

# The Politics of Communal Polarisation: A Precursor to the Gujarat Carnage

○ D. L. Sheth

**T**here has been a widespread feeling of shock and disbelief outside Gujarat that the cruel and barbaric acts of violence that began on the morning of February 27 at Godhra and have since engulfed a large part of the state could have taken place in ‘Gandhi’s Gujarat’. Influential Gujaratis had consistently, over many years, projected a certain positive image of their society to the outside world of a land inhabited by a peaceful, conflict-avoiding and pragmatic people who are vegetarian and teetotallers to the hilt. This image was further reinforced by the fact that the land produced Mahatma Gandhi. Of course, this stereotypical image, like most others, was never an accurate description of the complex reality of Gujarati society—nor was such factual corroboration ever attempted.

## **Gandhi’s or Jinnah’s Gujarat?**

However, when the collective acts of a people defy the projected image, one is compelled to turn to previously neglected facts. Let us look illustratively at some facts pertaining to Gandhi’s Gujarat which have so far failed to register against its image. First, very few people remember that Gujarat has produced not just the Mahatma but also the founder of Pakistan, M.A. Jinnah. Second, contrary to general belief, a majority of the population in Gandhi’s Gujarat are meat-eaters. The 15 per cent

**Very few people remember that Gujarat has produced not just the Mahatma but also the founder of Pakistan, M.A. Jinnah.**

population of Tribals, 8 percent Dalits, 10 percent Muslims, at least about 20 percent belonging to smaller, lower OBC communities like the Chunvalia Kolis, Chharas, Thakaradas, Waghari etcetra., have traditionally been non-vegetarians. Add to it the blue-blooded Rajputs and the Christians, and we find that a majority in Gandhi’s Gujarat have been meat-eaters. Third, the production and smuggling of illicit-liquor in prohibitionist Gujarat is worth thousands of crores of rupees with a huge number of people employed in the bootlegging industry. If this is quantified, the result will be an impressively high per-capita rate of liquor consumption in Gujarat. And this leaves out of account the non-monetised economy of many of the tribal and lower OBC communities

**Hardly anyone has paid attention to the kind of ‘Gandhian’ violence perpetrated on the Tribals for maintaining their tradition of social drinking.**

who have a tradition of both producing and consuming liquor and toddy.

Hardly anyone has paid attention to the kind of ‘Gandhian’ violence perpetrated on the Tribals for maintaining their tradition of social drinking. When this state asserted its character as “Gandhi’s Gujarat” under Morarji Desai’s leadership by imposing total prohibition, vast numbers of Tribals were thereby transformed into ‘criminals’ overnight when they refused to relinquish toddy and liquor drinking. In the 1960’s, lakhs of toddy palm trees in the countryside were cut down. Every day hordes of Tribals were rounded up in the villages for prohibition offences and brought to the city courts for trial. Many of them ‘came to town’ for the first time in their lives. They did not know why they were there in the first place, nor what to do and where to go. With fear in their eyes, they looked like thirsty and hungry animals trapped in a cage, being taken to a zoo. Of course today they have ‘come of age’ and we see some of them keeping pace with their urban compatriots in carrying out loot and arson operations. Fourth, the declining male female ratio (934 females per 1000 males in 1991 and 920 per 1000 males in 2001) suggest, among other things, a relatively high incidence of maternal mortality, female suicide and female infanticide in



Gujarat. Fifth, a disturbingly high number of atrocities perpetrated against Harijans should discourage any Gandhian from associating Gandhi's name with societal relations in Gujarat.

So much for 'Gandhi's Gujarat.'

### Upper Caste Hegemony

Yet, the fact remains that from the days of the Independence movement till about the late 1960's, Gujarat could, relatively speaking, legitimately project itself as 'Gandhi's Gujarat' in certain respects. The political culture of protests and of governance that developed during this period, by and large affirmed the values of secular nationalism. The numerous instances of nationalist agitation, even though not lacking in aggression and innovation, did not on the whole, transgress some basic democratic codes of political mobilisation. The Mahagujarat Movement (the movement for Gujarat as a separate linguistic state) and later even the Navanirman Movement (a student movement against corruption) could also arguably claim such distinction as compared to the kind of collective expressions of social unrest and political agitation that took place in the 1980's and 1990's. On the whole, the institutions of governance and movements of protest during this period operated within democratic

norms rather than those later adopted by advocates of raw, majoritarian power.

### Jain-Vaishnav Ethos

However, it was also during this period that a political and cultural hegemony of the upper caste-middle class struck roots in Gujarat. In this process the Gandhian strain in Gujarati politics became subordinate to the old, still enduring upper-caste elite culture generally described in literature as the Mahajan culture. This culture is marked by a strong Jain-Vaishnav ethos. The resulting synthesis that emerged after Gujarat was carved out as a separate state in 1960 could best be described as the Mahajani-Gandhian culture. In this culture some elements of Gandhian thought and practice— such as non-violence, simplicity and building autonomous organisations for social service and constructive work — blended well with the Jain-Vaishnava ethos of the Mahajan culture as expressed in its principle of *Jeevadaya* (non-killing),

teetotalism, thrift, prudence and a well-entrenched tradition of devising mechanisms of conflict resolution.

The Mahajani-Gandhian culture was thus a culture of pragmatism and reconciliation. Individuals and groups, while not defining their politics in terms antagonistic to the State, did not, at the same time, allow the State to occupy any major space in their personal or social life. The individual ideal was to lead the life of a *sadgrahastha*, (a good-householder)—distinct from that of a common citizen—avoiding conflicts, winning goodwill, and cultivating a benign, patronising attitude towards the poor and deprived in the society. While it indeed reinforced the upper-caste hegemony in Gujarat politics and society, the Mahajani-Gandhian culture did not allow for such political practices that threaten social harmony, promote communal polarisation or allow for violence on people under their patronage. The collective ideal was 'progress' (*pragati*). In practice, 'progress' meant accumulating wealth at the individual level and, at the social level, establishing Trusts, Charities and Co-operatives and building new non-state organisations and institutions relevant to the emerging urban industrial-society of Gujarat. This was the image the Gujarati elite upheld and

**Some elements of Gandhian thought and practice... blended well with the Jain-Vaishnava ethos of the Mahajan culture.**

also projected for the whole of Gujarat. In retrospect, this image reflected a life-style and world-view marked by the dominant Jain-Vaishnav culture of Gujarat which had effortlessly incorporated the Gandhian idiom.

### **Erosion of Mahajani Culture**

Though the views of the cultural elite are not the only factor determining social reality, it is also true that the dominant culture does have an important role in the determination of a people's collective image. It also plays a significant role in forging social policy—it invests symbols with its own preferred meanings and exerts itself to try to enforce compliance with its own social and cultural codes on the subjugated others. The Mahajani-Gandhian culture that once dominated Gujarat has undergone radical changes in the course of the last three decades. In order to understand the communal carnage that we witness today, we need not go too far back into history. Rather than search for some deep cultural and historical roots it will be more useful, given the urgency of the situation, to focus on specific social and political factors of contemporary relevance that seem to have caused almost complete erosion of the Mahajani-Gandhian culture and in the process led to dangerous levels of communal polarisation in Gujarat.

Gujarat did not face the intensity of communal conflicts and violence

**Gujarat did not face...  
communal conflicts and  
violence of the kind and  
degree that took place in  
many other parts of the  
country preceding or  
during the Partition.**

of the kind and degree that took place in many other parts of the country preceding or during the Partition. In the 1940's, when there was a high degree of communal tension and conflict in several parts of the country, Gujarat with the exception of Godhra had, by and large, remained unaffected. Even at the time of Partition, the riots that took place in Gujarat were on a smaller scale and these too occurred only in a few cities: Ahmedabad, Veraval in Saurashtra (the site of the Somnath temple) and (in a more virulent form) Godhra. The riots in these few spots can be attributed to the situation prevailing in the rest of the country at that time rather than to specifically identifiable endogenous factors. In brief, what took place was episodic communal violence, but that did not ever appear as based on any sense of a deep-seated divide between Hindus and Muslims. For example, it is not

accidental that communities like the Piranas (part Hindu and part Muslim in their faith and practice) could survive till the recent onslaught by the *Tablagui* (an orthodox Muslim movement) and the *hindutva* movements.

### **Why Communal Polarisation?**

The process of communal polarisation in Gujarat really began with the 1969 riots in Ahmedabad. And since then, riots of one kind or another have been recurring in some sort of a pattern every few years, in one or the other city in Gujarat. From 1969 to this day, close to 7,000 lives have been lost and property worth thousands of crores of rupees has been looted or destroyed in these riots. Most of these riots were communal in nature and they were often engineered by interested parties for short-term political gains. But in the process they created long term consequences in the form of communal polarisation. Even the anti-reservation agitation of 1985 that initially targeted the Dalits ended-up in Hindu-Muslim riots. Communal polarisation in Gujarat is primarily a post-independence phenomenon.

There are several factors that have indirectly contributed to the growth of communal polarisation. Gujarat has undergone rapid urbanisation, in the last 50 years. Many former villages have grown



Photographs: Sahir Raza, Courtesy SAHMAT



into towns, mid-sized towns have grown into large cities and big cities like Ahmedabad, Surat and Vadodara have been fast acquiring the character of a metropolis. But more important than the rate of urbanisation is the *pattern* of urban growth and spread in Gujarat. Every district, including in the tribal belt, has at least a couple of sizeable cities and a number of middle and small towns. Even the villages are much larger than usual. A large part of rural Gujarat could in fact, be described as urban hinterland. Urban-

concentrated and centralised the power of print media in Ahmedabad, but has brought about a much greater uniformity of opinions and attitudes among literate Gujaratis. Both the print and the visual media (the Gujarati channels and the cable network on TV) have created over time a vertically and closely linked system of cultural and political communications which is overly marked by a majoritarian Hindu ethos.

### **Transformation of Hinduism**

All this, among other things, has transformed the local and rural character of Hindu practices into some sort of folk Hinduism, giving it a strong urban imprint of anonymity and marketised entertainment. The conventional rural character of festivals such as the Navratra has radically changed even in villages. The village youth often go to cities to participate in the religious festivals. The household, sectarian and ritualistic

practices of worshipping deities have transformed into public-functions and processions. Quite a few of these activities are now systematically promoted and sponsored by the Hindutva organisations. But on the whole, the anonymous and marketised character of this folk Hinduism has yielded participative spaces to the Tribals and Dalits. The new folk-Hinduism in Gujarat has however been appropriated by political Hinduism.

In the process of urbanisation the character of a Gujarati village has also changed significantly. Most economic activities except farming, and often even social and cultural activities, have shifted away from villages to nearby towns. An average village is increasingly becoming primarily a locale for agriculture, with a population directly related to the land. Many larger settlements often designated as 'villages' are more like towns, both in terms of size and occupational structure, and manifest many other urban characteristics. In an average small village, services like those of a barber, a tailor or a blacksmith are often obtained by making a small trip to a nearby town. Even a priest operates from town and serves several villages by making extensive and hectic trips on motor-cycles to perform wedding and death rites and other rituals.

**It is no longer possible to view the political culture of rural Gujarat as significantly different from that of urban Gujarat.**

rural transactions of all kinds — not just economic, but social, cultural and political — are close and frequent. In brief, it is no longer possible to view the political culture of rural Gujarat as significantly different from that of urban Gujarat. This is reflected in the fact that, in recent years, the two Ahmedabad based Gujarati dailies have been able to establish between them a lion's share of the newspaper market in Gujarat that includes the rural market. This has not only

**Concentrated and centralised power of print media in Ahmedabad, has brought about a much greater uniformity of opinions and attitudes among literate Gujaratis.**

## The KHAM Alliance

In the course of the last 30 years the demographic composition of urban centres in Gujarat has radically changed in two major respects. First, there has been a massive influx of OBCs, Dalits and Tribals into the towns and cities of Gujarat. Second, a sizable number of non-Gujaratis have migrated and settled in all urban centres of Gujarat. The former type of migration — i.e., the rapidly increasing rate of urbanisation of the OBCs, Dalits and Tribals—threw up a new kind of leadership from these communities by providing them with an urban base. It was through this process that the challenge to the Congress party's Mahajani-Gandhian leadership emerged in the form of the KHAM alliance, comprising the Kshatriyas (OBCs), Harijans, Adivasis (Tribals) and Muslims. This massive infusion of the subaltern communities into politics provided a basis to the Gujarati-elite fear of political instability. And the influx of non-Gujaratis generated deep anxiety in the Gujarati middle class and was fraught with chronic urban tensions.

Many of the educated non-Gujaratis who migrated to cities in Gujarat have found significant positions in the corporate sector and higher level Government jobs

where knowledge of the English language is at a premium.

## Resentment of Outsiders

Here, most Gujaratis, even the university educated, feel disadvantaged because even middle-class Gujaratis have not developed competence in the English language. More importantly, members of the business communities from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have made

**[Transformation of ] the local and rural character of Hindu practices into some sort of folk Hinduism, [have given] it a strong urban imprint of anonymity and marketised entertainment.**

significant inroads in the Gujarat business world at all levels. Earlier, as a consequence of the Partition, a very significant proportion of Sindhi traders had already carved a niche for themselves in the Gujarati business world. Although the percentage of non-Gujaratis in Gujarat is not very high (about 10 per cent) their concentration in the cities makes their presence quite visible.

Labourers from Orissa, Maharashtra and Karnataka as well as from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh

and Uttar Pradesh have in significant numbers entered the urban labour market in Gujarat. On the whole, what has been conventionally perceived as the Gujarati character of cities like Ahmedabad, Surat, Vadodara, Rajkot and many smaller cities has been visibly altered. This is also reflected in the changes in ethnic composition of elected representatives. It is not unusual to find non-Gujaratis in the municipal governments, corporations, universities and college student unions, as well as in the trade unions.

Although on the surface a fair degree of peace and harmony seems to exist between Gujaratis and the non-Gujarati linguistic groups, a strong undercurrent of resentment runs among a cross-section of Gujaratis comprising the businessmen, traders and petty-traders, as well as among the professionals and intellectuals. Interestingly, the resentment is not about the cultural differences of language, life-style or even religion.

## Politics of Hindu Ekta

The resentment that has grown in the course of the last two decades comes from a sense of economic insecurity and frustration among the Gujarati youth. They feel they are being systematically edged out or peripheralised from their respective,



Photographs: Sahir Raza, Courtesy SAHMAT



traditionally occupied arenas of economic activity by the non-Gujarati immigrants. Such feelings are expressed more frequently and strongly in the business world against the Marwaris from Rajasthan and the Aggarwals and Guptas from Uttar Pradesh and in the white-collar world against the South Indians who are perceived to enjoy an 'unfair advantage' due to their proficiency in English which the Gujarati youth lack.

Even though the insider-outsider divide in urban Gujarat has been considered a potential source of ethnic conflicts since the inception of Gujarat as a state it has all along remained an undercurrent. It did not give rise to any ethnic-chauvinist sons-of-the-soil kind of a movement in the past. This was primarily because the Mahajani-Gandhian political culture dominant at the time was not conducive to such movements. And it is not likely

to arise in the future because the present politically dominant *hindutva* leadership in Gujarat views any such movement as constituting a threat to its politics of *Hindu Ekta*. *Hindutva* political leaders instead desire to garner the 10 percent non-Gujarati (mainly Hindu) population as a vote-block and co-opt their leadership into the Party's power and patronage structure. Thus the fear that the Maharashtra kind of ethnic conflicts ('insiders' vs. 'outsiders') could take place in Gujarat was warded off by the Parivar's politics of Hindu Ekta that took root in the 1990's. In fact, it has almost removed such a possibility from emerging on the political scene in Gujarat. This has been done by co-opting the non-Gujarati leadership in the BJP and directing the Gujarati ethnic passions towards the religious minorities by portraying them as the villains of the piece. Even earlier, attempts by the upper-caste middle-class Gujaratis to assert their power by resorting to anti-reservations and anti-Dalit agitations of the 1980's and 90's were thwarted by the *hindutva* leadership by supporting the reservations and then co-opting the Dalits and Tribals into the party and its front organisations.

### Effect of Hindu Ekta

The BJP politics of *hindutva* did not just provide an ideological basis to their goal of converting the religious majority into a political majority and thus help forge a massive electoral majority based almost entirely on Hindu votes. It also created a social-cultural infrastructure in support of this politics. The *hindutva* politics of 1990's succeeded in erasing not only the old Mahajani-Gandhian political culture but also its short-lived successor - the subalternist political culture of the KHAM coalition consisting of the OBCs, Dalits, Tribals and the Muslims. This was achieved by bringing large chunks of the OBCs, Tribals and Dalits — albeit the latter in smaller proportions — into the patronage structure of the ruling BJP. It set up special wings of Dalit and tribal youth, even as they were being directly recruited in large numbers,

**The fear of the Maharashtra kind of ethnic conflicts... was warded off by the Parivar's politics of Hindu Ekta that took root in the 1990's.**

**The *hindutva* politics of 1990's succeeded in erasing not only the old Mahajani-Gandhian political culture but also... subalternist political culture of the KHAM coalition.**

along with the OBCs, in the VHP and Bajrang Dal.

### **Widespread Infiltration**

More importantly, this political privileging of the OBCs, Tribals, and Dalits by the BJP gave them a sense of upward social mobility. The BJP succeeded in capturing some Gandhian institutions, trusts and NGOs and also infiltrated into the vast networks in the larger civil society: co-operatives, educational trusts, trade unions, youth and women clubs. In brief, the party's cadres occupied large spaces in the civil society. The vast network of political patronage established and operated for years by the Congress party was now taken over, expanded and effectively used by the BJP. The upper caste-middle class hegemony which had been originally challenged by the KHAM coalition was thus re-established by extending the power and patronage of the ruling BJP and its associate organisations, the VHP and Bajrang Dal, to the KHAM communities while completely excluding the Muslims.

Seen in a larger cultural-historical perspective, the BJP's success in forging political unity among Hindus in Gujarat could be explained by the Congress party's inability to shed its Mahajani-Gandhian character which was theoretically secular-nationalist but in practice upper caste Hinduist. And this was what had prevented the Congress party from any longer accommodating, beyond rhetoric, the political and economic interests represented by the KHAM (especially of Dalits and Muslims among them) that had brought the party significant electoral victories in the decades of the

**This political privileging of the OBCs, Tribals, and Dalits by the BJP gave them a sense of upward social mobility.**

1970's and 80's. Along with extending its power and patronage as a ruling party, the BJP Government allowed a free hand to the Sangh Parivar to implement its agenda of hinduisation of the Tribals and the Dalits. In sum, in the course of 1990's the Sangh Parivar's politics of communal polarisation succeeded in transmuting the ethnic and caste conflicts into communal conflicts, thus securing the consolidation of Hindu votes in favour of the BJP. This resulted in the BJP winning two successive elections in Gujarat with a massive majority. This is what one means by Gujarat being a laboratory of *hindutva*.

### **Scapegoating Minorities**

Yet, the fact remains that the Sangh Parivar has never found itself fully secure in the political demography of Gujarat. This is because in the Gujarat electoral politics some version of KHAM consolidation against the BJP can never be ruled out. Sensitive to this context, the BJP in Gujarat has lately been experiencing increased fear of the anti-incumbency factor, well deserved for its disastrous performance in government. This fear became more acute after the BJP's miserable performance in the statewide local government election in both urban and rural areas as well as in the assembly and parliamentary bye-elections. Clearly, the BJP was seen to be on its way out in Gujarat. The fear

turned into a nightmare when the BJP got a severe drubbing in the recently held Uttar Pradesh elections. It is in such times that the hard and continuous work put in by the Parivar organisations and cadres in creating and maintaining the politics of communal polarisation comes to the party's aid. "Just make a scapegoat of a religious minority and you will get the Hindus by your side" is clearly their strategy. Godhra came, cynical though it may sound, as a God-sent opportunity.

The Sangh Parivar has so far prided itself on making Gujarat a laboratory for the success of its *hindutva* politics by manufacturing electoral support of a vast majority of Hindus for the BJP through the *hindutva* politics of communal polarisation.

The challenge before all those who cherish the values of secular democracy and Gandhi's vision of the peaceful coexistence of various communities is whether Gujarat can now be made a laboratory for the survival of India's plural and secular democracy! □

### **Apology**

**We regret our oversight in forgetting to credit the photographs of Shankar Sharma and Devina Mehra on page 23 and of the press conference by *Tehelka* on page 38 of Issue No. 128 to Sondeep Shankar.**