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John Dayal: What We Can Do

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How does it feel to be a Muslim in Gujarat in 2002?

The violence in Gujarat was already a month old when some of us went to the State for the first time, part of a so called Peace *yatra** designed by well-meaning NGOs and Human Rights activists sitting in New Delhi, as a worthwhile experiment in persuading the people of Gandhi's State to give up their maddened frenzy of violence. Within hours of touching Gujarati soil, we were to discover just how deep passions flowed in the State, and just how acrid was the hatred that made otherwise normal people utterly blind to basic human values, and of course entirely inured to any persuasion.

After facing a Hindutva mob in a village, which had been purged of all Muslims, we repeatedly discovered that it did not pay to be a Muslim, even in a peace group and even if staying at Gandhi Ashram. People bayed for Muslim blood. It was the influence of some enterprising activists that finally brought a police team to the spot and restored a semblance of confidence in the peace team.

The visit brought home to about 70 persons how it might feel to be a Muslim in Gujarat, the homeland of Mahatma Gandhi.

Not surprisingly, Muslims still huddle in many refugee camps four months later, and run for cover every time the dominant Hindu group (or rather, the activists of the right-wing ultra nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its front organisations such as the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad) want to organise a devotional procession.

Relativity has a new meaning in India, especially in the context of Gujarat.

Do 2,000 dead in violence in Gujarat matter in a national population of more than 1.1 billion people? More, do they matter when measured against the incidence of fatalities in ethnic strife or racist pogroms in the several continents? Does the rape of five nuns or the demolition of a few hundred mosques *really* make a difference – much less the demolition of about 50 churches in two phases in the same State of Gujarat? Does it matter that more than 120,000 human beings, half of them children, live cramped in four dozen refugee camps in the modern city of Ahmedabad (the capital of Gujarat and once the textile capital of the country) seeking a balance between the ever-present threat of an epidemic and the other threat of a bigoted

**yatra*: pilgrimage or journey

police and an armed mob waiting at the turn of the road? Muslims comprise a full 12% of the Indian population; Christians comprise about 2.4% and Sikhs just under 2%.

And India has had to face an embarrassing question from its own civil society: How secular is India?

The statistics are depressing.

Number of communal (Hindu-Muslim) riots in India since 1950	13,000
Percentage of Muslim victims in every communal riot	87%
Percentage of Muslims among those arrested in communal riots	90%
Percentage of Indian police officers who say they have noticed communal (anti-Muslim) bias in the behaviour of Indian policemen during a communal riot	48%
(Data: courtesy <i>Outlook</i> , 14 August 2001 Volume XLI, Number 32. Compiled by Anoop Babani from data of Institute of Objective Studies, New Delhi and Former Inspector General of Police Vibhuti Narain Rai, Indian Police Service.)	

Over the last fifty years, India has seen a systematic assault on constitutional and civil guarantees for minorities, particularly freedom of faith and equality of opportunity, especially economic opportunity. As Christian human right activists, we have carefully documented the erosion of Article 30, under which minority educational institutions function, and a major attack on freedom of religion specifically directed against Christianity in half a dozen States. Recent legislation on foreign donations and even public meetings are specifically directed against minorities. The devolution of economic progress has been almost negative as far as minorities are concerned. Minority representation in entrepreneurship, modern industries and self-employment has regressed, and their share in agricultural wealth was never much to speak about.

There is need for detailed discussion on these issues.

More urgently, there is need for a detailed domestic discussion about the police and the political and administrative structures of the State that led to the sort of violence that was seen in Gujarat in 2002, for the second time in 32 years following the massacres of 1969. There is perhaps a greater need for an international spotlight on India's sectarian and inter-religious record, than even on its Human Rights record. And that is so even though it might seem diplomatically highly inconvenient in the light of the West's own geo-political diplomatic, security and strategic interests and current popular concerns, including the international war on terrorism and the spotlight on Islamic fundamentalism. I think that it is in the

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I think it is in the interests of the West, and of both its political and economic community, to take a clear, hard and focused look at the Indian situation in the post-Gujarat era. It will be injurious to international interests if undivided attention is given to the containing of Islamic fundamentalism, yet Hindutva fundamentalism, seen at its blood-tinged worst in Gujarat, is ignored.

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The *Economic Times* makes an interesting inference of violence extending to tribal forested areas in Gujarat, a fact noted by others (including this writer), that tribals played a big role in the March-April 2002 violence. Their youth were in the forefront of looting in north Gujarat districts such as Sabarkantha and central Gujarat districts such as Dahod, Panchmahal (of which Godhra, the so called trigger of the violence, is a part) and Vadodara.

Traditionally underprivileged, the fact that the Adivasi (tribal) aggression was due to economic reasons is clear from what happened in Chhota Udaipur sub-division of Vadodara district. A day after some levelheaded local administrators decided to start government-sponsored employment programmes, the adivasi aggression stopped in that place. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a major recipient of dollar charity, has been busy for several years, Hinduising and militarising the tribals through its Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra in tribal Gujarat. The Hindu identity taken on by these adivasis may also be responsible for their targeting Muslims, spurred on undoubtedly by outside miscreants.

A point made by several of the enquiry committees set up by the civil society has been the systematic attack on the economic backbone of the Muslim community during the recent violence. This has led Professor Kamal Mitra Chenoy, Teesta Setalvad and many other Human Rights activists to charge that the organised mayhem (with the State police force actually conniving, and the ruling elite in power openly encouraging the mobs, with some Ministers actually 'supervising' the action) fulfils international criteria for being called genocide.

Besides the attack on the economic identity of the Muslims, the attacks also focused on the places of worship. Hundreds of mosques and sacred sites, some of them several hundred years old, were destroyed. Finally, it was a targeting of Muslim culture. For example, the gang-rape of women: a committee of eminent women that conducted an independent enquiry told the media in New Delhi that the situation was reminiscent of the rape camps that were organised in some countries during civil wars. Dr Syeda Hamid, a former member of India's National Commission for Women, said there was such brutality that the Muslim women of Gujarat had now one 'Meta experience', typified in the story of a full-term pregnant woman who was attacked and whose belly was slit open with a sword. The unborn child was taken out, slaughtered and thrown into the fire before the mother too was killed and burnt.

What are the implications of Gujarat for the international community: for the economic departments of Western governments, even Japan in the East - and not just their ministries of External

affairs and Defence, concerned at the nuclearisation of the Indian sub-continent and the ever-present danger of yet another India-Pakistan War? How do they respond to revelations that many of the political groups, including the ultra-right wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its daughter organisations which are indicted in much of the anti Muslim violence across the country, are being funded by persons of Indian origin living in the United States and in Europe, through both legal as well as the 'gray' channels for transfer of funds, using lacunae in the law?

What meaning does economic stagnation born of ethnic and religious strife in India have for welfare agencies of the United Nations, for the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the Bretton Woods institutions involved in credit and finance?

Above all, what signals does it send out to the vast investing public in the United States and Europe, which hopefully will assess India as a worthwhile potential investment area? It is axiomatic that nations with ethnic, religious or similar strife lag behind in development, even if like Ireland they are in the middle of the prosperous West.

I think the West has a vested interest, a vested economic and political interest, to ensure that there is no sectarian bloodshed in India, that the Muslim community is not targetted continuously and viciously, and particularly in its economic entrails.

In an economy which India's Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has committed himself to accelerate to an annual growth rate of more than eight percent from its present hesitant 5 to 6 percent, the occurrence of a communal riot, or an episode as ghastly as that witnessed in Gujarat from 28 February 2002 onwards for more than four months, comes as more than a mere hiccup. It is a major break in the economic continuum with far-reaching repercussions. They include not just a flight of capital in the short term, but a flight of labour, a polarisation of society, an astronomical cost of rebuilding of infrastructure. Most of all, it involves rehabilitation and re-integration of an entire community that has been economically emasculated in a systematic State-sponsored pogrom. Not to do so, or to cavil at the cost of such rehabilitation and re-incorporation of the Muslim community into Gujarat's economic fabric, will open up a Pandora's box of future strife and bloodshed, accessing other sensitive States throughout the federal space of India.

The economic loss of the four months of violence has been variously estimated at between Rs 10,000 to 50,000 crores (1 crore = 10 million: \$1 = approx. Rs 48.50, a little over two cents to the rupee; £1 = approx. Rs 74.00). Estimates of damage therefore extend from Rs 100,000 million to Rs 500,000 million. (For the remainder of this presentation all figures will be given in millions, not according to the Indian system). This in a State that is just recovering from an earthquake in 2001 that was one of the most devastating in Indian history; it devastated parts of the capital, Ahmedabad, and wiped out entire districts in other regions of Gujarat. I have seen the earthquake damage. The victims, apart from those living in condominium flats in Ahmedabad, were the poorest of the poor, whose mud and stone houses crumbled under the earth tremors. A year later, the targets were Muslim businessmen, hoteliers, entrepreneurs, big and small,

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artisans, anyone with the semblance of a job.

The All India Christian Council, like many others, has called on the international community, which has a stake in India, to also play its crucial role. They need to act on the call for a full-fledged enquiry and ban the organisations of the Hindu Right – especially the VHP in the USA, which has established itself in the free world. They use civil liberties there to raise funds (under the guise of ‘religious charities’) in order to recruit, train and support an army of Hindu militants who wield the sword, the Trishul and the petrol bomb and terrorise people as demonstrated in Gujarat. Dialogue between communities can begin once the hate campaigns and the malice, often State-sponsored, ends.

India’s leaders are unanimous in their call for a national ban on the Bajrang Dal and the VHP. It is also time for the free world to demand reciprocal Human Rights from the Hindu Right in India. The campaign against terrorism has to be applied impartially. It cannot be applied only to the Islamic extremist; the Hindu militant is as dangerous, if not more, to global peace. The dictum that there is no such thing as good terrorism and bad terrorism should be followed regardless of political or economic expediency. Otherwise the West will stand accused of hypocrisy.

It is good to see that many in the European community, and in particular the United Kingdom, have taken bold, if seemingly undiplomatic, positions. The European Union has rejected the Indian government’s position on Gujarat and has in a demarché expressed concern over the incidents in the State. The EU made a number of fact-finding visits to Gujarat and went through material that indicated the response of the State had been violative of international law.

The British have been equally forthright.

But there is more that all of us can do; those of us in India, and especially those Indians who are in the West, and the Governments and Human Rights groups in North America and Europe.

The Sangh Parivar, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its frontal organisations, have defied international covenants. They have targeted, in malice and in cold-blooded conspiracy, men, women and children identified by their religion, each one of them innocent of any crime.

The response of the Government, led by their men, is expectedly and criminally cynical. The Chief Minister of Gujarat today remains the man whose life’s training is to propagate the thesis of the Sangh, and who was sent to Gujarat to polarise the State, a task he accomplished with distinction. His success has made the Bharatiya Janata Party leadership send to Uttar Pradesh, where they lost the Chief Ministership, a man called Vinay Katiyar, a small-time politician who came to the top as head of the Bajrang Dal brigade which demolished the Babri mosque back in December 1992. His task, which he confesses with glee, is to polarise Uttar Pradesh so that in the near future, when a mid-term election is held, his party can sweep the elections.

The pattern is being repeated in State after State. And at the cen-

tre. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, conceding that he may not be around to lead the party for a second term, has named as his successor and deputy the man who began it all, L. K. Advani. Less than fifteen years after he rode the infamous *rath yatra* from Gujarat, Advani is today the Deputy Prime Minister of India.

There is now a considerable body of evidence to prove that the Sangh Parivar which swears by *Swadeshi*, (indigenous production and self-sufficiency) is not hesitant to collect money abroad, banking on the vast Non Resident Indian community for most of it but not averse to going to Western sources when it can. It seeks funds there in the name of, and under the guise of, charity work among orphans and tribals.

It is time to take action under international laws to stop such activity; it is time to subject the Sangh Parivar, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and others of their ilk to an international scrutiny. India, and the world, cannot afford to let these latter-day fascists and neo-Nazis remain loose with aspirations for full political power in democratic India.

TALKING POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEACE AND HARMONY IN INDIA

Gujarat offers an opportunity to Indians at home and abroad, and to all those who desire peace in the subcontinent, to do some serious introspection on the situation of the minorities, as also of the Dalits and the backward communities in the country.

Consider the facts:

1. A perceptible and systematic breakdown in the rule of law, for which the instruments of State (including the administration – incorporating the army and the police – and not excluding the judiciary) are culpable and responsible. Police reforms have been aborted and police and military brutality is on the rise. The judiciary, bereft of even marginal representation of the subaltern groups, is increasingly under suspicion because of emerging biases.

2. Rapid erosion in the safeguards, affirmative action and cultural guarantees of the Constitution as far as the minorities and Dalits are concerned. The government position on the Supreme Court hearings on Article 30, in which the Union Cabinet has decided that minorities deserve no special consideration, is an alarming development.

3. Alarming decline in the share of the minorities and the Dalits in the development process, and even more so, in the governance and administrative apparatus. The process of making the Tenth Five-Year Plan has shown that funds are still not available to Muslims and Dalits for viable economic growth.

4. A conspiracy to subjugate and coerce the minorities, with violence when required, aimed at dividing the leadership, silencing the spokesmen and dissident voices; using fake dialogues as instruments of blackmail against fragile leaderships and clerical hierarchies

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Respect Human Rights, and restore Human Rights in Kashmir, Nagaland and other States by open investigation of previous violations, setting up of special courts, punitive action against the guilty, and adequate and exemplary compensation for the victims of Human Rights violations by the State apparatus (including police and armed forces), as well as for other Muslim, Dalit and Christian victims of communal and caste violence.

embattled in internecine war or susceptible to such blackmail for other reasons. The plight of the Christians, who were victims even in the current anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat, is all too well known internationally. The State complicity in the Gujarat violence has been proved by independent enquiries.

5. The utter, criminal (if I may so call it) cynicism of the ruling elite in general, the Bharatiya Janata Party, NDA and the Rastryia Swayamsevak Sangh specifically, and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani individually. The following sequence of events will explain this better than anything.

Even as the violence against Christians makes global news, and the anti-Muslim massacres in Gujarat stun world audiences even where opinions might be biased by the events of 11 September 2001, the ruling group, instead of seeking to build confidence, takes the following actions:

The RSS, the ideological political master of the government, announces that Muslims and Christians must know that they survive at the mercy of the majority community, and they must forthwith purge their holy books and scriptures of all that is offensive to the majority community.

The national meeting of the BJP at Goa is attended by the Prime minister and his deputy, in effect endorsing it as his own voice.

Narendra Modi has already been posted to Gujarat with a charter to violently polarise the State – in which he is succeeding beyond the expectations of his gurus.

His ideological twin, Vinay Katyar, who as head of the Bajrang Dal was a mastermind of the demolition of the Babri mosque, is posted to Uttar Pradesh to head the BJP in another exercise in religious polarisation.

In a final irony, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, shedding for ever any mask he has worn of justice and moderation, appoints as Deputy Prime Minister his Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani, who is facing indictment for his role in the demolition of the mosque and the subsequent violence. He is seen as the brutal anti-minority face of Hindutva in the government. The prospect of Advani succeeding Vajpayee as Prime Minister sooner than later is a nightmare for all minorities and Dalits.

TOWARDS A SOLUTION

□ Restore the rule of law. To this end, ensure adequate representation of minorities and Dalits in the police, administration, judiciary and financial sectors.

□ Respect Human Rights, and restore Human Rights in Kashmir, Nagaland and other States by open investigation of previous violations, setting up of special courts, punitive action against the guilty, and adequate and exemplary compensation for the victims of Human Rights violations by the State apparatus (including police and armed forces), as well as for other Muslim, Dalit and Christian victims of communal and caste violence.

❑ Postpone elections in Gujarat where terrorised minorities cannot exercise their franchise.

❑ Devolve development resources towards Minorities and Dalits who today are landless, without the potential of self-employment and entrepreneurship, and absolutely without a safety net.

❑ Act to end hate campaigns and demonisation of Muslim and Christian communities, along with all consequent ramifications.

❑ Take transparent steps to separate church (majority religion) from the State.

❑ Bring the law to act upon all actions, groups, ideologies, and organisations with a neo-fascist, racist, supremacist, communal and casteist agenda.

❑ Use legal machinery to stop armed training of cadres of neo-fascist groups.

❑ Restore full freedom of the media.

What the International Community, including expatriate Indians, can do:

❑ Urge an international enquiry of the neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups, including the members of the Sangh Parivar. This is urgently required as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and other sister organisations are seeking international accreditation and setting up groups within the Indian community in Europe and North America.

❑ Urge international investigation of all funds sourced from North America and Western Europe to organisations which are found, or suspected, to be involved in anti-Christian, anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit violence and hate campaigns.

❑ Urge transparent enquiry of violation of Human Rights in India by State apparatus, including police and the armed forces.

❑ Encourage the Human Rights movement in India by setting up support groups in Europe and the Americas. Protect the Human Rights movement from the influence and coercion of the State.

❑ Develop advocacy in Europe and North America to put pressure on the government in India to encourage and nurture a plural cultural society in keeping with the diversity and plurality of Indian civilisation.

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