

Conflict and Suffering: Survivors of Carnages in 1984 and 2002

HARSH MANDER

Even though these were separated by 18 years of history, there is tragically a great deal in common between the communal massacres that played out on the streets of Delhi in 1984 and in settlements and bye-lanes across Gujarat in 2002. This paper documents some of the findings of the research conducted with survivors of these two major pogroms over more than a year in the widows' colony established by the Delhi government in Tilak Vihar and in four of the worst-hit districts of Gujarat. It examines the paths of suffering, renegotiation and healing separately for the direct victims and the vicariously affected.

The suffering of survivors of many of India's most gruesome communal massacres and pogroms does not abate even with the passage of decades. The rest of us move on – some indifferent and impatient, others ashamed of painful episodes of our recent history, but genuinely believing that time heals all wounds. But in my many encounters with survivors of each of these conflicts – including in Nellie, Assam in 1983, Delhi in 1984, Hashimpura, Uttar Pradesh in 1987, Bhagalpur, Bihar in 1989 and Gujarat in 2002 – I find that their suffering not only endures, but it carries an immediacy and anguish, as though the killing, rape and arson happened just days earlier, not many years past. This is even more acute for those who are further disadvantaged by gender, class and caste. For them, a lifetime is too short to forget.

In this paper, I will document and try to reflect upon some of our findings about our meetings with survivors of two of these major pogroms: the anti-Sikh carnage in Delhi in 1984, and the organised slaughter of mainly Muslim men, women and children in Gujarat in 2002. This research was conducted with the help of Navjot Bir Singh and Manisha Sobhrajani over more than a year in the widows' colony established by the Delhi government in Tilak Vihar for more than 450 impoverished women whose husbands were killed in 1984, and their dependents; and in neighbouring middle class Tilak Nagar where they also met people affected by the massacre. It was conducted also in four of the worst hit districts of Gujarat – Ahmedabad, Anand, Kheda and Sabarkantha – for a longer period of three years with community researchers, who call themselves Nyaya Pathiks or activists who are assisting a large number of survivors of the 2002 carnage to fight for legal justice in the Nyayagrah campaign.¹

1 Overview of the Contexts: 1984 and 2002

Even though these were separated by 18 years of history, there is tragically a great deal in common between the communal massacres that played out on the streets of Delhi in 1984, and in settlements and bye-lanes across Gujarat in 2002. There is considerable consensus among legions of credible and independent observers of both these massacres that these were not spontaneous conflicts between people of different religious identities; they were pogroms systematically and cynically enabled by acts of commission and omission of public agencies at all levels, including in positions of command authority. State officials similarly stood by in both episodes, as mobs were allowed and even actively encouraged to loot and torch properties, desecrate places of worship, and gruesomely murder often by burning alive people of specified minority faiths: Sikh in one case and Muslim in

The research for this paper was supported by financial assistance from International Development Research Centre, Regional Office for South Asia and China.

I acknowledge with gratitude the support and advice from Navsharan Kaur, Ashis Nandy, Vinay Lal, Yasmeen Arif and Pratiksha Baxi.

Harsh Mander (manderharsh@gmail.com) is with the Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi.

another. In both instances, communal organisations and political leaders worked openly in tandem to stir and stoke communal hatred, and to organise the logistics of the slaughter, efficiently transporting men, weapons and inflammables to settlements and commercial establishments of the communities marked out for slaughter. Similar stories are told in both events of people relying on voters' lists to know which properties were to be targeted.

The major differences are that although once the slaughter was under way, it was deliberately organised in both pogroms; but it is no one's case that there was advance planning *before* Indira Gandhi's assassination of the 1984 massacre that followed in its wake, whereas there is considerable circumstantial evidence gathered by nearly 40 citizens' reports to confirm that the 2002 massacre was planned long in advance of the actual flashpoint of the train burning in Godhra. The Gujarat carnage targeted women and children with gruesome and sadistic mass killing and burning alive, whereas the massacre in Delhi mostly reserved its brutality for men and male youths. The biggest difference, as we shall see, was the 2002 carnage was followed by an organised social and economic boycott of the targeted community, which continues even seven years later at the time of writing.

In both cases, the violence was spurred by criminal acts perpetrated or purported to have been committed by persons of the specified religious minorities: in one case, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards; and in the other a group of Muslims were claimed to have planned and executed a terrorist attack, to set aflame a compartment of a train, deliberately killing many women and children, a charge which subsequently was contested by one judicial enquiry and many citizen investigations; and upheld by another. The command leadership infamously condoned the attacks on people of the religious identity of those accused of both these grave crimes: Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi deployed a terrible metaphor to condone the massacre, declaring that when a big tree falls, the earth would naturally shake; whereas the Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi relied on Newtonian physics to find spurious ethical basis for the then ongoing slaughter, in the eternal law of physical sciences that every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

In this way, both brutal pogroms against religious minorities were sought – both by the political leadership and in wide sections of popular perceptions in the community of majority faith – to be “justified” and even “righteous” violence, because entire communities were deemed to be guilty merely by their shared identities with alleged killers. The attacks in both pogroms were on communities and not individuals; they built upon and further consolidated large and persisting social hostility prevailing at the time of the massacres against the communities. The two massacres also had in common the role of communal organisations in manufacturing and sustaining hatred; and underlying agendas of political power, riding on waves of engineered hatred. Ruling governments in both massacres reaped rich, even unprecedented, electoral harvests in elections that followed in the wake of the slaughters.

Both massacres also share a common history of impunity, with the majority of the killers and marauders and all those in command positions of authority in government and the civil

administration still unpunished. There was in both cases a spectacular and comprehensive subversion of justice by all agencies of the criminal justice system: the police, prosecution and courts. The difference has been that unlike the 1984 massacre, the Gujarat carnage was followed by unprecedented sustained legal activism by a range of human rights and survivor organisations, and by a far more activist role both by the National Human Rights Commission (which was not in existence in 1984) and the Supreme Court. Therefore, compared to the accused of 1984, almost all of whom still walk free, many of those accused of crimes in 2002 have been arrested and are facing jail sentences at the time of writing, and the Supreme Court ordered the reopening of more than 2002 cases which had been closed even without trial, the transfer of some cases to courts outside Gujarat, and special investigation teams with the court's own nominees to re-investigate some of the biggest massacres.

2 Direct and Vicarious Victimhood

It is misleading to assume that the survivors of any communal carnage are a homogeneous entity, who would respond in common ways to the catastrophe that confronts them. There are, first, the direct victims of any conflict: those whose properties are looted or destroyed, whose bodies suffer assault, or whose loved ones are attacked or killed. Even among these, there are massive differences of gender, class, caste and age. The capacity of those persons affected by violence who are targeted because of their religious or ethnic identity, but who are otherwise relatively privileged by gender, economic means, social standing, or age, is much greater than those who are women, especially single women, impoverished, of disadvantaged castes, or those who are biologically dependent: children, infirm or the aged. The relatively privileged members of the targeted community tend to respond in different ways, while renegotiating local spaces with those who attacked them, rebuilding their lives, homes, livelihoods and social relationships, and in their attitudes to justice. Therefore, the immediate and enduring suffering, and healing, of direct victims is overlaid greatly by other considerations of privilege, power and advantage.

Sectarian conflict is an attack simultaneously on individuals of a community, but it is also vicariously an assault on that entire community. Therefore, in addition to those who directly suffer the consequences of episodes of mass sectarian violence, members of the entire targeted community are also vicarious victims of the communal pogrom, even though they may not have actually suffered any personal losses, of assaults on body or property, or the death of people they loved or even personally knew. They may well be protected by various levels of privilege from any realistic probability of such a direct attack in the future. But because the attack was on individuals of a faith to avenge, shame or break the spirit of the entire community with which the direct victims share a religious identity, they suffer because of their religious identity, in ways which are distinct but not always entirely different from the direct victims of the communal attack.

Therefore, in this paper, we will try to examine the paths of suffering, renegotiation and healing separately for the *direct* and the *vicarious* victims of a pogrom. We will also observe that even

the direct victims differ in their capacities as well as choices, based on their relative advantage and power on other axes from that of their victimised religious identity: of gender, class, caste and age.

3 Graded Suffering: 1984 Survivors

I have observed the ways in which for the entire Sikh community, including those who were born after 1984, in India and anywhere in the world, the 1984 pogrom in Delhi and other parts of India, endures in memory as a source of intense anguish and loss; it also fuels a dormant anger and alienation, even as the community typically prospers, and its members excel variously in business, politics, sports, the armed forces, the letters and the arts. Both anguish and anger was far more visible in the years immediately after the carnage, but it gradually subsided, even as suspicion and hate against Sikhs by members of the majority Hindu community dwindled.

Today, over 25 years after the carnage, there are few signs of actively perceived victimhood in the collective psyche of the Sikh community in most parts of India. The abject failures to bring to justice those who led and organised the crimes of 1984 still rankle. There is anger still against what is perceived to be the imperious insensitivity of Indira Gandhi in using brute military might in the Operation Bluestar, to crush insurgents who took refuge in the Golden Temple, because it desecrated this most revered place of worship of the Sikh people. But for the greater part, they seem to have pushed the trauma behind them. I observe greater community anger in Sikh majority Punjab, but here the anger is not just for the crimes of 1984 or even for Operation Bluestar, but for the enormous human rights abuses and mass killings by security forces who felled thousands of Sikh militant youth during the late 1980s and 1990s. By contrast, a shrill and vastly exaggerated sense of victimhood is still actively fostered in non-resident Sikh settlements, such as in Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

Among the direct victims of the carnage, our research suggests that even those who suffered grave losses, of property, loved ones and male breadwinners, have been able to recover and indeed prosper, if they originally belonged to middle and upper income brackets, and upper caste Sikhs. The investigation focused on two adjoining but contrasting localities. In one of these, Tilak Nagar, live many middle class and upper caste Sikhs who suffered grave losses in 1984, whereas in Tilak Vihar live widows of the poor, often low caste and even non-Punjabi Sikhs, many of whom work as domestic help in the wealthy homes of Tilak Vihar.

Researcher Navjot Singh reports,

The survivors of 1984 riots, living in Tilak Nagar and Tilak Vihar today, represent two ends of the experiences of Sikhs in Delhi in rebuilding their lives following the riots. Both still have painful memories from 1984 and share a sense of frustration, at the lack of genuine acknowledgement of what happened and how it affected the Sikh victims, and, perhaps most importantly, at the absence of conviction and punishment for those responsible for the carnage. Yet, their lives since 1984 have moved along different trajectories and provide a study in contrast despite their living in adjacent spaces with what are now deeply entrenched economic, social and political relations between the two groups of survivors.

He finds that “survivors living in Tilak Nagar have successfully reconstructed their lives after the riots and often acknowledge having economically bettered their status beyond that which they enjoyed even before the riots (stressing without failure their having done so without any help and assistance from the State)”. By contrast, although we came across no case of absolute destitution and penury,

many families in Tilak Vihar faced great economic vulnerability and hardship arising from these large families’ dependence on a single breadwinner (usually a widow from the 1984 riots). Despite a semblance of normalcy due to access to minimal shelter and means of livelihood for all families, on looking beyond this façade...multiple vulnerabilities, whether perceived or real, plague the survivor families. Unemployment among youth; lack of adequate education and vocational skills that feed into this unemployment; trauma and other psycho-social problems experienced by the survivors (particularly by widows forced to accept roles as matriarchs in a deeply patriarchal community); rampant drug abuse; escalating crime to fund this addiction and arising out of the economy associated with drug peddling; domestic violence; high suicide rate among survivors, especially women; a sense of rootlessness and “unbelonging” among the youth; and prevalence of an acute sense of cynicism, suspicion, bitterness, hostility and pent-up frustration among all segments of these survivors are some, though by no means all, of these vulnerabilities.

The upper middle class survivors residing in Tilak Nagar were optimistic and upbeat. For instance, Naunihal Kaur, a married working woman employed with a bank, lived formerly in Janakpuri, where she lost three male members of her family including her grandfather, father and an uncle during the riots. Today she proudly says,

We lost (male) earners in our family, both our shops and most of our belongings during the riots. My mother (Praneet Kaur) and uncle considered it humiliating to then have to go to the very State that was responsible for our plight for what was peanuts being offered in name of compensation. Instead, she restarted my father’s transport business and ran it with my uncle’s help. The first few years were very tough and they incurred heavy losses. Besides unscrupulous relatives took advantage and cheated her. However, things turned around by the 1990s and my mother was able to not only educate all of us three children, but also arrange our marriages. Today I work as a manager. My mother lives with my eldest brother. But all three of us have independent families and enjoy lifestyles that are better than that we ever saw as children before or after the riots. My mother taught us Guru Govind Singh’s message that “every Sikh of the Guru is equal to one and a quarter lakh other adversaries”. That gave us courage when even the State turned against us (in 1984).

By contrast, nearly all the survivors in the working class colony of Tilak Vihar felt that life today was far more difficult and full of hardships than before the riots. Most households depend on the ageing widowed matriarchs who were provided with a pensionable government job as peons and sanitary workers as part of the rehabilitation package by the state. These women and their jobs are the sole regular sources of incomes among most survivor families till date, even though the new generation of sons and daughters are all in their late twenties or thirties.

The traditional occupation of the Sindhi Labana Sikhs was charpoy making (a wooden frame on which are woven cloth ropes), and of the Sikligars who also live in Tilak Vihar was the trade of blacksmiths. But the death of adult males in the families also meant that the next generation was

deprived of training in these traditional professions. Navjot Singh reports,

The lack of educational and vocational qualifications has resulted in large scale unemployment. This, in turn, has fuelled extreme frustration and lack of purpose among the youth; a problem further compounded by a sense of unbelonging and rootlessness due to their having grown up in absence of both, their (dead) fathers and (working) mothers... Drug abuse, small crime and domestic violence against women are the resulting features of this situation.

A consequence is the sole dependence on women of widows having to take up employment in government offices; this resulted in their absence from home for long durations of the day, when the children were left without supervision. Vidya Kaur put it evocatively, "A generation of children in Tilak Vihar raised itself. They would play truant from school. The boys would hang around in bad company. Many took to drugs and then to thefts at home and outside to feed their addiction."

She added,

Earlier the problem was restricted to older boys and young men. But now even very young boys do drugs. There is no one to stop them. The first generation of drug users went ignored because their (widowed) mothers were out at work. Now the situation has got completely out of control. Adults are scared of even broaching the issue with their wards as those who intervene or speak out risk getting assaulted and worse by both addicts as well as the drug peddlers.

Apart from drug abuse, petty crime and domestic violence against women are the dominant realities of life in Tilak Vihar today. Mathri Kaur recalled,

My husband started drinking heavily after the riots when he saw his father burnt to death and his house and shop razed to the ground. He also became violent and ill-tempered after 1984 and started raising his hand on me and other family members. Today he refuses to work and spends all his time drinking or drunk. My home disintegrated, both materially and emotionally, during the 1984 riots.

Among the men who witnessed the riots and are haunted by its memories there were many who have lost their sanity, while others have sought refuge in alcohol and drugs. Nirmal's *nana* (maternal grandfather) was the sole male survivor in her family despite his having received sword wounds. She recalled, "he lost his mind after seeing all his three sons as well as a grandson killed in front of him. All day he would either speak to the wall or roam around with an unsheathed sword fighting imaginary duels. He died seven-eight years back." Lachmi's older son also spends his entire day pacing the small apartment and muttering to himself.

Women in Tilak Vihar – even those who have bravely defended and raised their families for a quarter of a century, despite being completely unprepared for this challenge in a patriarchal society in which they rarely worked outside the home and were barely lettered – also show heart-rending symptoms of unmistakable deep continuing psychosocial distress. Surinder Singh (a Sikh volunteer working among the survivors) testifies to several women witnesses of the killings, known personally to him, who committed suicide in the years since 1984.² Lachmi Devi, like many of these ageing widows, complained of "constant headache and frequent memory lapses". According to Nirmal Kaur, "high

sugar, hypertension, blood pressure, etc, afflict every second woman in the colony". She says, "today I have reached a point where I feel neither much elation, nor any great sadness. I feel cynical and indifferent to most things and to the plight of all people. Whether somebody lives or dies is of little consequence to me. I have no clue what is going to happen to my children and at some level I am beyond care".

4 Graded Suffering: 2002 Survivors

The brutal assaults on Muslim men, women and children after 58 people tragically lost their lives in the train fire at Godhra on 27 February 2002 was intended as a punishment and a warning to the entire Indian Muslim community. The slaughter was engineered so as to strike at, and break, the spirit of a whole religious community. It sought to reduce them from equal citizens and partners in India's destiny, to submissive, segregated second class citizens, similar to the dalits in large swathes of rural India. It eroded the premises and pledges of the secular democratic Constitution of free India, approximating instead the vision for minorities by Hindutva leaders like Golwarkar. When Narendra Modi refuses to express regret, but instead boasts in rallies across the country that only he had the "56 inch chest" required to take on and tame the enemy within, it was not just vengeance against the Ganchi Muslim residents of Godhra, who, he alleged, had set the train on fire; it is retribution for an entire community for what the militant Hindutva vision of history portrays as a millennium of Muslim subjugation, violence and treachery.

This massacre was, therefore, like the carnage of Sikhs in 1984, an assault not on the direct victims but on the religious community to which they belonged, and more than at any moment in independent Indian history, Indian Muslims across India and even those who had taken citizenship in countries of the North or the Gulf, felt personally intensely devastated by the violence. I have interacted with innumerable gatherings of Muslim people – in cities, towns and villages across India and in many countries in the world after 2002 – and each time I have been struck by the extent to which they have internalised the suffering of the direct victims as if it was their own. The meta-narrative of the pregnant woman whose womb was slit open and the foetus set aflame is repeated and recalled as though it was experienced by a known loved one, as are numerous gruesome stories of rape, arson and murder. Each grieves with a personal sense of loss, each time a new mass grave is discovered, or when a Muslim is killed by the police in a faked encounter. I have met non-resident Indian Muslims, who have not returned to India for years, but who slipped into clinical depression after the Gujarat carnage. Many weep and hold my hands, even years later, like people unable to come to terms with an enormous personal tragedy.

More than anything else, I encounter in the hearts and minds of Indian Muslims after 2002, the anguish of intense betrayal. Each recounts his or her personal memories of childhood and youth, peopled by close Hindu friends, who they believed loved them without chauvinism: with whom they comfortably shared the spaces of home, play and school, who were an intrinsic presence in moments of joy, celebration and sadness. But today they are variously wounded, by the open support of their childhood

comrades for Hindutva ideologies, or by their deafening silences, their failures to condemn the injustice of holding them culpable only because of their separate religious identity. They wonder what has changed between them, or were they only fooling themselves that their bonds were untainted by prejudice.

The sense of personal betrayal is matched by the state's open partisanship. State authorities have been known to be biased against minorities in all communal riots, but the Indian Muslims still encounters an entirely new low when a government unrepentantly becomes complicit in abetting the most brutal mass assault on women and children in recent history, and yet is unpunished. Instead, it is emphatically voted back to power, not once but twice, and the person perceived to be the chief architect of the slaughter is projected as a realistic contender for the position of prime minister of the country in the not-too-distant future, cheered on by most of the country's leading industrial leaders. They wonder if the pledge of the Constitution – that no person in this country is the child of a lesser god – was in the end a sham.

This anguish of the vicarious victims of the 2002 massacre, the entire Indian Muslim community, linked them organically to the direct victims of the carnage only briefly. Since the state government refused to establish relief camps for around 2,00,000 people who had been displaced by the conflict – and the secular humanitarian organisations who came forward were too few to meet the colossal need for succour to the people who had been critically traumatised and dispossessed – it was mainly the Muslim community which had to support a massive relief and reconstruction effort. Donations poured in from Indian Muslims from across the country and the world over: religious organisations, overseas Indians, rich business houses and probably even the mafia filled the gap left by the abdication of the state and large segments of secular civil society. This gigantic self-help collective enterprise of extending relief and rebuilding homes was admirable and epic: many unknown heroes emerged in these times.

But the modes and institutions for distributing this colossal assistance were built around conventional notions of charity, which were intrinsically inegalitarian. The survivors were never informed or consulted about the funds raised for them, or the plans made for rebuilding their futures. They were not involved in the administration of the camps, and even less in the construction and management of relief colonies. In virtually, every relief colony, run by a range of mostly diverse religious organisations, residents report that demands were made for them to pay large sums of money – from Rs 10,000 to Rs 25,000 – to secure allocation of the homes. They paid this with great difficulty, collecting money from relatives and private moneylenders – and I am sure that the donors were never informed about these demands – but in no colony have they received papers of title to these homes. They live even eight years later in constant fear of eviction. The managers of many of these colonies have emerged as local tinpot dictators, who can eject dissenters from their homes at will; and single women often complain of sexual harassment.

Donors within and outside India are increasingly unwilling to contribute to the survivors' struggles for justice, or to rebuild their homes and livelihoods or educate their children. It is remarkable that although they themselves continue to suffer as

“vicarious victims” of the carnage, conventional class suspicions have overtaken their view of the impoverished survivors, who are seen to be parasitical and unreasonably dependent on further external support.

Even within Gujarat, there is an almost unbreached communal divide between lawyers of different religious identities, with only rare Hindu lawyers willing to pursue criminal charges against accused people of their own religious faith. But leading Muslim lawyers are also unwilling to fight the cases of Muslim survivors, unless they are paid extraordinarily high fees. People gossip that the greatest beneficiaries of the fight for justice have been local lawyers, whose fortunes have risen from two-wheeled scooters to luxury cars. To make matters worse, even with these high fees, many of these Muslim lawyers are negotiating behind the backs of their clients “compromises” with the Hindu accused, in which they agree to prevent the witnesses from recording truthful statements, in return for money which is shared unequally between the lawyer, sometimes the judge, and the witnesses. Former relief camp managers have made their own compromises with authorities: they tell me that since they have businesses to run, and properties to preserve, they cannot afford to antagonise local politicians and officials.

Therefore, although there is initially an overlap of the concerns of direct victims of conflict with those of the vicarious victims (the larger community), but they are also autonomous and, in some cases, in potential conflict (such as around other fault lines such as of class and gender). It is remarkable that although both sets of victims continue to suffer, their interests seem to diverge so much over time, that today a lot of the proximate anger of the indigent survivors is against privileged members of their own community, rather than only against their attackers or the partisan state. I found this to be the case also with the impoverished survivors of the 1984 carnage.

The more privileged direct victims also tend to be far more willing to surrender to second-class engagement with the majority community. A large number of Bohra shopkeepers have returned to their villages – and some are even supporting the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in elections – and wealthy owners of truck companies and garages in cities have resumed their livelihoods, accepting the condition that they will not give evidence to the police or courts against any of their attackers. But within, the betrayal does rankle even those who tactically choose silence. The owner of a transport company with nearly a hundred trucks in Ahmedabad confided to me that the Hindu partner of his company had himself organised the loot and arson of his properties. But months after the carnage, he resumed business with the same partner, as though nothing had happened. But he met us one late night clandestinely supporting another witness, who was willing to give evidence against his partner. He was unwilling to openly proceed against him, but was happy if someone else facilitated his punishment.

The direct survivors grapple mainly with ways to rebuild their lives, with security and justice, and to renegotiate their spaces, livelihoods and social and economic relations with individuals and communities who attacked and betrayed them. Once again, the continued immediacy of grief – for the direct survivor, pain

persists with an urgency as though the conflict was recent – is, I believe, greatly related to the sense of personal betrayal by neighbours and friends. Mushtaque Ali, a dedicated young lawyer who was raised and studied in Aligarh, volunteered to work with us in Nyayagrah, a campaign for community-based mass legal action against those who committed these crimes. He lived for three years in a relief colony in Anand, in daily close proximity with the survivors. He perceptively observed:

In Aligarh, communal riots have been an intrinsic part of our lives. But in Aligarh, the Hindu and Muslim communities live in separate parts of the city, with very few social and cultural bonds. Whenever violence breaks out, you are attacked by a stranger. You, therefore, deal with the practical consequences of this loss, but are able to emotionally move on. By contrast, in rural Gujarat, the attack was by people one knew intimately, trusted, and had shared life with for an entire lifetime.

When this intimate friend turns enemy overnight, it causes a wound in the soul which they find hard to heal. It only rankles and festers.

In Chaklasi village in Kheda, an elderly widow refused to be cowed down by threats or lured by inducements: she insisted on testifying against her neighbours who had looted and burnt her house. After her testimony was concluded in the court, she was asked by the judge to identify the main accused. She pointed to a young man who sat with his head bowed in a bench in the crowded court-room. “Beta, Lalla, uth”, she said, her voice, breaking. She addressed the young man as her son, by his nickname Lalla, and asked him to rise. She said I know his real name, but for me he is still Lalla, like a son.

He was my neighbour’s son. We were dear friends, and the boy virtually grew up in my house. He was an inseparable friend of my own son. He would eat in my house, and play all day. I have seen him grow from boy to man. I have brought him up like my own son; I never saw any difference between him and my son. And yet he led the mob to loot and burn down my house.

My colleague Altaf, who was present in the court at that time, said a hush descended in the court as she spoke. Even the judge was visibly moved.

More than their economic decline, it is the permanent loss of social bonds with their Hindu neighbours that most grieves the Muslims in villages ravaged by the violence. Amina bahen, a middle aged widow weeps often in the loneliness and austerity of her one room tenement in a relief colony in Himmat Nagar. She was married into her village Khumapur when she was 16 years old.

Where have those good times gone? It was a village where, when my son fell from a tree and hurt himself, Jayanthibhai Patel drove his scooter at a crazy pace eight kilometres distant, to fetch an auto-rickshaw to take him to the hospital. It is the same village whose residents attacked my house, and we barely escaped with our lives. I only have my son. If we return and he is killed, then I will have no one. So I have become a stranger to my home.

We have found no one who was affected by the carnage, who has been able to rebuild livelihoods to levels before the carnage. This is partly the result of meagre state support, but more so because of the organised economic and social boycott that persists even seven years later against the Muslim community. We have not been able to locate any comparable campaign in the

aftermath of any riot in India, or any other contemporary account of ethnic conflicts, in which a boycott of this scale is organised and sustained for so many years against the members of a targeted community. In this sense, Gujarat is witnessing an ongoing genocidal project. The first phase saw blood flow on the streets; the years that have followed have been the bloodless phase of the genocide, in which the spirit, social standing and economic strength of a community have been systematically destroyed.

Earlier no one needed to invite people on festivals in the village: it was understood that all festivals would be celebrated together. In the past, Muslims contributed willingly for the installation of the beloved Hindu deity Ganesh; today they grieve that no one comes to them to ask for *chanda* or donations. It was routine for Hindus and Muslims to attend weddings at each other’s households, and give the couple gifts of Rs 51 or Rs 101; today no one invites them, and if they do, the invitation is so cursory as to communicate that they will not be missed if they do not come. In Vijaynagar, in desperation, Muslims printed two wedding cards, one with Muslim symbols for Muslim guests, and the other with a picture of Ganesh for the Hindus guests. Even this did not succeed in bringing in the Hindu elders, unlike in the past.

There is a continuous sense of loss in big things, and small. Usman recalls an evening in Pahada village in Sabarkantha, when the elderly matriarch gave Rs 5 to a fakir who was begging at their threshold. She then began to weep inconsolably. They worried that they had stirred some painful memories. She explained: “Earlier Allah had given us so much, that I would never send away a fakir for less than 50 or 100 rupees. Today I could only place five rupees in his outstretched hand”.

The loss can be even more intangible, and profound. A group of college interns from Delhi came to spend a month in summer, and we housed them with survivors who welcomed them, despite their empty homes. One day, the women were sitting together and applying make-up. One elderly woman said she looked like the legendary beauty, film actress Madhubala, when she was young. Maybe the student’s face fleetingly reflected her disbelief. “I had photographs which would have shown you how beautiful I was. But these too are burnt down with our house”, she sighed. She mourned the loss of evidence of her beauty and youth. All interns and our community workers remark at how every conversation with survivors always must go back to: “It was not always like this. Before 2002...”

5 Renegotiating Identity

As we observed, a communal carnage is an attack less on specific persons who are directly hit as on people who share a targeted identity: in this case, a religious identity. Therefore, symbols of this identity are attacked with special viciousness, such as places and books of worship, or cemeteries and cremation grounds. In 2002, bodies were pulled out of recent graves and set aflame. Women’s bodies were seen as the “property” of the community, and therefore, violated. In both homes and places of worship that were desecrated, stones with saffron paste were planted, or statues of Hanuman installed which rioters called *Hullad Hanuman* (or Hanuman of the riots), as symbols of Hindu occupation. In many of these locations, these installed symbols remain embedded years

later, and some survivors are fighting legal cases to vacate these spurious “temples” from their properties.

It is well-understood that in the event of a threat, there are two rational responses: to flee or to fight. In a situation of attacks on one’s religious identity, people can respond in two binary opposed ways. One is to try to hide one’s identity, and the other is to assert it more aggressively. I find the individuals and communities who are impacted by threats to their identity tend to respond in complex ways, with elements of both “safe” assimilation into the mainstream identity, and proud, conscious, often aggressive identity assertions.

In the event of the vicarious victims, one can safely generalise that the tendency in times of assault on religious identities is to assert these more belligerently. This applies more to people who live in situations of relative privilege and safety. The 1984 violence led many middle class Sikh families to return to symbols of Sikh orthodoxy, such as open uncut beards, turbans, and carrying of ritually sanctioned daggers or kirpans. The Golden Temple authorities defiantly installed within the temple premises pictures of not only slain Sikh militant Bhindrawale, but even the assassins of Indira Gandhi among the revered martyrs of the Sikh faith. (This remains unchanged today, and I find this celebration of terrorist violence in this most sacred place of worship unchallenged by Sikh masses deeply worrying). There was a marked decline in syncretic and shared religious and cultural traditions between Punjabi Sikhs and Hindus, and an assertion of separateness by members of both communities, whereas many before this were content to be seen as a reformist sect of Hinduism with martial traditions. Women began to abandon markers associated with Hinduism, such as vermilion or sindoor on the forehead or parting of the hair. There was more investment in constructing grand gurudwaras; however ironically (not connected perhaps with the conflict), a growing separation from dalit and subaltern wings of the faith, who have built their separate places of worship, in violation of the egalitarian tenets of the faith. But there are also some who also quietly encouraged or permitted sons to abandon the turban and beard, for safer outward appearances that assimilate with the majority.

This has been the journey also of relatively privileged sections of direct victims. But the journey of the subaltern sects of Sikhism, such as the Labanas and the Sikligars, is distinct. The Labanas have their origins in Sindh in Pakistan, from where they fled in waves after Partition. They worship in gurdwaras, but also the Sindhi deity Jhulelal, who is revered by Sindhi Hindus as well. Many of their religious practices would be considered heretical by orthodox upper caste Sikhs. For instance, the Labana gurudwara in Tilak Vihar contains also a *mazaar* or tomb to one of the Labana leaders, which other Sikhs regard to be a sacrilege. The Sikligars are also from very different stock from the Punjabi Sikh: they are part of the nomadic communities of central India which colonial governments were deeply suspicious of, and dubbed as “criminal tribes”. Sikligars were probably itinerant blacksmiths, but many continue to be in the dark shadows of the law, as some trade in illicit weapons.

Both these communities settled in slums in Delhi, which were demolished in the campaign led by Sanjay Gandhi during the

Emergency. They were resettled with other dalit and impoverished Hindu communities, in colonies like Trilok Puri and Kalyan Puri. These colonies were to face the worst wrath of the mobs which massacred Sikhs in 1984, which is a particularly tragic irony, because the majority of the both Labana and Sikligar Sikhs were staunch supporters of the slain Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, because they believed that she was the only leader who had a heart for the poor.

There has been little aggressive assertion of identity politics among the survivors, both before and after the carnage. The support for the creation of a separate independent Sikh state called Khalistan can be seen as one proxy to suggest aggressive identity assertion. Our research found that irrespective of their class background, the survivors were unanimous in their strong opposition to the idea of Khalistan. Navjot Singh reports that

the survivors said they never seriously considered Khalistani ideologies either before or after 1984. Khushwinder Kaur (a middle class survivor from Tilak Nagar) said (that) even after 1984 ... there was “no question of having a Khalistan. Not that such a Khalistan is going to be perfect anyways. Look at the Akalis. They are just as bad as the Congress, BJP or anyone else...even for the Sikhs.”

The opposition to the idea was even more forthright among working class Sikhs of Tilak Vihar. For instance, Man Singh declared that “Khalistan is another name for terrorism. It is a political tactic seeking to mislead people. It did not as much seek to form a separate homeland for Sikhs as it did to get them killed. The idea was flawed and wrong.”

Mathri Kaur is another such survivor who felt that Khalistan “will make no difference. As it is, the Sikh leaders no longer come to our assistance. It (Khalistan) will merely enable the well-off Sikhs to live off us poor Sikhs the way well-off others (implying non-Sikhs) do now.” Yet others, like Lachmi Kaur, a widow from 1984, totally abhor the idea. She asked, “How can there be a Khalistan? It makes me sad to think of such things that would only cause greater anguish. I believe people should have the right to live peacefully the way they want, where they want (referring to Hindus in Punjab and Sikhs in Delhi).”

I cannot resist quoting the irreverent Khushwant Singh here, who famously declared that the only Khali-stan (playing on the word Khalistan, it can also mean, with a hyphen, “empty space”) is in the heads of the supporters of Khalistan! If the idea of a separate Khalistan survives in the popular Sikh imagination, it is only in the privileged overseas havens of non-resident Sikhs, but by no means even there is it universal. In Vancouver, I was bemused to observe an interesting bitter confrontation between two sets of Sikh youth, one who dreamed of an independent Khalistan, and another who were far to the left of the political spectrum, opposing any religion-based identities, but instead advocated class warfare.

Our research, however, indicates a marked process among the subaltern segments of the direct victim communities of what Navjot Singh describes as “Punjabisation”, but this is fuelled by concerns for livelihood advancement and accessing services from more orthodox religious organisations, than spurred by hurt or anger of the conflict. Navjot reports:

While most still use Labani [a dialect of Sindhi] for communicating within the community and Hindi for communicating with outsiders,

nearly everyone also speaks Punjabi with varying fluency. Punjabi is seen as key for enhancing one's economic [and spiritual] prospects since it is a prerequisite to make [from a Labana perspective] a lucrative career as a priest, preacher or musician in a Gurudwara. The fact that the economy of Tilak Vihar is closely enmeshed with that of prosperous Punjabi Sikh-dominated neighbourhoods like Tilak Nagar [where, for example, many women from Tilak Vihar work as maids] also necessitates knowledge of Punjabi language to carry on these day to day economic and social interactions.

Many of the Sikh organisations which work with the Sikligars also have orthodox religious beliefs of their faith, and they propagate these among the survivors and their dependents to whom they provide high quality educational and health services. Navjot adds: "Finally, politics too plays a role in this felt need for Punjabiisation as Tilak Vihar survivors depend on Punjabi-speaking (and also Punjabi-promoting) Delhi Akali Dal and Gurudwara leaderships to effectively lobby for compensation and criminal justice for the victims of 1984 carnage."

The experience of the direct and vicarious victims of the Gujarat carnage mirror many of these trends, except that in a continued climate of fear which prevails just below the surface in Gujarat, but not in Delhi, there is a much greater effort to hide identities by Muslims in cities of Gujarat. Markers of identity like beards, skull-caps and veils (if they are used, which is not common) remain relatively unchanged among those who live in villages, possibly partly because in the more intimate social economy of a village, it is impossible to hide your identity in the way that is possible in the anonymity of cities. However, all persons who have returned to their villages after the carnage report that they have had to suppress identity expressions and celebrations. Many have "voluntarily" disconnected the loudspeakers from mosques which relay the azan or the traditional call for prayer five times a day. They abstain from celebration of festivals like Bakrid which involve the ritual sacrifice of goats, and if they wish to celebrate, they do so with relatives in Muslim ghettos in cities.

In cities, there are intensified identity expressions, but only within the safety of Muslim ghettos. But direct poorer victims often struggle to negotiate "safer" adherence to identities in the wider society, such as many Sikh children cutting their hair post 1984. In 2002, in cities, especially in the practice of livelihoods, there is a conscious masking of identities. Many of the eateries in the highways are owned by Muslims, but it would be hard except for a trained observer to detect this. The eateries are pure vegetarian, and have names like Ashish, Tulsi and Bhagyodaya: Sanskritised names usually preferred by Hindus businesses. It is conventional for owners of eateries to decorate their walls with religious symbols and pictures, to bless their business, but none of these are visible in these eateries. The same is true of autorickshaws, drivers of which have a partiality all over India to pictures of gods to keep them safe in their risky vocation, alongside pictures of film actresses presumably to entertain them in their long hours of wait. But in cities like Ahmedabad, I can detect that an autorickshaw is owned by a Muslim only by the fact that it carries no religious symbols.

But in all of this, there are striking exceptions. We encountered a Sikh truck driver who lived in with a Muslim woman for many years. Their home, with those of their neighbours, were

targeted and destroyed in the carnage of 2002. This, so infuriated him, that he converted to Islam and aggressively wears his newly assumed Muslim identity.

I have observed the least religious orthodoxy among working class and poorly educated Muslims in Gujarat, compared both to the vicariously affected non-resident community of Indian Muslims, and the smaller numbers who have improved their economic status within India. Overseas, there is a growing resort among Muslims of Indian origin to the headscarf and beard as assertive markers of identity. But as with the subaltern Sikh sects in Delhi, many of the working class Muslims in Gujarat follow in their villages, religious practices that reflect Hindu influences, like lighting lamps and even variations of *aartis*. Most worship devoutly at dargahs. Like other Gujaratis, they love to dance the *garba*. They are partial to television soaps and loud film music. Few wear the veil. Contrary to stereotypes, women are assertive even among men, and engage in banter and teasing between genders. They are angered that a significant part of the funds allocated for their colony development by their donors is spent by religious organisations not in building better homes or public services in the colonies, but on grand mosques. There is also scepticism against religious orthodoxy. The description of the fundamentalist Tableeqi Jamaat – which calls for return to strict Islamic orthodoxy, including the veil and abjuring of music – by youthful residents of the one of the colonies, is to dub them *Allah Miyan ke Police* (the police force of god). This attracts much merry laughter and approval.

But now, in relief colonies – which thousands of the poorest and most dispossessed of the survivors have been forced to convert into their permanent homes – they are under intense pressure by the religious organisations which established these organisations to follow orthodox religious practices; to wear the burqa or at least the headscarf or *hijaab*; and to abjure from unorthodox forms of worship and prayers at dargahs; and to stay away from television, the radio and "non-Islamic" celebrations like the *garba* dance. The working class residents do not accept these restrictions without a fight, but worry that they may be ejected if they dissent too raucously. The worst hit are single women, who are taunted by colony managers and even male neighbours if they work outside their homes, claiming that they have lapsed into clandestine sex work. Some are offered remarriage to much older men, often with children who are as old as them. Many resist, but some tire of the daily struggle and derision and accept these loveless matches.

In these ways, different identity aspirations and responses prevail between vicarious and direct victims, and between working class and more wealthy survivors. These fault lines lead to potential dispute within religious communities after conflict: such as against single women; resentment that places of worship are invested in more than public services; non-transparent demands for money for house allocations; the residents still have no house tile deeds; and they resent restrictions on tv cable and radios.

The most worrying reassertions of identity are not of orthodoxy, but when they are of hatred of the "other" identity. In many villages, particularly which have succeeded in driving out all the erstwhile Muslim residents, there are boards at the entrance

announcing that the village is a Hindu village in a Hindu rashtra (country). In some of these, there is a local “ritualisation” of hate: statues have been erected of “martyrs” in Moghri; these are men who died when a house which set on fire after the Muslim residents had fled, and the men were inside still looting, unknown to the arsonists. Each marriage procession in the village goes and bows before these statues. In another village, women daily collect cowdung for their fuel needs but reserve a part to throw into the Muslim daily desecration of cremation grounds.

In cities, children are growing up in ghettos, in which they rarely encounter children of the other community. For those who try to cross the new “borders”, there are often sad repercussions. We heard the story of a Muslim schoolgirl in an upper-middle class who invited her friends home for her birthday party. When they saw the address, in Juhapara, the biggest Muslim ghetto in Ahmedabad, all their parents refused to send their children to the party. Children are dropping out of school in large numbers after 2002, to assist their families in times of economic hardship, and their only schooling is in *maqtabs* or informal religious schools in mosques. Children, who still are able to study in mixed schools fortunately, do not report widespread discrimination from teachers; but say that students are wary of them as they eat meat and eggs. A boy was told by a teacher, “Why do you bother to study, if you are going to end up as a mechanic in a garage?”

But as an entire generation of Muslim and Hindu children are raised with little or no contact with children of the other community, identity assertions, prejudices and even hatred are likely to deepen and coagulate with time. This outcome of seemingly irreversible ghettoisation is the greatest victory of those who designed the communal project.

The victimhood of the vicariously affected person is mediated by identity, so much so that there is little or no active solidarity between the survivors of the two carnages, although they both suffered in so many similar ways. There are few examples of expressions of solidarity by organisations of Muslim people for the Sikh people affected by the violence in 1984, although objectively none are better-placed to understand their predicament and empathise with their suffering, than the Muslims who had suffered in a number of pogroms before and since.

Similarly, Ramesh Singh, priest at the Labana gurudwara in Tilak Vihar, said he admires Narendra Modi more than any other leader in India, and claimed that many in Tilak Vihar shared his view. He said:

Modiji spoke inconvenient truths about what happened in 1984 and the hypocrisy of Congress Party and national media (this hypocrisy, in his view, was the national media and Congress Party's loud protests against state sponsored anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat while having kept quiet or denied the veracity of Congress-sponsored anti-Sikh violence in Delhi in 1984). His questioning of the double standards about what happened in 1984 gives us some hope and heartens us. This gesture, token or otherwise, means more to us than the plight of Muslims.

I have encountered similar views among wide sections of the Sikh community in Delhi, who are anguished at the massacre of

their “own” but are indifferent, even appreciative, when it happens to “others”.

But fortunately, many across social classes who directly suffered in 1984, differ. In Tilak Vihar, Man Singh said that the violence in Gujarat

was wrong and made me uncomfortable since it brought back memories of 1984. The Muslims there faced the brunt of the violence for no fault of theirs. This time the players were different but again the politicians were responsible. While the Congress staged the 1984 carnages, this time it was the BJP.

In Tilak Vihar, Pranet Kaur said even though she had voted BJP, she realised after 2002 that “all parties have blood on their hands”. Similarly, Khushwinder Kaur felt the violence in Gujarat against Muslims during Narendra Modi's regime “was also very wrong and made me sad. Why should people be killed for no fault of theirs? Whether Muslim or Sikh or anyone else, a single person's killing destroys the lives of many others. Only those who have lost their loved ones to such senseless violence know how it feels.”

NOTES

- 1 These include Usman Sheikh, Ishaq Arab, Sheikh Khaleda, Umarbhai, Jayanthibhai, Johanna Barnabas Lokhande, Mushtaque Ali, Chiragbhai, Manibhai, Jeetendra Sadhu, Nazir Khan, Sharief, Jaswantbhai, Afroz, Altaf, Kishorebhai, Khaledabahan, Bhanubhai and others. Many of their findings were sensitively recorded and personally observed by secondary researchers Priya Raghav and Andrea Valverde.
- 2 See, <http://www.allaboutsikhs.com/delhi-riots/teach-the-sikhs-a-lesson.html>.

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