

Lies, Half-Truths And Illusions Cedric Prakash

It is January 14th 2009, Makarsankranti, the only feast of the Indian calendar which is not observed on a particular day of the Lunar month. It is generally believed that on this day, the sun enters the constellation of Makar (crocodile) and begins to move towards the north. In Gujarat, it is known as *Uttarayan*, the day on which thousands of kites dot the skies in order to propitiate the Sun-God. The newspapers today (as those of yesterday) are filled with stories of 'Vibrant Gujarat'... of how the biggest industrialists of the country have "promised" to invest thousands of crores (millions of dollars!) in Gujarat. Overnight, the problems of the State seem to have been solved!! Some have decided that Gujarat can now take on China and a couple of industrialists have even anointed the CM of the State as the next Prime Minister of India!!!

Visitors and dignitaries who came to Ahmedabad were welcomed by posters and banners, by floodlights and illuminations, with newly paved roads and a city which was cosmetically spruced up for the "mother of all events" to flaunt what is termed in Government propaganda, as "Vibrant Gujarat".

The local (and some national) media went "gaga" showcasing how Gujarat is more than India, how the "whole world" had come to invest in this one State during the two-day affair known as 'Vibrant Gujarat Investors' Summit'. The Government and their cronies flag-waved all over ...it's the Number One State in the Country! The hype put forward by the well oiled propaganda machinery was so compelling that even the most diehard critics of Gujarat fell into the trap, and joined the chorus that "all is well".

Very few dare ask uncomfortable questions. Everybody knows the truth about who is doing the "flag-waving!" There are voices who say that 'the "emperor" has no clothes on' but at this moment, there are not too many listening. The plain truth is that the cosmetic has stifled the reality. If one scratches the surface a little, the bubble of euphoria will surely burst.

For a State that should have had 'Ahimsa' as its cornerstone, violence has in fact become institutionalized. The State presided over the killing of hundreds of Muslims during the Carnage of 2002. Trigger-happy policemen have eliminated several Muslim youth in 'encounters'. (One high-ranking police officer is now in jail for such an 'encounter'.) Innocent boys are killed in an ashram of a well known Guru, and, no one can do anything about it! Young girls studying to be teachers are raped in Government Hostels by their teachers for the sake of better grades. Female foeticide is rampant. One only has to skim through the daily newspapers to realize how violence has become a perfected art in the State.

There is a sophistication in the way intolerance has been main-streamed. One can experience it in the chaotic traffic on the roads. If one is a Muslim, one is denied the right to buy a house or a shop in the up-market areas of Ahmedabad, Surat and other cities. One is forced to live on the periphery of many villages. The Freedom of Religion Law prevents anyone from embracing another religion, without permission from the civil authority. Couples in love, are forcibly prevented from marrying if the partner belongs to a different religion or caste. Movies like "Parzania" and "Fanaa" are not allowed to be screened in the State - one, because it exposes the Truth, and the other, because the lead actor asks that the tribals who were dispossessed because of the Narmada Dam, to be justly rehabilitated.

The art of lying seems to have taken a new meaning in Gujarat. This is obvious when even a sheer Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is regarded as "Mission accomplished!" This bluff was called, when recently, under an RTI query, the Government of Gujarat admitted that just about 25% of the MoUs of the last three years were actually in the pipeline!! Narmada Dam water is being utilized by the rich and powerful of Ahmedabad. The parched lands of North Gujarat, Saurashtra and Kutch still harbour illusions of the water reaching them !!! State Government advertisements highlight projects and programmes which are in fact undertaken and executed by the Central Government, like the expressway, the airport, the railway system and the 108 ambulance service.

In Gujarat today, anyone standing up for Truth and Justice is at the receiving end. The Government pulls out all stops (to stop School Grants, to impound Passports) to ensure that

voices of dissent are silenced. A few months ago, when the *Times of India* did an expose on the Police Commissioner of Ahmedabad, sedition charges were filed against some of those who ran the newspaper. Honest and objective police officials and bureaucrats are transferred to insignificant postings; Government agencies like the Collectorate, the Police, the Charity Commissioner are used to intimidate and harass individuals and groups that work for the betterment of the poor, the vulnerable and marginalized. Prominent citizens are kept under constant surveillance and many live under the veil of fear.

A sense of arrogance seems to have puffed up the chests of a few who try to control the lives and destinies of others. Such arrogance was very visible in the hey day of Nazism when Hitler brutally trampled on those who were "not like him". Key people in the State roam about with immunity and impunity and are also elected to positions of power. The underlying message that is conveyed is that "no one can touch them". One needs to look at the judgments that are given from the Lower Courts and the High Court of Gujarat, in order to experience the subjectivity that has permeated the system.

Large sections of society in Gujarat are totally neglected. Systematic efforts are made to snatch the forests from the hands of the adivasis. A recent study says that more than thirty-five thousand families will be displaced from the banks of the River Sabarmati because of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project. Development-induced displacement is also the lot of several poor and marginalized farmers and others. Fisher-folk along Gujarat's vast coastline, continue to be marginalized. Dalits are at the receiving end and many of them continue to live in inhuman conditions. The status of women in Gujarat is way down in comparison to several other States of the country. Children are denied their rights: a large percentage of them constitute the labour force; the textbooks dished out by the Gujarat State Secondary School Board is a clear violation of the rights of children - full of errors, inaccuracies, myths and distortions; only about 59.6% of the rural children of Gujarat can read Std. 1 text as against the All-India average of 66.6%. The *Indian Express* of December 21st 2008, has this to say : *According to International Food Policy Research Institute's 2008 Global Hunger Index, Gujarat is ranked 69th alongwith Haiti, the nation infamous for food riots. The State is placed in the 'alarming' category.*

Gujarat State is truly terror-filled! For almost seven years now, the principles of democracy have been thrown to the wind. Right-wing Hindu groups can put up bill boards almost anywhere proclaiming a "Hindu Rashtra". Places of worship have sprung up on public space and they are given full protection by the law and order mechanism. The Constitutional rights and freedoms of an ordinary citizen are not safeguarded. In fact, in several cases, when a victim approaches the system for help, he / she is made the perpetrator of the crime!!! The diversity which has been characteristic of this State, has been totally decimated as communities are forced into ghettoization. There is palpable fear all over.

What "Vibrant Gujarat" then, does one talk about? The truth is that Gujarat as a State is "Violent", "Intolerant", "Bluffing", "Revengeful", "Arrogant", "Negligent" and "Terror-filled".