

“We Know The Weapons Will Finally Turn On Us”

-Recurrent Anti Muslim Violence In Ahmedabad

RATHYATRA, an important festival for Hindus in Ahmedabad, is celebrated by carrying the idols of Lord Jagannath and others in a massive procession. On June 9, the 101st *rathyatra* was to take place, and it was the third time that communal violence rocked the city as a fall out of the *rathyatra*. This was probably the bloodiest communal violence in the history of this city.

The earlier communal riots of 1969 and 1985, which were at times more violent and widespread, at least spared women. But the present riot of Ahmedabad witnessed some of the worst atrocities against women.

The scars of last year's violence, which had an almost similar history, had not yet fully healed. People had just returned to their homes in March and April from the relief camps, and many have not yet received full compensation for the losses they suffered last year. The same people have now become victims once more.

Last year, the *rathyatra* was forcibly taken out, defying the curfew orders imposed by the army. The city was already tense with months old caste and communal strife. As a result the riots broke out in Jordan Road area, leaving eight people killed in police firing. This year, residents of the area decided to take precautionary measures well in advance. A local committee of citizens met the chief minister, city mayor, the police commissioner and various other officials of the state and the city, requesting them first to change the route of the procession and, later on, to provide a

special reserve police point in the area. But their request made no impact on the authorities.

Yet they were not deterred. With the help of the local police, about 300 volunteers, both Hindus and Muslims, were selected and given special badges. The task of these volunteers was to restrain anybody from coming out or peeping through any window while the *yatra* passed through the area. In a sense, it was a self imposed curfew by the people.

The daylong efforts of the people succeeded and the procession passed

way, but there was no other way.” Yet all this hard work by the people could not avert riots. They had just heaved a sigh of relief as the *yatra* left the Jordan Road area, when a volunteer saw smoke billowing nearly a kilometre away. The trouble had started.

The first two shops which were burnt belonged to Muslims near Dariapur Chakla, an area where Hindus are in the majority. Some eyewitnesses state that the first incident of stone throwing took place here. The area is known as Moti Kadwa Pole. The police says that the first stone throwing was reported at



The aftermath of festivity-while police look on

peacefully through the area, although the occasion lacked festivity. As one of the volunteers, Yakubhai, lamented: “The *yatra* passed almost like a mourning procession and people were literally running away. We do not enjoy it this

Kadianaka, a 100 percent Hindu locality, just between Jordan Road and the Moti Kadwa Pole.

According to an eyewitness, Mr Vinubhai Shah: “About 250 people leading the procession shouted abusive

slogans against Muslims, and the stone throwing followed immediately afterwards. It is not clear who threw the first stone as it was impossible to observe such details when thousands of people were jammed in a 25 feet wide road.”

Another eyewitness, a lecturer of psychology in a city college and social worker who is owner and resident of the house at the junction of Moti Kadwa Pole, a Hindu area and Sajjan Jamadar’s Mohalla, a Muslim area, says: “We had about 70 guests and relatives watching the *yatra* from my house. As the *yatra* over the years has turned into an ugly exhibition of strength and the youngsters riding the trucks make obscene gestures at women, I feel very upset as a woman and so avoid watching it. The *yatra* came at around 5.30 p.m., almost two hours behind schedule. Suddenly, I heard a lot of noise from the crowd below and immediately heavy stone throwing started. We closed our windows. Then we smelt smoke and in no time our house was filled with smoke. We realised that the shops on the ground floor which we have rented to Muslim shopkeepers, one of them a tailor and another a cycle repairer, were set on fire. We were horrified at the thought that our house, which is mostly made of wood, would catch fire. I rang up the police control and fire brigade half a dozen times within a few minutes.

“I opened the front window, braving the heavy stone throwing, and told people in the procession below that we all were Hindus and would be roasted alive in no time. People watching us, from across the road, afterwards told us that due to my request, some of the *yatra* volunteers pulled out burning torches from the shop below our house, which saved all of us from the disaster. The shops are completely destroyed.” She said her house top had a police point and policemen on duty were keeping watch with binoculars.

When asked whether the trucks in the *yatra* contained stones, she said: “As I did not watch the procession I

cannot say. But the next day I visited the neighbouring Muslim locality and saw it completely covered with stones. It is hardly possible to believe that the Muslims threw stones at themselves, and considering the geographical situation and the number of stones lying there, I leave it to you to decide from where the stones came.” Another



**Habibai’s 65 year old mother —
hacked to death**

eyewitness from the same family, a young woman in her late twenties, told us: “It is we Hindus who have started it all.” The procession continued in spite of the trouble.

Around 6.30 p.m., it entered Shahpur Darwaja area. The area between the Darwaja and Shahpur Chakla is almost entirely a Hindu area and there are nearly 100 shops on each side of the road, of which only six belong to Muslims. All the six were burnt down.

At Chakla, the road bifurcates into two, one leading to a Muslim locality. This area between Chakla and Rangila police station is known as Shahpur Adda. The *rathyatra* moved along this road.

Another eyewitness to the incident, Mr Iqbal Sheikh, an advocate, said: “The trucks were fully equipped with stones and petrol. On both sides of the road in our locality there are many shops of readymade garment makers. People live above them. For a moment I feared that

in no time all those shops along with the people would be burnt alive. But soon the people of the area resorted to stone throwing in defence. By the time the *raths* had entered our locality, the *rath* pullers got heavily pelted by stones and were compelled to leave the *rath*. They were later on escorted by the police to carry the *raths* away. Meanwhile, police from three points posted within 50 yards of the area, resorted to firing without any prior warning and killed five Muslims on the spot. Three Muslims were stabbed by the processionists. Most of the garment maker shops employ women and some are run by women. All of them have lost their raw materials and ready stocks. Their meagre means of livelihood were totally destroyed due to the riot that followed the *yatra*. The shops and houses in the interior of bylanes were in flames. They kept burning till the next day when the fire brigade came with photographers.” Within hours, the riot spread to various parts of the city and most of the walled city was brought under curfew.

In the immediate aftermath of these incidents, the Hindu Raksha Samiti, headed by several priests, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad along with other organisations gave a call for a state wide *bandh* on July 12, to demand a judicial inquiry into the incident of the so called attack on the *rathyatra*. The government had two days time to pressurise the leaders who had given the call into withdrawing it as everyone apprehended more violence. The government agreed to hold an inquiry but that did not appease the Samiti.

On July 11, two Muslim women along with their brother were in a rickshaw, passing through an area known as Astodia Gate. They saw a huge mob in front of them. Though they hesitated to go towards the mob they could not turn back. The mob surrounded them and started beating them. The clothes of the women were torn apart. This happened within 20 yards of the local police station. Somehow the women and the man ran

into the police station and saved themselves, but the rickshaw puller and his rickshaw were burnt.

On July 12, the frenzied mobs of the majority community went on a looting and arson spree throughout the city, including the most posh areas. They burnt down isolated Muslim owned shops and stalls on footpaths. Innocent people were hacked and burnt alive. In one day, 24 people were killed and hundreds of shops and houses completely gutted.

The most gruesome carnage was reported from Meghaninagar, a working class area, in the eastern part of the city. A mob of 500 men from this area, led by a suspended armyman, Laxmidas *alias* Kali Kamaliwala Bapu, who claims to be a temple priest, ransacked hundreds of houses and shops belonging to Muslims. Around 10 a.m., they reached the housing board colony, comprising 1,000 blocks. Each block is a three storeyed building of 24 flats. Of these, six blocks are occupied by Muslim families. The mob destroyed, burnt and looted most of these flats belonging to Muslims. In flat no. 32, a family, unable to reach the terrace, was lynched and hacked by the mob and then burnt.

According to an eyewitness, Mr Ibrahim Sidibhai, living in block 31: "Ten people entered the house and I saw Habibbhai, a 42 year old man working as a driver in ONGC, being pulled out by some people. His stomach was bleeding profusely. Two advocates, Chetan Shah and Narendra Joshi, living in block no. 41, were among them. One of them poured petrol on Habibbhai and the other lighted a match. Immediately, the mother of Habibbhai, a 65 year old lady, came out of the house. A man who has a brick shop just outside this block attacked her with a sword like weapon, and her face was cut into two pieces. Another blow severed her feet from her body. Then Jamilabibi, a 17 year old woman, came out and she too was attacked with *lathis* and other weapons and collapsed. Finally, a 25 year old woman, Saira, who



A historical library housing manuscripts of the Sultanate period, damaged by acid bulbs

was six months pregnant, came out with her three year old daughter in her arms. The man with a sword killed the child and then another man killed Saira." The husband of the pregnant woman miraculously escaped as he hid himself in the attic of the house.

Mr Dilawar Jamalbhai, living in the same flat, not only witnessed this incident but saw his father being burnt alive by the same people, in a mosque just behind the block. Mr Dilawar accompanied dying Jamila to the civil

hospital and there, while waiting to get the body, he witnessed two other Muslim men being burnt alive. Mr Dilawar was in a stunned state.

Each of the blocks where Muslims lived were provided with SRP points and yet all this carnage happened without intervention from the police. The guards on duty just watched all the brutality from a distance of only 10-15 yards.

Alimabibi Nazidkhan, living a little further away in Kalapinagar, had many painful memories to share. Around 10.30 a.m., when she was in her house with her sick husband, three grown up daughters and a young son, they heard a lot of noise. Apprehending trouble, they bolted the front door of the house. But within a short time, the door was broken open by some people. Two of them, who ran a *pan* shop outside her house, started beating up her husband. Alimabibi intervened and in the process got beaten up with *lathis* and pipes. Meanwhile, she remembered a suitcase filled with ornaments and some cash meant for her daughter's marriage. She ran and took the bag in her hand. One of the persons injured her hand with a knife and took away the suitcase which contained the life savings of the family. She fell unconscious. Thereafter, her two



A lifetime of repeated displacements

daughters were also beaten up. According to the younger daughter, two people poured kerosene on the unconscious bodies of her parents and sister. Suddenly realising the implications of the act, she dashed towards the police constables who were watching the entire scene and pleaded with them to save her family. The police showed their guns to the miscreants who then ran away.

Later on, Alimabibi found herself in the hospital. After the family fled, the entire house was destroyed. This family had been ruined in the same way in the communal violence of 1969. The woman, along with her daughters, after working days and nights on sewing machines, had been able to acquire a few worldly goods which they have now lost. They will have to build their hut again. Alima says: "Due to the grace of god we are alive today and my daughters have not lost their honour. I know the people who ruined me. We all have been living there for 24 years. If the people known to you turn enemies, what can one do? Where does one go? I would prefer to die a beggar but I will not go back to that house."

There are thousands of women, children and men in the various relief camps in the city. Each woman has a similar painful story to tell. Each has only a flickering hope left. Jainabibi says: "This is the third time in my life and the second time in a year I have come to this camp. How many times shall we keep coming? How many times can we start life all over again? Aren't we human beings?"

Fatimabibi has two daughters. One of them in her teens was gangraped by several men in a mob which entered her house. The younger one had to watch her sister being raped. But Fatima does not want to complain. She is afraid that no one will marry her daughter.

Ayeshabibi is in her early twenties. She is handicapped, and has an old mother who cannot even walk. The sole earning member was the father who died



Person and possessions—reduced to a few bundles

six months ago. In this riot, their house has been destroyed, looted and burnt. She does not know how she will survive.

Hamidabano is a daily wage worker and is a widow in her early thirties with three young children. She has lost everything.

Mehraj is just about 20 and was married two years before. She has a one year old baby and is expecting another. Her husband was killed in police firing when the *rathyatra* procession turned violent at Shahpur.

A Muslim man says: "Hindu eyes were flooded with agony for Shahbano. Aren't all these also Banos? Where have those Hindus gone? Where has their sympathy for Muslim women gone?"

The outburst was natural. The Shahbano issue had become an issue to browbeat the Muslim community. The communalists had turned into, "saviours of Muslim women." They used it to inflame the prejudices of Hindus and deepen the communal divide. The women's cause was used as secular cover by liberals and intellectuals to slide into Hindu chauvinism. The riots have once again revealed the truth. The major victims are women, most of them illiterate, knowing nothing of the causes of riots and some naively waiting to enjoy the festivity of *rathyatra*.

While talking to many women victims of the riot about the cause of it, Jainabibi

says: "We did not know what happened on the *rathyatra* day. No one is literate in our *basti*. We heard about the trouble. Suddenly, on July 12, we were attacked by a mob in the early morning and we fled without waiting even to wear slippers."

Young Jamila says: "We all liked to watch *rath*. Like every year, this year also we finished cooking earlier so that we could watch it. I never imagined that I was going to watch *maiya* of our dear Azamat Chacha."

Ayeshabibi has something else to say: "Whenever and wherever any trouble happens, as soon as we hear about it, we immediately leave our houses. Because we know that they will turn all their bullets and weapons on us only."

The Hindu women have a natural tendency to detest such barbarity, notwithstanding their prejudices. Most of the women witnessing the riots know the truth. But it is difficult to speak out. One has to stand bravely against communal male members of one's family and society.

When a woman belonging to a fairly well to do Hindu family was explaining how the *yatra* people had been responsible for creating the trouble, her husband intervened: "She does not want to say anything more and she is not going to say anything more. Don't

mislead my wife, this is my order.” Repeated efforts to make him understand that it was her right to speak whatever she wanted, failed. The woman’s mother, sister and other family members watched her being suppressed. The woman said with agony: “On this issue, our house is divided between men and women. We women are not allowed to speak frankly and discuss the reality.”

When one talks to men, the communal divide appears more wide. Mr Bharat Vyas, member of Hindu Raksha Samiti, says: “All the Muslims are antisocials, and they want to bring the entire city under their control. Police get their bribes and allow them to do whatever they want.”

Mr Gulam Husain, a prominent social worker and an advocate, says: “It is we, the people, and our communal mind which is responsible.”

Mr Ashwin Dave, BJP-RSS worker, says: “Russia and America maintain world peace by showing their strength. If a few nations have to fight and suffer, it is not very important. Similarly, Hindus and Muslims have to show their strength. Muslims have long been prepared. Now it is Hindus who are getting prepared to show their strength. If a few Muslims are killed or burnt we are not bothered. They must be taught a hard lesson.”

A local Congress (I) worker, who did not want to disclose his identity, says: “Congress worked for minorities. But now the Congress is totally taken over by elements who believe in Hindu supremacy. And it is these elements who are becoming more powerful and virtually ruling the country.”

An old man working as a labourer

says: “The police is very partial. It works only for those who give money. Our houses have been looted and burnt in front of police yet the police opened fire on us, killing those victims who are not the culprits. Not a single man involved in looting and burning received any injury. There is no justice left for us in this world.”

“If Muslims want to live in Hindustan”, says Bharat Vyas, “they will have to become Hindu. I don’t believe in compromises and peace committees.”

The point is not who will score more. The ratio and proportion of deaths may be different for different communities. But both Hindus and Muslims will bleed. It is our historical destiny to live together and it is in our common interest to live together peacefully and with mutual respect.

MIRAI CHATTERJEE

“Aren’t All These Also Banos?”

—What Muslim Women Suffer

VIOLENCE is nothing new to women in Ahmedabad. What is new, however, is the dramatic up surge of communal violence in the city in the last year. It now follows an all too familiar pattern—days of uncertainty, tension, violence, and then curfew.

Except for isolated pockets and incidents, the communal violence is confined to the eastern bank of the Sabarmati—home for the labouring people of the city.

While all are affected by the communal atmosphere, it is women, workers of the “informal sector”, constituting the poorest segment of the population, who are the most severely affected.

What happens to them at such times? And what do they think and feel about it all?

With the onset of violence, there is

0 mass exodus to the relative safety of refugee camps. Often with no time to move their valuables elsewhere for safekeeping or to lock their homes, people literally run for their lives. Their exit is made even more difficult by members of the opposite community pelting them with stones or attacking them, generally in full view of an in-effectual police force.

In 1985, and overwhelmingly so in the recent communal violence, Muslims have been the worst sufferers. This year, according to the Ahmedabad collectorate, there have been a total of 19,000 refugees in the six camps in this city. Only one of the camps at Dhalni Pole, Astodia, was for Hindus with a total population of 350.

For Muslim women, many of whom live secluded lives, eeking out a living as readymade garment workers, incense

rollers, kite makers and in other low paying trades, the refugee camps are a nightmare.

Although food and water are available, women and children are herded into hastily constructed tents, open on all four sides to wind and rain. If there is an empty, school, *dargah* or public hall in the neighbourhood, they may be used. Men are “housed” in similar facilities nearby.

Amanl Chowk, in the eastern suburb of Bapunagar, is an open space used both in 1985 and this year as a camp. When we went there to find our members, a sea of tiled, anxious faces overwhelmed us. Some of our members, readymade garment workers who marched through the ‘city a few months ago demanding minimum wages, were sitting, demoralised and fright-ened, in small groups.



Rebuilt repeatedly—only to be shattered once more

“You have always told us to be strong and united”, shouted Zarina, a normally shy and soft spoken readymade garment worker. “Where is your unity now ? We struggle all year, attend meetings for unity and peace, and yet we are always the ones who are beaten. Are we supposed to be ‘guests’ of these camps every year ?” Others clung to us and wept, narrated tales of horror, of fear and of the in-difference of the police. Still others spoke of the difficulties of living in camps.

“My child has been having diarrhea for days now”, said Meherunissa of the Shah Alam camp, holding her listless little girl. “Finally, someone gave me some opium to keep her quiet. They say the doctor will come soon but I hope he doesn’t prescribe medicines to be bought outside. Where can I get the money ?”

For those women lucky enough to have survived unhurt or for those spared the ordeal of fleeing from their homes, violence and curfew bring different stresses and strains. Confined to their homes, often not even allowed to open a door or window, they worry about feeding the family, about the non-availability of medicines and about the boredom or restiveness of children

locked in for days. In addition, there is the tension of ensuring that menfolk stay indoors or return early from work.

At such times, rumours are rife. Whom to believe ? What to believe? When will it all end ? A period of endless anxiety. Radio and TV reports are of little comfort. While newsreaders announce that “the situation is under control”, new areas of the city experience terrible violence and, of course, this news spreads in no time.

During and after this recent bout of violence, several SEWA members complained of headaches, palpitation, insomnia, loss of appetite, ulcers and other stress related problems. And then there is hunger. Even when curfew was lifted briefly to allow women and children to buy food and other essentials, many self employed women, who are daily wage earners, had no money.

It goes without saying that these long periods of violence take a tremendous toll of the economic wellbeing of the city, and that poor women workers are the worst hit. For one thing, there is no question of selling vegetables and fruits from baskets in markets, or of pulling handcarts or rolling *bidis*. When curfew is imposed, women can neither reach their workplaces nor deliver finished

products made at home such as *bidis*, readymade garments, and incense sticks, to the merchants. In addition, there is no way of receiving fresh supplies of materials to make these.

Sometimes, with great difficulty, women deliver the finished goods to the employers at considerable risk to themselves. But, later, when normalcy is restored, women workers are told by employers that all records of goods received and even the goods themselves were destroyed in the violence, so how can they possibly be paid ?

In addition to the loss of daily wages, many workers lose the tools of their trade in the violence and destruction. Sewing machines, pushcarts, *charkhas* and small stocks of goods are either looted or burnt to a cinder. In last year’s rehabilitation efforts (see the report in Manushi No. 33), SEWA restored women’s tools of trade, only to find that some of the new machines and carts were destroyed or lost this time too. While claims have been filed at the Collector’s office, it will take time to process applications and survey the damaged homes of thousands of the city’s poor.

One problem that several small vendors and others have been facing is a lack of “proof” a pre-requisite for compensation from government agencies.

“When we buy a fresh stock of vegetables, then abandon them and run for our lives, only to return a week later, how can we show any proof ?” explains Laxmiben Patni, a vegetable vendor of Manek Chowk.

Others have bills, licences and testimony from neighbours and wholesalers, but their claims for compensation are rejected for reasons that are unclear. “I had two *laris* and had just bought four hundred litres of kerosene. When the mob came and demanded that we hand over our kerosene, we resisted for a while, but what could we do ? Now, not only am I being told by the officers that I had no *lari*, but also I’m being accused of

providing kerosene for arsonists”, explain? Valamben, a kerosene vendor who has made several fruitless attempts to obtain some compensation.

Homebased workers have to bear the cost if any finished goods or raw materials are destroyed. To receive government compensation to offset this, they have to get written statements from their em-ployers or preserve the remains of materials or both.

A particularly disturbing prospect is that the increased frequency of communal violence in Ahmedabad is likely to lead to permanent crippling of an already sick economy, and to further pauperisation in the future. Just when the city’s poor begin to recover from the previous nightmare, there is a fresh onslaught.

Another feature of the violence is that, in many cases, it is the same people who are repeatedly at the receiving end. One of the most pathetic incidents this year involved a handicapped tailor in the Chamanpura area who was all but wiped out in 1969, in 1985 and this year too. It is hard to know where such individuals find the strength and will to continue. Indeed, at times, it is difficult to believe that we can and will survive and that we have to struggle for peace and justice.

For SEWA and its 23,000 members who have grown to believe that there will be a better tomorrow, such communal violence is a time of reckoning. We worry about each other, our families, and how to remain strong and united. Although it would be unrealistic to expect that we remain totally impervious to the poisonous forces pulling us apart, we are determined to try.

It is not easy. Many of us who try to preserve our linkages as women workers are chided, taunted and isolated. “Whose side are you on?” they jeer, goading and provoking us. But we take strength and courage from each other, in knowing that we are not alone, although the violence may temporarily separate us. Throughout the violence, we tried to keep in touch, to renew our efforts to



At the relief camp—the same families rendered homeless again and again

create dialogue, form new linkages and strengthen old ones.

“In the midst of the violence, I met our Muslim sisters and brothers’ in Sarkhej”, explains Chandaben Pappubhai, old clothes vendor and SEWA stalwart. She was speaking on the occasion of a joint meeting of all the city’s trade unions, the first ever, and an important event in the History of Ahmedabad’s labour movement. “We vowed to prevent any violence, especially by ruffians from outside our localities. We sat together, talked together, ate together. We know that while big bosses sit in offices drawing

big salaries, it is we the poor, the self employed, of all communities, who suffer. There are people in this city who want to divide us, to keep us down. But we will fight back together.”

Whistles and hoots of approval along with thunderous clapping and cheers accompanied her words. Two thousand or more workers, women and men, packed the Lalkaka Hall in Shahpur, despite a *bandh* call from the Hindu Suraksha Samiti and a bus strike. Several prominent union organisers pledged support and declared the commitment of their unions to peace and justice, reinforcing Chandaben’s sentiments