and Muslims together, but the present Hindutvawadis have taken his conception of Ramrajya and his ideology beyond repair and redemption. (GT 20 April)

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