

Reflections on 'Gujarat Pradesh' of 'Hindu Rashtra'

The economic relation between the adivasis and the Muslims in rural north Gujarat is of the kind that most radical analysts have deemed to be sufficient to justify a violent class struggle. And that is just how the VHP is likely to project it as in the coming days – an explanation for adivasi participation in the violence that could be quite embarrassing for radical analysts. It is time for radical analysts to give up simplistic assumptions and modes of analysis, not for the sake of the VHP, but for possible progress in human affairs.

K BALAGOPAL

The predominant emotion as one leaves Gujarat is that of fear. Not the fear that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has been watching what you have been doing there and will catch up with you and cut you up or burn you alive. It may, but if you have been a human rights activist long enough, you have come to terms with the idea that you could be killed some day.

Nor that the next time half an opportunity offers itself, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad will kill more Muslims in Gujarat. It will, but they could be killed by an earthquake, any way.

It is the fear of how much hatred human hearts can be filled with, and how easily. Forget about burning human beings alive and prancing gleefully around as the tortured flesh thrashes about. Forget also about cutting open a pregnant woman's womb to burn the foetus. Such people are at least killing something alive. Can you imagine the state of mind that digs up an old grave, pours petrol on to the presumed remains of a long dead Muslim and sets it aflame? The common Hindu's hatred for anything to do with Muslims, an intense and inflamed hatred, is the only thing alive in Gujarat today. Don't talk to the Sangh parivar cadre. They are barely human anyway. Talk to the clerk in an office, to the housewife, to the taxi driver, to the college-going student. Most of them spew venom. One feels sorry for saying this of a whole people. One has, of course, met a handful of Gujarati Hindus who are

different. Not only English-speaking liberals of Ahmedabad and Vadodara, but also farmers and labourers. But they are just that, a bare fistful. Cutting across divisions of caste, class, gender, town and country, Gujarat is one mass of hatred for Muslims. The history of the state, dominated over the last few years by the Sangh parivar, has come to this.

Can one teach love as easily as that?

Radical-minded people feel insecure about such questions, for they could be fatal to our utopian dreams. But while dreams are all right, and probably also necessary, we should have the honesty to pare them down to realistic dimensions. If hatred is so easy to build and love so difficult, and an uneasy tolerance the most we achieve when we work for love, how utopian can our dreams afford to be? This is, of course, a very big question. So big that leftist analysis of Nazism in Europe, of which there have been tomes upon tomes, never faced it honestly. Not even Erich Fromm, who came closest to looking it in the face but backed out in the last moment.

But there are smaller and equally uncomfortable questions. The participation of adivasis and dalits in the rioting, looting and killing is one such. Some initial reports said that where adivasis participated in the violence, they neither raped nor killed but only looted the property. To be fair to such views, there was perhaps not much information available at that time. The view appears to have based itself upon the events of the Chotaudepur area of Vadodara district. But in Chotaudepur,

even the non-adivasis did not rape or kill. They too only looted the property of the Muslims.

In all the areas along the north-eastern border of the state (Sabarkantha, Panchmahals, Dahod and Chotaudepur) there was sizeable participation of adivasis along with non-adivasis in the violence. The two were part of the same mob in most cases, with the non-adivasis leading. In some places, the mobs only looted and burnt. In some places there was rape and murder too. A break up of the violence into that which the adivasis did and that which the others did may not be easy. The most gory incidents of mass rape in the entire Gujarat carnage (at least so far as we know now) took place at Fatehpura in Dahod district, where the mob consisted of a large number of adivasis of neighbouring villages, along with the non-adivasis of Fatehpura. It was said by some NGOs of Ahmedabad that only the non-adivasis raped women and the adivasis only looted the property. That may be true, for the non-adivasis being locals to the village may well have reserved that 'privilege' to themselves, but one would like to know if the opinion is based on something more reliable than political faith. In Fatehpura itself, the Muslims in the refugee camp do not make such a clear distinction, though there is a general feeling among the Muslims that the adivasis are not bad by themselves, but are misguided by the Hindus of the Sangh parivar.

At Sanjeli in the same district the Muslims fleeing from the mob (of non-adivasis and adivasis) which attacked their houses in the town were obstructed all along the way, and many were stoned, pulled out from their vehicles, hacked with swords and burnt and killed by the rampaging mob many of whom had their faces half-masked. The taluka of Kallol in the Panchmahals saw a large amount of violence including about a hundred killings by mobs that included both non-adivasis and adivasis. Again, in both the cases, a break up of who did what may not be easy.

Sabarkantha is a district where there were a number of incidents of adivasis helping and sheltering Muslims attacked by Hindu mobs. There were also a number of cases where dalits saved Muslims in this district. However kshatriyas too played a role in protecting Muslims in some of these villages. What was at work there was not the presumed democratic character of dalits and adivasis, but in all probability,

what has been called the KHAM strategy of the Congress Party, which still has sizeable influence in Sabarkantha.

What is more striking than the observations of progressive-minded people based on their assumptions about what ought to have been the response of adivasis and dalits, is the hesitation voiced by many Muslims in the refugee camps in condemning the adivasis who attacked them. Since the hesitation, which is near-universal, could not be motivated by considerations of 'political correctness' (to use an obnoxious expression that has become current in recent times) it must be attributed to some thing real. Most of the victims insist that the adivasis were misled by the Sangh parivar leaders. But 'misled' can have more than one meaning, and not all of them carry the same political significance.

Both in Panchmahals and Sabarkantha it is said that in some of the villages the Sangh parivar leaders told the adivasis that there was a government order to loot. (But of course, there was!) This was buttressed by TV images of people looting freely in Ahmedabad with the police looking on. The adivasis took the permission to heart – the northern districts of Gujarat have seen three successive drought years – and in some villages, after looting Muslims shops, they fell upon Hindu shops as well. At Piplod in Dahod district, the police had to step in and put an end to the unauthorised looting of Hindu shops. Even where there was no mention of a government order, the widespread news and TV images of Muslims' property being looted without obstruction from the police was incentive enough to the poor to try their luck. Though it did not always end up with the looters turning their attention to Hindu property after finishing with the Muslims, the Hindus appear to be scared that the adivasis who have tasted loot will not stop there.

But not all the participation of adivasis was as innocent as that. Which takes us to the other meaning of the expression 'misled'. The Vanavasi Kalyan Samiti of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has made considerable inroads into the adivasi areas. When asked what activity they offer to the adivasis, an old Sangh parivar man at Chotaudepur says: "We tell them to campaign against drink in their villages and undertake bhajans of Hindu deities". 'Murtis' of Ganesh are distributed free of cost to the adivasis. It is said that every adivasi village has at least one VHP activist. The search for an identity that has

accompanied the growth of education among the adivasis has been filled by the Sangh parivar, says an adivasi MLA, himself a Congressman. The poisonous parivar has done an able job of it. The adivasis are in the process made to feel that they are Hindus, in the specific hate-filled sense in which that term is understood by the Sangh parivar. As a (Muslim) principal of a predominantly adivasi college near Chotaudepur puts it: "The new convert to Islam is always more ferocious in defending the religion than the traditional Muslim, and the same could be happening to the adivasis". If he is right, there could be a very serious problem here that 'political correctness' had better comprehend.

Of course, the newly educated adivasis' search for an identity could have reached a different shore. We should, then, ask ourselves why no democratic movement has ever achieved even a toe-hold in the vast adivasi area of Gujarat and much of neighbouring Rajasthan. Standing there and looking at Delhi, Somnath Chatterjee's otherwise impressive speech in parliament could not but sound hollow. What is the point in thundering at Delhi, having left the field free in the adivasi hamlets for the Vishwa Hindu Parishad? This is not a comment on only Somnath Chatterjee's party, but on the entire democratic movement of the country.

Dalit participation in the violence at Ahmedabad (in particular) is even less ambiguous. A large number of dalit youth took direct part in the gruesome violence of that city. And it is the dalits who have suffered most in the little retaliation the Muslims have indulged in. The only non-Muslim relief camps (there are about five of them in Ahmedabad) are populated predominantly by dalits. As with the adivasis, the dalits too have been left by all of us for the VHP to prey upon. There is almost no dalit movement in Gujarat, nor has the left movement any base worth speaking of. The Bahujan Samaj Party's role in coming to the aid of the BJP when even a character like Chandrababu Naidu in the fullness of his crooked mind thought it prudent to declare his dissatisfaction, is of a piece with the strategy of the biggest Ambedkarite party in the country: to keep Mayawati in power at Lucknow is the substance of their Ambedkarism as of now. Poor Babasaheb must be turning over and over again in his grave.

But the Vishwa Hindu Parishad is slowly beginning to articulate an explanation for adivasi participation in the violence that

could be quite embarrassing for radical analysts. The VHP's office secretary at Godhra in the Panchmahals, who sits cross-legged on the floor with an ugly chopper hanging on the wall behind him, says it was (in effect, for he has not yet learnt to use the expression) class struggle. The economic relation between adivasis and Muslims in rural north Gujarat is of the kind that most of us have often deemed to be sufficient to justify a violent class struggle. Where the Muslims are farmers, as in Dahod district, the adivasis are labourers or sharecroppers working for them. Where the Muslims are rural traders and transporters, as in Sabarkantha district, the adivasis buy, sell and borrow money from them. It is beyond doubt that if the VHP had not been the instigator, and/or the victims had not been a community perceived as an injured minority at the national level, many of us would have interpreted the adivasi violence against Muslims in rural Gujarat as class struggle, and then the question would not have been why adivasis participated in the violence (we would have then called it struggle and not rioting) but why it died out without achieving much, etc. The Sangh parivar has some former leftists with it who will no doubt make an issue of this in the coming days. Have not instances of adivasi or Muslim tenants revolting against caste Hindu landowners been interpreted by radical analysts as ('objectively speaking') class struggles, even if they took a communal form? Will the analysis change merely because the upper caste Hindus are now egging on the adivasis, and the exploiter is a Muslim? Soon we will have some Swapan Dasgupta asking this question, and it is doubtful that any amount of dialectics will help us wriggle out. What is needed is not some novel sophistry, but a resolve to give up simplistic assumptions and simplistic modes of analysis, not for the sake of the VHP, but for the sake of a possible progress in human affairs.

Let us come back to the hatred. The most sickening thing about the Sangh parivar is its absolute unreasonableness. Gujarat as a whole is infected with this characteristic now. It is the Muslims who suffered immeasurably in the carnage, but it is the Muslims who are now held to be the obstacle to the return of peace. And where there is Muslim, terrorist and Pakistan cannot be far behind. The triad Muslim-terrorist-Pakistan, with all its six permutations, quickly enters any discussion of

when people of Gujarat expect normalcy to return. "Pakistan is sending men and money, and therefore there will be no peace" is the commonest view in the matter. The exact amount Pakistan is believed to have sent is mentioned: Rs 2 crore. Advani puts the official stamp of approval on this by talking in parliament almost from day one about Pakistan-sponsored terrorists entering the relief camps. (The home minister of India never had anything to say about what put the Muslims in the relief camps in the first place.) The Delhi police, who obligingly make arrests of Lashkar-e-Toiba militants at Lal Qila/Chandni Chowk whenever the government needs it, forthwith make a few arrests, and of course the dreaded "jehadi" militants confess in no time that they indeed had planned to go to Gujarat to create mayhem. The novelty this time is that they are said to have got printed for themselves cards showing them as human rights activists! If this evident nonsense is an indication that the government wants put an end to human rights activism vis-a-vis Gujarat, that is a compliment it is paying to the only good thing that has happened after February 28: not only human rights groups as such, but every one concerned about human rights has been to Gujarat, and a considerable protest has been generated across the country.

The mood of the unrepentant rulers of Gujarat and India – and Gujarati society in general – is that they are all set to fight Muslim terrorism ready to burst out from the refugee camps. The refugees themselves are more worried about when they will be able to get back and rebuild their lives. They have lost their dwellings, they have lost their household property, the traders among them have lost their tempos, trucks, and other articles of trade, and the farmers among them are worried about their land that is ready for being grabbed in the villages. In many places the assailants are openly saying that the victims will not be allowed to come back unless they shave their beards, discontinue the 'azaan', and promise that they will not insist on observing religious customs that the Hindus find annoying. In some places it was made clear that the refugees, if they wish to come back, will hereafter have to forswear any trade that will hurt the interests of the Hindu competitors. (This is what the RSS said at Bangalore some time ago, is it not? That the best guarantee for Muslims is the good will of the Hindus, purchased at whatever cost. Well, it is being imple-

mented in Gujarat now.) Obscene slogans have been scribbled on the walls of idgahs, dargahs and masjids – where they have not been demolished, that is. At Khetbrahma, a taluka headquarters town in Sabarkantha district, the assailants who cleared the town of all Muslims, put up a notice with the ungrammatical threat: 'Muslim no allowed'. And in village after village one finds a welcome sign painted in ochre colour and signed Vishwa Hindu Parishad, reading: 'You are welcome to village such-and-such of district such-and-such of Gujarat Pradesh in Hindu Rashtra'. The Muslims have to walk back from the camps into such villages. But not only the rulers of the country and Gujarat but Gujarati society as a whole is prepared to see only terrorists and Pakistan agents in them. Blinded by hate, driven to self-validating propaganda by their sense of guilt, building an alibi in advance for the further and complete ghettoisation of the Muslims that is to come: it could be any and all of these reasons.

But why talk only of Gujarat and Gujaratis? One startling revelation that Narendra Modi achieved with his criminal brazenness is that a very larger number of Hindus all over the country harbour an extraordinary hatred for Muslims. Gujarat is different only in degree. Until Narendra Modi called this hatred the revolt of the long-suffering Hindus, it was not thought fit to express it. Now that a lawfully elected head of government has said so and continues to head the government, it is no longer felt necessary to hide the hatred, and they are all speaking out. It is said by the post-structuralists that giving a thing a name is essential for making it an object of knowledge. It is also true that giving a wretched feeling a respectable name is essential for making it a subject of acceptable discourse and practice. That is Narendra Modi's great contribution to the demise of Indian civilisation.

It was said after September 11 last year that the world will never be the same again. One of the many irreversible changes wrought by September 11 is that it has

become civilised thereafter to hate Muslims, and to talk of Islam vs civilisation. February 28 this year borrows from that American achievement. If, after all, current history is the saga of civilisation pitted against Islam, slaughtering Muslims can only be a contribution to the cause of civilisation. It was left to Narendra Modi to realise this, and to signal to Hindus that they need no longer feel ashamed of their secret hatred for Muslims. That is why the Sangh parivar gang admires him next only to George Bush.

We are asked to believe that Hindus have so become bitter only because secular-minded people have never understood the deep historical hurt Hindus are suffering from. One must confess to some scepticism. Hatred of one's neighbour does not require such deep historical causes. It is enough if the neighbour insists on being different and thereby offers himself as the cause of all one's frustrations and failures. The real sin of Muslims is just that: they insist on being different. I am talking here of the ordinary Muslim, and not the handful of maniacs who believe that all Muslims shall live only in Islamic regimes, and that divine state of affairs will be achieved with Kalashnikovs. And the real sin of the secular-minded people is that we say they have the right to be different.

What other meaning can there be for the insistence that if the refugees wish to come back to the village, they must remove the beard, shut off the hateful azaan and not wear the skull cap? Sadly, it is these hate-filled minds that speak incessantly of the great tolerance of the Hindus. What is this great tolerance that cannot bear the only people who are really different? This country is being overtaken by small-minded and hate-filled men who are bluffing and blackmailing the country into accepting their perverse logic. It is true that those who stand for secularism and democracy have some soul-searching to do; not for their alleged indifference to the great Hindu sense of historical injury, but for having allowed these goons to occupy so much space in our society. [4]

Back Volumes

Back Volumes of **Economic and Political Weekly** from 1976 to 2001 are available in unbound form.

Write to:

Circulation Department, **Economic and Political Weekly**

Hitkari House, 284 Shahid Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400 001.