

Men Riot, Women Are Imprisoned

Reports from Biharsharif and Ahmedabad



WHENEVER and wherever riots take place, it is the most oppressed sections of society — those who contribute least or not at all to communal tension — who suffer the most. In communal riots too, it is the prosperous who instigate killings, the downtrodden who are killed. The Biharsharif riots were no exception to this rule.

On April 30, four young men — two Hindus and two Muslims—got into a squabble over drinking *tadi*. The land on which the *tad* trees grow has been disputed for years by the two communities who are also engaged in a lawsuit over it. The Hindus maintain that it is a *Shivsthana* and the Muslims that it is a burial ground. The situation in this area is normally tension-ridden due to religious bigotry and superstition. This controversy heightened the tension.

The following day, the squabble was exaggerated out of all proportion, and made the excuse for a terrible slaughter. Alinagar, Rupaspur, Harnaut—one village after another was engulfed. In the midst of gunfire, bomb explosions and streams of blood, all kinds of atrocities were perpetrated. 18 year old Shehnaz Begum's stomach was trampled upon and crushed. Her unborn baby was farced out of the womb, killing her on the spot. Israt Khatun's six day old daughter was torn from her and smashed to death on the ground. Israt

was raped and then stabbed to death with a spear. A 60 year old woman Bakridan's throat was cut. The rioters inflicted on the women every possible cruelty that a diseased mind could conceive. Purdah — that so-called shield from attack — became the greatest contributory factor to the women's unsafety.

The fact of the matter is that the rioters — Hindus and Muslims— were all men, only men. It was men who manufactured the bombs and gunpowder, men who fought over the *tadi*, men who conducted the massacre, men who spread rumours to fan the flames. After the riots, male police administrators descended on the city, policemen armed to the teeth roamed the streets, the relief workers too were all men, only men. Even the groups which worked for peace and harmony consisted of men only.

Wherever one looked, there were only men to be seen. Men in every active role — good or bad. When I walked through the lanes, distributing pamphlets, the children said to one another: "Look at that man, dressed in woman's clothes." What does this imply? That, even though an equal number of women died in the riots, yet a woman could not be accepted as an active worker for peace. In the massacre of May 1, there was not a single woman among the attackers but of the 15 who died, all, except one, were women and children. In many colonies, I talked to Hindu and

Muslim women, to young men and to children, both individually and in groups. The Hindu women said, firstly, that they scarcely have any time to spare from household work, and secondly, there has never been any public programme in which women could participate together. Whenever, now and again, there have been programmes to integrate the two communities, it is only men who participate. Of course, women do visit each other, whenever they can spare a few minutes. But now, after the riots, they will not be allowed to meet each other any more. Now people of both communities have started thinking that the only way to strengthen their respective religions is to cling more fiercely to their own traditions and rituals. They say that if they neglect their rituals and customs, they will grow weak and the Muslims will grow strong. They also fear that if women step out of the house, they will immediately become targets of attack — so fierce is the feeling of revenge still in the air. Some women say: "We have always been slaves. We used to go to each others' houses and sometimes sit together, share our sorrows. Now each one is kept imprisoned in her own house. It is the men who riot but the women who get locked up in these jails — women are

made each other's enemies. Often, they want to communicate with each other but their men's order is that no Muslim, not even a child, is to be spoken to. Rumours of atrocities on Hindu women have been used to make Hindu women feel bitter towards Muslim women, Hindu women are not even able to sympathize with the Muslim women who are victims of male violence, because they have been brainwashed to the extent that they think if a woman steps out of the house, she will immediately be kidnapped by Muslim men. The riots have become a convenient excuse to once more imprison women inside the home.

Blinded by religious superstition, women have not been allowed to question the exploitative hierarchy within their own religious community, therefore they begin to be intolerant towards one another. Women's mistrust is greater, because they suffer two kinds of violence — direct slaughter and mutilation as well as sexual violence. So great is the terror induced by this that they temporarily forget the routine violence which they suffer within their own homes and families. Women are forced to seek security from external attack, in the home which is a site of daily violence against them. Thus their oppression within the family gets reinforced. Having created a barrier of hatred between the two communities in the outside world, men become absolute tyrants within the four walls of the home. I found, on questioning, that violence within the family has increased of late. The greater the fragmentation in society at large, the more complete becomes women's imprisonment in the home. But this particular evil consequence of riots is not usually discussed or even recognized for what it is.

Women too want to work for peace and communal harmony but male society will not permit them to do so.

They are permitted to do only one thing— die. I came across a few instances of women having sheltered each other. Akhtari Khatun of Giriyat says that when all around, in adjoining streets, Hindu men were dragging Muslims out of vehicles and murdering them, a Hindu woman rescued her by pretending to be her sister-in-law, and later, with great ingenuity, managed to send her to the Khanfah camp. Many women rose above communal feelings and saved the lives of one another's children by taking them in their arms. Akhtar

Women whose family members have not been killed are more easily able to voice such sentiments. One woman, several of whose family members have been killed, says: "Women never want riots. Why should we want them? In riots, either we die or the children nourished in our wombs die. Whether a woman dies or a man — both are born of woman, they grow on her milk. It is always woman's creation which is destroyed — whether it is a home, a man., a woman, an old person or a child. What do we care about



One of the Injured Women in Hospital

Khatun talks about this to everyone she meets. She says : "We women do not want riots, we risk our lives to save each other."

I am not saying that men did not help or save each other. Many did, and many are waiting for peace even today. But if we look at the history of the riots from women's point of view, we find that inspite of absolute non-participation in the riots and inspite of having played an active role as rescuers of each other, women in this male dominated society have not been able to build on that feeling which is in Akhtar Khatun's heart, have not been able to forge their own unity from it. It is the women who say : "If men want to riot, let them riot between themselves, why do they stop us from meeting and interacting? Why do they kill us, attack us? Why do they kill our children, burn our homes ? Why do they cut our society to bits?"

statistics—how many women died and how many men? My young son died. A man died, a man killed him, but he was born of my womb. I have fed him with my milk..." She breaks into sobs. She has raised a very important question. The whole world, created and given life by woman, is being smashed before her eyes yet she is not allowed to stop this destruction!

In the Khanfah camp too, there were many discussions in which women suggested that peace committees, consisting of people from every section, be set up in each village and colony, to prevent riots. These committees should be responsible for the local situation. When asked whether women of every section should be on the committees, they fell silent. Then they began to speak. They said that they live in purdah, they don't even come in front of the

men of their own families, they know nothing about the country or the world — of what use can they be? And even if they want to participate, the men will not allow them. Who will do the housework, who will look after the children? They are not educated as the men are — what can they do on the committee? Question upon questions, but no answers. So burdened are they by the task of ensuring men's welfare within the home that they have no time to define their role in working for society's or even their own welfare.

While this discussion was going on, many men came and joined in. They said that purdah is desirable— if women are attacked even in purdah, what would happen to them out of purdah? (These attitudes and arguments in favour of purdah and seclusion of women are common to both communities) I asked: "Since men keep women in purdah, away from the world, how is it that in Alinagar the men escaped while 14 women and children died?" First they tried to give various excuses — the men had gone to pray, they were outnumbered by the attackers, they tried to save the women but failed. They also told the story of one woman who continued to face lathi blows so as to save the other women and children, but refused to remove her veil. They were proud of her as a truly pious woman who would never unveil herself before men — in this lay her strength. Woman's true religion is to keep wearing a veil. If she dies, it should be in defence of the veil, not in defence of her self! But when I repeated my question, they finally replied that when a man dies a woman becomes a widow and the children are orphaned. But if a woman dies, the man will bring another woman, so neither will he be widowed nor will the children be orphaned. When I suggested that a woman too could



A Refugee Camp in Biharsharif

bring another man, the immediate retort was that a woman does not bring a man, she goes with a man. Even here, where people were in fear for their lives, in the midst of such gloom and terror, male power and supremacy was alive and thriving—consciously and unconsciously.

When the young men met in groups to plan for peace, they clearly said they were not interested in discussing separately the question of violence against women. According to them, the massacre was a general one in which both men and women died, so the only issue was how such a massacre could be prevented in future. When I suggested that women should at least be included in the discussion and thinking process, they immediately replied that this was not women's work. The religious texts all say that woman is just an organ of man, she exists for man. If women come out of the home, men's characters get corrupted and the whole society gets corrupted. If the morality of society is to be preserved, women must stay in the house. If women come out, riots will only increase!

It is clear that these religious texts of the various communities represent a strange disease. Men of both communities are on guard to protect

their religion! Trampling women underfoot, they are busy laying down rules and policies for the preservation of "peace"! All that woman creates is being madly destroyed but these religious texts, the creations of men, are as strong as ever like chains choking the pulse of society. They are nowhere near the destruction they deserve!

The government has put up banners and posters all around: *Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Isai, Aapas mei sab bhai bhai*" (Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians are all brothers). My question, perhaps the question of all of us sisters is: Where have the sisters gone? Is the agony of riots to be reserved for us but the blessing of unity to be only for brothers? □

RENANA JHABWALA

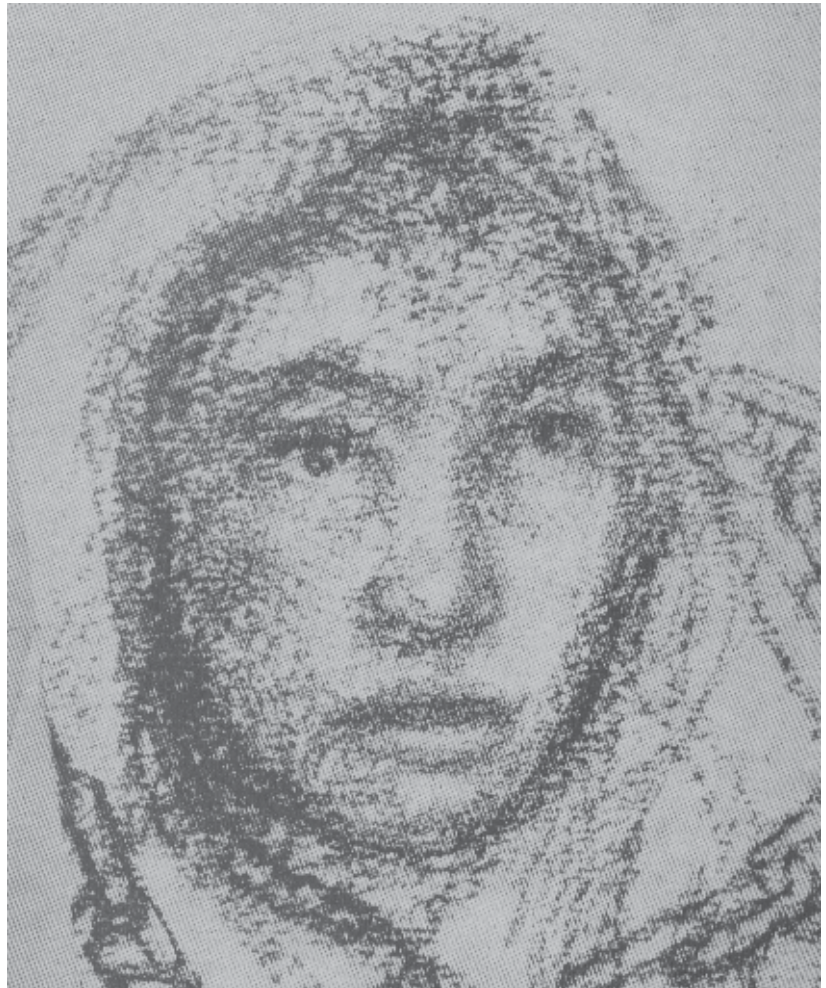
Caste Riots In Ahmedahad— Women Faced The Fury

AHMEDABAD is a city of riots. Almost every year, some group starts an agitation over some issue, but after a few acts of violence the issue is lost sight of, and the city is suddenly aflame with baseless rumours and exaggerated stories. Hatred and lust for revenge excite mobs who rush round the city, burning, looting and killing. This year, 3 group of doctors started an agitation to end reservation of seats for harijans in the medical colleges. The agitation soon spread all over the city. From an anti-reservation agitation, it became an anti-harijan agitation. Harijan colonies were attacked, stoned and burnt by caste-hindu mobs. Individual harijans were stabbed and lynched. Curfew was imposed on the city. Rumours and false news reports kept the harijans in a state of fear. In this state of tension, harijan women came out to defend their homes. Afraid that the clash of male egos would lead to more violence, they forced their sons, brothers, and husbands to stay indoors while they themselves faced the fury of the mobs.

Hiraben is a clerk and the wife of a mill worker. She lives in a harijan *pol* in the inner city area of Khadia. Her *pol* and the neighbouring caste-hindu *pol* have lived peacefully for the last 30 years. One night during the anti-reservation riots Hiraben woke up to the sound of shouts outside the *pol*. "Kill the harijans, beat the harijans." Hiraben's two sons, aged 13 and 19, immediately got up and tried to rush out. But Hiraben stopped them. She and her two daughters-in-law jumped up, wrapped cloths around their heads, picked up iron rods, called to the other women in the *pol*, and rushed out to the *pol* entrance, "About 35 of us women stood there with rods and sticks," Hiraben said, "We would not let our boys out. We saw a crowd of young men standing there with stones and sticks, shouting slogans at us. There we stood—our group of

harijan women and that group of caste-hindu boys. I looked very carefully to see who the boys were, and I recognized quite a few of them. I said to them: 'What do you want? Go away.' They stood and shouted for a while and then went away. Next morning, our caste-hindu neighbours

were going to the temple. I accosted them and said: 'So your sons want to kill us?' 'No, no', said our neighbours. 'We have lived together for 30 years, we cannot see this anti-reservation agitation divide us like this. If our sons have threatened you, we will make them apologize.' That evening, the



caste-hindu elders, men and women, came with the boys to our *pol*. In front of me, the gang leader's father beat him and told him to touch my feet and apologize. So the boys touched our feet and after that, there was no more trouble for us."

The police, who are mostly caste-hindus, also took this opportunity to enter harijan areas, and harass and loot harijans. Motiben lives in a *chali* in the labour area of Gomtipur, "The police come in at night", she says, "They beat up our boy, break into our houses and loot whatever we have. My son is crippled and a little weak in his head. One night the police knocked on my door. Only my son and I were at home, and I was afraid to open the door. So the police broke a panel of the door, put their hands in and opened the bolt. My son just went off his head and began screaming: 'Save me, save me', Her neighbour Beniben adds: "That very night, the police beat up some of the boys. Then they began taking the boys away, so a woman ran out and grabbed her son's arm. She yelled and screamed, and all of us women ran out. We held on to the boys from one side, the police held on to them from the other. Then we began to plead with the policemen, we began to pull their arms and legs and say: 'Please, please leave our boys. They are good boys, they have done nothing wrong.' There were only 10 policemen and about a 100 women. Finally, the police had to give up. We surrounded the police and escorted them out of the *chali* so that they would not do any more harm."

But harijan women were helpless against the deadly combination of police and caste-hindus. Chanchalben, the victim of one such attack, had her chest all bandaged up and was coughing blood. "I live in the Phoolchand *chali*", she says. "One night a gang of caste-hindu hooligans broke into our *chali* and

began looting, beating, breaking. The police were also with them. They dragged my son out of the house and started beating him with lathis, I heard him screaming and ran out and flung myself onto him to protect him. The crowd dragged me off him and pushed me to one side. Then one man hit me hard on the chest with a rifle butt. I fell down and fainted. Some bones are broken in my chest and I have been coughing blood ever since."

In every city there is a large section of men and women who earn their living as vendors, artisans, home-based producers or casual labourers. When they cannot get work, they cannot eat. Since they constitute the self-employed or unorganised sector, they do not get a regular wage but must make do with what they earn every day. In Ahmedabad, such workers are about 45 per cent of the work force. Due to the agitation, these people were completely without work during the month of February and had only occasional days of work during March and April. The traders of cloth, grain, oil, who control the market of Ahmedabad, kept the market shut, in sympathy with the anti-reservation strikers. So the casual labourers, most of whom carry loads in the markets, had no work.

"I used to go to the market everyday", said Radhaben, a head-loader in the cloth market, "Usually there was curfew so I would go by the back lanes. But when I reached the market, all the shops would be closed. I and my other sister head-loaders would sit for a while, waiting for the shops to open. Then a merchant would come and say: 'Today we are closed. Go home.' That day our cooking pots would be empty." The vendors would go out, hoping to make some money, but suddenly curfew would be clamped down, and they would all be chased away. Not only would they earn nothing but their small capital would

also be lost. Laxmiben sits on the pavement in the market place selling vegetables. "During two months of the agitation, my children went to bed hungry every night", she says, "I don't understand what the doctors wanted but everyday they would have some procession or programme. Since we have no other income, I would try to raise a little money in the morning and buy some vegetables, I have pawned all my jewellery during this agitation. I would go to the market, suddenly curfew would be declared. We had no way of getting to know this. The police would come running with lathis. They would overturn our baskets, beat and kick us. We would lose all the money we had invested. You can see the mark of lathi blows on my back. Why can't doctors and other big people settle their quarrels in a peaceful way?"

The Sabarmati river flows through the city of Ahmedabad, dividing it into two parts. While textile mill areas and the inner city ghettos on the west side were rocked by mob and police violence, the middle class, high-caste areas on the east side were in the throes of a "non-violent agitation." This agitation was led by the medical students who thought up original "revolutionary" programmes. One day, they took out a procession of scooters through the heart of the city. The next day, newspapers carried front-page photographs of the boys riding in a circle round the vegetable market. The third day they publicly dissected the "reservation monster" revealing its heart of stone, and so on.

Meanwhile, other middle class young men also carried on the agitation with great energy, if less originality. They made bonfires out of hoardings. They pulled down bus stands, threw stones at buses, and occasionally stopped and set them on fire. They raided banks, breaking down the doors, smashing the windows,

dragging out furniture and burning it. They smashed the windows of the university with petrol-filled bulbs. Everywhere in Ahmedabad middle class areas there were blackened buildings, broken windows, roads littered with stones, still-smouldering buses and hoardings.

“The day shift of the agitation over, middle class areas would have dinner, and move into the night shift. Every night there would be “Burn Makwana” programmes. An effigy of Yogendra Makwana, a harijan minister, would be hanged by the neck on a lamp post. A broom would be placed in its hand. Then a bonfire would be lit under the effigy and as it burnt, crowds would gather around, shouting : “*Dhedia* (derogatory word for harijan) *hai, hai, Makwana, hai, hai.*”

Rocked by the violent agitation in working class areas and the non-violent agitation in middle class areas, the whole city was placed under curfew and patrolled by the police. Any person caught in the streets without a curfew pass would be severely beaten. Confined to their homes, middle class women worried about their families, and hoped curfew would be lifted so that they could go out to buy milk and vegetables. Schools and colleges were closed so their children were home and had to be looked after. The children were playing new games such as “stone throwing” or “killing *dheds.*” “If cricketer Karsen Ghavri comes here, we will kill him”, one small boy said to his mother. “Why, dear?” “Because he is a tribal”, said the boy. “Colleges are closed and my son who is doing his BA, is free all day”, said Meena a 40 year old housewife. “He leaves the house after eating in the morning. He doesn’t tell me where he goes. But he comes back in the evening excited and angry. He tells me many stories of happenings in the city and I get afraid.”

Rumours are the only source of news for middle class women. Rumours calculated to breed fear and anger are whispered from ear to ear, are brought home from the youth gangs in the streets, from respectable clubs, from business offices: “The harijans do not really want reservations, they want our women. Once they could only come as far as our latrines. Then we felt sorry for them and let them into our homes. But now they want our women. We must beat them and teach them a lesson.” So the undercurrent to the agitation is no longer the reservations issue but “protecting” women against rape and abduction by low caste men. Women live in an atmosphere of fear and mistrust.

Sushmaben’s husband is a professor. He showed her a poem supposedly written by a harijan, which mentions rape of high caste women. Her son brought home stories about harijan groups breaking into caste-hindu homes and attacking women. He told her that harijans have

been attacking caste-hindu women on the streets. Cut off from the outside world, Sushmaben believed these stories and was afraid. Her fear was enhanced by the stories her friends whispered, “All these stories of rape are true”, her friend Sheela told her at a Lioness Club meeting, “You know my friend Mona. Well, her sister’s daughter has a friend whose cousin knows a nurse working in the civil hospital. That nurse saw some women in the hospital with their breasts cut off. And my son says that his friend Harish was telling him that his father’s friend’s brother heard that a group of harijans attacked the St Xavier Ladies Hostel and abducted some of the girls.” Sushmaben was afraid though she had not seen or met anyone who had witnessed the supposed rapes and abductions. She had nothing to go on, but these whispered rumours. So she stayed at home, fearing a harijan attack.

The agitation died down after the medicos withdrew their support, but Ahmedabad continues to suffer from the after-effects. □