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Harsh Mander: A Defining Moment

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Before Mr Mander spoke, the Chairman invited the Conference to stand to observe a period of silence in memory of the victims of violence in Gujarat. This was followed by the singing of the Indian national anthem, led by Mr Mander.

I am hesitant to speak in a foreign land about the anguish and dishonour of a defining moment in the contemporary history of my country. My hesitation is compounded because Britain has its own history of brutality and inhumanity, whether in the spectacular injustice of its colonial past, or racial violence, or most recently the unconscionable attack on the devastated and impoverished people of Afghanistan. The reason that I speak is because in the end injustice involves us all. The chains on any one of us are the chains on all of us.

Gujarat will eventually fade from the front pages of our newspapers in India. The agony of the survivors of the carnage will pass into the unhurried, dispassionate pages of commissions of enquiry and a few scholarly treatises. As a country we must move on. But if we are to survive at all as a people who really care, it is imperative that we do not forget. We must acknowledge with honesty what happened, however painful, and deal with it, before we can reclaim our gravely threatened collective humanity.

The carnage that has convulsed the State of Gujarat since a railway bogie was set alight in Godhra on 27 February 2002 has left in its wake a human tragedy that does not heal or abate. I stand before you as a shamed witness of pitiless brutality against women and small children by organised bands of armed young men in the name of religion, and unspeakable mass terror and savagery unleashed by our people on our people. As a former government servant, I am especially appalled at the role of the State authorities, who enabled – or actively assisted – the planned massacre and destruction. The aching sickness in my soul has deepened further in subsequent months, as I have observed with disbelief the continuing silent annihilation of the devastated innocent survivors, through the merciless subversion of all civilised norms of relief and rehabilitation.

Among the searing images that I will carry in my heart throughout my life is one of a small boy of six, his eye gashed, his head

bundled in bandages. As I held him on my lap in a relief camp, he described to me in excruciating detail how his mother and his six brothers and sisters were battered to death before his eyes. He only survived because he fell unconscious and was taken for dead. My heart was repeatedly lacerated as I heard gut-wrenching testimonies of the gang-rape of young girls and women, often in the presence of members of their families, followed by their murder by burning alive or bludgeoning. A broken old man, insane with grief, lost his entire family. He shared with me the story of his life, wondering why he was still alive. An escaping family spoke of losing a young woman and her three month old son, because a police constable directed her to 'safety'; she found herself instead surrounded by a mob which doused her with kerosene and set her and her baby on fire.

Contrary even to colonial practice, the government refused to establish relief camps for the survivors. An estimated 200,000 people were condemned to live as refugees in their own land. Camps were instead organised by the self-help efforts of the devastated community itself, under tattered canvas covers, often amidst graves, or in *dargahs* or schools. There were almost no toilets, few bathing places, and little drinking water. Initially even food supplies were organised by the camp managers, but following a public outcry, about ten days after the violence, the State government started to supply rations and occasional medical supplies. Despite the soaring summer temperatures and monsoon rains, the State government refused to construct structures that ensured protection from the extremes of climate. Compensation to rebuild homes and livelihoods is usually no more than a few hundred or thousand rupees, a miniscule fraction of what is actually needed. In the run-up to the announcement of elections, the State government began to force the closure of camps, and halted even the supply of rations.

In major disasters of the past, both government and the civil society have raised funds in high-profile drives, organised by schools, offices, celebrities and the media. Our failure to do so for the devastated survivors of Gujarat only heightens their sense of isolation. Collectively we seem to have drawn borders even on ordinary human compassion. It is that we are too busy, frightened, or prejudiced to reach out and heal? In this vast land, cannot the governments and the people find the moral and financial resources to assuage the agony of tens of thousands of innocent women and men, girls and boys, utterly traumatised and rendered destitute? Can we together rebuild not only their shelters and livelihoods but also their trust, spirit and hope? Is the suffering of some people less important because they are children of a lesser god? Or is it that we have lost our capacity to care?

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If these 'agreements' are not resisted, we may not be able to recognise this as the country we cherished, and of which the ideal remained - even if the practice faltered: that of people of diverse

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faiths, castes and gender, living together with dignity and equality.

In many ways, the savage carnage in Gujarat constitutes a defining moment in our collective contemporary history. The unending tragedy holds up a mirror to us as human beings, and to our society and polity.

Incontrovertible evidence of the bestiality and brutishness of which we are capable has left us deeply shaken. As testimonies of marauding crowds targeting defenceless women and children continue to pour in, people respond with disgust and horror. What can transform ordinary people – law-abiding, industrious, god-fearing people – into merciless, murderous mobs? Might you or I be similarly transformed one day?

Our agonising deepens when we find a defiant absence of remorse in mainstream Gujarati society. Since the first weeks after the massacre, the first impression when one alights at Ahmedabad is of strident normality: glittering shops, bustling roads, people engaged in their everyday business as though nothing is amiss. Barely kilometres away, in makeshift camps across the city, are several thousand brutalised, bereaved and destitute people, whose agony seems of no concern whatsoever to the rest of the city.

A chilling word that you frequently hear in Ahmedabad these days is ‘border’. People have drawn borders between sectors of the city in which one or the other community is amassed, and are fearful to cross these borders. The local press reports resolutions by groups of professionals like doctors and lawyers, as well as traders, to boycott Muslim clients.

What rivers of poison have seeped so deep into our souls, to enable us to erect such tall and uncompromising walls of hatred between our people?

We must also understand urgently the fires in their hearts that drive legions of young men to volunteer as soldiers of hatred in fundamentalist militant pseudo-religious outfits. In a world that offers them no future, why do only ideologies of hatred and division give them a sense of self-worth and social meaning? Earlier generations of idealistic young people threw themselves into struggles for freedom from colonial fetters, for women’s equality and Dalit rights, for land reforms and socialist revolution, and for a more just and humane social order. In the two last decades, the only nation-wide mass movement in our country has been for the destruction of a medieval mosque and the construction, at that very spot, of a grand temple. Young people need to reclaim authentic struggles for a fairer, kinder world.

Social organisations elsewhere in the country need to consider, too, whether they would act differently should sectarian violence break out tomorrow, where they work. And if they too would remain passive, then a whole tradition, one that lays claim to progressive ideals of justice and caring, is in the throes of an unprecedented crisis.

In the relief camps in Ahmedabad I have wondered sometimes what Gandhiji would have done in these dark hours. During the Calcutta riots, when Gandhi was fasting for peace, a Hindu man came to him. He told Gandhi about his young son who had been killed by

Muslim mobs, and about the depth of his anger and longing for revenge. Gandhi is said to have replied: 'If you really wish to overcome your pain, find a young boy just as young as your son, a Muslim boy whose parents have been killed by Hindu mobs. Bring up that boy like you would your own son, but bring him up with the Muslim faith to which he was born. Only then will you find that you can heal your pain, your anger, and your longing for retribution.'

If the savage massacre in Gujarat and its disgraceful conspiracies of silence and complicity marked a monumental collapse of traditional 'civil society', it witnessed simultaneously a countrywide upsurge of genuine voluntary action: spontaneous, luminous collective acts of compassion, conscience and faith. Many lamps were lit in this hour of national darkness. Ordinary people in several corners of the country, through individual acts of caring and courage, have defended the gravely threatened humanism and democratic traditions of our land.

A shameful paralysis gripped the development sector in Gujarat. Celebrated and revered social activists chose to shut their eyes and ears to the slaughter and continuing agony of innocent people, and the unprecedented complicity of State authorities. Gujarat has a proud tradition of social movements, constructive organisations and trade unions. Most of them did not even attempt to confront the demons of brutality in the years when they were being nurtured, or in the dark days when they broke loose. Few staked their lives to halt the death-dealing throngs. Most are unwilling even to reach out and heal amidst the torment and destruction of what survives. Their thin alibis of 'neutrality' amount to taking sides with injustice.

Amidst the bleak despair of this ignoble abdication, a few civil society organisations in Gujarat refused to join the conspiracy of the silence that engulfed the development sector in the State. Some banded together under the banner of Citizen's Initiative in Ahmedabad. Many others grappled with the even more daunting challenges of rural communalism. Despite threats to the very survival of some of the organisations, they refused to flinch from their collective stand against injustice. They supported the organisers of the camps with relief supplies, ran health camps and temporary schools to heal traumatised children, organised legal assistance to file police complaints and applications for compensation, and extended trauma counselling for the survivors of rape, arson and the mass murder of family members. When the State government refused even to construct rain-proof shelters in the camps, they built them themselves, despite there being a severe lack of resources. Even as the State government forced the majority of the camps to close, starving them of food supplies, they sustained the life-line of food supplies. It is only because of them that the camps are not fully disbanded, and the survivors still have some succour and hope.

The concerted attempts by the State government and the dangerously communalised local media to hide the truth of the massacre from the rest of the country was decisively subverted by journalists in the national media, who withstood intense pressures and courageously reflected a widely shared national outrage. There can also be no better testimony to the robustness of the secular and democratic

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instincts of large sections of people than the series of independent citizen's enquiries into the events of Gujarat – more than forty at the last count. Spontaneously organised by a range of concerned citizens' and human rights groups from the length and breadth of the country, these reports fearlessly and painstakingly document the facts of the Gujarat massacre so that the rest of us may know.

The parched compassion of Gujarat has been quenched by the stream of mostly young volunteers who continue to pour into Gujarat, eager to contribute in whatever way they can, to show that they care, and suffer with their fellow citizens in Gujarat. For many, it is an act of *prayaschit* or penance; for others, it is a pilgrimage of active caring. Many more have sent donations, from wage workers in Lucknow to rich industrialists in Mumbai.

I recall a team of auto-rickshaw drivers arriving from Andhra Pradesh. They lived in camps in Ahmedabad for over three weeks, cheerfully sacrificing their daily earnings back home. Of all the volunteers they were perhaps the most loved. Women in the camps blessed them and declared that they had adopted them as their sons. They wept when they finally returned to their homes.

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A leading woman industrialist and a respected senior film actress quietly, and without publicity, approached everyone they knew to collect millions of rupees to help in the task of rebuilding the lives of the survivors.

A village volunteer from the organisation MKSS in Rajasthan visited a camp and observed that the toilets were intolerably dirty, blocked with night waste and not cleaned for days. Without a word, ignoring the nauseating stench and caste taboos, he set about cleaning the toilets. It took him several hours. When he returned the next morning, women surrounded the toilets, refusing to let him enter. They had resolved to take up the duty themselves.

I have been most touched by the *aman pathiks* (peace volunteers) – painfully young men and women who responded to our call in Ahmedabad to work for healing and rebuilding. Many of the volunteers had themselves suffered gravely in the carnage. As they showed me pictures of the ruins of their burnt and plundered homes, or occasionally spoke in low voices of the violence suffered by members of their own families, I wondered how many of us in their position would be able to summon the same inner resources to forgive so quickly and cheerfully help others in need.

If the agony of our land is to heal and the rivers of poison are to dry up; if love and tolerance are to be restored to our public life – it will be because of our ordinary people. It is ultimately because of them that we are still able to hope, amidst the darkness of Gujarat.