

# Back From Gujarat

**Yoginder Sikand**

Modi Sahib has wrought a revolution in Gujarat' announced the glum-looking corpulent businessman sitting on the berth next to mine on the train to Ahmedabad recently. He proudly introduced himself as a Nagar Brahmin, even though I did not ask him his caste. 'We now have regular electricity for our industries, new superhighways and massive shopping malls', he went on excitedly. 'Modi ji is the saviour of the Hindus of Gujarat. He taught the bloody Muslims a lesson in 2002 and now they dare not raise their heads', he belligerently asserted.

A young Sindhi man sharing the same compartment, also a businessman based in Ahmedabad, winced and hurriedly changed the topic. A while later, when the Nagar Brahmin was not within hearing range, he whispered, 'Not all Gujarati Hindus think like this man, although many do. I, for one, don't, but we can't openly counter such views, such is the climate of fear in Gujarat'.

The man was right. Public opposition to Modi and to the Hindutva lobby is muted, not just because of fear but also because the claims of the Hindutva forces have become received truths for many Gujarati Hindus, thanks to years of carefully-planned indoctrination. The BJP and allied Hindutva fronts have made deep inroads among sections of communities such as Dalits and Adivasis, who form a large chunk of Gujarat's 'Hindu' population, who were traditionally opposed to the 'upper-caste-controlled Hindutva groups' and were once earlier strong Congress vote-banks.

'The Congress is totally ineffective as an opposition force in Gujarat', says Raju Solanki, a well-known Dalit activist, who works with the Centre for Social Justice in Ahmedabad. 'In the last six decades, the Congress did precious little for the Dalits and Adivasis besides taking their votes and so the BJP has taken over. There's no difference, as far as Dalits and Adivasis are concerned, between the two—they both represent broadly the same dominant caste-class groups. Hindutva fronts are desperately trying to Hinduise the Dalits and Adivasis, to use them as foot-soldiers against the Muslims, setting them against each other so that 'upper' caste rule remains unchallenged', he argues.

Unity between Dalits, Backward Castes, Adivasis and Muslims, who together form the overwhelming majority of Gujarat's population, is the only way to challenge the BJP and the Congress, Solanki says. Yet, he laments, hardly any efforts are being made in this regard. In the wake of the state-sponsored anti-Muslim genocide in 2002, scores of NGOs entered Gujarat to provide relief, but today, he says, few of them are involved in anti-communal work. 'Many of them made tall promises of working for empowerment, for Dalit-Muslim unity, for taking on the Hindutva lobby and so on. They got lots of money to fund big projects but nothing much has come of this'. 'And then there are so many stories of corruption in the NGO circuit', he wryly adds. 'And so', he goes on, 'the only effective opposition I see today is within the BJP itself, among dissidents opposed to Modi'. 'But that', he explains, 'in no way challenges the ideology and caste-base of Hindutva'.

Solanki speaks of how the focus solely on communalism in Gujarat has led to an obscuring in secular political discourse of the widespread oppression of Dalits and Adivasis in the state. 'The secularists, self-proclaimed secularists such as the Congress, and the Hindutva lobby all focus only on the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations, thus effectively ignoring the Adivasis and Dalits', he notes. 'Of course we need to work for communal harmony, for the rights of the Muslims and Christians, but that must go along with strengthening of the struggles of the Adivasis and Dalits. Hindutva forces seek to

whip up anti-Muslim sentiments precisely to sabotage the growing awareness of the Adivasis and Dalits about the oppression that they suffer at the hands of the caste Hindu establishment'. 'Hence', he insists, 'communalism cannot be defeated without taking up the caste issue, without working to unite the oppressed castes and the Muslims at the political and social level against the system of caste-class oppression of which they are the common victims'. 'We need to make Dalit and Adivasi issues, along with the plight of Muslims, the centre of a new social, cultural and political movement, which alone can challenge the 'upper' caste Hindu hegemony which both the BJP and the Congress represent and defend', he tells me.

Solanki talks of the work of his Centre in taking up numerous cases related to these communities. He speaks of widespread discrimination being practised against Dalits in Gujarat—for instance, in this state which the Hindutva lobby touts about as about as its most successful experimental ground, a veritable 'Hindu Rashtra', Dalits continue to be refused entry into temples in many villages. He cites figures about rape of Dalit and Adivasi women by 'upper' caste landlords, many of them firm BJP supporters; of increasing land alienation among these groups; of the squalid slums, deprived of even the most basic amenities, to which the 'low' castes have been confined in Gujarat's towns; and of the rapid impoverishment of Dalit and Adivasi communities in the face of the government's economic policies.

Godhra, a town located in Gujarat's Panchmahals district, a two hours' journey from Ahmedabad, has a roughly equal Hindu and Muslim population. This obscure town shot into the limelight when, in 2002, a coach of a train caught fire near the town's railway station, triggering off a massacre of Muslims throughout Gujarat on an unprecedented scale. Today, Godhra, like many other towns in Gujarat, is geographically completely polarised. A narrow river divides the town into two clearly Hindu and Muslim areas.

A semblance of 'normality' prevails in the town, although, its residents are quick to point out that the massacres of 2002, which, curiously, left Godhra itself largely untouched, have severely impacted on inter-communal relations. Almost all the NGOs that appeared in Godhra in the wake of the genocide to extend relief to Muslim victims in scores of villages nearby have now departed. Only a couple or so remain, with much trimmed budgets and staff. 'As a result', says Ilyas Bhagat, a local social activist, 'the victims of the massacre, including families of over 80 men arrested under the deadly POTA law, have been left to fend for themselves'.

Bismillah Behen works with an NGO in Godhra and outlying villages. Her house in Himmatnagar was burnt down by Hindu mobs in 2002. Her husband has taken a second wife, and so she now lives by herself. Her own trauma, as a victim of both the anti-Muslim pogrom and of an insensitive husband, she says, has made her even more committed to working for communal harmony and women's rights. 'Women are the worse sufferers in riots', she explains. The efforts she and some of her colleagues, including Adivasis and Dalits, have made to bring women of different marginalised communities in Godhra to fight for their rights. She sees this as important not only in itself but also as one way of countering communalism. 'We face opposition from patriarchal conservative forces in all our communities. Some Adivasi and Dalit men tell our non-Muslim sisters who are with us that they should not associate with us because we helped Muslim victims of the massacres. Likewise, some maulvis oppose the Muslim sisters in our group because they refuse to cover themselves in burkhas. They are angry with us because they insist that women must not come out of their homes'. 'But', she emphatically adds, 'we women have undergone so much suffering during the riots. We have to come out and speak out'.

Bismillah Behen has not read any arcane feminist texts—what she speaks reflects her own personal and collective struggle, along with that of other women like her, who have

experienced what it means to live through a genocide. 'We have to join hands with sisters from other marginalised communities to fight for women's rights and also against communalism', she insists. 'We have to explain to our sisters in other communities that communalism poses a major threat to women's rights and to our freedom. The issue of women of all socially marginalised communities must be made a central part of the anti-communal struggle'.

Lakshmi Parmar, 26, is Bismillah's colleague. She is the only female graduate in her village. Hailing from a poor Dalit family of the Vankar or weaver caste, she faces considerable opposition from her villagers, including some fellow Dalits, for working with Muslim women and for communal harmony. She tells me about how, in many villages around Godhra, Dalits were literally forced by the 'upper' castes to join them in attacking and killing Muslims in 2002. "They searched Dalit houses to see if any Muslims were hidden there. They threatened to boycott them if they helped the Muslims flee. Many Dalits yielded to this pressure as, being mostly landless labourers, they are dependent on the 'upper castes' for work", she says.

Lakshmi speaks of how in these villages Dalits continue to suffer humiliation at the hands of the 'upper' castes, who consider them as fellow 'Hindus' only at the time of anti-Muslim violence, when they are generally used to attack Muslims. 'In my own village', she says, "Dalits cannot enter the local temple. A Dalit bridegroom cannot sit on a horse like 'upper' castes do. Last year my brother, who was getting married, tried to do that but we were forcibly stopped".

'Those days were really harrowing for all of us', Lakshmi recounts of the brutal events of 2002. 'I had to stay in a village, where Muslims had been driven out from. We started meetings to bring the different communities together, to facilitate the return of the Muslims to their homes, to rebuild their houses. But, eventually, due to the opposition of a local BJP politician, I had to flee', she says. 'However, we carried on working. We tried to bring together Dalits, Muslims and Adivasis through cultural activities, such as observing the anniversary of Babasaheb Ambedkar, Women's Day and so on'.

'We need to widen the scope of the movement for the unity of marginalized communities from just aiming at the political level to the wider social level', she explains. 'We have to work to unite our people through new forms of culture of resistance and struggle'.

'This is, of course, may be easier said than done', says Raju Solanki, 'but we have to make it our main focus. From ancient times to this day, 'upper' caste forces, including today the Congress and the Hindutva lobby, have used culture, including religion, to oppress us. We now must use those very tools to challenge our oppression'. □□□