



Courtesy Patriot

## Why This Slow Murder ?

*A SEWA report on the effects of communal violence in Ahmedabad on the lives of women, and efforts at rehabilitation*

THE anti-reservation movement in Gujarat began in late February, 1985. By March 18, the movement led to caste based and communal violence in the city. Days of arson, looting and murder resulted. Several shops as well as houses were destroyed especially in the Dariapur-Kalupur area of the city. Although this first phase of violence subsided, sporadic incidents continued. April 22 marked the second phase of violence, resulting in a breakdown of police control, police excesses and communal violence in Bapunagar. Casteist violence also erupted in Ashedkarnagar and other pockets in the city. In the third phase starting on May 8, Saraspur, Bapunagar and Dariapur-Kalupur were the areas where severe communal violence occurred. Finally, June 7 marked the fourth phase, with violence erupting mainly in the Dariapur-Kalupur area.

As many of our members live in the areas affected by the violence of the past four months, we were concerned about their wellbeing and safety. On visiting their homes, we were shocked to find that many had been severely affected. Some had lost family members, relatives and neighbours were injured, belongings, including tools of their livelihood, were looted or destroyed and, in several cases, homes were either damaged or destroyed. Many members had fled their homes and neighbourhoods and were living in relief camps. We found that they were getting food and shelter in the camps but were in desperate need of clothes. They had fled their homes with only the set of clothes they were wearing. We collected clothes and distributed them immediately in all the camps. As a result of discussions with our members and a brief sample survey of the damage caused, we realised the following :

1. The poorest people were the worst affected and the need of the moment was to help them rebuild their lives.

2. Moral support in this time of crisis was needed and appreciated by our members. In one area, even before we started any relief activity, women greeted us, saying : "our support has come."

3. Relief work could be both a means of staying in close touch with our members and a way to reach out to potential members for further organising activities at some other point in time.

These observations prompted us to consider what SEWA could do in terms of relief work and what our role should be. Previously our members had been self sufficient but they now faced an economic and moral crisis. While we resolved to undertake relief and rehabilitation work, we had some reservations. SEWA has never given "hand outs" to people, which is

essentially what relief work entails. Yet, there was little else that could be done since members were facing enormous difficulties.

Meanwhile, in the wake of the violence, the government appointed a Relief Committee. We attended meetings of this Committee and found that a number of organisations were involved in relief work. However, not many were willing to work with the poorest of people, our members, and thus there was a danger of the latter being left out of the relief and rehabilitation programmes. The main concern of the government was rebuilding the houses damaged or destroyed.

While this was undoubtedly important, it was equally important to restore people's means of livelihood for which few efforts were being made. The livelihood of self employed women was particularly absent from government relief measures. Therefore, we decided to focus our efforts on restoring the means and tools of livelihood of the poorest women, so that they could be self sufficient and slowly rebuild their lives both in terms of income and general morale.

In addition, OXFAM, also represented on the Relief Committee, was distributing large plastic sheets for roofing of damaged homes. They wanted to complete the distribution before the rains and needed assistance. We agreed to help with the distribution in the affected areas.

### **Identification Of Areas**

We decided first to distribute the plastic sheets and then restore the tools for self employment. For the affected areas, we planned to rely on government surveys and to supplement these whenever necessary. When the government surveys were obtained, we found that they were not complete. Certain areas had been omitted and in those that were covered, several families were left out. So we decided to distribute the sheets and simultaneously conduct a survey.

Those identified in the survey would

## **Profiles Of Riot Victims**

Banubibi is a SEWA member. She sews quilt covers. Her husband is a mill worker. During the 1969 riots, her house was burnt down. Her husband had to take a loan of Rs 10,000 to rebuild the house and replace the household goods. Ever since, both of them have been working to repay the loan. Then her husband's mill closed down and he was suddenly out of work. Banubibi and her daughters worked long hours to repay the loan. She also saved money for her daughters' dowries. In the 1985 riots, disaster struck again.- Banubibi managed to put out the fire that the attackers lit in her house. But the dowry collected for her two daughters, and her sewing machines were looted. "If they want to kill us, why don't they just shoot us?" she says bitterly, "Why this slow murder ?" SEWA replaced one sewing machine within a month and Banubibi started work again.

Gajra is 14 years old. Her father died two months before the riots. Gajra and her 12 year old brother took over his work of vending metal items from a handcart. During the riots, her house was attacked and the handcart stolen. The shock was too much for her mother who died of a heart attack. Now Gajra and her brother live on their own. SEWA replaced the handcart so that they can earn a living.

Rabiya Pathan was the young wife of a factory worker. She had six children. During the riots, she was raped by policemen who then threw acid all over her body. Her husband was killed. Rabiya had to be hospitalised for two months. Her children were in a relief camp where a reporter took their photograph which was reproduced on the cover of *India Today*. Rabiya's old father in Azamgarh, UP, saw the photo in an Urdu newspaper and, recognising his grandchildren, hurried to Ahmedabad. When Rabiya was released from hospital, we provided her with a sewing machine. Today, she still screams in shock from time to time. But she has begun working on the machine to earn a living.

Mariambibi lives in Delhi Chakla, a predominantly Hindu area. Her husband and brother-in-law own a bicycle shop. She and her sister-in-law sew quilt covers out of rags. The family also makes statues of Hindu gods, which they sell at Janmashtami.

During the riots, Mariambibi's house was looted and her husband's bicycle shop burnt. They lost all their means of income, the bicycles and bicycle parts, the sewing machines, the clay and moulds for statue making. Since both Mariambibi and her sister-in-law are SEWA members, they came and wept and told us what had happened. "Now we will have to go and live in Dariapur, a Muslim area", said Mariambibi. "That way, we will lose an important source of income because the orthodox Muslims will never let us make Hindu statues." SEWA helped her buy clay and moulds for Rs 1,000 and she was able to to earn nearly Rs 2,000 from sale of statues during Janmashtami. With this, and the Rs 1,000 she received from the government, her husband bought some cycle parts, rebuilt his shop, and started his business again.

be helped to obtain tools to restore their livelihood.

The areas were identified as follows :

1. through newspaper accounts and field visits ;
2. localities where the poorest people lived rather than a reas where shops were destroyed ;
3. through members and others

coming to the SEWA office and reporting on the affected areas.

### **Procedure Adopted**

Our relief team consisted of 15 union organisers of all castes and faiths. We divided ourselves into four teams and went house to house in the Saraspur, Bapunagar, Mehannagar and Dariapur areas. Organisers located damaged or

destroyed homes and property, identified the owners wherever possible and then filled in the survey forms. Based on the information collected, plastic sheets were given to those in need.

Those who had lost their self employment tools were called to the SEWA office and accompanied to the shop where the particular tool was obtained. We found that the main damage was to sewing machines and pushcarts. However, some women vendors were given some merchandise with which to start their livelihood. We found it most encouraging that women resumed their trades and left relief camps for their homes, once the tools of their trade were restored.

In the course of our surveys, we found several people who had suffered bullet wounds. We gave them aid amounting to Rs 250 for medical expenses. We also came across several families who did not receive government financial assistance, especially for their homes, either because they were absent at the time of field assessments or due to some oversight. We lobbied for these families both at the collector's office and in the Relief Committee meetings. Finally, we coordinated with other aid giving organisations to prevent unnecessary duplication of services.

### **Problems Encountered**

In the course of our relief work, several problems, both expected and unexpected, came to the fore. We will briefly discuss some of the main obstacles and questions that arose as they had an impact on our work and our learning process.

One major problem that we faced arose directly out of the unsettled situation in Ahmedabad. Although there was a fairly long, peaceful period in late June and early July, the tension and violence were a constant hurdle. For several days, we had to discontinue our relief activities because of the fear and violence which gripped the areas in which we worked. This was very



**Police in action**

frustrating for our whole team as we were aware of the difficulties people in affected areas were facing, compounded by the onset of the monsoon.

When the violence abated, curfew was lifted, but only gradually. We were constrained by the curfew hours as we were unable to obtain the necessary curfew passes that would have enabled us to work uninterrupted. By the time we applied for curfew passes, the police had completely stopped issuing them.

Further, some of the worst affected, poorest and thus neediest areas continued to be under army control. We were not permitted to enter some of these areas and were actively prevented by the army. One such case was Jalimpur Ni-Chali in the Saraspur area. When we first entered the Saraspur area, we were appalled at how devastated this *chali* was. Scarcely a home remained undamaged and the whole area looked like it had been aurally bombed. Yet there was only a fleeting mention of it in the press. We resolved to visit every home in the *chali* but the army prevented us until much later.

Another difficulty was the scale of

destruction. We could not have anticipated how great and widespread the damage was. Whole *chalis* were severely devastated. Every day we came across additional affected areas and families. As we were careful not to leave out any families in need, our work seemed frustratingly slow at times, in relation to the task that lay ahead.

We were also distressed by the fact that much of the relief work in the city was being conducted on communal lines. Several affected families we met explicitly told us that certain groups representing either Hindus or Muslims only helped their respective communities. Consequently, we were often surrounded by several poor families who had not received any aid.

### **Building Communication**

We began to feel that we must somehow act to stop the violence. We saw that violence was the direct result of fear and hatred that developed between communities which had amicably lived as neighbours. We were shocked to find that poor Hindus and Muslims, many of them SEWA members, who normally lived in a neighbourly way,



suddenly became enemies during the riots. We visited both Hindus and Muslims, and found that there was a complete breakdown of communication between the neighbouring communities. Each community would tell us horrendous stories of how their neighbours were preparing for warfare. When we checked up on these stories, we found them to be untrue. We, therefore, felt that we could perhaps help curb the violence by establishing communication between the two communities.

Our most successful attempt in this was in Raikhad in the inner city. We were told that tension was building up between Hindu fisherfolk and Muslims who were block printers, rickshaw pullers and garment workers. Raikhad was under curfew. We told the army officer in charge that we wanted to help with peace efforts. We were allowed in and held meetings separately with Hindu women and Muslim women. We got the impression that both sides were preparing for a fight. However, both the Muslims and the Hindus said they were arming themselves only because the other side was going to attack. Both sides said they wanted peace. We suggested that we have a common meeting. The meeting was held in SEWA. At first, the women were very angry with each other, but slowly, they began to understand each others' viewpoints. Finally, they agreed that they would try to keep peace. They suggested that similar meetings of the men and boys be conducted.

The two meetings of the boys and men were held in a hall in Raikhad. On talking to each other, the men found that the police had been spreading false rumours and instigating them against one another. The Hindu and Muslim men visited each others' houses and satisfied themselves that neither side had lethal weapons. A peace committee of Hindus and Muslims was set up to patrol the area every day. After this, the tension in Raikhad died down and there was no violence.

In August, after the riots had died down, we felt we must do something to

bridge the gap between the two communities. On Rakhi day, we arranged a function where Muslim women tied *rakhi* on Hindu boys and Hindu women on Muslim boys. The function went off well and created amicable feelings. We also began talking about communal harmony in all our union meeting. We explained to our members that if they wanted to unite and fight for their rights they could not allow themselves to be divided along religious lines. On

we began relief work, several severely affected homes were either locked or empty. We were reluctant to fill our survey forms with information based on neighbours' reports or hearsay so were forced to omit these homes till their owners returned. Once the owners returned and heard about us, we were flooded with requests and so had to do considerable backtracking in several areas. However, we felt this was important because most often, those



**Riot victims**

October 15, we had our annual general meeting. Over 5,000 women passed a resolution stating that they eagerly desired communal harmony and pledged to work to maintain it.

### **Combating Hostility**

When the violence started in the city, thousands of families were either displaced or fled their homes in terror. They sought refuge in makeshift relief camps that sprung up overnight, moved in with relatives in safer neighbourhoods or just left for their villages. Thus, when

who had fled were the worst affected in every way.

Since our relief team had divided into smaller groups working in different areas, several cases of duplication of forms occurred. For example, we filled out survey forms in Pannalal Ni Chali, Niranjan Ni Chali and other *chalis* in Saraspur. However, several residents of these areas had taken refuge in camps at Bakar Shah Roza and the school in Cement Ni Chali, and had filled forms out there too, unknown to us. Further, some



**Riot victims in a relief camp**

individuals deliberately had our staff, at different locations, fill out separate forms for them. This resulted, for example, in one local leader having forms filled out in triplicate, each with differing accounts of his losses. Fortunately, these problems were easily solved at our biweekly meetings, where the entire team met.

Apart from these logistical problems, we faced certain difficult situations where hard decisions had to be made. For one thing, we were faced with several families whose members had lost various tools of their respective trades. A typical case was that of Banoo Bibi Munir Khar of Chamanpura, who had fled to the Bakar Shah Roza camp. She had a small business selling biscuits and sweets on the pavement. Meanwhile, her daughter-in-law, living under the same roof, sold glass bangles from pushcarts. Both lost their merchandise. The question we faced was whether, given our limited resources, we should help both parties or whether we should concentrate on providing aid to at least one member per family, so that as many families as possible could begin to earn. Although it was hard to restrain ourselves, we tended to favour the latter alternative.

Inevitably, we were confronted with situations where certain individuals, often not affected or not the worst affected, attempted to hinder our work unless we provided them with some aid. Sometimes, these individuals were highly respected local leaders, who threatened to withdraw their support to us if we did not heed their request. Though faced with a difficult choice, we continued to focus our efforts on those truly in a crisis situation.

In addition, in certain areas where two different communities lived, despite our efforts to the contrary, some people felt we were only helping one particular community. Consequently, there was the danger of resentment and, worse, hostilities, after we left. We think this problem arose because when entering a *chali*, we naturally gravitated towards the worst affected and poorest of families. Most often, these families belonged to the community that was in a minority in the area. Meanwhile, in the eyes of the other community, the minority group was no more deserving than they themselves were, even though the former had suffered more damage. While we continued to provide aid only to those truly in need, we ensured that we met

and spoke to all the residents of a particular area.

Finally, a major moral dilemma which we faced constantly was the problem of poor families who had not suffered losses in the violence but were certainly victims of economic deprivation. As we were providing aid in different areas, several such families came to us with requests for help while honestly admitting that they had not suffered damage or loss of property. As our aim was specifically to focus on families affected by violence, we were forced to turn away people. This was very painful and emotionally trying for us, especially as some were even our members, whose situations were truly difficult. One such case was that of Khairoo Bibi, a mother of eight, deserted by her husband and struggling to survive. We knew she lived in a small hut and that the rain poured in. She was also a SEWA member of many years' standing. It was very difficult to turn down her request for a plastic sheet as roofing. However, we felt that once we set a precedent by making an exception, there would be no limit to such cases. In the end, we were able to help Khairoo Bibi in another way.

In sum, we felt that, problems notwithstanding, we did in fact reach out to the poorest and did what we could within the constraints of our resources. We were heartened to learn that people in the various neighbourhoods also felt we had been fair and thorough on the whole.

In the words of Diyaben, a vegetable vendor of Saraspur : "The *sahebs* from the government only saw the damage from the street. You are the first to come to every home, in all the *chalis*. This is a very big thing." For our part, we were moved by the simple generosity and warmth with which we were greeted everywhere. We had to struggle to refuse kind offers of tea and other refreshments. We could not but be touched by these offers. In addition, we were constantly amazed at the determination and sheer courage of people who had lived through one of the worst crises this city has ever seen. □