

PUCL - Vadodara and Vadodara Shanti Abhiyan

PUCL (People's Union for Civil Liberties) - Vadodara and Shanti Abhiyan are two major forums active in Vadodara for more than a decade. Several progressive organisations and individuals have participated in these forums over the years. During the 1992 riots, people from Sarvodaya groups, women's organisations, trade-unions, environmental groups, NGOs working in community health and development, concerned academicians and progressive individuals working for peace and harmony decided to work under one banner, which was subsequently named Shanti Abhiyan. Similarly, activists are working for human rights from many of the above mentioned organisations came together under the banner of PUCL. Over the years the PUCL undertook several fact-finding missions during communal violence, atrocities on Dalits, women, slum dwellers and environmental issues, published fact finding reports and filed public interest litigation on issues of human rights violation. PUCL members also organised programmes to create awareness about human rights among society. There are many common organisations and individuals working in both the forums.

On February 27, 2002 as soon as we came to know the news about Godhra Sabarmati Express incident, a press release was given to the press condemning the event. Only Indian Express and no Gujarati newspaper published the press note.

The next day the house of Dr. Bandukwala, an active member of PUCL - Vadodara and Shanti Abhiyan (and also one of the signatories of the Shanti Abhiyan press release) was attacked and his car was burnt by a mob. The mob threatened to return to burn the house and attack Dr. Bandukwala. Some friends from these forums decided to stay at his home during the night. Meanwhile news started coming in about violence from all corners of Vadodara, not only from the walled city but also outskirts of Vadodara. Gotri was one of the first places to experience mob violence. Here, Muslims were driven out of their homes, with free looting and burning of houses of minority community. Our members wherever they were situated started intervening for peace by trying to save people's lives and property. Members continuously tried to contact Police for help but could not do much. In most areas we ourselves could not get support from the Police in this initial phase. The situation of common persons during these riots can be understood from the fact that we, with repeated phone calls to the local administration and even the chief minister of Gujarat, could not save Dr. Bandukwala's property. Because of our pressure police protection was given to Dr. Bandukwala. However, in the presence of Police on March 1st night his house was attacked and with difficulty his life and that of his daughter were saved. Those who helped in the process were also attacked and threatened by the mob. All this happened after information was given to both the Collector and the Police Commissioner. We are narrating this incident in detail in order to explain the situation which common Muslim families of Vadodara were experiencing.

At this time and under such conditions some of us decided to work together under a common umbrella of PUCL-Vadodara and Shanti Abhiyan. Since then various activities have been undertaken by PUCL- Vadodara and Shanti Abhiyan. The range of activities and people involved in these activities is varied and heterogeneous. However all of us firmly believe that people should not be divided in the name of religion and we will not tolerate violation of human rights in the name of any religion. We are committed to peace, harmony and rehabilitation of people affected by this senseless violence.

Range of Activities

PUCL - Vadodara and Shanti Abhiyan have undertaken a range of activities and about 100 volunteers have contributed at various point of time for different activities from end February to May 2002 These activities can be broadly classified as follows:

1. Organising peace committees
2. Organising awareness and protest programmes
3. Pressurising and liaison with Police and administration to save human life and property.
4. Undertaking fact-finding and analysis of the situation
5. Representation of the voices of victims, analysis of ground level situation and organising representation to various commissions.
6. Working for relief and rehabilitation.
7. Satyagrah against injustice and Police atrocities

These activities were in response to the situations and events that occurred each day. The activities emerged and were not always the result of very serious planning. Co-ordination processes and mechanisms were also informal, and often not to the satisfaction of many. Despite these limitations we were able to establish a presence in Vadodara both among the administration and among the affected citizens.

1. Organising Peace Committees

This forum has organised peace committees in some localities in which Hindu and Muslim population stay side by side. The significant experiences of organising peace committees are in Tandalja situated at the western outskirts of Vadodara (populated by about 40,000 people, 80% Muslims and 20% Hindus), Kalyan Nagar, situated in Karelibaug and Purva vistar (eastern part of the city). A detailed case study of Tandalja is included in this report. Page-

2. Organising awareness and protest programmes

The forum organised peace dharnas, human-chains, etc. from the very first week of the violence. Between March 4-8 peace demonstrations and peace march were organised in various areas of Vadodara. On March 8th, the International Women's Day a demonstration was organised by all women's organisations associated with this forum. Activists of women's organisations presented songs and street plays, artists from Faculty of Fine Arts prepared very effective posters against communal violence and its effects on women. They also made a mobile white pigeon as a symbol of peace. More than 500 women, children and men formed a human chain at Sayajigunj at the end of the programme and took an oath to fight against communal violence and communal ideology.

Again during the second phase of violence we came out on the streets and during March 24-28 large demonstrations were organised in several major public places of the city in collaboration with some educational institutions. Teachers and students of various schools participated in these demonstrations.

3. Work with Police and Administration

We worked and continue to work as a pressure group and a liaison group with the Police Commissioner and the Collector. We established communication with the Collector and the Police department to get their help for citizens. We realised that it was almost impossible for many common people to contact Police during emergency because phones of Control Room were constantly busy; and many a time if contacted, the Police did not respond immediately to prevent violent incidents. The explanation given by the Police Commissioner was that "out of 100 phone calls received, 90 are wrong information and several events are happening at the same time all over the city. Since we do not have sufficient Police force we do not take immediate action on receiving each and every phone call." We gave concrete examples of the various occasions when we gave information to the Control Room to prevent certain incidents but because of Police inaction they could not be prevented. We assured the Commissioner that we were careful to verify facts before complaining and requested him to instruct the Control Room to act immediately on our phone calls. We also established a continuous link with the Commissioner and some of the senior Police officials in various areas on their mobile. We circulated some of our phone numbers in affected areas so that people can contact us at any time. We started receiving complaints on phones. Our phones were working for 24 hours. When people realised that they could get some support with our intervention, not only people from Vadodara City but also those from nearby villages started making phone calls for immediate Police intervention. Through this link we were able to help prevention of incidents in a few cases and helped in the prevention of worsening of violence in several cases. Some examples are Ranmukteswar, Bahar colony, Wadi Taiwada, Macchipith, Samiyala, etc.

In some sensitive areas we organised peace vigils. During the height of the riots our activists went to stay in areas where there were threats of imminent attack. Our activists contacted people from both the communities and ensured that no one would initiate the attack. We also informed the Police about our stay there and thus pressurised them to take immediate action in case of any outside attack. These actions created an atmosphere of trust and confidence among the residents of the area.

4. Fact Finding

Organising fact finding missions in the city and surrounding areas by our members has been a major activity. Supporting fact-finding teams and journalists from other cities to get first hand information about the events was another aspect of this work. Some of these outside friends and journalists have also contributed in writing this report.

5. Representation to Various Commissions

Representing the condition of Vadodara's affected citizens to Defence Minister Mr. George Fernandes, the NHRC team, to the Editors' Guild of India, the President of India, the Prime Minister of India, National Commission For Women, National Women activists and other visiting teams of concerned individuals, K.P.S. Gill etc. was also a task undertaken by members of this forum.

We also organised public hearings for the Concerned Citizens' Tribunal, headed by retired Supreme Court judges and other eminent people in Vadodara during May 8-11. Around 500 affected persons and witnesses from Vadodara City and surrounding villages gave their oral and written depositions

6. Work for Relief and Rehabilitation

We have worked closely with relief camp organisers to provide relief material like food, vegetable, footwear, clothes, food for children, etc. at various points of time to people living in camps and other shelters from resources collected by us. We also worked as a pressure group to get support from the State on various occasions. At one point because of the continuous curfew, those daily wagers who were not affected by violence were also suffering from hunger and we organised distribution of rations for such affected families of all communities in the Panigate and Tandalja areas.

Supporting rehabilitation by providing means of livelihood and some basic necessities of household items to start their life again has been our other major rehabilitation objective. We also worked/work as a link between people and their employers so that they can restart their work. For instance, we contacted employers of women home-based workers who roll papad so that they get work even when they were staying in the camps.

The forum has helped/helps affected people get their compensation and other dues from government. Our activists have also been helping file FIRs and the writing of complaints to the Police and the Collector and other authorities.

7. Satyagraha against Injustice and Police Atrocities

During the second and third phases of violence from 15th March onwards, the Police played a prominent, if unsavoury, role in terrorising Muslim residents of localities through partisan and brutal combing operations and arrests. Women, in particular, were subject to extreme forms of harassment by the Police in their own homes. In many cases this occurred when men had fled their homes out of fear of Police repression. In the third phase of violence, Police refused to give us curfew passes so that we were unable to visit sensitive localities. Nevertheless people continued to contact us on phone and we conveyed to the Police Commissioner about the heart rending testimonies, particularly of women from Badri Mohalla, Tai Wada, Imran Chambers, Mohammed Talao, Khazgi Mohalla, Raja Rani Talao and other places in Wadi and Pani Gate area. Women routinely broke down on the phone while recounting their horror stories and it was evident that they were experiencing extreme insecurity. They were being continuously and constantly attacked and terrorised. The youth in the area were being consistently abused and provoked to come out in the open. Police remained mute spectators to the stone throwing and abuses hurled by the mobs instigating violence. In addition the Police were forcibly entering Muslim homes, destroying property and assaulting and arresting innocent men, beating women (not even sparing pregnant women), issuing sexual and communal threats in abusive language, and vandalising their houses. When no action were taken by the Police Commissioner to stop this atrocities, the PUCL - Vadodara and Shanti Abhiyan decided to protest against this Police brutality. We wrote an open letter to the Police Commissioner. An excerpt from the letter is as follows:

“As this harassment has become unbearable ordinary Muslims have decided to launch martyr-marches from Tuesday onwards. Everyday 25 women and 25 men will surrender themselves to you for slaughter so that you can complete your assigned task in cold blood. In accordance with the teachings of

Mahatma Gandhi the group will deliver itself totally unarmed with their mouth bound and the men will be ready to face your bullets bare-chested. The first martyrs march will commence tomorrow at 10 a.m. from Moghulwada after peacefully breaking curfew orders and will reach your office at Narmada Bhavan where we will mutely accept whatever punishment you choose to give us for this Satyagraha. We hope that this human carnage will stop as a result of this Satyagraha. May God Grant Wisdom to All."

From 30th April to 3^d May 2002 every day a group of Muslim women and men courted arrest in a silent and peaceful march. The most important positive impact of the demonstration was that many Muslim women came out on the streets for the first time in their lives and increased their confidence. They felt that they could tackle the situation after the experience of arrest for a day. Their feelings of helplessness and frustration were reduced to an extent. On the fourth day the Police Commissioner called us for meeting and promised to undertake inquiry against guilty Police personnel.

On 13th May a demonstration was organised as part of national level call by several women's organisations to oppose violence on women and children in Gujarat. About 500 Muslim and Hindu women and men marched together under the banner of Vadodara Ekta Divas (Day of Unity of Vadodara citizens).

AN APPEAL

The PUCL - Vadodara and Shanti Abhiyan has designated SAHAJ to receive donations on behalf of the front. Till May 31, 2002, more than ten lakh rupees have been received and spent.

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