

Communal Upheaval as the Resurgence of Social-Darwinism

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Amsterdam, 2 April 2002

The recent pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat was not the first I have observed from close quarters. The wave of communal violence engulfing the state after the destruction of the Ayodhya temple coincided with a round of rural and urban research in which I was engaged during late 1992 and early 1993. I wrote on the shock and dismay in the village of my fieldwork when the news arrived of the urban carnage taking place in Mumbai, and on the state of disorder which still prevailed in Surat and Ahmedabad during my subsequent stays in these cities.¹

In Spring 2002, the religious cleansing operation has been more severe, larger in scale and longer lasting than on earlier occasions, mainly because the state apparatus – both the leading political party and government agencies – condoned or even facilitated the pogrom, rather than stopped it, while it was taking place in late February and early March. The breakdown of civic society has been discussed from various angles, such as the unique history of Gujarat with deep-seated lines of fission between religious majority and minority, a progressive state of flux in the caste balance caused by upward mobility and the concomitant assertion of the middle class, or finally the character of the region as a cultural frontier.

I myself am inclined to give a lot of weight to the well-entrenched nature of the *Hindutva* movement and its predecessors in this part of the country, strongly opposed to communal harmony and to the design of society as a melting pot of diverse and open-ended social segments. The mobilisation of low and intermediate castes to participate in the activities of the *Sangh Parivar* organisations in the last two decades has broadened the base of Hindu fundamentalism as a social-political force. The price these previously denigrated segments have to pay for their acceptance within the *Hindutva* fold is their willingness to express antagonism to Muslims as members of the religious minority and, in brutal acts of confrontation, to do the dirty work of cleansing on behalf of their high-caste brothers and sisters. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are intricately interwoven.

However, this explanation also has to be contextualised within the changing political economy of Gujarat. My following comments relate to Ahmedabad, the primary location of many of the horrors that have been reported. Since 1998 I have been carrying out research in localities in the city which used to be marked by the smoking chimneys of textile mills, many of which had a history of production for close to, or even more than, a hundred years. To this branch of industry Ahmedabad owed its fame as the Manchester of India. That proud record came to an end when, from the early 1980s onwards, these

¹See 'Rural Impressions of the Urban Carnage', in: *Times of India*, mid-January 1993; 'An Anti-Muslim Pogrom in Surat', in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.28, no.16, 1993:737-41; 'Ghettoisation and Communal Politics; Inclusion and Exclusion in the Hindutva Landscape', in: Guha, R. and J. Parry (eds.) – *Institutions & Inequalities; Essays in Honour of Andre Beteille*. Oxford University Press, Delhi 1999: 259-83.

factories started to close their gates. Twenty years later more than 50 mills have stopped production and, in this still ongoing crisis, at least one *lakh* workers have lost their jobs. While around the middle of the 20th century half of the city's workforce used to earn its livelihood from employment in the composite textile enterprises dominating the industrial landscape, this percentage has now dwindled to a tiny fraction.

The dismissed workers were driven into the informal sector of the economy, to depend on casual rather than regular jobs, requiring no or only minimum skills, remunerated with very low wages and paid, moreover, not on time but on piece rate. Hired for hardly more than 15 to 20 days per month, most of them have been forced to strengthen the economy of their household by bringing former dependents, women and also young children, into the labouring process. Even all these efforts combined generally result in a life standard far below the poverty level. In the process of immiseratisation the erstwhile mill workers have been made to surrender the regularity, stability and dignity they used to enjoy in the formal sector of the economy.²

Pauperisation is not only contained within the sphere of these households but has become publicly visible in the run-down quality of the industrial localities in and around the old city centre. In contrast to the new prosperity displayed so glamorously in the middle-class neighbourhoods on the right bank of the Sabarmati river, the low-income districts on the left bank, inhabited by a huge labour reserve army of underemployed own-account producers, home workers and casualised wage earners, have been thoroughly discredited in their former economic dominance and vitality.

The closure of the textile mills has resulted in more than just massive loss of earnings and employment. Hardly less dramatic is the collapse of the social infrastructure that has accompanied it. It is certainly not a coincidence that the orgy of violence that has taken place in Ahmedabad since the end of February seems to have reached a climax in ex-mill localities populated by social segments from which a major part of this industrial workforce used to be recruited: subaltern Hindus (mainly *dalits*, *obc's* and intermediate castes, especially Patels) and Muslims.

Whenever communal tensions have flared up and erupted in street riots in the past, these clashes could be defused by appealing to working class solidarity, which transcended the boundaries of primordial loyalties. The social consciousness produced by factorised employment did not arise spontaneously but had been built up during the social struggle in which the *Majoor Mahajan Sangh* played a pivotal role. Over a period of many decades this famous trade union, established in 1920 as the outcome of a strike led by Mahatma Gandhi, successfully galvanised the collective interest of workers in the textile industry. Preaching an ideology of class harmony instead of class conflict and with unconditional acceptance of the composite character of its membership, the Gandhian leaders of this social movement aroused the need for concerted action and tried to scale down more parochial interests along lines of caste and religion.

² J. Breman – *A Turn for the Worse: The Closure of the Ahmedabad Textile Mills and the Retrenchment of the Workforce*. Wertheim Annual Lecture 12. Centre for Asian Studies, Amsterdam School of Social Science Research. University of Amsterdam 2001.

No doubt, there were communal disturbances also then. When riots broke out in 1969 the police agreed to set up a control room at the headquarters of the trade union and on the basis of messages received by phone from its cadre in the mill localities the leadership kept the authorities informed about the latest incidents. The factories had stopped production but on the third day of the riots the call came for members of the MSS to report back to duty. Workers of the same shift but with different caste and religious identities were told to go to the mills and back home in mixed badges in order to safeguard each other's wellbeing. Nowadays there is hardly any space left for that sort of intercommunal sharing and mutual protection. The union which at that time with more than 150,000 members was one of the largest and best organised in the country is a spent force, reduced to less than one tenth of its former strength and depleted from all economic and political power. In mid-March 2002, with parts of the city still under curfew, I met the secretary-general in his office, a big building once vibrant with activity but which now stands desolate in the heart of the old city. This veteran, at the age of 88 years and in failing health, told me with anguish how a fortnight ago he had endeavoured for many hours to reach the police commissioner as well as prominent politicians. When he received no response to his incessant calls on 28 February, he realised that the state machinery deliberately refused to give shelter to the victims and to protect life and property when the rampage of killing and looting was at its worst. In the relentless drive towards a regime of informality as the dominant mode of employment, labour appears to have forfeited not just its economic value, bargaining power and dignity. In vain this Gandhian stalwart had tried to persuade his office staff, cut down from its former impressive size to a few helpers, to come along with him on a tour of the industrial localities in order to pacify the incited mob. In addition to their blunt refusal to go out into the streets they also warned him against risking his life on such a hopeless mission.

The trade union movement which used to be the main platform for collective action has withered away. Neither have other kinds of social movements been able to stem the rising tide of communalism. Apart from a few exceptions the wide variety of non-government organisations in Ahmedabad which claim to represent civic society remained by and large lethargic under the communal onslaught. In the words of one commentator:

'The space, which allows, mediates and keeps alive the possibility of dialogues, seems to have disappeared from our social, cultural, political and even our educational life (*my note: in Gujarat*). Public life has become so implicated and impoverished that in the face of crisis there is no one individual or collective which can exercise moral authority and rescue the dialogic space.'³

This state of paralysis could not have been better illustrated than by the decision of the board of the Sabarmati ashram to close its gates when the violence spread through the city on 28 February. Where the founding father of this institution would not have hesitated to rush to the scene of the *hoollad*, the lame excuse of the ashram's trustees was that they had to protect Gandhi's heritage. The way they did this betrayed the very ideals

³ T. Suhrud – 'No Room for Dialogue', in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.37, no.11, 2002:1011-2.

the Mahatma stood for all his life and which in the end also became the cause of his death.

The MMS did not merely negotiate better labour standards with the captains of the textile industry in the city. Throughout much of the twentieth century, a large outreach staff worked together with social workers assigned by municipal agencies to dignify the circumstances of the working class by promoting a wide range of welfare practices – such as sport clubs, reading rooms, classes for adult education, family care and counseling courses, day nurseries, primary health centres – in the mill localities. All these activities naturally became meeting points, which facilitated interaction between people of different identities. The Other was not at a distance but highly visible and touchable as a workmate, a neighbour or a friend with whom close contact was maintained both within and outside the mill. This mesh of social cohesion that transcended the separate niches of caste and religion broke down once the MSS started to fade away and municipal welfare agencies, due to lack of funding, had to cease or drastically curtail their activities.

The trend towards spatial segregation which already began several decades ago should be understood as both cause and effect of the erosion of intercommunal networks. The formation of ghettos has taken place within and beyond the neighbourhood. In the first round segregation came about at the level of the locality itself, as people moved to blocks inhabited by members of the same community or faith. Living together creates the illusion of having found adequate shelter and a feigned ability to resist in case of attack. In this restructured setting streets become zones of demarcation. In times of unrest, crossing from one side to the other means putting your life at risk. Nevertheless, bridges are kept intact by peacemakers on both sides who discretely exchange information on what to do or not to do, even at the height of the upheaval. They try to keep their own youngsters, who are eager to make mischief, in check and agree on rules of engagement or disengagement. Passing from one zone to the next during the latest round of mayhem, one cannot but be impressed by the quality of the grassroots leadership and the goodwill that continues to exist between people now separated but who still remember the years when they used to work and live together. One Muslim in Gomtipur, a former jobber in a textile mill, narrated his nightmarish experiences but added that he refused to see Hindus as his enemy. He was sure that the large majority of them, on his count four out of five, did not wish him harm. As a matter of fact, a few hours before the signal for the hunt on Muslims spread like wildfire, a Hindu friend had phoned with the urgent warning to stay at home and see to the safety of his family. With trusted friends like this one, he was accustomed to sharing food, participating in their rituals and celebrating festivities in the house.

In the second round of ghettoisation, members of the minority are driven out of localities in which they themselves have lived all their lives, and often generations before them. I witnessed and described such instances of collective deportation during my stay in Ahmedabad in early 1993.⁴ Also this time there are reports of large-scale treks of members of the minority fleeing to marginal sites on the outskirts of the city. Juhapura, on the right bank of the river, has emerged as a huge Muslim enclave. It is an

⁴See J. Breman , in Guha and Parry 1999 o.c.

overcrowded district which has been inundated with many tens of thousands of refugees in a short period of time. The area is known popularly as ‘mini Pakistan’ and most of the people living there seem to have slid down into a state of utter deprivation. In the mind of the Hindu outsider, they constitute an anonymous mass. It is with reference to such alien landscapes at remote distances from more ‘civilised’ parts of the city that the Other is constructed as having neither name nor face and becomes demonised as an anti-social, criminal underclass which cannot be accepted as part and parcel of mainstream society.

The end of the *Hindutva* politics of exclusion is not yet in sight. Before my departure from Ahmedabad, I acquired a pamphlet urging the Hindu majority to avoid all economic transactions with Muslims. The call for a total boycott – don’t buy from their shops or engage in business with them, don’t employ or be employed by Muslims – is not a new one and the same message of systematic discrimination already circulated in previous rounds of communal rioting. There is also the appeal in the text to Hindu men to keep their daughters and sisters under close scrutiny lest they fall prey to the lust of the bestial Other. The hatred radiating from these sentences is as ignominious for the targeted males as it is for the females belonging to the majority, who are portrayed as lacking the will and the capability to be in charge of their own virtue. One could, of course, argue that the separate niches occupied by Hindus and Muslims in the labour market militate against exclusion from economic life of a newly created segment of untouchables. I am not so sure that such a plan of action, contingent upon a more comprehensive blueprint and backed up by the kind of intimidation we have already witnessed, would prove to be abortive in the end.

The design does not seem to be so dissimilar from what happened during the initial phase of the nazi regime in Germany. Prior to the actual elimination of Jewish people from mainstream society by the state, their property was identified and either destroyed or confiscated. In the latest orgy of violence in Ahmedabad, which combined a killing spree with the selective and ruthless destruction of Muslim shops, garages and other business establishments, I see a notable resemblance to the *Kristallnacht* in the early 1930s when the policy of German nazification began in earnest. Seen from that perspective it is quite alarming to observe the complete absence of feelings of shame and remorse among those who propagated or participated in the Ahmedabad onslaught after the worst of the pogrom was over. The dominant mood was rather one of glee and satisfaction, or even a sense of fulfillment, expressed in statements such as ‘they had it coming’ or ‘they got what they deserved’. The chairman of the VHP in Ahmedabad went on record as proudly claiming that ‘it had to be done’.⁵ What sort of future does the *Sangh Parivar* leadership have in store for the religious minority in the country? As second-class citizens, as the apex body of the RSS made clear at a recent Bangalore meeting: ‘Let the Muslims understand that their real safety lies in the goodwill of the majority’. Such phrases come dangerously close to labeling them as *Untermenschen*.

Both first-hand reporters and more analytical commentators have squarely laid the blame for the communal upheaval in Ahmedabad on the proponents of the *Hindutva* movement, helped by the power of the state – which, in Gujarat, happens to be under control of the

⁵ S.Bhatt,- ‘VHP’s Startling Revelation’, in : *Mainstream*, vol. 40, no. 13, March 16, 2002.

BJP. Although I have no qualms about accepting that verdict, my argument is that the viciousness of Hindu fundamentalism still needs a follow-up explanation which takes into consideration the globalised nature of the political economy that has emerged. The welfare capitalism that was both cause and outcome of the emancipation of labour in the Atlantic part of the world from the end of the 19th century onwards arose out of a specific mode of production, distribution and consumption which, in retrospect, proved to be time-bound and did not spread to the colonised economies. During the struggle for national freedom in the first half of the 20th century the Indian leaders made promises to the working class for a better deal. The new society to be shaped after the end of foreign rule would be just and fair to all. Although repeated again and again this pledge has fallen into abeyance in the post-colonial era. The brand of *Lumpen* capitalism that came to dominate in the so-called development decades is based on an ideology of social-Darwinism, could not care less about the urgent need to raise labour standards and shows precious little interest in increasing the dignity of the working poor.

In a recent essay on how the regime of neo-liberalism has worsened the plight of labour at the bottom of Ahmedabad's urban economy, I concluded that:

'Gujarat could be understood as an experiment for trying out what will happen to state and society under a policy regime which does not attempt to harness the most brutal consequences of a market-led mode of capitalist production. The total eclipse of the kind of Gandhian values which, for the better part of the last century were so important in the promotion of a public image both within and outside the country, has also led to the shrinking of social space needed for humanising economic growth. The disappearance of a climate leaning towards social democracy and tolerance has been accompanied by an increase in communal hate politics.'⁶

Public order had not yet been restored when I left the city close to the end of March. The curfew was lifted in some parts of the city one day, only to be reimposed the next day in the same or other localities because new incidents had occurred. There has been hardly any discussion of what all this has meant for the large number of working class households who fully depend for their daily subsistence on the erratic and meagre yield of their labour power. Even under so-called normal circumstances steady employment is difficult to come by, but for more than three weeks at a stretch now these people have not been able to move around in their cumbersome search for gainful work. For many of them the regular state of deprivation in which they live has further deteriorated into destitution. Without any food reserves left and bereft of all creditworthiness, they have to survive on whatever private charities are willing to dole out to them. It comes as no surprise that the front organisations of the *Sangh Parivar* were able to mobilise mercenaries from this *lumpenised* milieu of subaltern castes to assist in the operation of killing, burning and looting.

⁶ See the S.Chakravarty Memorial Lecture which I delivered on 16 November 2001 at the Delhi School of Economic Growth. The text of the lecture is part of a larger essay 'An Informalised Labour System; End of Labour Market Dualism', published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 35, no.52, 2001: 4804-21.

One should, however, be careful when implying that underprivileged segments in the underbelly of urban (or for that matter rural) society can easily be incited to engage in indiscriminate and sustained combat against each other. Indicative is the recent change in meaning of the term communal. The riots which broke out in the early 1980s were a reaction by the high and intermediate castes against the reservation policy introduced by the Congress government to favour their clientele from the lower social classes. The first anti-reservation agitation targeted the *dalits*, while the second round of the same backlash which erupted in 1985 included the *obc*'s (other backward castes) which stood to gain from the proposed expansion in the system of reservation. While the notion of communal until then tended to refer to frictions between top and bottom of the caste hierarchy, the social forces pushing the *Hindutva* agenda gave a different slant to the term by propagating the unity (although most certainly not on equal par) of Hindus high and low. In their guidelines for societal reconstruction, inferiority and subjugation were coined as the exclusive stigma of Muslims. It remains to be seen whether, as part of a long term strategy – if not dictated than at least inspired by the interests of classes higher up in society – the fragmented segments of the labouring poor can be trusted to go on waging war against each other. Particularly in the localities inhabited by *dalits* it is not only possible to detect remnants of a previous class-based solidarity but there is the realistic awareness that in a next round of violence they might again be on the receiving end of the discriminatory policies that have been practised by the powers that be from generation to generation. Of undiminished and even striking relevance here is the observation with which Gooptu ends her study of the urban poor in India at the beginning of the twentieth century:

‘..... in the case of the untouchable or the Muslim poor, their caste status and religious affiliation further reinforced their stigmatisation and social exclusion by the urban upper and middle classes, who were predominantly higher-caste Hindu, and included orthodox commercial groups as employers of labour and as zealous promoters of Hindu revitalisation movements. All sections of the poor in varying degrees found themselves culturally and socially distanced, at times even physically segregated as the middle classes retreated into the safe havens of new urban residential areas.’⁷

We need historical reports not only for the sake of writing the chronicles of today's events, but also to get an idea of things to come. Accounts with a focus on *la longue durée* might give us a handle on the kind of future we are heading for, or drifting towards.

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Amsterdam, 2 April 2002

⁷ N. Gooptu – *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century, India*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001: 420.