

# HEALING THE WOUNDS

Human Rights and Minorities in India

The proceedings of a conference  
held in London 15 August 2002

Speakers:

Dr Ram Gidoomal CBE (Chairman)

Maja Daruwala – John Dayal – Lord Meghnad Desai

Harsh Mander – Gopal Menon

Sir Gulam Noon – Shrikumar Poddar

Dr Prem Sharma

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# Ram Gidoomal: Introduction

Since 27 February 2000 Gujarat has been at the centre stage of Indian politics. From the hideous violence of Godhra to the elections in December and beyond, events in Gujarat have evoked strong emotions across India and, indeed, around the world. Hatred, suspicion and fear have been dominant. But there have also been many welcome examples of people acting with courage, honour, self-sacrifice and a concern for justice.

'Gujarat today, India tomorrow' is a commonly heard slogan from the Hindutva brigade. That makes it all the more important to examine carefully what has been happening in Gujarat, for better or for worse, and to consider the implications for India and beyond.

On 15 August 2002 a conference was held in London. The date was the anniversary of India's independence; the place, the Gandhi Hall in the Indian YMCA. Among those present were representatives of every faith community affected by the violence in Gujarat - some of them distinguished names, others ordinary citizens.

There can be few occasions when representatives of communities so deeply divided by a tragic and horrific event have consented to meet together so soon afterwards to discuss that event and its implications. This happened because a number of business people and other professionals wanted to set up a forum where people of different backgrounds could talk about issues which so far had been the cause of division, appalling conflict and bloodshed.

Invitations were issued to a range of speakers. Those who accepted formed the final programme. The intention was to allow expression of divergent views in an attempt to seek agreement and find ways to move forward. The aims of the conference were:

- ❑ To highlight issues of human rights abuse in Gujarat and their relevance to human rights and the treatment of minorities in India.
- ❑ To analyse and reflect on the causes of conflict and human rights abuse in this situation.
- ❑ To seek ways to bring truth and reconciliation between different groups and to work for justice and peace, both in India and the Diaspora.

What did the organisers hope to achieve through the conference? As Chairman, let me say three things on their behalf.

'It has always been  
a mystery to me  
how men can feel  
themselves  
honoured by the  
humiliation of their  
fellow beings.'  
(Mahatma Gandhi)

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We wanted to make a statement as a body of people, drawn from very different backgrounds and communities. We wished to make our voices heard, and listened to, by those in power. This book is one product of that wish.

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We wanted to show our pride in India and our love of our mother country.

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We wanted to create a situation in which people on all sides could hear their opponents speak. And I want to record my appreciation for the majority of people who did come to listen as well as speak. Certainly some arrived with a clearly disruptive agenda and some presuppositions about what they expected to hear, but most who came – graciously, considering the depth of anger and grief that the Gujarat riots have aroused – listened as well as argued.

We wanted to make a statement as a body of people, drawn from very different backgrounds and communities. We wished to make our voices heard, and listened to, by those in power. This book is one product of that wish. More specifically, the Conference Statement you will find on p.8 is a summary of the points which the conference as a whole felt able to endorse as a group. This document has been circulated extensively since the conference.

But most of all: We wanted to show our pride in India and our love of our mother country. The conference was not convened to apportion blame, draw up battle lines, define divisions, consolidate aggression and fuel further hatred. Our conference title was ‘Healing the wounds’. To that end we invited our expert speakers to consider, with courage and honesty, Gujarat and its wider implications.

But why London? Was it an appropriate place to discuss sensitive matters relating to India?

Your answer to that question depends on how you see the role of NRIs\*. For me the answer became even clearer when I had the privilege of being invited to the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, the Government of India’s festival for NRIs. Speaker after speaker emphasised the deep love and concern that NRIs have for every aspect of India and its well-being. Lady Vidya Naipaul’s impassioned plea for human rights for minorities was met by the Deputy Prime Minister’s assurance that India remains a secular country. But it was sad to read reports of on-going communal violence even during those days. However, I was grateful for the opportunity of a personal meeting with Sonia Gandhi, leader of the Lok Sabha Party, and for her message to the Conference:

The preservation and protection of human rights is a fundamental duty of any civil society. Our founding fathers have fully recognised this responsibility and enshrined the necessary provisions in the Constitution of free India. The Congress Party has always considered the promotion of human rights as one of its fundamental tenets and has endeavoured to implement it through its successive manifestos. We believe that in contemporary India the central maxim for safeguarding human rights should be the empowerment of the poor and the disadvantaged. We must commit ourselves to these objectives with renewed vigour today when these ideals are threatened by forces of fundamentalism and bigotry.

I am happy to know that concerned and responsible People of Indian Origin are organizing a conference on Human Rights and Minorities in India. This is a reflection of the shared anguish of thinking Indians everywhere over the deleterious effects recent events

\*NRI: Non-Resident Indian (ie an Indian living outside India).

have had on the great traditions of tolerance, secularism and democracy in our Nation. I send my good wishes for the success of the Conference.

It was also a considerable encouragement to receive a letter from the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, wishing the conference well.

NRI's are concerned about issues in India. And they believe that if India wants to engage its diaspora, it must be willing to hear its point of view. Foreign minister Yashwant Singh suggested a comparison with the Jewish Diaspora - united and working for a common goal. NRI's want to be sure that the goal they are supporting is an India where human rights continue to be upheld and minorities are affirmed, as historically they have been. The London conference was part of our contribution, as NRI's, to that goal.

But why focus on India? And is it not one-sided to focus on Gujarat and the Hindus? These and other questions were raised in speakers' presentations and in the general discussion, of which a summary is included in this report. Some participants praised India's record of tolerance and freedom from violence. Several quoted Lord Parekh's comment - 'On the global scale, India is a very peaceful country.' But what happened in Gujarat has to be seen as a pointer to possible (and avoidable) future scenarios. Today Gujarat - tomorrow somewhere else. The issue, also, is not confined to minorities: Ram Narayan Kumar's remarks on the Dalit situation remind us that while this conference focused on Gujarat, we must be mindful of such issues, which affect the majority of Indian citizens.

I shared in the conference the personal challenge that I received from the words of Martin Niemöller, reflecting on his experience in Nazi Germany:

They came for the Communists and I didn't object because I was not a Communist.

They came for the Socialists and I didn't object because I was not a Socialist.

They came for the Union Leaders and I didn't object because I was not a Union Leader.

They came for the Jews and I didn't object because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me, and there was no one left to object.

Some speakers regretted that 15 August was chosen as the date for the conference; others considered it an appropriate date. We have recorded both arguments in this book. Some expressed considerable respect for the Indian Government and its reaction to the crisis; others were harsh in their condemnation. Again, we have attempted to let both sides be heard fairly.

We have pleasure in presenting to you the response of our speakers, together with the proceedings of the conference as a whole.

Dr Ram Gidoomal CBE  
for the Conference Committee

'They came for me,  
and there was no  
one left to object...'  
(Martin Niemöller)