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Women and the Ideology of Violence in Gujarat

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“Attacks on women, including sexual atrocities – stripping, rape and burning, verbal abuse, etc., - took place more on women from the minority community. The delegation is in no doubt that....the brunt of such atrocities was borne by women of the minority community. ...we feel it is important to emphasize this point because we found a concerted and deliberate attempt ...to ignore or whitewash this reality or 'balance' it by saying 'it happened on both sides'.”

Report of the Women’s Delegation to Bhopal, Ahmedabad and Surat, AIDWA, CWDS, MDS, NFIW, 1992-93 (emphasis added).

“There is compelling evidence of sexual violence against women. These crimes against women have been grossly under-reported and the exact extent of these crimes – in rural and urban areas – demands further investigation. Among the women surviving in the relief camps, are many who have suffered the most bestial forms of sexual violence – including rape, gang rape, mass rape, stripping, insertion of objects into their body, molestations. A majority of rape victims have been burnt alive.”

Report of the Women’s Panel, Citizen’s Initiative, Ahmedabad, April 2002 (emphasis added).

For those who witnessed the communal riots in this country during 1992-93 after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, there is a terrible sense of *déjà vu*. It pertains to the systematic manner in which Muslim minority women were targeted in the recent communal carnage in Gujarat, as well as its under-reporting in both official government records as well as the media. Ten years later, the violence appears to have been even more systematic, pre-planned, precise and wide-

spread in its magnitude. It reached a depth of cruelty not seen earlier in such situations. And yet, these unsurpassed atrocities do not seem to evoke the sense of outrage concomitant to the degree of violence. Apart from those organisations and individuals already committed to fighting injustice of different kinds, be it based on class, caste or gender, the vast majority of ordinary people do not appear to have reacted adversely to these terrible incidents. Or to put it differently, a very large number

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Abstract For those who witnessed the communal riots in this country during 1992-93 after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, there is a terrible sense of *déjà vu*. It pertains to the systematic manner in which Muslim minority women were targeted in the recent communal carnage in Gujarat, as well as its under-reporting in both official government records as well as the media. Ten years later, the violence appears to have been even more systematic, pre-planned, precise and widespread in its magnitude.

of those who belong to the majority community in this country have remained silent, indicating their indirect complicity. Some have even sought to justify the violence as a “reaction” to the burning of 58 passengers of the Sabarmati Express at Godhra on the 27th of February 2002. What is most disturbing is that the justification is not merely in terms of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”, but a legitimization of the violence in ideological terms, in the name of religion and religious identity.

There are many related issues in the recent communal violence in Gujarat that warrant attention and analysis. As a state ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party, the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) for the last several years, Gujarat has for long been the laboratory of the “Saffron Brigade”, led by the RSS and its allied organisations (the *Sangh Parivar*). It is here that the state government has made several attempts to further the aim of the RSS to establish a “Hindu Rashtra” based on its ideology of “Hindutva”. This can be seen in the communalisation of its textbooks, the attempts to keep a record of inter-religious marriages, a census of the minority communities and patronage to the so-called “reconversions” of Christian tribals to “Hinduism”, permission to state government employees to join the RSS etc. The willful participation of the state in the Gujarat carnage is clear from the fact that several state Ministers were active in coordinating the attacks, and that the looting and killing were allowed to continue for 72 hours, only after which the army was called in. The Chief Minister himself justified the violence in terms of the

Newtonian theory of “action and reaction.” State complicity has continued even after the violence ebbed, in terms of discrimination in providing compensation and relief to survivors. The dissolution of the state assembly and the advent of elections point to a much larger game plan.

However, we will confine ourselves to the gender dimensions of the violence in this article. In the first part, we look at how women were particularly targeted, and the various ways in which they have been affected by the violence. In the second part, we look at the ideological underpinnings of the events in Gujarat and try and relate them to the gender aspects. Lastly, we underline the need to undertake an exhaustive campaign to reiterate the secular character of the Indian Constitution, as a means to protect the democratic rights of all citizens in the country, of all religious denominations, and especially its vulnerable sections such as women.

Women as Objects of Violence: The Gujarat Experience

Almost every report that has documented the events in Gujarat after the burning of the Sabarmati Express has pointed to the terrible atrocities that were committed on women. Several testimonies recorded by fact finding teams¹ repeatedly portray how women and children, especially young adolescent girls were targeted by huge mobs who attacked them, especially on the 28th of February and the 1st and 2nd of March 2002. Many survivors, particularly women and children, have described how women were pursued by

mobs, stripped, raped and then doused with kerosene and burnt to death to destroy the evidence. Camp organizers have confirmed that many women who reached the camps were naked. Some had had acid thrown on them. Many had deep gashes due to the use of sharp weapons such as swords and trishuls; others were severely burnt, or had broken limbs because of being attacked by iron rods.

The most horrific story is that of the nine-month pregnant woman, Kauser Bano. Many have narrated how her foetus was ripped from her stomach and burnt along with her. Another account is of Bilkees from Dahod district, which told of the killing of her three-year daughter, a newborn baby of her cousin and 14 of her family members; she was raped and left as dead with the others. 13 year old Farzana had a rod inserted in her stomach, she too was raped and burnt. There are many such narratives, each account more and more heart rending than the previous one. The purpose of explicitly mentioning some of them is because it is necessary to confront the chilling reality of the violence, so that we understand the processes behind it, and to mobilize opinion against it.

In each narrative, the recurring theme is that of large mobs, led by leaders of organisations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, and in some cases by elected representatives, all belonging to the *Sangh Parivar*. Police complicity has been recorded,² not just in terms of the passive inability of the police to stop the rampaging mobs, but as active participants in the carnage.

Several survivors have narrated how the police appeared to be showing them the way to safety, whereas in fact they led them into the hands of their attackers. Women have described how police hurled verbal abuse at them, often of a sexually explicit nature. There is not a single case where women police were deployed, a normal practice when women are affected.

Denial of Violence against Women

One aspect of the violence against women has been the tendency to deny that it happened. This is seen in the almost complete silence of the mainstream media in reporting these acts. It is only after the appearance of a few articles that mentioned these atrocities³, and after women's organisations raised the issue at the national level⁴ has it been acknowledged that minority women were specific targets of the violence. On the other hand, one of the Gujarati papers ran a false story that Hindu women were abducted from the Sabarmati Express and that their bodies were found in a mutilated state, with their breasts cut off. Although the same paper later denied the story, it became the *raison de etre* for subsequent attacks on Muslim women.⁵ It is to be noted that while this story was quickly believed, many people refuse to acknowledge that incidents such as that of Kauser Bano actually took place, and tend to express disbelief about the atrocities committed against Muslim women.

The attempt to ignore the magnitude of the crimes against women is exemplified by the fact that to date, only three FIRs that record sexual violence

against women have been filed by the police. Moreover, the FIRs do not specify the names of the rapists, preferring to use the term “tola” or mob, thereby rendering the complaint a useless piece of paper. This is in spite of the fact that some survivors, mostly eyewitnesses, have openly stated the names of the assailants.

When some elected representatives of the ruling party were confronted with these facts, they are said to have been quite indifferent to them⁶. Equally, the National Commission of Women, now dominated by women espousing the cause of Hindutva, first maintained a deafening silence about Gujarat and then made a shocking statement that “reports of sexual violence against women in Gujarat were highly exaggerated”.⁷ It is quite clear that an endorsement of the findings of independent organisations would have been embarrassing for the Government of India, and that the NCW did a nice whitewashing job on its behalf.

Women as Perpetrators of Violence

This raises the complex issue of women’s complicity in the violence. There are many eyewitness accounts of how upper and middle class women drove up in expensive cars and participated in the looting of shops in the posh shopping areas of Ahmedabad.⁸ Some reports have stated that women participated in the attacking mobs, handing over women and children to them. Cases have been reported where medical and nursing staff denied Muslims medical help. In fact, in one of the rare cases where a Hindu woman had the courage

to help her Muslim neighbours, she was stripped, raped and brutally done to death by the mob, sending out a warning signal to others who might have wanted to offer a helping hand like her. It is clear that it was not the gender identity of women, but the overriding religious identity of the community that became the dominant feature.

Violence as a Loss of Means of Livelihood

While Muslim women have been subjected to extreme forms of physical and sexual violence, the loss of means of livelihood also constitutes a form of violence, of a more permanent and continuing nature. The total estimated economic loss due to the Gujarat carnage has been put down to around 3500 crores⁹. Needless to say, while it is the Muslim community as a whole that has suffered, it is the poor who are the worst off. Whether it is large hotels or shops belonging to the relatively wealthier class, or small handcarts and self-employed businesses, Muslims have lost everything.

For example, a large number of Muslim women in Ahmedabad worked on a piece – rate basis in the garment industry, getting work from Hindu contractors. They were the main source of income for their families, especially in a city that has witnessed the closure of the composite textile mills in the last decade. A large number of them worked from their own homes, using their own sewing machines. Today, their machines have been destroyed, and Hindu businessmen are no longer willing to provide them with work¹⁰.

How to survive in such circumstances is the most important question for them, leave alone the loss of their homes, other material possessions and property.

The callousness shown by the Gujarat government in providing relief extends to the rehabilitation process. The government has issued orders that the maximum compensation that can be awarded for damaged property is Rs 50,000, whatever the extent of losses suffered. But there is no known instance where even this amount has been awarded. In fact relief teams have reported seeing cheques of Rs 50 (Fifty) that have been handed out. Victims have reported that the surveys were carried out arbitrarily and that they were not allowed to accompany the survey team.¹¹

One of the major problems in the entire relief and rehabilitation process has been the gross underestimation of the official death toll. Several persons have been declared “missing” since the first week of March 2002, but have not been declared dead because they cannot provide the necessary evidence. Many women have not been given compensation because “proof” wanted by the government is unavailable. It should be noted that such conditions were waived during the earthquake in Gujarat in December 2000. These women are probably now condemned to a future of destitution. How gender discrimination operates even in such adverse circumstances can be seen from the fact that in cases where compensation has been received, some of the widowed women have reported that they have been

cheated out of it by family members, while they were observing the mandatory period of “*iddar*” decreed by Islam. One woman even reported that she had been declared dead by her in-laws so that they could claim the compensation!¹²

The manner in which the economic backbone of the Muslim community was sought to be broken is quite clear from the scale of destruction. What is even more shocking is the way in which these efforts continue even after the violence has ebbed. For example, as many as 105 Muslim schoolteachers, 70 of who are women, in Sabarkantha district were asked to join schools in particularly those areas where there has been large-scale violence¹³. This is clearly in order to drive them out of government employment.

Tragically, the sexual attacks on women have become a weapon in the hands of the majority community. It has been widely reported that the Muslims are being allowed to return to their homes, particularly in rural areas after signing affidavits that lay down the “conditions” under which they will be required to adhere to in the future. One condition has been that complaints of sexual assault will be withdrawn. The other is that they will not “harass Hindu girls and women”. There are also reports of how Muslim men had to quit their jobs after becoming the subject of taunting from their fellow workers about the “fun” they had had with Muslim women¹⁴. Clearly, the rape of women is not a matter of shame but of pride for some of the majority community.

Attacks on Religious Places

One of the significant features of the Gujarat violence has been the attack on the religious symbols of the Muslim community, particularly mosques. As many as 180 masjids have been destroyed; many were demolished with the help of cranes and bull-dozers, pointing to the meticulous and planned nature of the attacks. These sites now house small idols of the Hindu God “Hanuman” and have been given the name “Hulladiya” or “Godhariya” Hanuman, symbolizing the riots (“hullad” in the Gujarati language) or the Godhra incident. Daily rituals are held around these makeshift temples, in a sense venerating the violence. Along with mosques, around 240 dargahs or mazhars have also been demolished. It must be noted that these places of worship, in Gujarat and elsewhere, are frequented not just by Muslims, but equally by Hindus, and especially women from both the communities. In a sense, they are symbols of the harmony and integration of ordinary people. Demolition of these dargahs has not only destroyed the syncretic culture of common people, but also systematically done away with meeting places for members of both communities, furthering the polarization within the community.

The Ideological Determinants of Violence

The widespread nature of the violence, the degree of precision and planning and the viciousness with which it was conducted all point to a well thought out strategy of its protagonists.

These were certainly not spontaneous acts; they were coordinated efforts of very large numbers of people. It is quite clear that this is not possible without strong motivation; this was provided by the ideological campaign of the *Sangh Parivar*. In this section we look at how the RSS has created a rationale for the violence, which in a sense justifies the atrocities against women, and does away with the need to show any remorse or regret about what happened in Gujarat.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Ideology of Hindutva

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was founded in 1925 with the basic purpose of reshaping pluralistic India into a singular “*Hindu Rashtra*” based on its theory of “One Nation, One People, One Culture”. The RSS in turn draws its ideological inspiration from the concepts of “*Hindutva*” as espoused by V D Savarkar, who was the first to argue that Hindus constitute a nation, and that they had a historical task to regain the glory they had lost after being defeated at the hands of the Muslims. Savarkar was quite clear that there is a difference between the religious term “Hinduism” and the political category of “*Hindutva*”, stating that “when we attempt to investigate into the essential significance of *Hindutva*, we do not primarily concern ourselves with any particular theocratic or religious dogma or creed.”¹⁵

Savarkar’s ideas were further developed by the first *sarsanghchalak* of the RSS, M S Golwalkar. He provided not only the ideological basis but also the organizational structure to achieve

the aim of the *Hindu Rashtra*. In bare terms, Golwalkar argued that India was always a Hindu nation, straitjacketing the entire diversity of tradition, culture, language and customs of this country on the basis of geography, race, religion, culture and language. Needless to say, this required a considerable distortion of scientific and historical evidence, a task that the *Sangh Parivar* continues to work at to date. All those falling outside this notion were “foreign elements” with only two options, either to merge themselves or to live at the mercy of the National Race, that is, the Hindus. The way to deal with them was the way Hitler had dealt with the Jews.

The foundations of the social order of the *Hindu Rashtra* lay in the Manusmriti. Golwalkar acclaimed *Manu* as the first and the greatest law-giver in the world, thereby endorsing the Brahmanical varna system, which he thought to be the inner strength of India. Golwalkar thus endorsed and legitimized inhuman caste and gender oppression as part of his vision of the *Hindu Rashtra*.¹⁶

A closer examination of the RSS discourse on women, seen in the writings of Golwalkar, reveals the image of women primarily as mothers, *matrushakti*. Golwalkar upheld the old practice whereby the *Namboodiri* Brahmin fathered the first child of every woman of any caste. In the *Sangh's* world view, women are mothers in a primarily patriarchal family structure; their main role is to bear children (sons) who will be willing to die for their motherland. The main role of a woman is to educate her children to follow the nar-

row sectarian interpretations of Hindu tradition, what the *Sangh* calls *samskaras*. Girls should be taught absolute obedience to the family, the role of women is supplementary, but they carry the responsibility of maintaining family discipline. All inequality within the family is explained away in terms of tradition and culture.¹⁷

This fundamentally inegalitarian approach to women, which totally ignores their oppression within the family, as well in the economic and social sphere, is reflected in the positions taken by the *Sangh* and its political wing the BJP, on various gender issues. It will be recollected that the RSS vehemently opposed the Hindu Code Bill, arguing that daughters should not be given a share in parental property. Members of the *Sangh Parivar* have openly endorsed the retrograde practice of *sati*. Despite the rhetoric, the bill reserving one-third of the seats in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies for women is not really a priority for the BJP. A recent bill introduced by the BJP-led coalition in Parliament actually seeks to legitimize violence against women within the family in the name of protection of property. Even its opposition to beauty contests was based on its opposition to the display of the body, not to the commercialization of women's bodies and their standardization to norms set by multinational companies selling cosmetics and fashion products. Recently the students' wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), opposed young women wearing jeans and skirts, arguing that it was against the Indian cultural tradition. In a similar fashion, the *Sangh* dismisses the

movement for women's emancipation in India as "western" in origin, and destroying the family structure in India.

It is quite clear that the ideology of Hindutva has no place for women's equality, or for movements that are against gender and caste oppression of women. Thus violence against women is not on its agenda, particularly if Hindu men are oppressing Hindu women, in the form dowry, sexual assault, wife beating, polygamy, etc. However, what is interesting is the manner in which the concept of violence against women is used by the ideologues of Hindutva to further their cause.

Historical experience of violence against all subordinated communities, whether in terms of class, race, caste or religion, points to the universal manner in which rape becomes an instrument of power in the hands of the oppressor. The identity of the subordinated community is viewed in terms of its women. Subjugation of the community is the subjugation of its women. Dishonour and defilement of the community is equated with the violation of its women. Therefore, rape of minority women is the rape of the entire minority community. Further, these acts are justified by arguing that the community under attack is inherently immoral, its women without character, and therefore not entitled to any rights.

This is clearly seen in the political perspective of Savarkar, who even denounced Shivaji's liberal policy towards Muslim women, arguing that they were undeserving of such a non-violent attitude when Muslim men were themselves shameless religious fanatics who

had abducted thousands of Hindu women. Savarkar cleverly constructed an image of a tolerant Hindu male, with what he called "a perverted sense of Hindu virtue." This was contrasted with the image of a rampaging, lustful Muslim male, who forcibly abducted women in order to systematically increase their numbers. On the other hand, Hindu men had a perverted sense of chivalry towards Muslim women, who were equally guilty of abetting their men in crimes against Hindu women¹⁸. These images were systematically nurtured in the post partition period. Further, it was the metaphor of the violated body of "Mother India" that came to be regularly used to signify partition and the formation of Pakistan.

It is from this perspective that one must view the terrible atrocities against women in Gujarat, and their indirect justification in terms of the relative silence that has been maintained on this issue. It is clear that the rapes and sexual assaults, the killing and burning, of women and children are seen by the Hindutva brigade as a means of retribution. A number of anonymous pamphlets that appeared in Gujarat before and after the carnage are explicitly sexual and targeted towards Muslim women. The rumour that Hindu women travelling in the Sabarmati Express had been abducted and found with their breasts cut off only added to their justification. What one scholar has written about the rape of minority women in Surat in the wake of the riots in 1992-93 after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, holds absolutely true 10 years later – *"The heroes in Surat were thus trying to do away with this perversion,*

*which is responsible for their humiliation, as they have been enjoined to do. They were not raping innocent female individuals but were punishing the active abettors of crimes against the Hindu nation, particularly against Hindu women. They were not rioting, but fighting a millenium – old war.”*¹⁹ In the wake of such logic, it is not surprising that the rapes in Gujarat have been systematically ignored.

Finally, one must note, with great concern, the participation of Hindu women in the Gujarat carnage, either actively, or in silent complicity. This is a trend that has become increasingly evident after the successful mobilizations of women by the Hindu right in the *Rath Yatra* and the *Kar Seva* leading up to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, and the subsequent riots that the country has periodically witnessed thereafter. Here it must be acknowledged that women's identity is multi-layered – class, caste, gender and community are intertwined in its construction. In addition, women have traditionally been the carriers of religious ritual. It is precisely on this space that the Hindu right has made inroads, converting women's religiosity into a communal identity. The rising insecurities in this era of globalization, where growing inflation and unemployment are causing a deep crisis, are leading more and more women to seek solace in *satsangs* and other such spiritual gatherings. Unfortunately, such collective gatherings are also the breeding ground for communal passions. It is interesting to note that the women who travelled to Ayodhya for the *Yagna* held for the completion of the Ram

Mandir were actually members of *bhajan mandals*, basically groups of women who sing spiritual songs. In such times of economic tension, it is relatively easy to convert one's frustrations into a hatred of the (Muslim) “Other”. No doubt these processes are at work, not just in Gujarat but elsewhere in the country. How they should be countered is a major challenge to the secular and democratic people of this country.

Secularism – The Only Way

For all those who are united in their condemnation of the Gujarat carnage, there is only one way to ensure that it is never repeated – the upholding of the secular principles of the Constitution of India. Here, we must be clear that secularism as a concept is in no way contradictory to religious belief. Secularism, as we understand it, is not simply an “equal tolerance” of different religious denominations, “*sarva dharma sambhav*” as it is popularly understood to be. The true meaning of secularism is that the state shall not discriminate amongst its citizens on the basis of religion, and in the Indian context, caste, language, etc. In a multi-religious society that has been further segregated by the caste system, the true meaning of democracy is that no single group shall dominate over the other. Therefore, the freedom to practise the religion of one's choice (or not to practise, as the case may be) is best protected in a secular system. No religion preaches violence. There must be a clear distinction between religion as an individual's means to attain spiritual peace, and the use of religion by communal forces as a political instrument to gain and remain in

power. With women increasingly becoming the targets of communal violence, the need to conduct a campaign to uphold secular values amongst them has achieved prime importance today.

Notes

1. See for example, "Ethnic Cleansing in Gujarat, Report of the SAHMAT Fact Finding Team to Ahmedabad", 10-11 March 2002, "AIDWA-CPI(M) Report on Gujarat, Report of the Visit of the Delegation on March 10-13", "How Has the Gujarat Massacre Affected Minority Women: The Survivors Speak", Syeda Hamid and others, Report of the Women's Panel, April 2002, etc.
2. "Communalism Combat", March-April 2002.
3. "Cry, The Beloved Country, Reflections on the Gujarat Massacre", Harsh Mander, from website groups.yahoo.com/groups/gujaratdevelopment, March 2002
4. Women's organisations observed 13 May 2002 as a National Day to highlight specifically the atrocities against Muslim women in the Gujarat carnage and to draw attention to the fact that virtually no FIRs had been registered by the police.
5. See Report of Women's Panel, April 2002.
6. Report of Women's Panel, April 2002.
7. See Vasudha Dhagamwar's two-part article in *The Hindu*, May 22 and 23, 2002
8. See SAHMAT and AIDWA-CPI(M) reports and many other eyewitness accounts
9. See "What the Hindu Hero has Done for the Majority Community", Digant Oza, from Website on Gujarat mentioned above.
10. See Sharmila Rege, Vaishali Diwakar and Anagha Tambe, "Gujarat Carnage (2002): Outlining the Gendered Character of Communal Stereotypes, Strategies and Violence", Paper presented at a Seminar organised by the Vikas Adhyanan Kendra, July 2002.
11. See Report of the Left Front Team Visit to Gujarat, People's Democracy, 10-16 June 2002.
12. See Sharmila Rege, et al, July 2002.
13. See Left Front Report, June 2002.
14. See Sharmila Rege, et al, July 2002.
15. As quoted in Purushottam Agarwal, "Savarkar, Surat and Draupadi, Legitimising Rape as a Political Weapon", in *Women and the Hindu Right*, Ed Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, Kali for Women, 1995.
16. For a detailed exposition of Golwalkar's writings, see Sitaram Yechury "What is This Hindu Rashtra", *Frontline Publications*, 1993.
17. See several articles in *Women and the Hindu Right* and "RSS: The Ideological Onslaught on Women", AIDWA, December 1998.
18. For an excellent analysis of Savarkar's approach to rape, see Purushottam Agarwal in *Women and the Hindu Right*.
19. Purushottam Agarwal, *Women and the Hindu Right*.