

Rural Impressions on the Urban Communal Carnage

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Lallubhai is positively gloating over events in Ayodhya and their aftermath.

Muslim prayers won't be heard any longer on that very spot where Lord Rama was born. And my host is full of derision for the lukewarm plans drawn up by the Central government to rebuild the Babri Masjid together with a Hindu temple.

Lallubhai is a big farmer in Gandevigam, one of the villages of my fieldwork in south Gujarat. Over the past decade, I have seen him turn from a sceptical Congress supporter into a staunch believer in the BJP gospel. Lallu has a pat response to my concern. Would you Christians tolerate that other faiths are practised in Bethlehem, where the cradle of Jesus Christ stood? My reply carries no weight, and is irrelevant anyway.

December 6 marked the climax of a campaign which had been going on for many months. From this village also bricks were sent to Ayodhya. *Kar sevaks* have spent their blood, several of them even life to demolish this symbol of past Moghul supremacy.

On the evening of my arrival I am shown the video cassette, distributed by the BJP cadre free of charge. The battle scenes in the streets are ingeniously mixed with exultations by party leaders to wipe out the „shame which soils the honour of Bharat.“

As a member of the dominant caste of Anavil Brahmins, my host does not mince words in expressing his antipathy towards Muslims. Idols said to be found under the fundamentals convincingly prove, according to him, that the Babri Masjid was built on the remnants of a *mandir* dating back to times immemorial.

Moghul Overlords

As happened in so many other holy places, the Moghul overlords replaced the venerated buildings by their own prayer houses. These intruders have for centuries repressed *Bharat* while they forced weak segments of the

population to adopt Islam. As for the subsequent European masters, Lallu has nothing but praise for their record of tolerance in religious matters. Under the British regime, stagnation and regression made way for modernisation is what I learn. Railways came, education as well with many other signs of veritable progress.

I am given to understand that discipline is a western virtue, as can be understood by the incorporation of the „law-and-order“ term in all Indian languages. Lallubhai rejects the view that the spiriting away of the mosque, which is five centuries old, is a loss to the cultural heritage. Why make such a fuss about the disappearance of a single *masjid*, while in Kashmir Muslim rebels have destroyed *mandirs* in tenfold numbers? That scandal is covered up in a conspiracy of silence. The so-called national press has much to learn from Israel, a state deeply admired by Lallu for the way the Yehud are prepared to cut the Muslims to size.

The minority community in India will now have to adjust to the wishes of the majority. Gone forever is the time of Muslim prerogatives and favoured treatment in all forms. The maintenance of a dual civil code is untenable. The prescribed legal code of conduct has to be the same for all citizens in the country. Why should *Mussalman* be allowed to keep four wives? Lavishly supported by Arab funds, channeled through the *mullah* circuit, the minority is encouraged to breed a maximum number of children. In order to raise their proportion in the total population, with the ultimate aim of becoming a majority. No Way! That scenario simply has to be rewritten. If necessary, forceful means, including compulsory sterilisation, will have to be applied.

The continued presence of this creed can only be tolerated if it behaves properly. That is to say, keep a low profile and as much as possible out of public sight. Therefore, no loudspeakers in the mosques for the calls to prayer and certainly no more *namaaz* spilling over in the streets.

„Good Muslims“

There appears to be some ‚good‘ Muslims, a rare exception to the rule of thumb that most of them are a nuisance. Salim from the neighbouring village happens to be such a deserving case. I came to know him during my first stay in Gandevigam in the beginning of the sixties. In those days he was a junior student, younger still than I myself was. Salim introduced me to the residents of his locality and once in a while took me home to enjoy a non-vegetarian meal. Afterwards Salim rounded off his academic studies by writing a thesis on Lord Krishna, a remarkable choice of subject for a

pakka Muslim. He is the local boy who has made good, also in the eyes of his Hindu co-villagers. Salim now teaches in a local college, but he confesses to me that his real love is writing books. This he has certainly done in ample quantity. His score at the moment is 23. Mostly religious brochures in Gujarati.

However, Salim has paid dearly for his latest publication which appeared only a few months ago, entitled *Quran and Gita*. The underlying message is the commonality of all religious doctrines, hardly adequately illustrated by picking up quotes from the *Gita* and then pointing out similar lines in the *Quran*. Rather harmless stuff at first sight, one would say, but blasphemy according to a Muslim from the region who has settled in UK. The book, by pure incidence, reached this confessor of the true faith, who immediately took offence. The *One-and-the-Only-Light* bears no comparison and certainly not with writings pertaining to gods out of the Hindu pantheon. What he read enraged the expatriate watchdog to the extent that he sent Rs 50 000 to the *maulvis* back home to put their house in order. Rumours went around that a price had been set on the *kafir's* head who had forsaken the belief of his father and had betrayed the trust of his brethren at large.

Salim left his family and went underground in a nearby town. This turn of events gave Lallu the idea to write to me with the request to find a safe haven somewhere in Europe for this second Salman Rushdie. But this is where the Homeric drama stopped.

From his place of hiding Salim sent out a signal that he was willing to atone. He got in touch with the *mullahs* who sternly reprimanded him. He obeyed the order to buy up all remaining copies of the disgraceful edition and had to promise never to write again on religious matters.

Salim is now back with his family in the village. Much to the surprise of Lallu, who, I felt, is even a bit disappointed that the outlaw was taken back at all. According to my Hindu friends, the sinner was further humiliated by being obliged to remarry his own wife in order to confirm his return to the fold.

,Mullahs a Danger to Nation'

Together with Lallu, who vainly tried to suppress his curiosity, I paid a last visit to Salim before my departure. My Hindu companion deemed it necessary to make use of the opportunity to blame fundamentalism and pinpoint the *mullahs* as a danger to the nation. In a mild way Salim went along with him.

Why, he questioned, should Muslims not join in singing *Vande Mataram*, when the Quran also asks its adherents to show their love for the land of birth? He is equally firm on the subject of family planning. The holy book commands parents to take good care of their offspring. Too many children implies poverty, which goes together with deprivation and negligence. Still, Salim adroitly refuses to be put in an Uncle Tom role by Lallu. He points out that Aurangzeb in this region also made land gifts to Brahmin priests to build their temples and underlines that Moghuls in succession used to take Rajput warriors as their allies. He goes on to probe subtly into the impeccable record of Shivaji. Lullabies, still sung by mothers to put their infants to sleep, curse the name of this Hindu hero who raided the villages in the area, irrespective of the creed of their inhabitants.

Although agreeing that his co-believers have been the main target, he claims that the heinous deeds were, in most cases, done by outsiders – Kathiawadis engaged in diamond cutting, Oriya *malis* and UP *bhaiyas* who operate the powerlooms in this hellhole of a city. Particularly the bachelors among them are the culprits who committed unspeakable brutalities. Is it an act of wishful thinking that Salim doggedly keeps repeating stories of Hindus who protected their Muslim neighbours? These are examples of the true *surthi* behaviour and he refuses to listen to my sceptical comments relying on first hand counter-evidence about the vulgar and criminal behaviour of higher sections of the middle class in truly lumpen bourgeois fashion. When I wish him goodbye, his return farewell is a Gujarati motto: live and let live.

Violence that Shook Bombay

Is that what the Hindu majority is willing to practise? Daily news now reaches the villages about the explosion of hatred that has shaken Bombay, worse and on a much wider scale than the last month. Although toned down in the vernacular press, which has as if by instinct rapidly attuned itself to Hindu populist sentiments, the reports cannot fail to upset even the most-biased reader. At least, this is what I hope. But many people around me speak a different language. They utter noises like: what now happens had to happen. And: it is sad, no doubt, but Muslims are reputed to learn their lesson only when they are confronted with counter-violence.

Moreover, the average citizen minds his or her own business and cannot be held responsible for the horrors in which lumpen elements indulge. Some high-caste members, *Patidars* in particular, appear to be totally indifferent to the victimisation of Muslims. Their stance is that what now

goes on in the big urban centres is still a moderate reaction to the aggression and intolerable arrogance shown by the minority in the remote and even the recent past. Out of the mouth of Rajubhai comes the statement that the days of settling accounts have finally come and that this is the way in which the population growth of those who have nothing to contribute to the nation will be curbed. Lallubhai is more reserved in his comments, but his opinion also is that the victims themselves are to be blamed for their sorry plight. Emphatically, he refers to the earlier press reports telling how two lakhs of Muslims were driven out of Myanmar. His face lit up when he reads aloud to me the heading in today's *Gujarat Mitr* that 11 000 Pakistani fundamentalists had been expelled from Saudi Arabia. Does he mean to say that the Muslims will eventually have to leave India? By no means, is his reply to my question. After all, they belong to our country; the offspring of converted Hindus. The message, which he signals, is that the minority will have to live in future at the mercy of the majority. The easy solution to escape from discrimination and, once in a while from local waves of annihilation is, of course, to convert back to Hinduism.

'Rascals Those Who Raise Black Flags'

Traitors, however, will have to go. In this category fall, for instance, those who show jubilation by firing crackers when Pakistan (once again) beats India in a cricket match. Further, the rascals who instead of raising the Indian flag, hoist a black one and finally all others who can be criticised for ,un-national' behaviour. The statement made by some Muslim leaders that out of protest they will boycott Republic Day has not helped to defuse the aroused feelings of hostility. Though hurriedly withdrawn, it was a most unfortunate gesture of defiance in view of the not so hypothetical repercussions.

It goes without saying that the BJP may sweep the forthcoming elections in Gujarat. But a lot of their supporters whom I have met show little faith in the economic acumen of its leaders. However, these followers are prepared to pay the price for a change in the power set-up. The gospel of secularism preached by the Congress has a weak basis in this party's wavering course. The principles of equality and harmony in which the once-so-popular movement for Independence took pride has been substituted for a wheeling and dealing type of politicking, propelled by the consideration that the combined minorities – consisting of Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims – would result in a comfortable majority. Seen in that light,

the fight against the proponents of *Hindutva* is merely inspired by a vulgar competition for power. There are already signs that the Congress is willing to abandon its strategy in order to recoup the steady loss of upwardly-mobile Hindu segments.

Paradoxically the communalist bandwagon rolling fast through West India indicates an upsurge of emancipation for the lower-middle castes. The OBC Kolis in Gandevigam and the ST Dhodhias in Chikhligam, my second village of research in south Gujarat, are pointed examples of this trend. These communities, mainly consisting of small and marginal farmers, are out to capitalise socially on the economic progress made by them in the past few decades.

They have never been acknowledged as full-fledged members of the same faith by their upper-caste superiors and now vehemently assert themselves as First Class Hindus. This explains why Swami Narayan and other sects have become so successful in finding new disciples. Dhodhias have turned in large numbers to *Moksh Marg*, while Panduran Shastri is enthusiastically embraced by Kolis and Machis in particular.

Only a couple of months ago this last sect held a meeting in Umbergaon, which was attended by a crowd of more than two lakh.

Voices of Sanity

The BJP has reached out to all these, until now Second Class Hindus and legitimises their claim for a more dignified identity. A recurrent theme in this party's ideology is that all Hindus are equal to one another. This suggestion dictates the necessity to identify a common enemy, found in the Muslims as outsiders and scapegoats. In a truly Hinduised modern India this minority will be defined once again as the defiled other; those beyond the pale.

BJP's plea that its programme is not communal but national finds certainly no unanimous acceptance. Contrary to the harsh words spoken by Lallubhai and Rajubhai in Gandevigam, other voices can be heard.

Representative for this difference in opinion is Dhaya Kaka in Chikhligam. Although also a Brahmin by caste, he wastes no time in rejecting the claim that Lord Rama was born in Ayodhya as a myth. In his eyes the destruction of Babri Masjid was nothing but an expression of obscurantism fuelled by Hindu militants. They would have done better to concentrate on the *mandirs* falling apart in many parts. He further wants to know why also communalists constantly tend to harp on the one minority and omit attacking Christianity which has equally been intolerant of Hin-

duism in the past. But first and for all, more than by any outsiders, Hindus themselves have subordinated and discriminated against the lower strata; Harijans and Adivasis in particular. Dhaya Kaka observes that plurality has always been the cornerstone of Indian society. It is only in this country that so many diverse religions have met and lived together in peaceful co-existence.

Hindu Homogeneity ,False'

In his view the image of Hindu homogeneity is totally false, a construction serving political ends. As a local leader of the Janata Dal, he points at ultimate contradiction between Mandir and Mandal. The *dvija* born now promise to strive for the uplift of subaltern castes, but this minority actually conspires to maintain the rule of the *ujliparaj* over the lower orders. Soon the Kolis and Dhodias will realise that they are once again manipulated as passive vote banks and then the whole *Hindutva* framework will collapse. It is a sobering thought but also speaks of wishful thinking. Dhaya Kaka himself has problems in harnessing his confidence that a better future is just around the corner.

What has gone wrong after Independence, he laments. Economic growth and modernity have certainly benefitted Chikhligam. But the democratic order is not deeply entrenched in India. What worries him is the cry, also by otherwise sane people, for a strong leader to overcome the present crisis of state and society. This quest can easily degenerate into a totalitarian regime with a *Bharat* styled fascist at the top. At his old age my friend would prefer not to be around at the coming of a Hitler or Saddam Hussain in the thin guise of a Hindu *avatar*.

It is altogether a grim story which I have brought back from the south Gujarat countryside. What should not be overlooked, however, is that the carnage did not spread to the rural hinterland. Certainly, a few localised incidents did occur. On the other side of the river along which Gandevigam is situated some Muslim boys had the cheek to object against the noise produced by the *maha artis*, now held regularly at the Amba Mata temple.

Publicly, watched by more than thousand people, they received their punishment: a severe beating with sticks on their backs and chappal slaps in their faces. In a village not so remote from Chikhligam, Kolis have burnt a mosque, an act which is narrated to me with much glee. Still, the *dharmayudh* which has broken out in the major cities of west India remains far away. The Halpatis, belonging to the bottom class of landless

labourers, have avoided taking sides in the communal flare-up. This rural proletariat cannot afford to do much more than concentrate on their first priority: the day-to-day survival which for them is difficult enough.

Escape From Rural Misery

A few Halpatis thought to have escaped from their rural misery. They left for the city in the hope of finding a permanent foothold there. This afternoon Dipak came back from Bombay to the landless quarters in Chikhligam. Their *basti* has come under attack by members of a gang who looted and ravaged it at their will. No sign of policemen during that day or night. They have evidently been bought off by the slumlord who also hired goondas to raze it. The hutments were set ablaze and people who tried to fight back were ruthlessly knifed. With his two brothers and mothers, Dipak finally managed to escape. But the father stayed back together with a seriously-ill sister. The family is deeply worried about their fate. Should they stay here or go back? I have no advice to offer.

Dhaya Kaka warns me not to let the urban riots completely tilt my judgement. What is happening now cannot totally undo the feelings of harmony and tolerance which, next to factional fights, have always coloured life in rural India. At the occasion of Id, Hindus are used to meet their Muslim friends and workmates just like the latter come to congratulate Hindus on Diwali. In the village, at the opposite bank of the river a Halpati to whom his Muslim patron left behind all his worldly possessions on his deathbed commemorates his benefactor each *poonam* by arranging sessions in which Hind songs are sung in *qawwali* style. This blending of Hindu substance and Muslim style keeps the audience in rapture and irresistibly sways their bodies in the dark of night. What a beautiful sight!

Some Consolation

Only a mile from Gandevigam lies the shrine of Nasruddin Baba. On the day of my arrival in the village the annual festival was being held. It was a special occasion this year because the tomb of the *pir* has been covered with a roof, donated by a wealthy Bania. The Muslim guard tells me that 90 per cent of the huge crowd which turned up were Hindus.

In my frequent spells of optimism, I see in such manifestations of syncretism, rooted in an age-old tradition, a beacon of hope for a future India

characterised by an enduring rich socio-cultural diversity. I am afraid, however, that a further deterioration in the direction of a rigorous and monolithic so-called orthodoxy is due before things start to become better. The realisation that the historical awareness in Asia goes back to a much more remote past than in Europe, or for that matter anywhere else in the world, seems to offer me some consolation.

This sense of a long-term perspective may help people heal the wounds many of which are now bleeding



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