

# **Life after the riots: violence, rehabilitation and citizenship**

Report of a seminar held in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.

December 15, 2009

As part of its dissemination activities, the Religions and Development research programme organized a seminar in Ahmedabad to discuss the research work completed by Professor Dipankar Gupta on the role of religious organizations in urban violent conflict and its aftermath. The research compared conflicts between Muslims and Hindus in Mumbai and Ahmedabad. The purpose of the seminar was to share the findings with fellow academics, civil society activists, local opinion makers, and representatives and activists from the faith communities, some of whom had been victims of riots or directly affected by the violence. The seminar was attended by about 60 people from Mumbai and Ahmedabad.

## **Findings of the research**

**Professor Dipankar Gupta** began by emphasizing that, because much of the existing analysis has focused on the role of religion in what in India are generally termed 'ethnic' or 'communal' conflicts, the focus of this research was to understand how the victims of riots sought to return to a 'normal' life, based on an examination of how victims of religious violence have coped over the long term with the tragedies inflicted on them. The research examined how government agencies, voluntary groups and commercial establishments, as well as the affected population, interacted with one another not only after the first moments of bloodshed had ceased but also in the longer term.

Both the nature of communal and religious violence and the coping mechanisms of victims depend on the context: Mumbai and Ahmedabad are very different cities, with different histories and different political establishments. For example, Muslims in Ahmedabad, unlike Mumbai, lack a secure community support system. In Mumbai there is a significant Muslim business community and strong Muslim-dominated localities, which were able to provide both support in the reconstruction of disrupted livelihoods and safe living environments to which victims of violence could move. Neither is present in Ahmedabad. Further, in Ahmedabad, the government was openly hostile to Muslims. The research showed that Muslims in Mumbai were able to return to their occupations and homes much sooner than Muslims in Ahmedabad. In Gujarat the economic boycott of Muslims sponsored by parties sympathetic to the state government made it more difficult for Muslim victims in Ahmedabad to earn a living or send their children to school. In many cases, Muslim workers in Ahmedabad were replaced by Hindus. In Mumbai, in contrast, Muslims were able to go to work, step out of their homes and send their children to school.

In both cities, the religious demography of residential areas has changed, especially following episodes of Hindu-Muslim violent conflict. In Mumbai, Muslim relocation has been gradual and largely planned. In contrast, in Ahmedabad, relocation has been sudden and rapid in response to fear and insecurity, forcing many Muslims into areas that lack even the most basic civic amenities. Muslims in both Mumbai and Ahmedabad feel that those who killed, maimed and

looted have not been brought to justice. For Muslims in the latter city, the unsatisfactory conditions in which many live add to their feeling that they have been treated unjustly.

The study showed that in the aftermath of violence conflict, non-governmental and faith-based organizations have only played a limited role. They have provided relief and some have assisted in attempting to secure redress and in resettling Muslims into safer residential areas, especially in Ahmedabad, where some religious organizations sometimes mistakenly tagged as 'fundamentalist' did commendable relief and rehabilitation work (although the houses and schools provided by some are inadequate in number and poor quality). However, long term security, safe and healthy living environments, access to livelihoods, restored social relationships and justice for victims depend on the government. When the government fails to fulfil its responsibilities, the peace is uncertain and the attendant 'new normalcy' is tenuous: an antagonistic truce prevails, in which the victims are constantly wary that another attack may occur, while the lack of trust between communities and in government means that victims' citizenship is not fully realized.

The study, Professor Gupta suggested, can contribute to the search for a 'new normalcy' in everyday life by drawing attention to what is needed for the maintenance of long term co-existence between religious communities, including meeting the real needs of victims.

The discussion following his presentation considered the educational needs of Muslims and the implications of increased residential (and educational) segregation. Participants from Muslim organizations and families affected by the violence expressed their deep sense of injustice at the perceived bias of the state, especially in Gujarat, where many young Muslims have (in their view wrongly) been imprisoned as 'terrorists'. A participant from the Islamic Relief Committee agreed that the most important issues are security and justice, both of which are connected to state politics.

## Implications of the research findings

In a second session, chaired by **Mr. Gagan Sethi**, a social activist from Ahmedabad, four speakers discussed the implications of the research findings.

**Mr. Satish Sahney**, former Commissioner, Mumbai Police, began by emphasizing the importance of the rule of law as the founding pillar of a peaceful society and stressed the need to practice 'constitutional morality'. He said that this morality had been violated time and again: first during the emergency, then with the 1984 riots, later in 1992 when the Babri Masjid was demolished, and so on. A citizen, he asserted, needs to be aware of the responsibilities that the law entails, citing examples from the ancient sacred text, *Mahabharata*, to support this assertion. In Bombay, Mr. Sahney recalled that the toughest task had been to set up Mohalla (neighbourhood) committees, which were meant to restore people's faith in the police and peace and trust between Hindu and Muslim neighbours. About 25 Mohalla Committees were formed and are still functioning. Mr Sahney discussed the crucial role played by people like Mr. Julio Ribeiro, the then Police Commissioner, and social worker Susobha Bharve, who gave the Mohalla Committees credibility by winning people's trust and earning the respect of both communities. At that time, he reported, the police realized that without the support of concerned people they could not work effectively.

**Mr. Hanif Lakhdawala**, a social worker from Sanchetna, Ahmedabad, lamented the fact that Muslims have been deprived of their citizenship rights in terms of school facilities, healthcare and housing. This has forced them into ghettos, where they live in very poor conditions. The speaker expressed his suspicion that Sangh Parivaar (Hindu nationalist) operations in Gujarat have percolated deeply into society. He claimed that Muslim rights are not being respected, many small and medium-scale Muslim entrepreneurs have been forced out of business and that the votes of some Muslims have been rendered irrelevant by gerrymandering.

**Indubhai Jani**, a senior journalist from Ahmedabad and the Honorary Secretary of the Gujarat Relief Committee relayed the feelings of helplessness amongst both the victims of the Gujarat riots and those who are seeking justice for them. He proposed that there should be 10 per cent compulsory enrolment of Muslim students in Hindu schools and vice-versa.

**Shahnaz**, from Aman Samuday, Ahmedabad, emphasized that, since hostility and tension between the Hindu and Muslim communities has increased, the pre-eminent need is to maintain peace and build trust, describing how the Aman Samudai is sensitizing and helping to bond communities through theatre, street plays, folk songs, etc.

**Rashida**, a social worker from Ahmedabad, questioned Mr. Sahney about the feasibility of citizen-police co-operation in Gujarat, where Muslims are not only scared of the police force but the police have been scornful of this community. Mr. Sahney acknowledged the shortcomings in policy recruitment and training, suggested that the police leadership admitted that police has to work in order to win the confidence of the people. Mr. Sahney explained the difficulties with police recruitment as the police are also victims of faulty training and recruitment policy. He opined that police leadership needs to reflect on this subject

## **Challenges to rehabilitation**

**Rashidaben**, a social worker from Ahmedabad chaired the third session, which examined some of the challenges to post-conflict transformation.

**Mr. Jayant Diwan**, from Sarvodaya Mandal, Mumbai, noted that the dominant social trends are individualization and commercialization. Although some voluntary organizations have become subservient to political interests, he highlighted the crucial role of those that work with a sense of service and help to connect people to the government, particularly to those officials who play a crucial role at times of crisis. He stressed that bridging the gap between the Hindu and Muslim communities needs to be tackled at the political level, but also that it is important for people to understand government roles and policies, for example by framing government circulars and orders in accessible language.

**Mr. Gagan Sethi**, a social worker from Jan Vikas, Ahmedabad, spoke about his observations that many more NGOs, international relief organizations and businesses provided assistance following the earthquake in 2001 than during the riots in Gujarat in 2002, when over 5,000 people were displaced. He reported that his organization had tried to implement the UN guidelines on dealing with 'Internally Displaced Population' for the first time in India. He was hopeful that the efforts of his and other organizations had established standards for compensation that would become national benchmarks, but lamented the cost of seeking redress through the courts.

**Ikram Mirza**, from Jamat-e-Islami Hind, Ahmedabad, reported that the Jamat had rehabilitated around 12,000 families after the Gujarat riots, in line with Islamic precepts to help the needy. He also mentioned that the Jamat had initiated an Association for Protection of Civil Rights, which is working in the wider realm of the education, cultural and civil rights of endangered minorities in the state.

Two short documentary films made by students of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, were shown to highlight the poor conditions in which people living in some of the rehabilitation colonies in Ahmedabad continue to reside.

## **Concluding panel: summing up the day**

**Mr. Mukul Sinha**, of Jan Sangarsh Samiti, Ahmedabad, focused on the discourse of citizenship and injustice. He asserted that the Muslim minority in Gujarat today continues to be as vulnerable as it was in 2002, reporting that since April 2009, dozens had been arrested and in the two weeks prior to the seminar alone, 213 newly constructed rehabilitation houses had been demolished. The need of the hour, he urged, is to urgently address the worsening harassment and persecution of minorities in India.

In **Professor Dipankar Gupta's** view, there is a need to reclaim citizenship – the government's priority should be to address the needs of citizens living in appalling conditions in resettlement colonies such as Citizen Nagar, not provide further benefits to non-resident Indians. He also cautioned against researchers relying on the internet, noting that the information available from this source in the context of this study underplays the commendable relief and rehabilitation works undertaken in Gujarat by faith-based organizations.

**Professor Gurharpal Singh** concluded by identifying the core lesson of the research: that citizenship without justice is meaningless. Although he felt that the research demonstrated clearly that Muslims in Ahmedabad have been persecuted, at the same time he identified signs of positive change, especially through the activities of NGOs and advocates, without whose contribution the situation would have been much worse.

**Mr. Satish Sahney** reiterated the vital importance of upholding constitutional norms, maintaining that if the rule of law inherent in the Indian Constitution is respected, then the rights of each and every citizen of the country will be adequately safeguarded and peace restored. The responsibility for this rests primarily on the government.

**In conclusion, Professor Surinder S. Jodhka** emphasized the role of research in getting to the root of a problem, but cautioned that one should distinguish between the activities of NGOs and research organizations. Research does not promise immediate relief, but hopefully, the efforts of researchers can contribute to lasting solutions, indirectly if not directly.

A short summary of the research findings will shortly be available on [www.rad.bham.ac.uk](http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk)

