

BREAKING THE STATUS QUO

BEYOND TRADE UNIONISM

[Ahmedabad-based trade unionist Mukul Sinha has been in the forefront of the trade union movement and struggle against fascism in Gujarat. Recently he spoke with Yoginder Sikand. Excerpts :]

Q: What has been the role of the trade union movement in combating fascism in Gujarat?

A: I must admit that the trade union movement in Gujarat has been unable to combat Hindutva fascism. Even the state units of the CPI and CPI (M), that have a small presence in Gujarat, remained largely silent when Muslims were being massacred here in 2002. This is because the trade union movement has not addressed issues such as caste, ethnicity and religion, being focused simply on economic issues. Also, trade unions have largely cultivated simply a trade unionist mentality. Also, they have not given enough leadership roles to marginalised communities such as Dalits, Muslims and Tribals.

For our part, our Gujarat Federation of Trade Unions, which is not affiliated to any political party, party-controlled or central trade union and our associated civil rights organisation, Jan Sangharsh Manch, have been involved in popular struggles in Gujarat, including the struggle against Hindutva fascism. Our union workers were active in resisting Hindutva lumpens during the genocide at some places and are also resisting the moves of the government to demolish slums, which are predominantly inhabited by Dalits and Muslims. We are now trying to build a political platform through the New Socialist Movement that was inaugurated soon after the anti-Muslim genocide in Gujarat in 2002. It isn't simply the BJP that we are opposed to. Rather, we see hardly any difference between the BJP, the Congress and the Samajwadi Party and even the CPI and CPI (M), who have given up on people's struggles. We are also opposed to the extreme Left groups who claim that there is simply no scope for mass political activity.

Q: The 2002 genocide witnessed attacks by Dalits, instigated by Hindutva groups, directed against Muslims. How do you see the issue of Dalit-Muslim relations in Gujarat today?

A: I believe that at this juncture the need for Dalit-Muslim unity to jointly struggle for their rights is really the need of the hour. In recent years in Gujarat, some Dalits have abandoned the Congress for the BJP. This is because all these years the Congress sought to garner Dalit votes without giving them any credible positions, and so several Dalit leaders shifted to the BJP, which offered them various posts, as president of this or that local Hindutva organisation. This gave these Dalit leaders a sense of empowerment and importance, false although it may have been. And that is how the BJP was able to win some support among Dalits. It isn't simply, as some people claim, that Dalits got attracted to the BJP because of religious reasons. The main attraction was the offer of leadership positions in the host of small outfits that the Hindutva-walas have spawned.

To add to this is the fact that Dalits and Muslims live together in slums in urban areas, so even a small skirmish can always end up in a giant conflagration with the active instigation of Hindutva groups. Yet another factor is the role of certain NGOs that claim to be working among Dalits but which have totally depoliticised the Dalit youth associated with them. Talking about NGOs, I must remark that very few of them are working for minority rights and for promoting dialogue and better relations between the Dalits, Muslims and other marginalised communities in Gujarat. Several of them, as well as groups such as the *Jama'at-I Islami*, stiffly opposed my proposal that cases lodged during the 2002 violence that involved Dalits and Muslims and related to relatively small issues such as stone-throwing, as opposed to major cases such as murder, be dropped in order to promote reconciliation between the two communities. They even accused me of working for Modi!

That some NGOs, which are not really rooted in the lives of working-class people, opposed that demand was hardly surprising. Equally revealing was the opposition of the *Jama'at-I Islami*, which was never happy with our work among Muslim workers, since they are vociferously anti-communist and pro-capitalist, as is clearly evident in their literature. They were also stiffly opposed to our working among Muslim women, hundreds of who come for our meetings and rallies. To some

Jama'at-i Islami leaders we were 'Hindus', and, by definition, therefore, our intentions were seen as suspect. They even probably thought that we were 'misguiding' their women by encouraging them to come out on the streets in protest demonstrations. So, they went around telling people that we were 'Hindu agents'. They even told this to the family members of Muslim POTA detainees whose cases we had taken up, but it boomeranged on them as I don't think many people bought that lie. Islamic fundamentalist groups like the *Jama'at-I Islami* are simply not interested in Dalit-Muslim dialogue or in any sort of progressive agenda. In contrast, although the *Jamiat ul-'Ulama-I Hind* is a pro-Congress outfit, it is more rooted in 'ordinary' people's lives and, therefore, potentially more amenable to more progressive politics. This is why the *Jamiat ul-Ulama* has a working relation with us, and we, and other groups, have together held several rallies in the last two years against POTA and the illegal detention of a number of Gujarati Muslim youth under this draconian law.

Q: How do you explain the rise to power of the BJP in Gujarat?

A: There are several reasons for this. One factor is the weakness of the Dalit and Tribal movements, although Dalits and Tribals constitute the single largest chunk of voters in the state. The Dalit movement has been historically weak in Gujarat because of the Gandhian presence. Then, land reforms in the 1950s led to major changes in caste relations, leading to the rise to power of the Patels, who were traditionally treated as a 'low' Shudra caste who worked as sharecroppers in the fields of the 'upper' castes. Seeking to use their new-found economic clout to rise up in the caste hierarchy, the Patels began sponsoring a number of Hindu religious outfits and backing Hindutva organisations in the state, thus presenting themselves as ardent Hindus, and, therefore, as 'high' castes. One aspect of that newly constructed identity as super-Hindus was a deep hostility towards Muslims. In fact, the Patels, who comprise more than 30% of the Gujarati population, played a major role in the 2002 anti-Muslim genocide.

Till the 1980s, the newly upwardly mobile Patels were not politically powerful. Gujarat was ruled by the Congress Party, which based its electoral calculations on the vote-banks of the Kshatriyas, Dalits, Tribals and Muslims-the so-called KHAM theory. So, the Patels felt that their political fortunes lay with a non-Congress party. The average 'upper' caste Gujarati Bania would not dream of giving his or her daughter to a Patel in marriage, because, despite their recent economic progress, the Patels were still seen as socially inferior. And so, in order to capture political power and also assert the claim to a higher status in the caste hierarchy, from the 1980s onwards the Patels took to Hindutva in a big way. Many leaders of Hindutva outfits in Gujarat are Patels and they are among their major sources of finance. To add to this is the Patel diaspora, in England and America, that sends enormous amounts of money to fund Hindutva and Hindu religious groups in Gujarat and other parts of India. □□□