

July 27, 2002

Religious Riots Loom Over Indian Politics

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The New York Times

AHMEDABAD, India — Here in the adopted hometown of Mohandas K. Gandhi, the great apostle of nonviolence, Hindu mobs committed acts of unspeakable savagery against Muslims this spring.

Mothers were skewered on swords as their children watched. Young women were stripped and raped in broad daylight, then doused with kerosene and set on fire. A pregnant woman's belly was slit open, her fetus raised skyward on the tip of a sword and then tossed onto one of the fires that blazed across the city.

The violence raged for days and persisted for more than two months, claiming almost 1,000 lives. It was driven by hatred and sparked by a terrible crime: a Muslim mob stoned a train car loaded with activists from the World Hindu Council on Feb. 27, then set it on fire, killing 59 people, mostly women and children.

The carnage that followed here in the western state of Gujarat has become a festering political sore because of widespread allegations that the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Hindu nationalist party that leads India and Gujarat, and the World Hindu Council were complicit in the attacks on Muslims. The party and the council — both part of the same Hindu nationalist family — deny the charges.

But official statistics provided in June by the Police Department, now under new administration, show that the state of Gujarat — the only major one in India governed solely by the Bharatiya Janata Party — failed to take even elementary steps to halt the horrific momentum of violence. The day after the train attack, for example, police officers here in Ahmedabad did not arrest a single person from among the tens of thousands who rampaged through Muslim enclaves, raping and looting as well as burning alive 124 Muslims.

Police officials and survivors said in interviews that workers and officials of the party and the council were complicit in the attacks and, in some cases, instigated the mobs.

"This was not a riot," one senior police official said angrily. "It was a state-sponsored pogrom." Party officials who lead the national government, while publicly condemning the attacks, resisted opposition calls for a forceful assertion of the central government's authority to halt the violence as it dragged on for more than two months.

Fathoming what happened here in the first major outbreak of Hindu-Muslim violence in almost a decade is critical for India. The specter of such violence has shadowed the country since its birth. India, a secular democracy, and Pakistan, an Islamic nation, were hacked apart when they won independence from Britain in 1947. The furies of religious hatred were unleashed, and about a million people died.

The use of religion for political gain is an enduring theme in both India and Pakistan and a wellspring of violence that vexes the subcontinent even today.

Senior national leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party, including Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, have maintained that India's tolerant Hindu ethos has helped guarantee religious freedom for India's billion-strong population, which includes 820 million Hindus and 130 million Muslims.

Until the violence in Gujarat, the party, which has led the national government since 1998, had proudly pointed to the absence of Hindu-Muslim violence during its years in power as evidence of its secular credentials.

But many influential Indians are once again questioning whether the party can be trusted to ensure that Hindus and Muslims live together in peace and to resist the temptation of exploiting religious divisions to reap Hindu votes.

Gujarat, a state of 51 million people, has over the past decade become the country's laboratory for Hindu nationalism. That ideology has long depicted Muslim and Christian Indians as converts to foreign religions who must accept the primacy of Hindu culture. Gandhi's assassin was an extreme adherent of this view — and for decades, the Hindu nationalist movement was a political pariah as a result.

In the recent carnage in Gujarat, most of those killed were Muslims. Among the survivors, 100,000 became refugees in their own country. More than 20,000 homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed, along with 360 Muslim places of worship.

The events have inspired an anguished outpouring from many Indian intellectuals.

"Gujarat disowned Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi long ago," Ashis Nandy, one of India's leading social thinkers wrote in *Seminar*, a monthly magazine that addresses domestic and international problems in India. "The state's political soul has been won over by his killers."

In an interview in June, the state's chief minister, Narendra Modi, offered no consolation to the state's Muslims and expressed satisfaction with his government's performance. His only regret, he said, was that he did not handle the news media better.

"We have 18,600 villages," he said in his office, where a photograph of Gandhi hung on the wall. "Ninety-eight percent of Gujarat was peaceful. Is it not a credit for the administration, the government?"

Mr. Modi was a longtime party organizer and pracharak, or preacher, from the source of the Hindu nationalist movement, the Association of National Volunteers. He was handpicked less than a year ago by the Bharatiya Janata Party's high command to turn around its fading fortunes in the state.

[Mr. Modi dissolved the state assembly on July 19 to bring on elections. In the usual practice, he resigned and was named caretaker chief minister while he led the party's political campaign.]

At the national level, too, hard-liners in the party appear to be on the upswing. Lal Krishna Advani, India's home minister, who represents Gujarat in Parliament, was elevated recently to be India's deputy prime minister and is expected to succeed the aging Mr. Vajpayee as the coalition's standard-bearer.

In the late 1980's, Mr. Advani led a movement to build a Hindu temple in Ayodhya, on the site of a 16th-century mosque said to be the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram. That movement was critical to the party's rise to power and culminated in the mosque's demolition by Hindu zealots in 1992, igniting the last major spasm of Hindu-Muslim violence, which left more than 1,100 people dead, most of them Muslims.

Mr. Advani said he regretted the mosque's destruction, just as he has decried the violence in Gujarat. Still, he stood by Mr. Modi, and at a recent news conference, said that Mr. Modi's government had generally performed well.

Others disagree. The National Human Rights Commission, headed by a retired chief justice of the Supreme Court, concluded that the state's efforts were "a comprehensive failure."

The commission released a confidential report on June 12 that named officials from the Bharatiya Janata Party who have been accused by survivors and witnesses of instigating the violence. It noted that many politically connected people were yet to be arrested.

"These are grave matters indeed," the commission wrote, "that must not be allowed to be forgiven or forgotten."

An Attack and a Vengeful Mob

The train that pulled into Godhra station at 7:43 a.m. on Feb. 27 was packed with more than 1,500 volunteers of the World Hindu Council, who were returning from Ayodhya, where they had agitated once again for construction of a temple on the site of the demolished mosque. Roused by religious fervor, hundreds of devotees poured out of the train at Godhra station, which is in the middle of a densely packed Muslim slum. A Muslim vendor was ordered to say "Hail Ram" and refused. The Hindu activists yanked his beard and beat him, said a state police investigator.

As the train pulled out, an angry Muslim crowd pelted it with stones. No one seems certain why, but the mob's fury focused on coach S6. Stones crashed through the windows. A flaming rag soared inside, landing on a synthetic leather seat that caught fire. Police investigators say that as many as 16 gallons of gasoline were poured onto the floor. Fifty-nine people were killed. Fury over the atrocity came fast. Within hours, a Muslim driver was pulled from his rickshaw and killed with a cricket bat. Hindu mobs burned down shops in the city and threw stones at a mosque.

The World Hindu Council called a general strike for the following day, Feb. 28, to protest the killings. Senior police officials say the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's endorsement of the strike made violence virtually inevitable.

Mashiha Qureshi, an 11-year-old Muslim girl, and her family fled to the safety of Juhapura, the city's largest Muslim ghetto. The family's house and five businesses were gutted by fire. She is now afraid to live among Hindus.

"Somebody might catch me, kill me, throw me under a train," she said. "There are good people. There are bad people. Some save you, some kill you. But how do you know which is which?" The chief minister, Mr. Modi, said he gave clear instructions that the police were to deal with any violence firmly.

But in a country where authorities routinely round up suspects to head off Hindu-Muslim violence, the Ahmedabad police did not make a single preventive arrest the day of the train attack, city police officials said.

P. C. Pande, who was city police commissioner at the time, and C. K. Chakravarthi, who heads the state police, refused repeated requests for interviews.

Other senior police officials — sickened by what happened, but unwilling to be quoted by name — contradicted Mr. Modi. One official said the chief minister directed that the police "should not come down harshly on the Hindus tomorrow."

As a result, they said, no clear orders were given.

Two large massacres took place on Feb. 28 in Ahmedabad, a gritty city of 3.5 million people, as the police stood by or, according to some witnesses, aided the mobs.

Thirty-nine people were killed at the Gulbarg Society, a walled compound that was home to Muslim families in the midst of a largely Hindu neighborhood.

The mob started gathering in the morning. By early afternoon, more than 10,000 Hindu men assembled, many armed with stones, iron rods, tridents, swords and homemade bombs, screaming: "Beat them! Burn them! Cut them!"

Muslim women and children in the neighborhood had gathered in the home of Ehsan Jafri, a Muslim and a former member of Parliament from the Congress Party. They believed he could protect them.

Through the day, witnesses said, Mr. Jafri made increasingly frantic calls to the city police commissioner and other powerful people, among them Amarsinh Chaudhary, who was the state Congress Party president and a former chief minister of Gujarat.

Mr. Chaudhary said he, in turn, called the heads of the city and state police forces. The third and last time Mr. Jafri called, he wept, begging: "Kindly help me. They will kill me. My society is burning."

The police arrived in numbers only large enough to take on the mob at about 4 or 5 p.m. — too late to save the women and children, who burned to death with Mr. Jafri, survivors said.

The next day, the smell of roasted flesh still hung heavy in the ruins of the residential complex. K. G. Erda, a senior police inspector, was standing outside, watching as people carried on with their looting.

He said the few officers who had been there the day before had stayed in the traffic intersections, only firing at the mob when it stoned the police. He and other officers had called for reinforcements, he said, but none came. In fact, he said, 10 policemen, including two high-ranking officers, were called away.

"What can two or three policemen do when confronted by 20,000 people?" Mr. Erda asked.

The second massacre of Muslims unfolded in a poor area called Naroda Patia, where 11-year-old Mashiha and her family lived.

Many survivors accuse leaders of Hindu nationalist groups, among them Bipin Panchal, known to many as Bipin Bhai, of leading the mob.

A man in the World Hindu Council's front office confirmed that Mr. Panchal was a council worker. Days after the atrocity, Mr. Panchal said his shop had been damaged by fire and looted. The Muslims had attacked, he claimed, and he had only defended himself.

"They live here in India and pray for Pakistan," he said contemptuously. "They only deserve one treatment. They should pack their bags and board the train to Pakistan. There should be no Muslims here."

He denied even belonging to the World Hindu Council.

Mr. Panchal has since been charged with being a leader of the mob and is said to have absconded. However, an official at the Naroda police station said the police knew where he was but had been instructed not to arrest him.

On the day these two massacres took place, Feb. 28, no one was arrested for participating in the violence. The next day, 55 people were killed, but only 93 arrests were made.

State officials would later point to the large number of Hindus arrested to prove the police were vigilant. Here in the city the police have arrested more than 3,500 people — but those arrests came belatedly, after the carnage had already gotten out of control.

Asked about the failure to make arrests early on, Mr. Modi, the chief minister, asserted that the police had fired into the mobs to halt the violence.

Yet in the three days after the train attack — when Muslims were overwhelmingly the victims of violence — the police killed more Muslims than Hindus, 22 to 14, in what was ostensibly an effort to stop attacks on Muslims.

An alliance of nonprofit groups, Citizen's Initiative, surveyed almost 2,800 Muslim families. But Mr. Modi dismissed the charges. "Not a single complaint has been registered like this," he insisted. Instead of rooting out those who may have been complicit, Mr. Modi used his authority

to penalize officers who enforced the law, senior police officials say. They cite what they describe as punitive transfers of four police superintendents in March.

Mr. Modi called the transfers a "purely administrative decision." But several officials confirmed that Mr. Chakravarthi, who heads the state police, wrote a letter protesting the transfers and commending the men for their handling of the violence.

The transferred police officials told dramatic stories of confronting mobs.

One officer, Himanshu Bhatt, recalled arriving at a Muslim village surrounded by a Hindu mob of 15,000 that was brandishing swords and scythes. Already, 14 Muslims had been killed. Mr. Bhatt immediately gave the order to fire. A deputy headman from a neighboring Hindu village was killed, and the mob ran away.

Mr. Bhatt said he took great pride that all the Muslim inhabitants were home cooking dinner by the next evening.

Rahul Sharma, another officer, described rescuing 400 children, ages 6 to 14, at an Islamic school that was surrounded by a mob of 8,000 armed with swords, pipes and soda bottle bombs. "We fired tear gas, but the wind was against us and it blew back on us," he said. "So we fired three rounds of musket fire. Four or five were injured. The entire crowd vanished."

"I don't think any other job would have allowed me to save so many lives," he said. "That is a bank balance for a lifetime."

As the violence in Gujarat continued into April, the political and civic outcry across the country rose, as did pressure on the central government. Mr. Modi's role became an issue, with even some of the Bharatiya Janata Party's own allies calling for his dismissal. After a bruising debate in Parliament, the central government finally dispatched a senior retired police officer, K. P. S. Gill, to advise Mr. Modi.

Mr. Gill arrived on May 3 and within days, the city's three top police officials were replaced. K. R. Kaushik, the new police commissioner, said he immediately issued orders for the police to arrest anyone gathering in a mob. By the evening of the next day, May 11, he said, the violence was under control.

Unapologetic, Separate, Hopeful

Today, there is no more apt symbol of the divide between Hindus and Muslims in Ahmedabad than the road separating Juhapura, the Muslim ghetto where so many sought refuge during the carnage, from neighboring Hindu areas.

The Hindu houses back up to barbed wire fences and high brick walls topped with jagged shards of glass. The windows in virtually every house on both sides were shattered in the rock throwing that accompanied the violence.

It is as though the Muslims of Juhapura and the Hindus in adjacent neighborhoods live in separate nations. They refer to the road that divides them as a border. It has the appearance of a war zone that has come under heavy shelling.

But as desolate as the road looks today, it ends on a green field, called Unity Ground, where Hindus and Muslims used to play cricket together.

Days after her husband, the former Muslim parliamentarian, was burned alive by a mob, Zakia Jafri, 65, still clung to the idea of an India where Hindus and Muslims lived in peace. For years, she and her husband resisted their children's entreaties to leave their majority-Hindu neighborhood. Mrs. Jafri, haggard and grief-stricken, vowed to go home to their burned-out apartment and start over.

"That is my husband's memory and dream," she said. "I will not abandon it."

But the lack of remorse among many Hindus has slowed the healing among Muslims. Mrs. Jafri said recently that none of her Hindu neighbors ever came to her to express sorrow that they could not save her husband. She asked, "How can I go back to such a place?"

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