

that their status had been considerably boosted since each of them now owned a piece of land and a *pukka* house, instead of living as formerly in unauthorised structures in slums. Many of the riot victims interviewed, who were amongst the original recipients of land, mentioned that they were very grateful to Indira Gandhi and to her party for this favour.

However, many of those who were given plots of land sold them off, because the resettlement colonies are very far away from the city proper, where most poor people have to come daily to earn a living. Many lower middle class families bought plots of land from the original allottees. Thus, today, the social composition of these colonies provides a rich mixture. For instance, in Trilokpuri, one finds North Indians and South Indians, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs all living cheek by jowl.

The occupations range from petty shopkeeping to business to domestic service to low level government employment to rickshaw pulling, scooter driving, peddling and artisanry. In normal times, there seems to be a good amount of intermingling and friendly feeling between neighbours of different communities, even among those who speak different languages. Yet the feelings about high and low status are also pronounced.

Among Trilokpuri Sikhs, too, there are significant variations. A large number of them, especially those most severely affected by the riots, are known as Labana Sikhs. These are not Punjabi Sikhs. They are migrants from Sikligarh in Sind, now part of Pakistan. They speak either Hindi or their own dialect, which is distinctly different from Punjabi. The traditional occupation of the community is weaving string cots and pounding rice. Few of the men still perform these jobs. Most of them have switched over to other occupations. A number of them drive scooters and pull rickshaws. Some work as porters at different railway stations. Others have taken to working as mechanics, carpenters and construction workers. A few have

been to Gulf countries as skilled labourers.

Even though they do not call themselves Mazhabi Sikhs, they are considered low caste by other Sikhs. Makhan Bai of Trilokpuri summed up the distinction aptly. Referring to urban based Sikhs, most of whom are involved in commerce, she said : “Punjabi Sikhs are Seths. We Labana Sikhs are labourers. Traditionally, we are *charpai* makers.”

Differences are visible even amongst the Labana Sikhs in this colony. Those who have entered some of the newer occupations such as scooter driving or mechanical repair work are relatively better off. They have *pukka* houses and their own plots of land. They are an upwardly

Trilokpuri. The Labana Sikh community seems to have very little connection with Punjab politics. Many of them are traditional Congress (I) supporters. That is one reason why they, like most Sikhs in Delhi, were taken totally unawares by the attack.

### Initial Resistance

Far more than 400 people were murdered in Trilokpuri alone. The largest number of deaths has so far been reported from the two blocks of Trilokpuri where the Labana Sikhs were concentrated. This is how Gubar Singh, a resident of block 30, Trilokpuri, describes the events of November 1 : “My house was the first to be burnt in Trilokpuri. I work for a tailor’s



**Systematic selective destruction —Sikh houses & vehicles destroyed and burnt**

mobile community. Many of them own television sets, taperecorders and other such consumer items. However, those who were not able to move into these new occupations are much poorer. Some of them live in huts constructed illegally in open spaces which are meant to be parks.

Labana Sikhs live together in clusters in blocks 30 and 32 of Trilokpuri. There are also some families scattered in other blocks. Labana Sikhs have a separate small *gurdwara* of their own. There is also a big *gurdwara* adjoining the main road in

shop. I bring the material from the shop every morning and stitch the garments at home. On the 31st, when I was on my way back from the shop, I heard rumours that Indira Gandhi had died. But no one stopped me or tried to hurt me. I never imagined that such a thing could happen to me. None of us was really prepared for what happened the next day.

“At about 10 a.m. on November 1, we heard a lot of noise and shouting. We climbed on the roofs of our houses to see what was happening. We saw smoke rising

from Noida colony and then we smelt human flesh burning. In the meantime, we heard people say that the mob, having set fire to the main *gurudwara*, was now coming to burn our Labana Sikh *gurudwara*. So we rushed and got together whatever weapons we had, and tried to save the *gurudwara*. But even when the *gurudwara* was attacked, we thought there would be fighting for a short while, and then the police would come and stop it. We never thought things would go so far. There has been no atmosphere of conflict between Hindus and Sikhs in Trilokpuri.

“Several men from our block went and hid in other lanes nearby. So we were not more than 500 men left to defend the whole block as well as the *gurudwara*. About 50 of us stood on each side of the streets in our block. The attackers came in a mob about 4,000 strong, and began an attack on the *gurudwara*. They were armed with *lathis*. They began throwing bricks and stones at us. We also stoned them. See, my fingers are cut with throwing bricks. Many of us got hurt. Heads were split open. The attackers far outnumbered us. Gradually, we had to give up. They advanced and we began to retreat into our houses. They set fire to the *gurudwara*.

### **Defenders Scattered**

“Then they began to attack our houses. We ran from one house to another, trying to save ourselves. They broke into each house and carried away all our possessions on *thelas*. There were about four policemen watching this looting campaign. They told us to put down our swords and not to worry. They said: ‘Nothing will happen to you.’ Then they went away and left us to be killed.”

Sajan Singh from block 32 adds that the attackers had three guns. The police kept telling the Sikhs to go into their houses and assuring them that peace would be restored. “We believed the police and we went in. That is how they got us killed.” He accuses the SHO of the area, one Tyagi, of having actively encouraged the attackers. Many others of the area also

testify that they heard Tyagi tell the attackers: “You have three days to kill them. Do your job well. Do not leave a single man alive, otherwise I will have to suffer.”

Once the attempt at group defence was broken down, they were in a much more vulnerable position. Each man ran desperately to find for himself a hiding place from the mob. Gulzar Singh continued his narrative: “By the evening of the 1st, some peace was restored. The attackers left. They threatened that they would return the next day and would take away the women. Several men died on the 1st. About half a dozen died in my presence. The attackers hit them with *lathis* and *khurpis*. They also managed to snatch some of our *kirpans* and stabbed some of us with them. When they were looting and burning my house, they laid hands on me. They burnt part of my hair and cut part of it before I managed to break free.

### **Seeking Hiding Places**

“I saved myself by hiding in my brother’s house which is in a Hindu street. For one day and two nights, my brother and I hid under a double bed. On the 2nd, a group of men came and began to search each house for Sardars. My wife says three men were caught and killed in the neighbouring house. The attackers turned everyone out of the house and searched it. We were hiding behind boxes and bags under the bed. They kicked the boxes and thought there was no one there. Another minute and we would have been finished.

“On the 3rd, the military came and my wife told them to rescue us. That is how we reached the relief camp. One of my brothers was found by the attackers and killed on the 2nd. They threw him down from the roof of his house and broke his spine. Then they burnt him alive. Many women were molested and abducted. I saw a jeepload of women being carried away to village Chilla in the presence of their families.”

Most others who survived had been through similar experiences. The attackers would kill every Sikh male in sight, would leave for a while, but would return again

to search Sikh houses and neighbours’ houses to finish off those men who were still in hiding.

Sajan Singh, who works as a porter at Nizamuddin railway station, and lives in block 32, Trilokpuri, was also a victim of the clashes. He saved himself by hiding in his house, in a small aperture where cowdung cakes used to be stored for fuel. The attackers came in repeated waves into his house and looted everything they could find. He says he had Rs 12,000 in cash, a television set, a radio, a taperecorder, utensils, eight quilts, blankets and other household goods, many of which were being stored up as dowries for his four daughters. At night, the attackers came with torches to search for men who were still hiding. Sajan got his children to bring him a pair of scissors and a stick. He cut off his long hair and beard while he was hiding under the cowdung cakes. Then, he says : “When the next wave came, I picked up a stick and mingled with the mob. All night, I shouted anti Sikh slogans like ‘Kill the Sardars.’ That is how I saved myself. At 6 a.m., I somehow managed to slip away and came to Nizamuddin railway station. There, the other porters gave me shelter and consoled me. I did not know what had befallen my family. On the 6th, I came to Farash Bazar relief camp and found them there. My sister has been raped. The other women and children are safe.”

Many of these one sided battles continued for hours on end. The woman neighbour of a victimised family in Shakurpur described the attack: “The mob came here on 31st night, and the fighting continued till the 2nd. The terror began on the 31st. The attackers began by stopping vehicles to check if there were Sikhs in them. Electricity failed in this area, in the houses as well as on the streets. The extreme darkness at night heightened the terror. The attacks on houses and *gurudwaras* started around 9.30 a.m. on the 1st. They came and started stoning the house of our neighbour, Santokh Singh. The family stayed quiet inside the

house. The crowd wanted to enter the house but was hesitant, afraid of possible resistance. People are generally afraid of Sikhs, you know. Finally, one of the men tried to break into the house. The men of the family hit him with a sword and his hand got slightly cut. This frightened the crowd and they retreated for a while. Then they slowly collected more men and returned. Now they were about a 1,000 men. They dragged some furniture and wood that was lying in Santokh Singh's courtyard, piled it up around the house, and set the house on fire. Then, the four men of the family came out with swords in their hands. The attackers immediately ran away. They did not want to take any risk. They were armed only with *lathis* and kerosene. But they soon advanced again and started stoning the house from all sides. The house was now burning. The four men of the family ran for their lives. One went to the house of a neighbour who cut his hair, gave him shelter and later smuggled him out of the colony. The youngest son was pounced upon on the road, hit with *lathis* and burnt to death. Another son is missing. Most probably, he was murdered by the same group. We do not know what happened to him. After some time the police came and took away the old father and the women to a camp. They have not yet arrested anyone."

So murderous were the attacks throughout the city that most of the men who fell into the hands of the mob did not survive. The number of injured men was very small in comparison to the numbers killed. Many others were less fortunate. One old man, Gurcharan Singh, also from block 32, lost all the three young men of his family. He had only one son, aged about 17, and two nephews, aged 20 and 22. All four men stayed in hiding for two days and one night. Finally, the door of the house was broken open. The four men had already clipped their beards and cut off their long hair. They came out and pleaded to be spared now that they were like Hindus. But the rioters caught hold of

the three young men, threw them on their own string beds, covered them with mattresses and quilts, then poured kerosene over them and set them on fire in Gurcharan Singh's presence. Gurcharan Singh was beaten up. He and his aged wife, who is a TB patient, are in the relief camp, despairing over the loss of their three sons, and destitute.

### **Deliberate, Unhurried Murder Squads**

Most people in Trilokpuri said though their immediate neighbours were not amongst the attackers, a fair number of rioters were from other parts of the same colony. They identified these men as



**Some of the widowed women at Shivpuri police station camp**

chamars, sansis, Musalmans and gujjars. The last named had been specially brought in for the attack that morning from Chilla, an adjoining village, they said.

Many eyewitnesses confirm that the attackers were not so much a frenzied mob as a set of men who had a task to perform and went about it in an unhurried manner, as if certain that they need not fear intervention by the police or anyone else. When their initial attacks were repulsed, they retired temporarily but returned again and again in waves until they had done exactly what they meant to do -killed the men and boys, raped women, looted property and burnt houses.

This is noteworthy because in ordinary, more spontaneous riots, the number of people injured is usually

observed to be far higher than the number killed. The nature of the attack confirms that there was a deliberate plan to kill as many Sikh men as possible, hence nothing was left to chance. That also explains why in almost all cases, after hitting or stabbing, the victims were doused with kerosene or petrol and burnt, so as to leave no possibility of their surviving.

Between October 31 and November 4, more than 2,500 men were murdered in different parts of Delhi, according to several careful unofficial estimates.

### **What Happened To Women**

There have been very few cases of women being killed except when they got trapped in houses which were set on fire. Almost all the women interviewed described how men and young boys were special targets. They were dragged out of the houses, attacked with stones and rods, and set on fire. In Trilokpuri, many women said that once the attack on individual homes started, the attackers did not allow any women to remain inside their own homes. The attackers wanted to prevent the women from helping the men to hide or providing assistance to those who were in hiding. Throughout this period, many of the women were on the streets.

When women tried to protect the men of their families, they were given a few, blows and forcibly separated from, the men. Even when they clung to men, trying to save them, they were hardly ever attacked the way men were. I have not yet heard of a case of a woman being assaulted and then burnt to death by the mob. However, many women were injured when they tried to intervene and protect the men, or in the course of molestation and rape. A number of women and girls also died when the gangs burnt down their houses while they remained inside.

This is somewhat unusual. For instance, when dalits in villages are burnt and attacked, women are prominent among the victims. When I asked why the killing was so selective, I got a uniform answer from most people interviewed : "They wanted to wipe out the men so that families



would be left without earning members. Also, now they need not fear retaliation even if we have to go back and live in the same colony.” Though this may not provide a complete explanation, the effect has been exactly that which the women describe.

In many cases, families tried to save adolescent and little boys by dressing them up as girls and tying their hair in loose hanging plaits. Sometimes, neighbours pointed out these disguised boys to the attackers. When such boys were caught, they were, pounced upon by the crowd and set on fire. However, a few, especially very young ones, did manage to escape death by assuming this guise.

Sukhpal Singh is one of the few older boys of Trilokpuri who was able to escape by dressing as a girl even though he is 15 years old. His family lives in block 19 but on that fateful morning, his parents sent him to his sister’s house in block 30 because they felt he would be safer in the latter area where Sikhs lived together in a large cluster. Sukhpal’s brother-in-law sought shelter in a Sikh house but he was turned out. The mob caught him on the second floor of a house, threw him down and burnt him alive. Sukhpal Singh’s sister dressed him up in girl’s clothes and braided his long hair like that of a girl. Somehow, he managed to escape attention and discovery.

In most camps, there is a disproportionately large number of women and children. Among boys, most of those who managed to escape were little ones. According to figures collected by Nagrik Ekta Manch volunteer Jaya Jaitley, out of about 539 families housed in Farash Bazar camp, there are 210 widows. Families which have lost all adult male members are the ones most afraid of going back to the colonies where they formerly lived. Most do not want to go back even to claim their plots of land, and would rather be settled elsewhere.

Even though most women were not brutally murdered as were men, they were subjected to other forms of torture, terror

and humiliation. This part of the story also makes familiar reading for anyone who has gone through accounts of riots, communal clashes and wars.

Gurdip Kaur, a 45 year old woman from block 32, Trilokpuri, told a typical story.



**Sukhpal Singh**

Her husband and three sons were brutally murdered in front of her. Her husband used to run a small shop in the locality. Her eldest son, Bhajan Singh, worked in the railway station, the second in a radio repair shop and the third as a scooter driver. She says : “On the morning of November 1, when Indira Mata’s body was brought to Tin Murti, everyone was watching the television. Since 8 a.m., they were showing the homage being paid to her dead body. At about noon, my children said: ‘Mother, please make some food. We are hungry.’ I had not cooked that day and I told them : ‘Son, everyone is mourning. She was our mother, too. She helped us to settle here. So I don’t feel like lighting the fire today.’ Soon after this, the attack started. Three of the men ran out and were set on fire. My youngest son stayed in the house with me. He shaved off his beard and cut his hair. But they came into the house. Those young boys, 14 and 16 year olds, began to drag my son out even though he was

hiding behind me. They tore my clothes and stripped me naked in front of my son. When these young boys began to rape me, my son began to cry and said: ‘Elder brothers, don’t do this. She is like your mother just as she is my mother.’ But they raped me right there, in front of my son, in my own house. They were young boys, maybe eight of them. When one of them raped me, I said : ‘My child, never mind. Do what you like. But remember, I have given birth to children. This child came into the world by this same path.’

“After they had taken my honour, they left. I took my son out with me and made him sit among the women but they came and dragged him away. They took him to the street corner, hit him with *lathis*, sprinkled kerosene over him, and burnt him alive. I tried to save him but they struck me with knives and broke my arm. At that time, I was completely naked, I had managed to get hold of an old sheet which I had wrapped around myself. If I had had even one piece of clothing on my body, I would have gone and thrown myself over my son and tried to save him. I would have done anything to save at least one young man of my family. Not one of the four is left.”

According to her, hardly any woman in her neighbourhood was spared the humiliation she underwent. She said even nine to 10 year old girls were raped. She was an eyewitness to many such rapes. The attackers first emptied the houses of men who were burnt alive. After that, they dragged the women inside the ransacked houses and gang raped them. Not many women would openly admit this fact because, as Gurdip Kaur says : “The unmarried girls will have to stay unmarried all their lives if they admit that they have been dishonoured. No one would marry such a girl.” Therefore, most families do not openly acknowledge the fact.

This led me to ask Gurdip Kaur why she had come forward to narrate her experience. I also asked whether she wanted me to publish her statement. She categorically said she wanted her

statement to be published : “Those women in whose homes there is one or more surviving men cannot make a public statement because they will be dishonouring those men. I have no one left (meaning no male member). My daughter has also been widowed. She has two children. My daughter-in-law, who has three children, has also been widowed. Another daughter-in-law was married only one and a half months ago and has also been widowed. I have nothing left. That is why I want to give my statement.”

In fact, many other families whose adult men had all been killed similarly felt that there was “no one left in the family.” At times, when people said that all their children (*bachey*) had been killed, they were actually referring only to their sons. I had to specifically enquire about surviving daughters, whose lives were not counted in the same way.

Indra Bai narrates : “At about 4 p.m., after they had murdered all the Sikh men they could get hold of in our block, they asked the women to come out of the houses. They said : ‘Now your men are dead. Come out and sit together or else we will kill you too.’

“We women all huddled together and they offered us some water. As we were drinking water, they began dragging off whichever girl they liked. Each girl was taken away by a gang of 10 or 12 boys, many of them in their teens. They would take her to the nearby *masjid*, gang rape her, and send her back after a few hours. Some never returned. Those who returned were in a pitiable condition and without a stitch of clothing. One young girl said 15 men had climbed on her.”

Gurdip Kaur and many other women from Trilokpuri whom I interviewed at Balasaheb *gurudwara* and at Farash Bazar camp also talked about several women who had been abducted by gangsters and taken to Chilla village which is dominated by gujjars, some of whom are alleged to have led the attacking gangs. On November 3, the military brought some of these women

back from Chilla. But many of them were untraceable at the time I interviewed these families. They were very worried that these women had either been murdered or were still being held captive.

Rajjo Bai, another old woman from the same neighbourhood, who had sought shelter in Balasaheb *gurudwara* in Ashram, had a similar tale to tell. Two of her sons were killed in her presence. One who was hiding in a hut is still missing. All three sons were rickshaw pullers. She got separated from her two daughters-in-law who were probably abducted. The daughters-in-law were found much later at the Farash Bazar camp but Rajjo’s 24 year old daughter, who had had to be left behind in the house because she was disabled, could not be traced.

Nanki Bai, also from Trilokpuri was distraught when she asked us to look for her daughter, Koshala Bai, who had been snatched away from her. She says : “All night, the attacks continued. My husband was hiding in a trunk. They dragged him out and cut him to pieces. Another 16 year old boy was killed in front of my eyes. He was carrying a small child in his arms. They



**Babybai**

killed the child too.

“We women were forced to come out of our houses and sit in a group outside. I was trying to hide my daughter. I put a child in her lap and dishevelled her hair so that she would look older. But finally one of our own neighbours pointed her out to these men. They began to drag her away. We tried to save her. I pleaded with them.

My son came in the way and they hit him with a sword. He lost his finger. I could not even look at his hand. I just wrapped it in my veil.

“They took Koshala to the *masjid*. I don’t know what happened to her. At about 4 a.m., when we were driven out of the colony, she called out to me from the roof of the *masjid*. She was screaming to me : ‘Mummy, mujhe le chal, mujhe le chal, Mummy.’ (take me with you). But how could Mummy take her ? They beat her because she called to me. I don’t know where she is now.”

Later, I met Koshala in the Farash Bazar camp and told her that her mother was in Balasaheb *gurudwara*. She confirmed her mother’s account and added that her father’s eyes had been gouged out before he was killed. But she did not say that she had been raped. She merely said : “They slapped me and beat me and struck me with a knife. They tore up my clothes.”

The rapists made no distinction between old and young women. In Nand Nagri, an 80 year old women informed a social worker that she had been raped. In Trilokpuri, several cases were reported of old women who were gang raped in front of their family members. As in all such situations, the major purpose of these rapes seems to have been to inflict humiliation and to destroy the victims’ morale even more completely.

Manchi Devi, about 55, says she was gang raped. Four men of her family, including her son-in-law and her nephew, were murdered. “When I tried to intervene to save the children, several of those men grabbed me. Some tore my clothes, some climbed on top of me. What can I tell you, sister ? Some raped me, some bit me all over my body, and some tore off my clothes. All this happened around 11 p.m. in my own house. I don’t know how many men there were. The whole house was full of them. About a dozen raped me. After that, they caught hold of some young girls outside. My old husband and one nine year old son are the only ones left in my family. Whom shall I depend on in my old