

GUJARAT

## Every Man A Laboratory

**Prashant Jha**

Short, stocky, and balding, Babubhai Rajabhai Patel can pass off as a normal, middle-class trader. Only, he isn't one. Babu Bajrangi, as Patel likes to be called, says he runs an NGO, *Naychetan Sangathan*. Sitting in his 'office' in Ajanta Ellora Complex in Naroda in Ahmedabad, Bajrangi is surrounded by images of RSS ideologues K S Hedgewar and Guru Golwalkar, a map of Akhand Bharat, and his own photographs, with politicians or in public meetings.

Bajrangi claims to be a social worker. "I rescue Hindu women who are lured by Muslims. I hate such marriages." As soon as Bajrangi gets to know of any such union, he kidnaps and sends the girl back home; and beats up the muslim boy. It's fun. Bajrangi's operation is ruthless and effective. He claims to have 'saved' 725 Hindu women this way. And what about the law? "What I do is illegal, but it is moral. And anyway, the government is ours."

Perhaps that is the reason that Bajrangi, chief accused in the Naroda Patiya murder case (during the Gujarat carnage), is out on the streets and not behind bars.

Bajrangi might be more extremist than most, but he represents a mindset that is widespread: the mindset of the Gandhinagar government's ministers. The mindset of several Hindus, from the waiter to the auto-driver and the middle-class, across Gujarat.

The discourse among Muslims has a striking unity. There is no one who speaks out. This is their rule—Hindu rule, what do we do? As an elder in Shah Alam, a Muslim area in Ahmedabad, puts it, "Our crime is we pray to Allah."

The emotions of Muslims across Gujarat revolves around alienation, helplessness, and anger. Understandably so, large sections of the Hindu society, led on by the BJP government, ensure that Muslims remain second-class citizens.

And that is the story of Gujarat today. A tale of a society that is sharply polarised and prejudices about the 'other' deeply entrenched, and a state that happily engineers everyday hatred. In its wake, lies a community that lives in fear. The Gujarat of today is in some senses more dangerous than the Gujarat of 2002. For here, the violence is invisible. It operates systematically, as well as subtly, at the establishment and social level.

The truth is, the Gujarat government has seceded from the Indian Constitution. It did so in 2002, when the state sponsored mass violence against Muslims. And contrary to what many think, it has consistently done so and flaunted it since then, it has tried to completely subvert the process of justice for 2002 victims, from distorting FIRs and ensuring faulty investigation, to letting the accused get away free, with office-bearers of the Sangh Parivar affiliates doubling up as public prosecutors, it is little surprise that only 13 out of the 345 cases decided so far have resulted in convictions.

Even as it fulfils its promise that no harm should come the way of rioters, the government continues its campaign to harass innocent Muslims. The fact that the UPA government in Delhi did not ban the draconian legislation, Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), retrospectively has meant that those charged under that law in Gujarat before 2004 remain in jail. This effectively means that the ‘secular’ UPA government, backed by the Left, is playing Narendra Modi’s game.

Maulana Omarji’s house is, ironically, on the Station Road in Godhra. But he doesn’t live there. Along with others accused of hatching the conspiracy and burning the train compartment at the Godhra railway station on February 27, 2002, he stays some distance away—in Sabarmati Jail in Ahmedabad. Omarji was arrested one year after the incident took place—a period in which he was active in organising relief camps for Muslims, and petitioning national leaders who came visiting about the injustice meted out to minorities in the state. Clearly, someone powerful did not like that. A well-respected man and community leader against whom there is no evidence, Maulana Omarji is charged with POTA.

His young and articulate son, Saeed, is quite frustrated. “What is the fault of Muslims in India? I am so angry with the system here, including the judiciary.” Everything is stacked up against Muslims in India, feels Saeed. “I am an Indian and will never be disloyal to my country. But I feel our parents and grandparents made a mistake by staying on here. We should have gone to Pakistan.” It is a striking comment, revealing the manner in which a fascist state is pushing people into a corner.

Half-an-hour from Godhra lies Kalol—a site of major violence in 2002. This reporter met Mukhtar Mohammad at the Kalol police station. Active in organising relief camps, Mukhtar has been working to get justice for the victims. Something that did not go down too well with the state authorities. Framed under, what by all accounts, is a false ‘rape case’, he is stuck making rounds of police stations and magistrates and has to spend occasional nights, and at times, extended periods in jail. He says, “They want to break any kind of leadership that emerges among the Muslims, especially those who are moderate, and want to fight politically, constitutionally and legally.”

Indeed, there is a pattern in which the Gujarat government is acting against Muslims. The Hindutva forces have no problems if the influence of the Muslim conservative religious organisations increases because it helps strengthen their stereotypes about Muslims. What they do not want is an articulate, liberal voice among Muslims that speaks the language of democratic rights and claims equal citizenship.

The regime targets innocent Muslims not just by framing false cases. Discrimination is spread across all realms. Juhapura is the largest Muslim ghetto in Ahmedabad with more than 300,000 people. Yet, it has no bank, state transport buses take a detour to avoid crossing through it, and there are no public parks or libraries. OBC communities among the Muslims in Gujarat find it difficult to get certain certificates. The saffronisation of the bureaucracy and local power structures, points out scholar Achyut Yagnik, has meant that panchayats, co-operatives, agrarian produce

markets and government schemes have become sites for discrimination against Muslims.

What is more alarming is the fact that this discrimination has larger social sanction. There is pride about the 2002 toofan among many Hindus.

Most cities and towns in Gujarat are completely divided into Hindu and Muslim areas; a street corner, a divider in the middle of the road, a wall, or just a turn acting as borders. If it was difficult for a Muslim to find a house in Hindu areas before the killings, it is impossible now.

Sophia Khan is a well-known woman activist in Ahmedabad. Her office was in Narayanpura, an upmarket Hindu area. A month ago, when neighbours in her office complex got to know of her faith, they asked her to vacate immediately. Putting up a fight was no use in the face of constant harassment, she has now shifted to Juhapura. "My house is in a Muslim area. My office is now in a Muslim area. My Hindu employee is being pressurised by her family to resign, because they don't like her coming to a Muslim area. And my work revolves around Muslim women. This is how they want to push an entire community into a corner," says Khan.

The segregation has spread to other realms as well, leading to absence of contact and interaction between the two communities and breeding stereotypes and intolerance. The most visible realm is the fewer number of mixed schools in Ahmedabad which have a fair number of Hindus and Muslims. Discrimination on religious lines, coupled with the desire of parents to send children to schools where there are 'more of our people' has further boosted this trend. Pankaj Chandra, professor at Indian Institute of Management, is worried. Brought up in the composite Ganga-Jamuni culture of Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh, he says, "My children may graduate from school without knowing a single Muslim. Imagine how easy it will be to build stereotypes then."

When this reporter, with his long, unkempt beard, walked into an elite government colony in Ahmedabad to meet a senior official, three kids parked their bicycles right in front. One screamed aloud, "Terrorist." Why? "Because you are a Musalman," he responded. So? "All Muslims are terrorists. My father is a judge. He will call you terrorist in court." Really? "Yes. And get out of here. This is a Hindu area." Sauryajya is only 12-year-old and has not met a single Muslim in his life. No one knows how many Sauryajyas are in the making in Gujarat. ~~del del del~~