

# The Falsehood of a Communally Peaceful Ahmedabad, Gujarat

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As a way to better understand how and why such violence occurs, collective violence research has recently begun to concentrate more and more emphasis on the violence's spatial distribution. The argument makes the point that in order to comprehend why violence occurs in certain locations, we must equally comprehend why it does not occur in others. Varshney (2002) contrasted three violent cities with three that were generally calm and came to the conclusion that violence is less likely to occur in cities with substantial and active civic associations than in towns with less civic participation. Varshney claims that interethnic cooperation in groups where Hindus and Muslims work together can reduce communal violence since these groups can dispel rumours and control minor incidents. Such civic engagement also provides members with incentives to preserve intercommunal peace.

Whenever one talks about Gujarat, the first incident that clouds the mind is the torment of 2002 riots happened in Godhra, spilled over in other cities of too. Godhra, Vadodara, Ahmedabad and Surat were one of the most violent areas, where the number of communal arrests were reported the highest. Reports show that four months after the Godhra incident, large mobs paraded the streets of Isanpur, Khanpur and Kalupur areas of Ahmedabad<sup>1</sup>. Did this incident mark a flagging of a peaceful state thereafter as the Bhartiya Janta Party claims to be? If so, how is peace achieved in these cleavages of deep communal and ethnic differences?

In an article published in 2017, the political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta, makes the following observation on a new kind of moral order that is unfolding in Indian politics. He argues:

*“A major riot would focus minds and generate a scathing headline. This appears to be just another typical day when compared to a long-lasting riot with isolated victims in different states. Thus, resisting it is more difficult.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Berenschot, W. (2011). The Spatial Distribution of Riots: Patronage and the Instigation of Communal Violence in Gujarat, India. *World Development*, 39(2), 221–230.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2009.11.029>

<sup>2</sup> Pratap Bhanu Mehta, “May the Silent be Damned,” *The Indian Express*, June 27, 2017;  
<http://www.indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/junaaid-pehlu-khan-mob-lynching-religion-minorities-hindu-muslim-politics-4723451/>

Mehta captures vividly the way communal incidents keep unfolding in Ahmedabad. We refute the widespread claim that the city has been completely peaceful after 2002. Even if one assumes that it has become peaceful, there has been no enquiry into the character or substance of peace existing in the city. Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat for a three consecutive terms, stretching over a period of twelve years (September 2001 to September 2013), has repeatedly claimed that during his rule Gujarat did not see any riots, and that 2002 was an aberration. During the election campaigning for the Gujarat 2007 assembly election, Modi in one of his speeches said, "*Ahmedabad's identity was curfew*" and that "*he was the one who re-established peace.*"<sup>3</sup> Again during the campaigning of the assembly election of 2012, Modi ji asked his audience, "*It has been 11 years...has the curfew gone or not? Have the riots disappeared or not?...Today we have embraced the road of peace and brotherhood.*"<sup>4</sup> Modi ji conveniently forgot that the gruesome violence of 2002 occurred when he was in office.

We think that the claim of a peaceful Gujarat does not hold true. On the contrary, communal incidents involving 20-30 people and injuring a few have occurred sporadically in different parts of Gujarat. For example, in November 2003, rumours spread that a person from the minority community had been stabbed in Juhapura in Ahmedabad, after which riots spread to Kalupur area and two people lost their lives.<sup>5</sup> In 2004, a communal clash took place in Vadodara, Gujarat, concerning a cycle mishap between a Hindu and a Muslim, following which groups from both communities started pelting stones at each other.<sup>6</sup> In 2006, riots occurred in Vadodara just before the Gujarat assembly election of 2007. Communal incidents involving stabbing, stone pelting and arson has been a regular feature in many towns and cities across Gujarat.<sup>7</sup> But none of these above mentioned communal incidents assumed serious proportions. This was because the BJP and the Hindu nationalist organizations had no interest in escalating them and exploiting them for electoral purposes. The state government ordered the police to prevent these clashes from translating into riots. Thus, while communal conflicts were triggered by local riot engineers over trivial matters, the larger political machinery in Gujarat prevented communal incidents from becoming widespread.

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<sup>3</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, "Gujarat Elections: The Sub-Text of Modi's „Hattrick“: High Tech Populism and „Neo-Middle Class“," Studies in Indian Politics, Vol. 1, Issue. 1, (2013), 82.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, "Communal Riots, 2003," Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 39, No. 1, (2004), 21-24.

<sup>6</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, "Communal Riots, 2004," Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 40, No. 6, (2005), 518.

<sup>7</sup> <https://centreforindia.wordpress.com/2013/10/07/the-falsehood-of-riot-free-and-communally-peaceful-gujarat-post-2002/>

In 2016, a RTI activist from Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh, Shams Tabrez, asked the Union Home Ministry for information pertaining to the number of communal riots that took place in Gujarat from 1980 to 2015. The state government, however, provided information for the period of ten years from 2005 to 2015. As per the official report, Gujarat had seen a total of 656 incidents of communal riots that have injured 1655 persons and took away 76 lives.<sup>8</sup> A social awareness organization, Anhad, argues that “Gujarat is still burning and riots still occur there.”<sup>9</sup> None of these riots has been taken seriously by the media argues Anhad’s leader Shabnam Hashmi.<sup>10</sup> So, while riots keep occurring on a sporadic basis so as to keep communal relations polarized at the local level, they are: (1) not allowed to assume significant proportions; and (2) are prevented from capturing the attention of the media, particularly the national media.

Incidence of violence is said to occur in areas with high ethnic volatility. In Ahmedabad especially, political mobilization is observed highest in economically weaker section of the society. Isanpur is a stark example of such an analysis. Poorer communities are more vulnerable to political mobilisation because their residents depend on politicians to obtain access to public resources. Random conversations in Ahmedabad's posh localities will convince a casual observer that a Hindu-nationalist ideology has taken firm root there as well. However, Ahmedabad's communal violence was concentrated in the poorer parts of the city because poorer residents do not have the resources and contacts to deal independently with state institutions, which can be very oppressive<sup>11</sup>.

The claims of a peaceful Gujarat may only be concentrated by the sights of posh localities of major cities. Although, other localities with poorer sections have not shown any signs of intercommunal civic associations.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.milligazette.com/news/14818-communal-riots-continue-in-post-2002-gujarat>; Right to Information Act 2005 mandates timely response to citizens’ requests asking the Government to share its information.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Berenschot, W. (2011). The Spatial Distribution of Riots: Patronage and the Instigation of Communal Violence in Gujarat, India. *World Development*, 39(2), 221–230.  
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Reducing communalism in Gujarat undermines the polity and democratic ethos of this country. Gujarat presently exhibits a unique phenomenon, without a doubt, but comparable patterns are evident in other regions of the nation as well as at other times in various areas of the world. Together, they provide a challenge to those like us who are debating these changes and puffing up our chests but are still unsure of how to handle them. I anticipate that as we consider and converse further, we will be able to determine how to re-establish the middle ground, to restrain the polarisation that is occurring, and to re-establish the pluralistic framework, which is currently under vicious attack.