Threatened Existence: A Feminist Analysis of the Genocide in Gujarat
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Chapter 2
The Context[1]

India has been witnessing a growing form of conservative politics driven by a fascist agenda purportedly based on religious identity, called *Hindutva* by its proponents, the *Sangh Parivar* (The Collective Hindu Family) or the Hindu Right. The ideology of *Hindutva*, which refers to the building of an exclusively Hindu nation has been, and is clearly, at odds with the secular Indian nation, which was created as a sovereign democratic republic in 1947. Under the secular democratic republic an individual finds place in the nation not through ethnic, religious, caste, or racial affiliations but through constitutional guarantees based on concepts of citizenship, equality before law, and civil liberties.

The organizations responsible for the spread of this ideology have been around for many years, but their visibility and presence has been more marked in the past two decades or so. The panel's visits and discussions with people affected by the violence and with organizations working in these areas confirm what other reports have said earlier–that the main perpetrators of the violence in Gujarat have been organizations of the *Sangh Parivar*. Hence we wish to place our report in the context of the history of this right wing organizing and its ideology.

2.1 The *Sangh Parivar*

The term *Sangh Parivar* is consciously used by the Hindu Right to refer to a variety of organizations– political parties, cultural and religious organizations and other affiliates–that adhere to their philosophy. The *Sangh Parivar* operates with a kind of division of labour among its several affiliates.

- The electoral front of the Hindu Right is the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (henceforth BJP). The Maharashtra-based regional political party, the *Shiv Sena*, is also considered a Hindu nationalist party.

- The "cultural organization" of the Hindu nationalists is the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (henceforth RSS). The RSS is the organizational and ideological backbone of the Hindu Right. It stays away from the "lure" of politics and in doing so, acquires moral legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Its main strength is its loyal, dedicated and highly disciplined cadre.

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[1] For this section on the political and social context in India we have relied on the knowledge of our Indian participants, the expert testimonies that covered these issues especially on the first day, the reading material put together and sent to us by the organizers before we all met and some secondary sources. Some of the main texts that have been referred to are: Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, Sambuddha Sen. Khakhi Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Press, 1993); Christopher Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999); Dipankar Gupta, Nativism in a Metropolis: The Shiv Sena in Bombay (New Delhi: Manohar Press, 1982); Zoya Hasan, ed. Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994); C. Baxter, Jan Sangh: A Bibliography of an Indian Party (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1971).

- The *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (henceforth VHP) is an organization of the Hindu ecclesiastical order, which focuses on unity among Hindus in India as well as in the diaspora. It is heavily funded by the Hindu diaspora for its activities. (For more details on the contribution of the diaspora to these right wing organizations please refer to Annexure II). The *VHP's* youth wing, the *Bajrang Dal* is particularly virulent in its operational tactics and rhetoric.

These organizations are rigidly hierarchical: in most, there are no internal elections, democracy is not encouraged and dissent is not tolerated. Members of one organization often cross over to other organizations of the *Sangh Parivar.* For instance, most office bearers in the BJP have been trained by the RSS. The Hindu Right runs social welfare centres, medical centres, schools, orphanages and other services. The Hindu Right also runs trade unions, student unions, women's wings and controls sections of print as well as other media. (A detailed list of all the organizations is given in Annexure III).

2.2 The sleight of hand of the *Sangh Parivar*

All these organizations have worked consistently and for many years (the RSS was formed very early in the mid 1920s) to influence a large section of the population with their ideology. (For a more detailed analysis of the ideology and political growth of the right wing in India refer to Annexure IV). To be able to do this, they had to begin by forging a Hindu unity within the otherwise diverse religious and cultural practices of the country.

Hindu communities have been characterized by multiple practices and beliefs. Hinduism as a religion is not derived from one source or text and has been for many years, a loose combination of beliefs and practices. There are various systems of beliefs that have been loosely termed the "Hindu" religion. These diversities are being obfuscated and glossed over, to create an imposed unity through uniformity, by the *Hindutva* brigade. A *Brahminical,*[2] Hindu, male culture is being established and projected as **the** "Hindu" culture of the region.

There is also a conflation of religion with culture and both these terms are used interchangeably. At the same time a new definition of nationalism has been made popular– "cultural nationalism." All those who do not subscribe to the Hindu religion, and hence culture, are not Hindu and so cannot belong to *Hindustan.*[3] There is thus an effort to make claims to belonging and indigenousness in the name of all–religion, culture and nation.

The Hindu identity thus created is monolithic and not representative of the multiple beliefs of "Hindu" people of this region. It also tries to nullify all contradictions and tensions within the practice of Hinduism – the main one being that of caste. The practice of Hinduism has inflicted all kinds of discrimination and violation on people from the lower castes which continues even today, exploding the myth of a tolerant and non-violent Hinduism. The centuries old violence of the caste system which long precedes the arrival of Christianity or

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[2] The caste system in India is a key part of the matrix that delineates community affiliation. Caste may be understood as a system of defining community, a system that is maintained through social hierarchies and clear rules about who one can and cannot marry. One is born into a caste and by extension community. Each sub caste theoretically has its own traditional profession, and thus the community is identified by the work traditionally done by its members. The groups within the caste system – *Brahmins* (priests), *kshatriyas* (warriors), *vaishyas* (merchants), and *shudras* (lower castes) – are organized hierarchically descending from the *brahmins* to the *shudras* with sub-castes within each of these groups. The lower castes are inclusive of the untouchables or Dalits (literally meaning oppressed) who are also referred as *Harijans.*

[3] Hindustan means land of the Hindus and is also one of the names for India.

Islam is being denied for the sake of the creation of a "Hindu" identity. In fact, through gross misrepresentation of facts, the right wing organizations have recently begun to shift the onus of violence inherent in the caste system upon Islam and Christianity, by claiming that people who refused to convert were made to occupy the position of the untouchables.

The obverse of the project of creating a Hindu identity is to create an "other" against whom this unity is projected and re-created. Although Hindu fundamentalist organizations do believe that Hindu people are supreme, they have consciously created an imminent and omnipresent threat to the Hindu identity from "foreign" cultures and religions, namely those of Islam and Christianity, to unite diverse populations. With clever distortions of history and with much contribution from international politics, Hindu fundamentalists have managed to successfully create the notion of a "victimized" Hindu majority in India and in the world, which needs to arm and protect itself from imagined attacks directed against it.

Violence against all non-Hindus, and against Muslims in particular, lies at the core of Hindu supremacist discourse and practice and is viewed as the necessary step towards the total annihilation or subjugation of minorities. This ideology has been espoused from the early days and its reflections are seen in the writings of V.D. Savarkar, a *Hindutva* ideologue who is revered even today. In his book, "Six Golden Pages in the History of Hindu Nation"[4] he argues for a clear annihilation of Muslims in India, such as the kind that took place in Spain:

> It can be seen from history that those nation-states who did not demolish Muslim political and religious powers were completely Islamized. Only those few 5-10 nation states who not only demolished the Muslim state, but also got rid of Muslim religious power could be successful in getting rid of Muslims altogether. One such nation was Spain….The state administration of liberated Spain specified a time period within which all Muslim men and women were required to either convert to Christianity or leave the country altogether. It was also said that those who would not abide by either would be killed. After the given period was over all the men-women, young-old Muslims were killed in Spain. The Church got purified in their blood. Spain had exterminated Muslims. And that is why Spain remained Spain and did not become Morocco.

For the purpose of coalition building, therefore, Hindu supremacists construct Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists as part of the Hindu "community" so as to dominate through numbers. This majority is pitted against the "others." Within this formation, Muslims and, to a lesser extent, Christians have been the preferred targets of the Hindu Right. From 1998 onwards there have been sporadic and more sustained attacks on the Christian community, particularly in predominantly *Adivasi* (tribal) dominated areas. In all of these regions, the relatively new presence of *Hindutva* forces is threatened by the presence of Christians who are perceived to be enhancing their numbers by seeking religious conversions.

The Hindu fundamentalists thus work mainly at three levels.

- One is to create a "Hindu" identity that obliterates all differences and hierarchies within the religion and brings together diverse sections of the population under one umbrella.

- The second is to "otherise" and exclude all those who do not fit into the category of "Hindu" and who do not thus "belong to the nation."

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[4] V. D. Savarkar, Itihaasachi Saha Soneri Paane (Six Golden Pages in the History of the Indian Nation) (Mumbai: Manorama Prakashan, 10th ed., 2002) 219 –221.

- The third is a systematic takeover of state power.

The first two tasks have been systematically carried out over past years, with activities getting a boost in the last two decades when entry into mainstream electoral political processes was gained.[5]

2.3 The Political Context of Gujarat

Violence against people from Muslim communities in Gujarat and the subsequent electoral victory of the very parties implicated in the carnage indicates that Hindu right-wing ideology and politics have been successful to a large degree in the state of Gujarat.

> Gujarat is one of the most prosperous states in the country in terms of per capita income and has a high level of industrialization. Its development has, however, been uneven. It has been an enthusiastic supporter of neo-liberalisation policies in recent years with an adverse impact on labour coinciding with a decline of labour organization. Apart from the increased casualisation of labour of the erstwhile working class the large numbers of those in the unorganized sector have no possible recourse to collective action. Further, despite high indices of development statutory wages remain low, and are lower than neighbouring Rajasthan. Skewed development and the absence of social movements to represent the interests of the politically vulnerable sections, including workers, *Adivasis* (whose proportion in the population is very high in Gujarat) and Dalits has been a fertile ground for breeding a conservative form of politics in the state. (Professor Arvind from New Delhi, speaking to the panel in Mumbai).

As an ideological formation, *Hindutva* has been dominating politics in Gujarat since the early 1990s and as a political formation, it has captured State power in Gujarat since 1995. In the early decades after Independence, the Congress party both at the Centre and in the State of Gujarat dominated politics. But by the late 1960s, the government's continuing failure to address people's aspirations led to a political crisis. This crisis led to the imposition of a civil national emergency in 1975-77, which further eroded the hold of the Congress party, delegitimized it and led to its defeat in the 1977 Parliamentary elections. The late 1970s thus saw the initial phase of coalition government in which the *Hindutva* forces had their first taste of political power as coalition partner. This was also a period of questioning for India–a range of separatist movements, communal conflicts, caste-wars and strong regional identities developed–which was not only unravelling the "givens" of the secular, socialist, Indian project but also putting a strain on the shrinking resources among competing contenders. The Hindu Right capitalized on this era of uncertainty, nationally and globally, and tried to increase the size of its flock through the construction of a single, "secure," essentialist identity–a "community of Hindus."

As the crisis of the State increased in intensity through the late 60s, 70s and into the next decade, political parties began to instrumentally use caste contradictions to build political

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[5] Chayanika Shah, "Representational Democracy to Religious Majoritarianism: The Growth of Hindu Fundamentalism in India." The paper is to be included in a WLUML report of the conference 'The Warning Signs of Fundamentalisms' 2002, London, UK. Forthcoming. The title of the volume is not yet finalised.

bases. Reservation policies have therefore consistently played an important role in the politics of Gujarat. Another development at the time was the transformation of caste-based violence into communal violence, particularly in Ahmedabad and Baroda:

> Gujarat has a history of communal violence going back to pre-Partition times, which has grown in intensity from 1965 onwards. In the collective memory of people, the 1969 riots parallel the violence of 2002, which affected both Ahmedabad and Baroda. The Reddy Commission of Inquiry had said that the violence was pre-planned and that the police adopted a partisan attitude in arrests and filing of complaints. The planned nature of the 1969 violence included the building up of a communal tempo. Using the backdrop of the 1965 war with Pakistan anti-Muslim sentiment was stoked by the RSS. The use of imagery of the violated Hindu woman's body with rumours of rapes and breasts being cut off was also a feature of 1969. Yet there are important differences between 1969 and 2002. The violence in 1969 was confined to the urban cities, and the government itself was not instrumental in igniting the riots. The general public was also not overtly communalised." (Professor Arvind, New Delhi).

> (In the) early '80s and up to '85- 86 there were a spate of riots in Baroda and they were also linked to the caste reservations then. Most often the caste violence got converted to religion- based violence. Also during the '80s the communal riots could be explained as clashes between differing interests, liquor dons and political members, which was given a communal colour. Though people were becoming communal they weren't acting on it. The situation changed dramatically in the 90's after the entry of the BJP and saffron parties. (Seema, woman activist, organizations BO8 and BO9, Baroda).

2.4 The Rise of BJP in Gujarat

The Congress projected itself as the champion of the marginalized sections of society, during its rule in the late 70s and early 80s, while the BJP supported the cause of the stronger upper castes at the time. With the collapse of the Congress in the State in the late 80s new caste and religious political equations were forged by the BJP in Gujarat:

> Traditionally Christian and Muslims were allying with the Congress. BJP thought that if they want to come to power they needed to get religion in. From the 80s they started this poison, then started Ram mandir and became more aggressive after they felt it works. Congress could not win only on Dalit and Muslim vote so they were also silent. We people became like footballs and we are being kicked by both of them. BJP thinks that the more aggressive they are towards Muslims, the more Hindu votes they will get. The Congress thinks if they protect the Muslims they lose Hindu votes so they do not stand up for us. Muslims cannot vote for BJP and are forced to vote for the Congress. Either ways we lose. (Shahadab, Congress party worker, Anand).

BJP favoured opening up of the economy, which garnered the support of the upper caste/upper class constituencies. *Hindutva* propaganda has used both secular issues, like corruption and inflation, as well as communal issues, such as anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric, to create a "Hindu" constituency across caste and class. Common people's travails

have been attributed to the Congress/secular appeasement of minorities much like the anti-Jew campaigns of the Nazis.

The whole State has been dotted with temples and the number of RSS *shakhas* (camps) has risen rapidly since the BJP came to power. In fact, the RSS claims that they will have a *shakha* in every village by the year 2005.[6] The Hindu right-wing has tried to infiltrate into all branches of the bureaucracy making it easy to get census records of minority communities. They have conducted religion-based censuses and have tried to manipulate education by monitoring schools and tampering with syllabi and textbooks. Youth organizations have also been increasingly "monitoring" Hindu girls and policing their behaviour. (See Annexure V for the details).

2.5 "Hinduising" the Marginalized

More recently Dalits and *Adivasis* have been drawn into the anti-minority campaign through front organizations allegedly involved in "development" work, and through mobilization to specifically target minorities during riots.

> In these villages they used to have *bhajans* [prayers] and tribal festivals but in the last 7-8 years, some people from BD [*Bajrang Dal*] used to go there with their *Hanuman Chalisas* [prayers], the RSS with their *trishuls* [tridents] etc… they would initially say that *ganvaar logon ko theek karna hai* [we have to reform these ignorant people]. They said, "Don't eat meat, don't drink alcohol." Now some of the *Adivasi* leaders are members of the VHP, they are specially invited and transported to meetings, fed and given respect as part of the Hindu fold by giving *chadar* [shawl] etc. And this has been happening on a very regular basis–there is nothing secret about these meetings. Talks at these meetings are about how to protect the Hindu religion–with slogans of "Hindus unite," and the youth are called upon to "chase out the Muslims." And these youth are unemployed, vagabond, wastrel men." (Laila, PO12 organization, PV12 village, Dahod; Kamalbhai, PO3 organization, Panchmahals).

Indeed, during the carnage in 2002, the economic distress and impoverishment of drought-ridden *Adivasis* was manipulated by promising them a free hand in the imminent looting in lieu of their participation in the violence against Muslims. The channelling of political and economic disenchantment into resentment against Muslims has been effectively aided by the large funding provided by the non-resident Indian (NRI) lobby abroad, many of whom are Gujaratis. (A more detailed account is provided in Annexure II). This funding has enabled the *Sangh* Combine to build an extensive network in villages and towns all over the country. They have continuously provided ideological and combat training to people from marginalized sections of Hindu society, mobilizing them in larger and larger numbers to

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[6] The Asian Age, January 7, 2000.

carry out attacks on the "other." New groups have joined in the violence and its nature has become more gruesome every time.

The *Sangh* Combine has strategically drawn in large numbers of women into its campaigns by using religious festivals as a focal point. From such innocuous beginnings, it has systematically incorporated women into its hate-filled mobilization against Muslims and has even distributed *trishuls* among them. Violence against women from Muslim communities was unprecedented during the Gujarat carnage and women from Hindu communities participated actively in the violence.

From the beginning of the 1990's, and especially after the destruction of the *Babri Masjid* in 1992, the pattern of violence has become more vicious. Human rights violations are on the increase and the attacks on minorities, especially Christians and Muslims, are now two-pronged: either spearheaded by *Hindutva* storm troopers who have unleashed a reign of terror during BJP rule, or led by the right-wing State itself. In the years 1998-99 about 200 incidents of varying intensity have taken place in Gujarat.[7] The State has become so communalised since 1995, when the BJP came to power, that it has proclaimed itself as a "Hindu *Rashtra*" or Hindu Nation on many sign-boards.

2.6 Hindu Right's Characterization of the Muslim Community

As part of the construction of a Hindu *Rashtra,* the Hindu Right has consistently sought to portray the Muslim as the "other," the enemy within who undermines the security of the nation, poses a threat to the *Hindutva* project of nation building and erodes "Hindu" rights. These rights are being allegedly diluted by what is termed as the "minority appeasement" of Muslims, attributed specifically to the Congress. More specifically, it refers to legal provisions allowing minority communities in India to be governed by personal laws based on religion, to run their own educational institutions and to receive subsidies for religious pilgrimages. These entitlements are used to convey the impression that minorities are "pampered" in India.

Even though the facts (See Annexure VI for the socio-economic reality of Indian Muslims) differ, they do not matter for the Hindu Right works with emotive and divisive sloganeering instead. Their divisive campaign draws upon political events going back to Independence and the Partition of the sub-continent. The continuing and unresolved tensions in the sub-continent from 1947, about boundaries of the new nation-states, reached a new flashpoint in 1990 in Jammu and Kashmir. This added to the perception of the "Muslim menace" creating more prejudices towards Muslims within India. Indian Muslim society was put on the defensive and was constantly under pressure to prove its loyalty to the country by demonstrating a shared hatred for Pakistan. A slogan coined by the Hindu Right during the early 80s, and which gained currency during *Hindutva* campaigns in the 90s (which was also used in Gujarat in 2002) demonstrates how Muslims' right to live in India became increasingly challenged:

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[7] Interview of Ghanshyam Shah in http://www.rediff.com on May 1, 2002.

Musalman ke do hi sthan – Qabristan ya Pakistan (There are only two places where the Muslim belongs, in the graveyard or in Pakistan).

Separatist movements both in Punjab and then in Kashmir have fed easily into the fear psychosis of the Hindu nation under threat. This was oxygen for the Hindu Right–providing for an easy conflation of Pakistani-Terrorist-Muslim-Enemy. The rhetoric of *Hindutva* politics has tended to create an instant subliminal association between these terms in the mind of the average Indian. In contemporary global reality, the Hindutva rhetoric dovetails perfectly with America's War on Terrorism. Post 9/11, the words "Muslim" and "terrorist" or "Islam" and "terrorism" are increasingly being used interchangeably.

The BJP's anti-Muslim campaign was accompanied by a direct attempt at collapsing the boundaries between political parties and institutions of governance during its terms of office in Gujarat. As part of its dictum, the BJP government passed an order lifting a 14-year ban on government officials joining the RSS–the organization banned after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi–in January 2000. This ominous move to open the heart of the bureaucracy to the RSS was resisted and the official order was stayed. However the *Hindutvisation* of State machinery has still proceeded systematically. Since 2000, persons holding official positions in the VHP and other allied organizations have been appointed public prosecutors in district courts. Police and administrative officers have been transferred in order to create a compliant administration. These measures have played a critical role in the partisan functioning of administration during the violence of 2002.

2.7 Saffronisation of Education and Media

At another level, saffronisation of education has been pursued vigorously. (For more details on the project of saffronisation of education in the whole country see Annexure VII). Control over educational institutions and manipulation of syllabi and popular media have been effectively utilized to further the ideology of *Hindutva*.

> They have taken over the entire educational system far beyond the textbooks, and the respect that is given usually to the "master" in a village has been exploited for the saffronisation of the entire culture, education and society. (Laila, PO12 organization, PV12 village, Dahod).

> The teachers recruited in the last 10 years are extremely communal. Within the syllabus they introduce sessions on religion/Hinduism, not officially but unofficially. Space is made within the school day for all this. Sometimes, school times have been changed to accommodate *Asarambapu* [see glossary] programmes. (Kamalbhai, PO3 organization, Panchmahals).

After the BJP came to power school textbooks routinely refer to caste divisions or *varna* as a great invention and to Hitler and Mussolini as folk heroes who rescued their countries from effete regimes.

Hindutva strategists realize that ideological campaigns in a society where not everyone goes to school have to include both old and new media tools such as pamphlets and popular tracts as well as audio, video and television to circulate "news." The wider reach afforded by these

media has enabled *Hindutva* to penetrate into areas, which do not have access to other forms of information and news. According to one testimony:

> The local electronic media was used by the VHP to whip up tension. Many channels were showing "patriotic" and anti-Muslim films. They also telecast the speeches of *Bajrang Dal* and *VHP* leaders. …. The significance of the media campaign was that they were very systematically working for the right-wing cause and created an encouraging ground for the violence that ensued. (Reshma, woman activist, organizations BO8 and BO9, Baroda).

2.8 Hindutva's Agenda for Women

Any right-wing religious ideology that defines "community" would be both incomplete and ineffective without an agenda for women. So also with *Hindutva*. Hindu women are being drawn into mass *Hindutva* campaigns, like the temple construction in Ayodhya, and supporting and participating in violence. While this gives some recognition to women as members of the community, it also means strict norms of prescribed behaviour for women, as in any other right-wing religious ideology. Those who are regarded as "deviant" or independent are policed and sometimes terrorized by storm troopers of the *Sangh*.

At the same time, women from the "other" (Muslim) community become more vulnerable as attacks on them are not only justified but also demanded. In his book, V. D. Savarkar derides some Hindu kings for, "[N]ot raping Muslim women in conquered areas, as this is the only way to teach Muslims [a] lesson for what was done to Hindu women in the past."[8]

Selective use and distortion of history has been the hallmark of the *Hindutva* project. Women, their bodies and sexuality play a major role in the replay and reiteration of the distortions of history. There are many stories circulated of how Hindu women were sexually violated by "foreign" Muslim invaders. The stories emphasize that these violations need to be avenged and that women have to be organized and trained in "self-defence" to prevent attacks in the future.

The myth of the virile and violent Muslim man and the victimized Hindu woman, whose body is used to attack Hindu culture and religion, is always kept alive. Women and men are then organized around these notions of self-defence, with hatred for the Muslim man and with a vengeance against the Muslim woman. Simultaneously, the Hindu woman is the perpetual victim and possible avenger when enraged. The *Sangh Parivar's* obsession with women and their shameless use of women's bodies are evident in almost all their strategies and pogroms.

Thus no segment of civil society remains outside the ambit of *Hindutva*–women, children, *Adivasis*, and Dalits have all been drawn into the fold. Consequently, the circuit between a communalised State, a *Hindutva* government and an equally communalised society was completed in Gujarat well before the carnage in 2002.

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[8] Savarkar, 156–159.