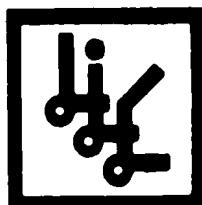


# COMMUNAL RIOTS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

Edited by  
**ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER**

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## PREFACE

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The present volume on communal violence in post-partition period in India has been planned on the basis of papers read in a seminar organised by the Institute of Islamic Studies, Bombay, and Ikhwanus Safa Trust in December 1981. However, some more relevant papers and articles on the subject have also been included in this volume to make it more comprehensive and useful.

I am thankful to the participating scholars for revising their papers at my request to include them in this volume. I regret some papers could not be included in the present volume. The exclusion was certainly not because the papers were not of the requisite standard. I am thankful to all magazines and journals which have kindly agreed to allow us to include the papers and articles which were published by them. Also included in this volume are investigative reports of some major riots which took place since late sixties. These investigations throw important light on the nature of communal violence.

I am thankful to the publishers for having agreed to publish this volume which would be found quite useful not only by scholars but also by laymen interested in understanding the nature of communal conflict in contemporary India. I also thank the Trustees of Institute of Islamic Studies and those of Ikhwanus Safa Trust for having agreed to organise this seminar on my request. I hope the present volume would promote correct understanding of the complex phenomenon of communalism, a phenomenon which impedes the growth of secularism and true national consciousness.

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER  
18.5.84

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### CASE STUDIES OF FIVE MAJOR RIOTS FROM BIHARSHARIF TO PUNE

Asghar Ali Engineer

#### I. Biharsharif Carnage — A Field Inquiry

It appears that caste and communal violence have become endemic in modern India. Caste violence and communal violence follow each other alternately in one part or the other of the country. Though caste and communal prejudices undoubtedly play an important role in the eruption of such violence, close investigations reveal that invariably various powerful interests, chiefly political and economic as well as some others of local variety, are pitted against each other, and these prove to be the real causes of caste and communal conflict. These powerful interests exploit caste and communal prejudice as an instrument for realising their own ends. Who cares if thousands of innocent people, caught in the cross-fire of these conflicting interests, lose their lives and properties?

The story of the Biharsharif communal carnage of 1981 is no different. We visited Biharsharif on 12 May when normalcy had apparently been restored and curfew relaxed during the day. Field investigations for understanding the nature of the communal conflict and the real causes of the catastrophe convincingly showed that much more than religious conflict alone was involved — much more than what meets the eye of a newspaper reader covering the events in a casual manner.

Biharsharif is a town — its population being around 1,30,000 in 1971 — situated on the Patna-Ranchi road about 80 km from Patna. It is the district head-quarters of the newly-created Nalanda district. Muslims account for 48% of its population — a high ratio which is rarely found in other major towns of India. The

town also has religious significance. There are holy shrines of Makhdum Sahib — a Muslim religious saint — and Mani Baba — the Hindu saint. These shrines attract thousands of faithfuls from their respective communities from all over Bihar, and the anniversaries of both the saints are celebrated every year with great fanfare. Most of the people settled in the town have come from nearby villages in search of livelihood. The town is thus fast expanding, with land prices soaring day by day. This fact is important and helps one to understand the nature of the present conflict.

The town has no record of previous major communal riots although it has not been free of communal tension ever since partition. Another significant feature of the town is its *bidi* industry which, according to Dr. Abdus Samad, a researcher of Patna University, employs nearly 15,000 workers, most of whom are Muslims. The others in the industry are low-caste Hindus. Next come the weavers who are the traditional residents of the town. Needless to say a large majority of the Muslim population is very poor and earns its livelihood by working in the *bidi* industry. There are some old Muslim *zamindar* families but their number is fast dwindling as they are taking up new professions. *Bidi* manufacturing units are generally owned by Muslims.

The low castes among the Hindus are either employed in the *bidi* industry or in other odd jobs. The Sonis and Telis are business communities while the Yadavas (who were mainly embroiled with the Muslims in the communal holocaust) are cultivators. Biharsharif is also known for potato cultivation which is quite profitable. A number of cold-storages have sprung up in the town for storing potatoes before they are sent out. This has brought a measure of prosperity to the town and has sent land prices soaring high. The large Muslim population accounts for the number of cemeteries. In fact certain localities are dotted with graveyards. In view of the soaring land prices many people have their eyes on these cemetery lands. It is not insignificant that the immediate cause of the communal flare-up was a dispute, between the Muslims and the Yadavas, over a piece of cemetery land.

According to Dinanath Singh of the *Indian Nation*, a daily from Patna, "The town of Biharsharif is full of graveyards most

of which have been shown in records as '*gairmazura*' lands. There are disputes regarding almost all of them and issues are also pending in courts of law for years together. While men of one community (i.e. Muslims) want these lands to be demarcated and fenced as graveyards, a section of the other community (i.e. the Yadavas) claims it as fields or '*khalihans*'. At some of the places the latter has succeeded in raising huts. There are 23 such points in the town where men are living since long in a state of strife and mutual distrust."

Towards the end of 1980 a dispute over a piece of cemetery land was going on between the Muslims and Yadavas at a place called Gagandivan. Azmat Husain Khan, a lecturer in history from Biharsharif, told us that this land on a hillock belonged to the Muslims but the Yadavas were claiming it as their own. The Yadavas, according to Mr. Husain, came in strength in the dead of the night, constructed a temple overnight and covered it with cow-dung to hide it from others. As the land was grazing ground for animals, cow-dung heaps were a normal sight. The plan was to 'discover' the temple a few months later in order to claim the land. However, the Muslims noticed it a month later and a pitched battle was fought between the two groups using bombs and bullets. Fortunately, there were no serious casualties and the police brought the situation under control.

The local CPI MLA told us that he pleaded with the authorities to settle the land dispute. Without any further action they simply kept the plot under police guard. Tension prevailed for about four months. According to Azmat Husain, a deputation on behalf of the Anjuman-i-Mufidul Islam met the district collector on 25 April and persuaded him to settle the question amicably to avoid further trouble. The collector agreed to call a joint meeting on 1 May and to survey the land under dispute. He also agreed to settle the disputes in respect of other cemetery plots. This news, according to the members of the Anjuman, disturbed the Yadavas who were not sure of proving their claim. The members of the Anjuman further alleged that the Yadavas were bent upon 'sabotaging' any such efforts on the part of the authorities.

Apart from this land dispute — which represents an economic factor — there is a political dimension of the conflict which is

equally, perhaps more important. Due to the high ratio of Muslims in the population, according to Dr. Abdus Samad, the town is a 'hot-bed of politics'. In the municipal elections 32 ward commissioners are elected, of which the Muslim share is 50 to 60 per cent. Of the chairman and vice-chairman, one is always a Muslim. In the first, second and third general elections the area was represented in the State assembly by Muslim candidates. In the fourth general elections, a communist candidate who was a non-Muslim was elected with Muslim votes. But due to its policy towards the Bihari Muslims in Bangla Desh, the CPI lost much of its influence and, in the 1972 elections, a Jansangh candidate won, obviously with Muslim support. However, the CPI regained its seat in the 1977 elections.

The CPI stronghold in Biharsharif is largely due to its trade union for *bidi* workers. According to the local CPI secretary, more than 3000 *bidi* workers are its members. The present MP is also a CPI candidate. Needless to say, the CPI owes this election largely to the Muslim vote. Even the members of the Anjuman-i-Mufidul Islam admitted this fact. The RSS, on the other hand, strongly resents this all pervading influence of the CPI, specially among the Muslims. The RSS is trying to spread its net-work in the area. Presently it runs a number of *shakhas* in different localities of the town. It finds its support among the business communities representing the Teli and Soni castes. It is making determined efforts to induce communal consciousness among the Hindus in order to combat the CPI influence. Moreover, it knows very well that communal riots make Muslims over conscious of their religion and drive them into the fold of conservative forces.

A section of Muslims have registered greater upward social mobility. They have their share in trade and commerce. They have their own markets, cold storages and shares in cinema halls, according to the research paper by Dr. Abdus Samad. They have started two high schools and one college. This upward social mobility and greater ability for economic competitiveness on the part of Muslims creates resentment among the section of the Hindu community aspiring for a greater share in the economic development. The Yadavas are a fast rising caste due to their

highly profitable cultivation of potatoes, and thus come into immediate economic conflict with the Muslims.

The RSS, I was told by some politically conscious people, used the resentment of the Yadavas against Muslims, specially on land disputes, to spark off riots. Of course behind the scene planning was done by the RSS. No conscientious observer of the Biharsharif scene can deny the role of the RSS in the Biharsharif riot. The then Chief Minister of Bihar Dr. Jagannath himself, in a press statement, unequivocally blamed the RSS for fomenting the communal trouble. Addressing a crowded press conference in Patna on 8 May Dr. Jagannath said that among the 550 arrested persons at Biharsharif were five well-known office bearers of the RSS. He further said that a prominent RSS activist of the town, whose name has been mentioned in the dying declaration of a riot victim (a woman who is alleged to have been killed with her six-day-old baby by him) of Alinagar village, was wanted by the police. Orders for attachment of his property, had been issued and were served, the district collector Mr. R. S. Singh confirmed on being questioned by me.

The person concerned, Raj Kishore, is *Nagar Karyavaha* (city in-charge) of the RSS and lives in Biharsharif itself. Many inmates of the refugee camps which we visited named him as leading the mob attacks.

The drunken brawl on 30 April was merely an excuse. Yadavas, who wanted to sabotage the district authorities' attempt to settle the graveyard disputes, came in conflict with the Muslims, and the RSS was waiting in the wings to start the massacre. After the brawl on the toddy plot at about 3 p.m. all the impartial observers in Biharsharif testify that the police, although nearby (a police post was established there due to prevailing tension), miserably failed to bring the situation under control. Soon after the brawl the town was bristling with rumours, and killing and looting started. By 7 p.m. shops and houses in far away localities were being burnt and looted. The first victim to die was a retired police constable Qamrul Hasan who was done to death couple of kilometers away from the original scene of the brawl.

Next day, during curfew hours, a mob attacked Alinagar where mostly poor Muslims lived. Akhtar Husain, a victim from a relief camp who had witnessed the scene told us that at about

12.30 P.M. a mob from Teli Mohallah came with bombs and guns and other weapons and attacked and completely burnt 12 houses in which about 120 people lived. One man and 14 women and children were killed. According to Akhtar Husain, Rajkishore and Pannalal (another RSS activist) led the mob. Those who survived ran away for shelter, and finally landed in the relief camp which until 10 May was being run by the Anjuman-i-Mufidul Islam activists.

Akbari, a 17-year-old woman told us that her husband was done to death in her presence. Her cries for mercy were heard by no one. In spite of her pleading with everyone who she thought could help to trace her husband's body, it had not been traced until 11 May. One Momtaz from Alinagar, we were told, lost 6 persons from his family and when he went to complain to the police, he himself was arrested. Admitting Momtaz's arrest, Mr. R. S. Singh maintained that he was wanted in another case and now orders have been issued to release him. So much for the human treatment by our police authorities.

It was a common complaint that the Bihar Military Police abetted the goondas in looting and burning properties and killing people. The victims testified before us that but for the arrival of the BSF and CRP the toll of life and property in Biharsharif town would have been much higher. The BSF and CRP displayed remarkable impartiality in handling the situation, and saved many lives and properties. The collector also had to admit this fact. The BMP, on the other hand, made no bones about its anti-Muslim bias.

The fact that the Chief Minister had to order the arrest of two district magistrates and the suspension of six, testifies to the role played by the local police and authorities. The charge against these magistrates, according to the CM's statement to the press, was that they abetted crime while on duty during the period of communal disturbances. However, in view of pulls and pressures and weak Congress (I) administration, many were doubtful whether these two magistrates were really arrested. The announcement, according to these sources, was made only to mollify public opinion.

In Biharsharif itself the loss of life was not more than 20. But actual disaster took place in nearby villages. The RSS machi-

nery worked systematically to spread false rumours in these villages. The local CPI MLA told us that the RSS activists visited rural areas in jeeps and scooters equipped with loudspeakers to announce that 200 Yadavas have been killed by the Muslims. From 1 May 1981, the authorities had clamped round the clock curfew in Biharsharif town. The villagers who normally go to the town during the day could not do so, and hence the rumour-mongers had a field day. Earlier there was no tension in these villages. Though the rumour about the killing of the Yadavas—a dominant agricultural community — created tense atmosphere, the village people did not take the initiative in killing the fellow-villager Muslims. The RSS organised mobs from the town went to attack the Muslims.

Umar Khan, aged 65, a peasant from Gulni village — one of the worst affected villages — told us that he did not remember having witnessed any communal riot since 1947. Hindus and Muslims had lived in complete harmony. There was no communal tension either. Only when rumours began to spread on 1 May they felt apprehensive. On 2 May a mob equipped with bombs, rifles and other lethal weapons attacked the village at 5 a.m. (Another victim insisted it was 6 a.m.). Other villagers, mainly Paswans (a Harijan caste) and Gwalas (Yadavas) joined the attackers. They kept on looting, burning and killing until it was dark. The police did not arrive. In all 13 persons were killed and 60 injured, many of whom were women and children. Draft animals were taken away and all belongings looted. The houses were either completely burnt or demolished. The inmates of the Nalanda college relief camp who came from Gulni village numbered around 200. They told us that they were penniless and had nothing to fall back upon. Many of them wept bitterly while describing their woes. Most of the Muslims in villages around Biharsharif are either *bidi* workers (*bidis* are made in these villages also) or farmers with small holdings of 2-5 *bighas* or 10 *bighas* in some cases.

Going round the relief centres was an experience. These centres were full of women and children most of whom belonged to the very poor class. In the hospital also almost all the 21 victims still getting treatment were children and women. Barring a few

cases they appeared to be labourers. There were innocent children, housewives and old people. In not a single case did a victim appear to have anything to do with anti-social activity. Mr. Dina Nath Singh of the *Indian Nation* maintains that "from their faces it is more than clear that the people who attacked them were either mad or blind." Even if they were mad (they were certainly not blind) there was method in their madness. Otherwise, they could not have so systematically killed and maimed people and destroyed their properties.

The total number of deaths is anybody's guess. Officially 52 deaths have so far been admitted. However, a sober estimate varies from 150 to 200. The local MLA who visited most of the affected villages also believes that the number of deaths could not be less than 150 in any case. Even the Prime Minister saw 38 bodies in a highly mutilated condition in a truck on her visit to the hospital on 4 May. She could not help covering her face with both hands and weeping. On 7 May, a correspondent from a Patna daily saw at least two bodies of riot victims in a highly decomposed state dumped in the open space. In full view of the patients and doctors, crows were having a feast over them while the entire hospital staff and police officials posted there remained unconcerned. This speaks volumes about the utter callousness and lack of respect for human life.

There are many other sad events to recount and even newspapers are full of such pathetic stories of suffering and woe. What is important to us, besides this suffering, is the genesis of these riots. It was different in the old days. The present caste and communal riots are organised by those who want to stop the upward social mobility of the scheduled castes or minorities, as they do not wish to give any share of development or progress to these deprived communities. The Biharsharif carnage once again proves this proposition. The Yadavas, an upcoming backward caste, are trying with the help of Telis and Sonis — the two business communities among whom the RSS has its main following in the town — to frustrate the efforts of the minority community to move up the socio-economic ladder.

There is yet another aspect. Most of the sufferers have been poor Muslims. They have been supporters of the CPI. However,

it was rather sad to note that the CPI could not rise to the occasion to vigorously help the victims of the riot or help preventing it, mainly due to the lack of any proper organisation of the local CPI unit. This has alienated some Muslims and have driven them to the fold of conservative elements, and this is what the RSS politically aimed at. Although both the CPI MLA and MP still retain high credibility with the people of Biharsharif, the CPI has certainly suffered some set-back. It ought to have been more vigorous and better prepared organisationally to face the grave situation. What is worse is that while the CPI has not succeeded in inducing class consciousness among the workers, the RSS, at one stroke, has brought about communal divide and made Muslims and Hindus communally conscious. This is a great challenge to the leftist forces in India, and these forces do not seem to have shown much willingness to face this challenge thanks to their pre-occupation with parliamentary politics which has its own arithmetical logic of caste and community. The RSS has taken this virus to the rural areas. The rural areas are today witnessing acute struggles through the channel of caste politics. The reactionary forces are succeeding in sharpening caste and communal consciousness and there lies their strength. Will the leftist forces sit up and take the bull by its horns?

## II. Communal Riots at Godhra

The Godhra riot which continued, on and off, for almost one year in 1980-81 provides very interesting insights into the local factors and thus makes a very useful micro-level study of communal violence in the post-partition period in India. A C.F.D. team comprising Prof. Aloo Dastur, Asghar Ali Engineer and Prof. Jayant Pandya visited Godhra for an on-the-spot inquiry in October 1981, and made a thorough investigation with a view to establish different linkages and specificities of the situation. Asghar Ali Engineer, with the consensus of the other members, prepared the report.

The recurring communal violence at Godhra resulted in the loss of several lives and property worth many lakhs. We met different sections of people, victims of communal violence, leaders of various political parties leaders of both the communities (i.e.

Sindhis and Ghanchi Muslims) not connected directly with any political party or group, and other citizens in order to collect facts and form an opinion as to what led to the eruption of communal violence. We also met the District Superintendent of Police as well as the President of Godhra Municipality to collect some relevant information and to check the information already gathered from other sources. It would be interesting to note that the investigations carried out by us clearly showed that the eruption of communal violence was due not so much to religious differences (as often thought) as to the conflict of the material interests of the contending communities. It is significant that not all the Hindus and Muslims, but two specific communities from amongst them, namely the Sindhis and the Ghanchi Muslims were mainly embroiled in the conflict.

Godhra, the district head-quarters of Panch Mahal district in Gujarat, has a population of 86228 (1981 census). (The population in 1971 was 66853.) Of this, according to the Superintendent of Police, 28,000 are Muslims, 39,000 Hindus and 19,000 others. However, the Muslim leaders challenged the figure of Muslim population and maintained that it is not less than 35,000 and the latter figure was upheld by the President of the Godhra Municipality. Roughly the Muslim population of Godhra is around 35 to 40 per cent. Ghanchis, out of total Muslim population of 35,000 number 20,000 and have acute sense of separate identity. They distinguish themselves from other Muslims who like *telis* and others are lower in the social hierarchy. A few non-Ghanchi Muslims like the Syeds and Bohras are superior to them both socially and economically. The Bohras, economically much better off, are about 10,000 and the Syeds (supposedly descendants of the Prophet) are not more than 5,000. The Bohras and Syeds also insist on their separate identities. Among all other Muslims the Bohras are socially and culturally much more advanced. Thus it would be wrong to think that the Muslims are a homogenous group in Godhra. (The Hindus are also divided into separate groups with distinct identities.)

The Ghanchi Muslims are generally poor and extremely backward both socially and educationally. There are only three advocates among them and no doctor, whereas among the Bohras

there are 5 advocates, 10 male doctors and 5 lady doctors. Ghanchi Muslims are mainly agriculturists (the average land holding being 5 to 10 acres per family), truck owners and operators. Some 500 trucks, constituting 90% of the fleet in the town, belong to the Ghanchi Muslims. The Ghanchi Muslims have taken advantage of bank facilities to acquire trucks, and a section of them has prospered which has naturally added to their socio-economic status. This is an important dimension of the communal conflict in Godhra. We will throw more light on it later.

On account of backwardness and lack of education they are quite conservative and each Ghanchi couple has large number of children (on an average 5 or 6). Usually, among poorer sections children are treated as assets as they begin adding to the family income at an early age, and the Ghanchi Muslims are no exception to this rule. However, the middle and upper class Hindus resent this and feel that the Muslims are increasing their population too fast. This, as pointed out and confirmed by some Hindu leaders, leads to communal tension. In this connection it would be well to remember that the Bohras, though Muslims, have small families with two or three children, the reason being that they belong to the upper socio-economic group. It clearly indicates that one's social status rather than religion determines one's attitudes towards such problems, although religion does, to an extent, influence one's outlook.

As the conflict is mainly between local Sindhis and Ghanchi Muslims we would also like to throw some light on the Sindhi community. The Sindhi population, according to the Sindhi leader Kishorilal Bhayani, a councillor and a journalist, is around 8,000. The veracity of this figure is borne out by other sources also. The Sindhis of Bhaiband section migrated from the rural environs of Karachi to Godhra in 1948. They are petty traders and as compared to the other section, Amils (who are generally well-educated and professionals), they are backward and conservative. Thus socially and culturally speaking, there is similarity between the Ghanchi Muslims and the Sindhis. In view of this social backwardness the Sindhis too could be expected to have comparatively large families, and during our inquiry knowledgeable people informed us that the average number of children in Sindhi families was four or five.

The Sindhi traders have set-up wooden cabins or stall boards in central business areas, as in the vicinity of a railway station or bus-stand. Many of them carry on hawking in hand-carts, etc. Setting up of cabins or placement of carts for hawking often leads to quarrels between the Sindhis and Ghanchis and provides the spark for the eruption of communal violence. One such phase of communal violence started on 29 October 1980, with two banana vendors quarrelling over setting up their carts near the railway station. Subsequently, it led to the burning of many shops and houses and the stabbing and burning alive of a Sindhi family of five.

At this stage it would be useful to throw some light briefly on the history of communal violence in Godhra since the major conflagration there in 1948. The arrival of the Sindhis in Godhra created an explosive situation. The atmosphere was surcharged with communal feelings on both sides due to partition, and it was further aggravated by the advent of Sindhis who narrated their tales of woe. The Ghanchi Muslims were, by and large, supporters of the Muslim League and were also known to be quite militant and aggressive.

The communalists among the Hindus led by Vamanrao Mukadam took advantage of such a situation to incite feelings against the Ghanchis. A large scale communal riot broke out in which, according to Mohammad Badanga, Yakub Bhatuk and other Ghanchi Muslims leaders, more than 3,500 properties belonging to the Muslims were burnt down. This riot, considered as a very major one, is still fresh in the memory of the people. Although the Sindhis do not seem to have played any direct role in the 1948 riot they did occupy the houses belonging to the Ghanchi Muslims many of whom fled to Pakistan after the riot. Since 1948 there have been four major riots of which the one in 1965 was quite serious in its proportions.

According to a prominent Congress (I) leader of Godhra, the initiative in the 1965 riot was taken by the Sindhis, and around 60 houses belonging to the Muslims in Chithyawar and other areas were burnt down. Also, four Ghanchi Muslims were killed (two in police firing and two were stabbed to death allegedly by the Sindhis). Later, according to the same source, these properties were bought over by the Sindhis and, it was, as the Congress (I)

leader put it, a distress sale. Housing has really been a problem for the Sindhis ever since they came to this town and in fact it is one of the major causes of the riots. An interesting aspect of the problem is that the Hindus were not prepared to give accommodation to the Sindhis partly because they are non-vegetarians and partly because they are considered by them as uncultured and having lower social status. There was, on the other hand, no such gap between the Ghanchi Muslims and the Sindhis and the latter had their eyes on the properties of the former.

Although refusing to accommodate Sindhis, the Hindus make a common cause and express solidarity with them whenever communal trouble breaks out between the Sindhis and the Ghanchis. In order to emphasise the complexity of the situation, the other contradictory aspect of the problem must also be borne in mind. For the ten years prior to the recent communal riot there was close co-operation between the Muslims and the Sindhis. The Ghanchi Muslim leaders told us that the Sindhis and Muslims made joint efforts to capture co-operative banks and other similar organisations. In the Municipality also the Sindhis and Muslims formed united groups to capture various offices. The Sindhis supported the Congress (I) candidate Abdur Rahman Khalpa.

There are various reasons for this collaboration between the two communities. There is no direct business rivalry between Ghanchis and Sindhis who follow different avocations. Sindhis have made great deal of economic progress specially in the field of *kirana* (grain merchandise), a business in which the Hindus (Gujarati baniyas) had had monopoly so far. Thus there was business rivalry between Sindhis and Hindus. It, therefore, suited them to come closer to the Ghanchi Muslims who usually brought from the Sindhi shops as the latter sold cheaper to compete with other *kirana* merchants, and also since the Sindhis in most localities are next door neighbours to the Ghanchis. Sindhis have also entered the money-lending business and most of the Ghanchi Muslims borrow money from them. This close collaboration, more than anything else, ensured communal peace in Godhra for almost a decade.

But in a dynamic situation areas of tension keep on developing. It is not clearly borne out by explicit statements, but it is quite

probable that the Hindu businessmen with whom the Sindhis compete may have subtly encouraged a divisive tendency between the Muslims and Sindhis so as to weaken or damage financial and political collaboration between them. This hypothesis needs to be tested by further intensive field inquiries before it is accepted in all seriousness, although its probability cannot be ruled out. Some Godhra citizens with no axe to grind did tell us that some dominant Hindu castes want the Sindhis to fight against the Muslims, while they remain in the background. It is a fact that during the current bout of communal violence between Sindhis and Ghanchi Muslims, some Hindus took the initiative to form the Godhra Hindu Mahajan which submitted memoranda to the Prime Minister, the Chief Minister and Governor of Gujarat, holding the Ghanchi Muslims solely responsible for the riots in Godhra ever since 1947.

The ever-increasing need for accommodation for Sindhis also impaired the collaboration between them and Muslims. Sindhis, for the reasons pointed out earlier, tend to produce more children and need more accommodation from time to time. With the Hindus unwilling to co-operate with Sindhis in this respect, the Sindhis covet the properties possessed by the Ghanchi Muslims, and the only way to gain control over these properties is to generate pressure for distress sale. After the 1965 riots also the Sindhis bought most of the properties sold by the Ghanchi Muslims. Since 1948 a number of buildings in Ghanchi Muslim localities have come into the possession.

The Congress-I leader referred to earlier told us that the Sindhis are trying to drive out the Ghanchi Muslims from the S.T. stand area and the station area where business prospects are high. This often leads to tension between the two contending communities. In the station area nearly 1,500 families of railway employees stay. Many Sindhis have opened *kirana* shops and do good business. They are also in the money-lending business and this location helps them to collect their dues from the employees on the day of payment. Sindhis are tempted, therefore, to drive out the Ghanchi Muslims from this strategic area of business. Thus any petty quarrel leads to the large scale burning of the shops of each other in these areas by both the communities.

In view of what is stated above it is quite clear that communal violence is based less on religious considerations than on the material interests of both the communities involved in the conflict. In fact, perceptive social scientists know that religious attitude itself, more often than not, is determined by one's social condition. One tends to be more aggressive, militant and fanatic if one feels deprived and insecure and threatened by external conditions. Liberalism and tolerance is often generated by affluence, a sense of security and mastery over external circumstances. The Ghanchi Muslims and Sindhis have often lived under adverse circumstances and, therefore, often tend to be aggressive when their material interests are threatened.

However, it is not intended to suggest any mechanical relationship between a group's behaviour and its material circumstances. A problem has to be appreciated and understood in the fullness of all its complexities. It is not only one's social circumstances which determine one's social consciousness; one's consciousness influenced by ideology also influences external circumstances, and it is in this sense that religion also plays some role in communal riots. There is economic and cultural hiatus between the Sindhis and other Hindus on one hand, and, between the Ghanchi Muslims and Bohras and other Muslims on the other, but in the eventuality of communal tension they tend to close their ranks and express solidarity with each other. Here it can be proposed that religious consciousness gets heightened and intra-communal differences recede into the background when faced with grave external danger. Other things being equal, the degree of solidarity is generally directly proportional to the degree of external threat.

However, the complexity of the problem does not end here. Religious consciousness, it must be remembered, is also subject to the strains and stresses of one's perceived interests. What appears to be strong cementing force under the pressure of circumstances soon gives way to these overriding interests.

The third factor is a changing and developing situation. Godhra is a commercially developing town and although Ghanchi Muslims are generally poor and backward, a section of them have benefited from this development and have acquired better means than they possessed before.

This relative prosperity among a section of the community and the attempt to preserve or increase it leads to increased communal consciousness and is expressed through greater assertion of communal identity. It was pointed out to us by certain people that until the communal riot of 1965 the Ghanchi Muslims were at the receiving end. It was for the first time on 29 October 1980 that they retaliated rather aggressively.

Shantilal Patel, a Janata MLA, from Rajgadh constituency near Godhra, ascribed this increased militancy among the Ghanchi Muslims to the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism in the Islamic world. But it would be gross oversimplification to do so. While Islamic fundamentalism may have increased the sense of religious pride among them, it would be difficult to accept it as an explanation of their militancy without linking it to the concrete material conditions of their existence. It has often been observed that if a section of a backward community acquires greater material and cultural means, it tends to increase communal consciousness leading to greater assertion of communal rights. The retaliation by the Ghanchis in the recent phase of communal riots can be explained better in this light rather than by invoking the operation of remote factors like Islamic fundamentalism. The leadership of the Ghanchi Muslim community in Godhra is in the hands of young advocates who have lately emerged on the scene. They are more assertive and aggressive in providing the lead to the Ghanchi Muslims for whom it is a question of consolidating their gains further.

We may now try to throw light on the main incidents which took place in Godhra between October 1980 and May 1981. In this phase of rioting the first major incident took place on 29 October, 1980. In Zahunpura, two hawkers (one Sindhi and the other Ghanchi Muslim) quarrelled with each other on the positioning of their handcarts. They hurled abuses and started beating each other. Soon the Sindhi crowd gathered from nearby and the Ghanchi Muslims too started collecting. Within a short little time incidents of burning and arson took place in distant localities. In view of the claims and counter-claims of both communities about who started the burning it is difficult to come to a categorical judgement. Only a thorough judicial inquiry can throw some light on the matter.

According to the Sindhi leaders, immediately after the quarrel a large crowd of the Ghanchi Muslims with lethal weapons gathered near Single Falia and set fire to the Sindhi shops and houses. The Muslims, on the other hand, claim that a large number of Sindhis gathered in strength carrying deadly weapons, and set fire to Muslim properties in Chitthiwad area. As a retaliatory measure, the Ghanchi Muslims set fire to the properties of Single Falia in which a family of five Sindhis was burnt alive.

Mr. Mohammad Badanga, Chairman, Muslim Relief Committee, felt very sorry about the horrific incident in which five members of a Sindhi family were burnt alive. According to his information, the arsonists asked the members of the family to come out before setting fire to the property, but they refused as they had valuable ornaments and a large amount of cash. The family was carrying on a money-lending business. "Nevertheless," said Mr. Badanga, "my head hangs in shame and the whole incident is indefensible."

In Single Falia locality, it is clear that the Ghanchi Muslims first set fire to the Sindhi properties in the morning. In the afternoon a large crowd of Sindhis, allegedly led by one Lacchu (who, it was alleged by our Muslim informants from Single Falia locality, is a notorious *goonda* owning illicit liquor dens and gambling dens) came from outside and set fire to the properties belonging to the local Ghanchi Muslims. It was also alleged by these sources that the houses were set on fire during curfew hours and in the presence of a police inspector. However, the DSP whom we met later denied the allegation of the presence of any police officer.

It is also alleged by the Muslims that the miscreants with the active help of some railway employees (some of whom are reported to have been transferred for their alleged complicity) brought diesel from a nearby railway depot. According to these sources, some 3,500 litres of diesel, is reported to be missing from the depot. According to one source the total number of properties burnt on that fateful day was 230, 116 belonging to the Muslims and 114 belonging to the Sindhis. Other areas were also affected.

Hindus allege that the Ghanchi Muslims had pre-planned the violence on 29 October, 1980. The Muslims also make a similar allegation against the Hindus. However, the District Superintendent of Police, vigorously denying both these charges; stated that his intelligence reports are quite categorical, and it was wrong to say that either community had pre-planned anything. According to him it was a spontaneous outburst of violence and both the sides were equally responsible for the incidents on that day. The Muslim crowd, the Hindus allege, tried to set fire to Mahaprabhu Mandir which is in the centre of the road. This charge, denied vigorously by the Muslims, is also disproved by an inspection on site.

A leading Hindu doctor told us that the Muslim crowd did not attempt to set fire to the Mahaprabhu temple. However, they did try to set fire to the Jainwadi where the Jain community holds communal dinners. It was slightly damaged. The Muslim leaders also denied the charge of having attempted to set fire to the temple. It was a false rumour to further incite communal feelings. On the same day, the Muslim leaders alleged, a Muslim boy, aged 17, who was standing near the corner of his house some 100 metres away from the temple was shot dead by a police constable. We also met the elder brother of the deceased who corroborated this version. Later on the Hindus honoured the constable who shot the Muslim boy and presented him with a purse of Rs. 1000.

In Baharpura area, according to Mr. Yakub Bhatuk, 55 to 60 houses belonging to poor non-Ghanchi Muslims were burnt and demolished and taken possession of by the Sindhis on 29 October.

We were told by Advocate Rashid, a Ghanchi Muslim leader, that on 30 October during curfew hours a 1,000 strong mob attacked the Badshahbawa mosque in front of police chowkie No. 5 and extensively damaged its front portion. Later we visited the mosque and found its front portion damaged. Similarly the Chamanpura mosque was also attacked and damaged in a number of places. However, we could not visit the mosque to inspect the extent of damage done to it.

In Baharpura the Iqbal Union School was attacked and 5 of its rooms demolished by a Sindhi mob on 30 October during

curfew hours. (Again on 10 September 1981, there was an attempt to demolish the remaining two rooms.) We visited the school and found that the rooms had been razed to the ground. The building, our inquiries showed, belongs to a Sindhi who, wanting to have it vacated, seems to have seized this opportunity to demolish the rooms to force the school society to vacate the building. Such instances are not uncommon during communal disturbances.

The next round of communal violence started on 29 March 1981. Its immediate provocation was the rebuilding of the wooden cabins of the Sindhis in the vicinity of railway station which were burnt by the Ghanchi Muslims during the disturbances of October 1980. The Sindhis collected funds from their community and decided to convert the stalls into *pucca* shops. The municipality allowed them to do so. The permission to construct *pucca* shops was granted not to individual owners but to the Sindhi Panchayat. It seems to have been resented by the Ghanchi Muslims, especially because a Bohra Muslim having a shop on the corner of the road, which was also burnt, was not allowed to reconstruct his shop on the plea that the road was to be widened on the junction. The Ghanchi Muslims argued that fifteen days before the October disturbances the planning committee of Municipality had recommended that the whole road be widened to 30 m. Though this plan to widen the road was dropped and the Sindhi Panchayat allowed to construct *pucca* shops along the footpaths on either side of the road, the Bohra was not allowed to reconstruct his shop.

Mr. Shanti Patel, the President of the Godhra Municipality, whom we met later, maintained that Mr. Nuruddin, the Bohra shop keeper, was a tenant of a Parsi who had notified the Municipality not to allow Mr. Nuruddin to construct the shop. The municipal record bears this out. But other sources maintain that in such cases the Municipality allows the tenant to repair or construct the property on certain conditions (executing indemnity bond, etc.). According to Mr. Nuruddin, though he was prepared to leave 4.5 m along the corner for the widening of the road junction he was not permitted to construct his shop. Mr. Shanti Patel stated that he had told Mr. Nuruddin orally to construct the shop leaving the necessary 4.5 m and assured him that no

action would be taken against him. Mr. Nuruddin insisted on written permission which was refused.

However, there was one more complicating factor here. The land on which this shop stands belongs to a temple trust (the priest of the temple claims that it belongs to him and not to the temple trust) and has been leased to the Parsi gentleman for 99 years. The trustees of the temple started agitation that they be allowed to construct a temple there as the lease would soon be over. The Sindhis demanded that a Gurdwara for the Sikhs be constructed there as number of Sikh drivers pass that way everyday (there are very few Sikh families in Godhra town itself). This demand added a potentially explosive dimension to the whole problem. There seems to be no justification for establishing a temple at a place where none has existed for the last 100 years. The saner elements ought to have restrained those making such demands to defuse the situation. Such a demand, aroused apprehensions among the Muslims and made a section of them aggressive.

On being refused written permission to reconstruct the shop, Nuruddin and two other Ghanchi Muslims went to court and prayed for an injunction restraining the authorities from allowing the Sindhis to construct *pucca* shops. However, though the matter was fought upto the Supreme Court, the injunction could not be obtained. According to Mr. Kishorilal Bhayani, agreements thrice were arrived at between all the parties to the dispute (i.e. the Municipality, Sindhis, Ghanchi Muslims and others) but the Ghanchi Muslims did not withdraw the court cases as per one of the conditions of the agreement, and the problem could not be solved. However, according to Mr. Mohammad Badanga, Muslims were prepared to withdraw the court cases but the Sindhis did not sign the joint petition to the State Government requesting it to withdraw the cases against the Ghanchi Muslims involved in burning of five Sindhis as agreed to by them earlier. Apart from the merit of these contradictory versions, Municipal politics was also involved in the dispute.

The Godhra municipality consists of 35 councillors of which 22 are Hindus and 13 Muslims (12 Ghanchi Muslims and 1 Bohra). For the election of the post of President there is always some kind of understanding between different groups. The Sindhis and

Ghanchi Muslims usually came together to elect a President of their choice. However, this time there was polarisation on communal lines. All the 22 Hindu members met separately before the election and decided upon a particular candidate without taking the Muslim members into their confidence. The Muslim members resented this and subsequently walked out of the joint meeting. This added more heat to the already hot situation. It is also significant that the next phase of communal violence started on a day when a municipal by-election was taking place.

When the Muslims failed to obtain a restraining order from the court to stop construction of the *pucca* shops, the Sindhis decided to start the construction work of these shops. The work began on 29 March which was the day of by-election in a predominantly Ghanchi Muslim locality. The Ghanchi Muslims had collected in large numbers for voting. As they came to know that shutters were being fixed to the shops, they rushed towards the shops and started shouting slogans. Many councillors and Sindhis who had gathered there, sensing danger began to run away. Some Sindhi youngsters are alleged to have thrown stones at the Muslims. This enraged the advancing and slogan shouting crowd which now began to loot the shops of Sindhis in the station area. Many persons felt that it was rather imprudent on the part of the authorities to have restarted the work on a day of by-election when a large number of Muslims were to come together for voting. From this day onwards a fresh bout of communal violence started in Godhra. Attacks and counter-attacks were planned and the authorities had to impose curfew from time to time to prevent the outbreak of violence.

On 18 June there was quarrel involving a rickshaw driver near a civil hospital resulting in mob violence. This was followed on 29 June by a quarrel between a Ghanchi Muslim boy and a Hindu on breaking the dairy-milk queue in a Hindu locality (there was an acute shortage of milk during those days in Godhra and black marketing in milk was rampant). The mobs began stoning and the police had to impose curfew which remained in force for three days continuously without any break.

Thereafter on 29 July, a strong rumour of the plans of the Sindhis to take revenge by killing Muslims forced the authorities

to clamp curfew on the day of Id. The communal monster raised its ugly head on 1 and 2 August. On 1 August at about 10.30 A.M. in several Hindu and Sindhi areas, attacks were made on Muslims in which two Ghanchi boys—one 12-year-old boy who had gone to purchase ice from a Sindhi ice factory and another a poor vendor selling salt in a cart—died on the spot. Six Muslims were also injured.

The next day morning the Ghanchi Muslims retaliated by attacking a truck passing from the highway carrying some 20 persons. One died on the spot and another person succumbed to his injuries on reaching home. Again two innocent lives were lost in this war of attrition.

Again on 21 August, there began to spread a rumour that Sindhis were going to attack the Muslim houses on Friday (when Muslim males would go to offer *namaz* in the mosques) as it had happened in Biharsharif. We were told that to stave off the danger the Ghanchis collected in large numbers near Neelam Hotel (belonging to a Sindhi). When the Sindhis heard about it they also came in strength and thus there was a danger of serious clash between the two. The police rushing to the spot asked the crowd to disperse. However, each side wanted the other to disperse first. Police resorted to lathi charge. As the Ghanchi Muslims were refusing to disperse they became the main target of the police action.

According to the Pesh Imam of the Jama Masjid of Godhra, Inspector Bhogal ordered his men to enter the mosque and beat up those who were praying. The police entered with their boots on and even desecrated the holy *Koran*. The Pesh Imam maintained that on entering the Ghuiya mosque also, the police beat up people inside. On 23 August the police again entered another mosque and took 23 persons into custody along with the Imam of the mosque. The persons were praying when taken into custody, we were told by the Pesh Imam Maulana Qasmi. The role of Inspector Bhogal was controversial. The Hindus lionised him as a clean and honest officer while the Muslims were quite bitter about his role. We could not meet him as he had already been transferred. Inspector Bhogal is also alleged to have beaten up innocent Bohra ladies, or ordered SRP men to enter into their

houses and beat them up. The SRP was accused of having broken open cupboards and stolen ornaments and other valuables from these houses.

The communal incidents had stopped when we visited Godhra on 17 and 18 September, and a settlement had been worked out between the contending groups. The people were worn out with the strain of continuous fighting and curfew for more than eight months at a stretch. Wiser counsels seem to prevail at least for the time being.

It is no use apportioning blame. What is needed is restraint and proper understanding. Both the sides have undoubtedly suffered losses and will continue to do so if they do not work hard to maintain peace. Some of the leaders of both communities were quite sensible and it is for them to restrain the aggressive members of their community in the interest of peace. Once doubts and misgivings arise, even petty quarrels, as we have seen, lead to serious outbreaks of communal violence. There are powerful vested interests ready to exploit the situation.

It was our observation in Godhra also that rumours cause a lot of damage and lead to grave danger. In our opinion it is the responsibility of the Government, specially of the police, to quash such rumours and take people into their confidence. In view of complaints from both the communities about the role of the police (all the complaints may not be true or some of them may be exaggerated) it seems their role is not upto the mark and impartial. Also, the police are often subjected to pressures by the interested politicians. Unless the politicians themselves evolve a strict code of conduct in this respect nothing much can be achieved. The constabulary (and even some officers) are not free from communal prejudices. They need to be thoroughly trained and secularised, which is not an easy task to accomplish.

The Indian religio-cultural milieu is quite conservative and most people are conditioned to evolve certain stereotypes about the members of other communities. This is taken advantage of by vested interests to incite passion against the members of other communities. It is, therefore, necessary to bridge this gap and develop closer ties with the members of other communities to develop a realistic picture of them. What is most shocking is the

fact that even politicians of the level and stature of MLAs and MPs are victims of such stereotypes. They are no less prejudiced than other members of the society.

### III. Communal Violence in Ahmedabad

In this study we shall confine ourselves to the riots which took place in Ahmedabad between 10 and 12, January 1982 in which one man was killed and several others injured by stabbing. This study is also based on extensive field investigation.

Ahmedabad is a highly crowded city with a mixed population (15,85,442 in 1971). Being a centre of the textile industry, with its large potential for employment, the city attracts a great number of poor people belonging to the scheduled castes and Muslims. There are several *bhaiyyas* from Uttar Pradesh already employed in the textile industry who compete for jobs with Muslims and Harijans. In the 1969 communal riots the *bhaiyyas* were used against the Muslims, competition for jobs being one of the factors in those ghastly killings. The middle and upper caste Gujaratis belonging to the lower-middle and middle class trading communities are highly conservative and harbour strong prejudices against the Muslims and Harijans.

Poverty among the Muslims in Gujarat in general, and in Ahmedabad in particular, is very acute. According to J. I. Laliwala, an economist from Gujarat University who undertook a sample survey of the Muslims in Ahmedabad, 75 per cent of the Muslims of Ahmedabad were destitutes; Muslims were found to be economically and educationally much more backward than the other poorer classes. Laliwala noted: "The required monthly income per capita for not relapsing below the poverty line was determined in 1973 to be about Rs. 46. On this basis the required monthly income for a family of 7 members was Rs. 322. But about 75 per cent of the families in one survey had a monthly income below Rs. 322."

Daryapur and Kalupur localities, where communal violence erupted on this occasion, are localities with mixed population. In both the localities there are Muslims, Harijans and upper caste Hindus. Among the Muslims and Harijans in these localities there is acute poverty. Many of them are involved in boot-

legging and gambling dens, most of them controlled by bosses belonging to the Patel castes. There are a few Muslim bosses too. The gang rivalry between the bosses often plays its own role in keeping the tension between the two communities alive. Needless to say, they have powerful connections with the police authorities as well as ruling politicians.

The North Gujarat Patels are a rising middle caste with high ambitions, both economic and political, and are aggressive. The Patels were on the forefront in the caste riots too. The RSS in Ahmedabad derives a great deal of support from the Patel community. Daryapur happens to be the stronghold of the RSS and the BJP.

The riot in Daryapur started on 10 January when there was a quarrel between two groups on kite-flying, and soon both resorted to stone-throwing. Subsequently, there were organised attacks. The police had to resort to firing seven rounds to disperse the violent mobs. On the same day in an attack on bus passengers near Daryapur, seven persons, six of them reported to be Hindus were injured. On 11 January, a small crowd entered into a house in Changiz Pole and killed a man aged 22. The police imposed indefinite curfew in the area.

The kite-flying incident was, as usually happens, merely a spark. For a long time systematic efforts were being made to build up communal tension in the city. Some time before, several branches of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (which is actively supported by the RSS) have been formed in Ahmedabad. In Ahmedabad the VHP is carrying on a virulent campaign against the conversion of Harijans to Islam, and its activists are collecting funds in a big way.

The VHP organised a big meeting at Nilkanth Mahadev which was addressed, among others, by Gaubhakt Shambhu Maharaj and Morarji Bapu, a popular Ramayan singer. The Parishad has also organised a poster campaign in the city. Some of its slogans are: *Ramnam bolo ya Hindustan chodo* (Say *Ramnam* or leave India), *Vande Matram gana hoga ya Bharat se jana hoga* (Sing *Vande Matram* or leave India), etc. I saw several posters on the city walls showing the saffron map of India in which Pakistan and Bangladesh, are included.

Similarly, a large number of leaflets in Gujarati have been distributed. The leaflets strongly condemn the conversion of some Harijans to Islam and appeals for funds for saving the Hindu culture. A Gujarati leaflet believed to be published by VHP quotes Swami Vivekanand to the effect that "a person leaving the Hindu fold is not merely a loss of one Hindu but adding one more to the enemies of Hindus". Yet another leaflet where more aggressive language has been used argues that the conversion of Harijans to Islam is not on account of their persecution by the upper caste Hindus but because of the large amount of petro-dollars flowing into the country. The leaflet also says that this process (of conversion) has been on for the last thousand years beginning with Mohammad Ghori upto Aurangzeb and then from Jinnah to Yahya Khan (it interestingly omits naming Zia!). The Arabs, according to this leaflet, have maintained this tradition and they are sending crores of rupees under the pretext of constructing and maintaining mosques. The leaflet does not spare the Christians either. In the North-East and in Kerala they are alleged to be playing a destructive role.

Some people tried to draw the Gujarat government's attention to this virulent propaganda. However, no action was taken to stop it. In a situation of acute poverty (leading to criminal tendencies and lowering the threshold of violence), gang rivalries and caste and communal politics, such blatantly communal propaganda leads to actual explosion.

#### **IV. Communal Fury in Pune and Solapur**

The Bharatiya Janata Party, of political necessity, has had to indulge in secular cosmetics to hide its ugly communal face but it is not doing so at the cost of its real ideology of communalism and Hindu chauvinism. The RSS connection is of course there, but after the Meenakshipuram conversions, it has also linked itself with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). The VHP, apparently a non-political religious organisation, is now becoming a focal point of Hindu communal ideologies. In December 1981 there was communal flare-up in Ahmedabad as a result of its intensified campaign for Hindu unity and in February 1982 a similar

campaign resulted in communal violence in the two important towns of Maharashtra, namely Pune and Solapur.

One must sit up and think seriously over what is being done in the innocuous name of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. A most deadly communal poison is being spread, which is seriously undermining the cause of national unity. The *Jana Jagran* Campaign undertaken by the VHP in different parts of India is doing all the mischief. Even the walls of Bombay city can be seen plastered with posters showing the map of India in saffron colour (which includes Pakistan, Bangla Desh—the old slogan of *Akhand Bharat* being subtly revived again) along with slogans like “*Jab Hindu Jagega Is Desh ka Dukh Bhagega*” (When Hindus awaken then only will this country get rid of its painful problems), “We are Hindus and we are proud of it”.

The campaign is also being conducted from door to door—apparently for the collection of funds for the VHP, but the real intention is to harangue the Hindus on the Meenakshipuram conversions and to awaken them to the “danger lurking over their heads of being reduced to minority in their own country”. Some printed literature is also given and lastly an appeal for funds is made. In Pune many industrialists are known to have contributed substantially to the Parishad funds. In Solapur—a predominantly working class city—the Parishad volunteers have collected as many as Rs. 82,000 in a couple of days. It is also to be noted that the Parishad is conducting such campaigns in cities with industrial bases and substantial working class populations. Ahmedabad, Pune, Solapur, Bombay all fall into the same category.

The VHP has taken its cue from Islamic fundamentalism. A booklet distributed in Pune and Solapur entitled *Dharmantar—Nave Rashtriya Sankat* (Change of Religion—A New National Crisis) awakens the Hindus to the danger of conversion and of Islamic fundamentalism in countries like Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Also issues like the common civil code, family planning and the use of amplifiers in the mosques are being raised and made out to be principal issues facing the country. The conversion of a few Harijans to Islam has provided a great opportunity to the Parishad for launching aggressively communal propaganda.

Commenting on the activities of the VHP in his lead article in the *Sadhana* (a Marathi weekly from Pune) Mr. N. G. Gore, one-time Indian High Commissioner in London, maintains that in the olden days in order that the screams, of a women thrown on the burning pyre of her husband may not be heard, the people around the pyre used to beat drums loudly. Similarly the VHP is raising hue and cry about the conversion of Harijans in Meenakshipuram so that the people do not pay attention to the screams of the Dalits burning on the pyre of discrimination. Also it was attested by many people that most of the persons associated with the VHP belong either to the BJP or RSS. Mr. S. M. Joshi, the well known Maharashtrian politician, told me that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Patit Pawan are front organisations of the RSS. It is the RSS machinery which is working behind them. Mr. Joshi also said that it is an insult to Harijans to say that they have embraced Islam for the lure of money. Will any Brahmin of Sadashiv Peth (a locality in Pune) change his religion if he is given money? Mr. Joshi held the VHP totally responsible for the communal violence in Pune.

Before we deal with the incidents of communal violence in Pune we would like to throw some light on the economic conditions of Muslims there. The Muslim population in Pune is around 80,000 (out of total of 13 lakhs) distributed mainly in the eastern parts. This makes it 6.15% of the total population. There is acute poverty among Muslims. Most of them work in small private units, do vending or other odd jobs. The economic plight of the Muslims is so miserable that many of them happily accept the sub-employment from Dalit sweepers of Pune Municipal Corporation for Rs. 200 a month.<sup>1</sup> Dalit sweepers who get around Rs. 500/- per month from the Corporation employ Muslims for Rs. 200/- a month and themselves do some more lucrative jobs elsewhere.

Baba Adhav, a prominent social worker from Pune told me that more and more Muslim women are taking to prostitution for want of any other alternative. He also said that there are very few Muslim workers in big industries in Pune and none at all among

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<sup>1</sup> This interesting piece of information was revealed during personal interview with Dr. Baba Adhav. (Ed.)

officers or managerial ranks. A glance at a Pune telephone directory establishes Dr. Adhav's claim. Dr. Adhav also says that due to the miserable plight of Muslims their number in the illicit liquor business is increasing. Even if the illicit business is owned by a Hindu, most of the workers are Muslims. Only a handful of Bohras and Khojas among the Muslims, are well to do; but their number, may not exceed five thousand.

The aggressive campaign of the VHP went on in Pune for more than a month towards the end of 1981. It created a scare among the Muslims. They were terrified. They even stopped using amplifiers in the mosques after the first week of February 1982 as the use of amplifiers was under attack and they had been apprehending trouble for quite some time.

The VHP announced its intention to take out a procession. The Police Commissioner first declined permission. But, it is said, the deputy mayor of Pune who is a former Shiva-sainik, pressurised the Commissioner to grant permission. The procession was joined even by members of the Congress (I), Janata Party, etc. The Janata Party members joined the procession despite an appeal not to do so issued by its State General Secretary Bhai Vaidya through a press note on 4 February 1982 after exposing the communal nature of the VHP. Strangely enough the Pune Municipal Corporation lent its elephant to the processionists.

The procession carried the portraits of Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule and Gandhi along with that of Golwalkar and a copy of the *Manusmriti*. Bhai Vaidya questioned how Golwalkar and the *Manusmriti* could be bracketed with Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule. Ambedkar had burnt the copy of the *Manusmriti*. He had said that he was born as Hindu but he would not die as Hindu, and he fulfilled his vow. A portrait of Guru Nanak was also carried to symbolise Hindu-Sikh unity. But the RSS is the sworn enemy of Sikhs in Punjab. The animosity of the processionists towards Muslims *per se* was evident from the fact that when it wended its way through Azad Square, it pulled down the name plate bearing Maulana Azad's name. Bhai Vaidya said that it showed the deep hatred the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has towards Muslims. Its volunteers would not otherwise have attacked and pulled out the name plate of Maulana Azad, a staunch nationalist.

Baba Adhav said that the processionists were shouting extremely filthy slogans to provoke Muslims. However the Muslims refused to be provoked. Many of them had fled in terror earlier. An old Muslim lady told him that the women were afraid the police or the goondas would enter their houses and rape them. Such a thing had never used to happen before. Even the leaders of Hindu Ekta Andolan conceded that VHP was involved in violent attacks. According to a report in the *Maharashtra Herald*, "The Hindu Ekta Andolan has decided to go alone henceforth with its declared programme as the Sunday incidents made them lose their credibility because of associating with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's *Jan Jagran Andolan* .... the Hindu Ekta leaders Vilas Tupe and Dhananjay Jagtap, said that there were specific groups in the procession who had resorted to stone-throwing. They also condemned the statement of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad disowning responsibility and blaming it on some *goondas*." Referring to the slogans shouted in the procession, HEA leaders said that "such slogan-shouting would only instil divisive feelings". According to HEA leaders some Muslim youth had even come to welcome the procession.

The procession changed its route and entered a Muslim locality. Then passing through Deccan Gymkhana, the rowdies in the procession attacked two Muslim (Irani) hotels. These hotels were completely burnt. Many Muslim shops were stoned and damaged. On the night of 17 February a shop belonging to a Bohra Muslim was completely burnt down during curfew hours. According to the owner of the shop he suffered a loss of about 4 lakhs. The situation was under control when I visited the city on 16 February but the peace was more illusory than real. Tension still prevailed. The Muslims felt nervous. The administration quickly brought the situation under control, but before the violence broke out the Government machinery had not moved despite clear signs of danger. The procession should not have been allowed in any case. Tact and firmness is required to handle the still delicate situation.

The story in Solapur is no different. Late Anna Patil, an MLA (Independent) made a provocative speech against Muslims in a public meeting held on 9 February. The Muslims, he said,

marry four wives and refuse to practise family planning, and as such are multiplying fast. "They were 3 crores at the time of partition and are now 13 crores (a deliberately exaggerated figure, as the actual Muslim population is not more than 9 crores). Soon they will be in a majority in our own country." This was followed by an intensification of *Jan Jagran Abhiyan* by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. According to some political workers in Solapur two meetings were held in Ram Mandir and a third at the house of a VHP activist. The conspiracy of communal violence was apparently hatched at these meetings.

Solapur is also a working class town. There are cloth mills, bidi manufacturing units and power looms. The Muslim population in Solapur is around 60,000 out of the total population of 5 lakhs but they are not in a happy economic position. Most of them are employed in the mills or bidi manufacturing units. A few Muslim families own bidi manufacturing works.

The last major riot occurred in 1967, in which 12 persons were killed. Things had been peaceful since then. The immediate cause of this riot was not any economic rivalry between the two communities. However, the Muslims here were not as passive as those of Pune. Here they retaliated and burned down a couple of Hindu shops in the recent riots.

The trouble started on 15 February 1982, when the procession taken out by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad was coming to an end at about 8 P.M. The collector initially reluctant to allow the procession relented and allowed it on the solemn assurance that it would be a peaceful march. In the beginning it remained peaceful but, according to eye witnesses when it came near the Punjab Talim Mosque—a usual trouble spot during the Ganesh festival—some miscreants from the procession started shouting provocative slogans such as "*Ek dhakka aur do, Pakistan tor do*" (give one push more and break Pakistan), "*Jalado Jalado Pakistan Jalado*" (Burn, Burn Pakistan), "*Vande Matram Gana Hoga nahin to Hindustan Chhodana hoga* (sing *Vande Matram* otherwise leave India)", and "*Yeh Desh Hindwon ka, nahin kisi ke bap ka*" (this country belongs to Hindus, not to somebody's father.) Then in Tilak Chowk at about 8 P.M. a hand cart, a cold drink shop and a pawn shop all belonging to Muslims were burnt down. Soon the news spread and the Muslims retaliated

in Shukrawar Peth and Guruwar Peth by burning three shops. The Hindu shops were big and well stocked and so they suffered heavier economic losses. According to the collector Mohan Singh Patil there were four cases of stabbing resulting in injury. The police fired twice, in all eleven rounds, resulting in leg and hand injuries to four persons. It must be said that through prompt administrative action the situation was brought under control. There was night curfew in Solapur when we visited it on 18 February. But, according to the collector, it was more by way of precaution than apprehension.

It would be seen from the narration of events that both in Pune and Solapur the riots were not results of any political or economic rivalry or competition. Unlike many other riots, both these riots were not precipitated by local factors. The Meenakshipuram conversions were too remote from Pune and Solapur to have an effect on the Hindus of these towns. Moreover, the conversions had taken place quite some time ago. The riots were the result of a sustained and calculated campaign by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad backed by the RSS. The Brahmins associated with the RSS do not desire the real integration of Dalits with upper caste Hindus. The farce of Hindu unity does not carry an iota of conviction with the Dalits. They have experienced the fury of upper caste Hindus recently in Maharashtra (Marathwada incidents) and Gujarat. They cannot forget the carnage at Deoli in Bihar either. This campaign of Hindu unity is only a weapon actually directed against the Muslims.

The perpetrators of the *status quo*, whether they be Muslim fundamentalists of Iran and Pakistan or Hindu fundamentalists of India, need the spectre of an external enemy to beat into submission the have nots within. The Pakistani fundamentalists now headed by Zia keep the image of the Hindu aggressor alive and vibrant to stifle the protest within. The RSS, on the other hand, has mastered the game of using the image of 'fast breeding aggressive Muslims' to suppress the internal contradictions of Hindu society and keep the Dalits in perpetual bondage. Religion in India performs more than an opiating function: it provides solace to the exploited and the oppressed of one community and challenges on silences into submission those of the other community.

In Indian conditions religion is not only an opium for the masses, it can also be made to act as a deadly poison. Only a strong mass movement can counteract this poison. But the tragedy is that even the left-wing in this country has not taken this danger seriously enough.