



The Nightmare of Surat

by

Kalpna Shah, Smita Shah and Neha Shah

THE CITY of Surat is unlikely to forget the nightmarish day of December 7, 1992. What began as a spontaneous expression of Muslim anger against the demolition of the Babri Masjid the previous day, swiftly degenerated into a free-for-all as lumpen and communal elements stepped in to let loose an orgy of bloodletting and brutality.

The madness was allowed to continue unchecked for six days, from December 7 to December 12. According to official estimates, in less than four days of the communal riots, over 150 men, women and infants were brutally killed. The figure may be even higher because it excludes the sizeable number of dead who were not brought to the government hospital for post mortem.

Though the worst is over, normalcy is still to return. This is because these riots -unlike other communal riots in the country, which are mostly confined to looting, burning, stone-throwing, stabbing and killing-were marked by extreme savagery.

From the information we have gathered by talking to 59 Muslim and Hindu victims in their localities (primarily the two worst affected areas of Vijaynagar-2 in north Surat and Pandesara in the southern part of the city), relief camps and hospitals, it appears that there was a peculiar method to the madness.

How else does one explain the ordeal of Ayesha Pathan, a 15-year-old girl who lived in Udhna Yard in

Surat? After four or five days of rioting in Surat, her family was feeling insecure in the city. Her father told Ayesha, her brother and sister-in-law to go to the family's hometown of Nandarbar. He said that if the situation worsened, the other members of the family, that is, her parents and two brothers, would also come there. Ayesha can never forget the

There were 42 relief camps in the city which provided shelter to over 20,000 people of both communities. We visited two relief camps and two of the worst affected areas of Vijaynagar-2 and Pandesara, apart from other areas such as Hidayatnagar, Adajan, Borwada and Payak Mohalla of Rander. We talked to 59 Hindu and Muslim victims, both men and women, in their localities, relief camps and hospitals.

The Economy and Politics of Surat

Surat city is in western India, between Ahmedabad and Bombay. Next to Ahmedabad, it is the second largest city of Gujarat and has recorded the highest growth rates in the state. During the last two decades, in fact, its growth rate has been higher than that of Ahmedabad and Bombay. The population of the city has increased nearly fourfold, from 4.71 lakh in 1971 to 15.71 lakh in 1991. Between 1971 and 1981, the population growth was a phenomenal 87.40 percent and in the following decade it was 64.21 percent. This high growth in population is explained by a burgeoning migrant population from all over the country which has been attracted by Swat's industrial boom.

The major industries of the city are art silk, powerloom, textiles and diamond cutting. A few large scale industries have recently come up in the city, but they are capital-intensive. Most of the powerloom

units and dyeing houses do not employ a large number of labourers so that they can avoid implementing factory acts. Workers are, therefore, paid on a piece rate basis and prefer to put in more hours of work to receive higher wages. The situation is similar in the diamond cutting industry. The majority of workers in the diamond cutting industry are from the Saurashtra region of Gujarat, while the art silk workers are from Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nadu.

Both the diamond cutting and art silk industries are going through difficult times. The diamond industry has been in a bad shape for the last three years. As work has declined, the actual wages of workers have fallen. Newspapers frequently report that many diamond workers have returned to their villages over the last year. The recession in the art silk industry has also adversely affected labour.

harrowing—and as it turned out, aborted—journey to Nandarbar. In her words: “We left for Nandarbar on the morning of December 10. Travelling with us was my 10-month old nephew. We boarded the train from Udhna. The train was full of passengers, most of whom were Hindus. One of our co-passengers gave us a seat. The train had hardly started moving, when the chain was pulled. People were shouting and asking people to get down from the train. There was chaos. All the passengers got down, but my brother, my *bhabhi* and myself remained seated in the train. Suddenly four strong young men rushed towards us and pushed and dragged us out of the train. They ruthlessly beat iron

rods on the back of my *bhabhi*. She fell down along with her baby. She was beaten mercilessly on her back by five or seven people and they tore away her clothes. They also beat my brother.

“They hit a sword on my head (she showed her fully shaven head which had about five wounds and 12 stitches). They tore away my clothes and pierced a knife in my breast and a little on the face. Around 10-15 people actively participated in this incident. Four persons raped me and then iron rods were inserted in my private parts. Then they threw me into the fire. In the meantime, there were shouts of ‘Police, police,’ and the people who had thrown me into the fire took me out and threw me on the railway track

instead. They were standing near me and I thought that if they came to know that I was alive, they would beat me again. So I pretended to be unconscious. The police came and took me to the Civil Hospital in an ambulance. I was unconscious. I don't know when I regained consciousness. Everybody says that my brother is in old Civil Hospital. He had bad sword injuries on the face and was thrown into a fire. I can identify the people who did all this, but the police has not produced them for identification as they should have.” Such incidents took place on a large scale. Many women recount in graphic detail the horrors of the December riots in Surat (see box). In fact, the three main targets of the rioters seem to have been religious places, religious heads and women. Sharijabanu, 22, who resides in Vijaynagar-2, recounts how on December 8 a huge mob rushed towards this area and encircled its residents. The mob comprised diamond cutters from Saurashtra, Oriya Malies, and *bhaiyas* from UP and Bihar. She says, “The residents of our society also joined the mob. They were beating both women and men. They tortured our imam and relentlessly beat him, all the while forcing him to take the name of ‘Ram’, which he refused to do. They tied him to a fan and when he did not give in, they chopped off his head with a sword. Thereafter they dragged the imam's wife from the adjoining house. She used to be in *pardah*. No one had ever seen her face, not even her toe. They tore off her clothes and raped her.” Sharijabanu herself lost her husband in the riots but she and her two sons were saved because they managed to hide in a safe place.

How it All Began

The genesis of the communal violence in Surat can be traced to

Extracts from Some of the Interviews with Victims

AHMEDIBEN MIYAN MOHAMMED, 32, a resident of Triveni Society: “On December 7, my husband, a rickshaw driver, told me not to go anywhere because there was a possibility of riots. He said I should stay at home and take care of the children. After some time, a Hindu man, a nice person, came and said that there might be riots in our area also and they might not remain confined to Bhagal or Rander.

“We were scared. We did not sleep on the night of December 6 or 7. There are 60-70 Muslim houses in Triveni Nagar. Although seven or eight Hindus came and assured us that nothing would happen and we could sleep, we were still apprehensive. Then we saw a mob of 50-60 people equipped with weapons. On the night of December 7, we heard voices from Vijaynagar saying, ‘Kill them, kill them.’ Some men of our community took women and children of our area to Vishramnagar Masjid. We returned home on December 8 in the morning and cooked food.

“While we were about to begin our meal, the mob came and started throwing stones. They killed three Muslims before our eyes and five or six Muslims received injuries on the head. When we tried to call the police, they said they did not have orders to beat Hindus. On hearing this, my husband apprehended some untoward incident. The women were again sent to Vishramnagar. All our houses were burnt; they looted whatever they liked. There were no outsiders. Marathis, Malies, Bhaiyas and Machhis (fisher-men caste) of our area attacked us. Initially they had assured us that they wouldn’t let anything happen. My three-year-old child has become paranoid and often shouts, ‘Father bring the gun and the knife. I will beat the police.’ We will now shift to the Muslim locality.”

Hamidaben, 45, a resident of Vijaynagar:

“A big mob came from outside. The Hindus of our society joined them. The mob consisted mainly of Ghasias—the diamond workers. So far we had all stayed together peacefully. But they lost their sanity and committed these heinous acts. The mob dragged five or six Muslim girls, stripped off their clothes, raped them, then killed them and threw them into the fire.

“Our Hindu neighbour had given shelter to my family. The neighbour asked us to stay in their toilet and then locked the door from outside. We remained inside for over two days. When the police came, we came out. I am so scared now that I don’t even send my children to get their salary from their employer who is a Hindu. Life is more valuable than money. We have lost everything. We do not know what we will do.”

Anifa bibi, 25, of the Muzavar caste, from Ashwinikumar:

“In our area, three or four houses belonged to Muslims. The mob which came killed Maultani Hafizbhai and burnt him. They had swords and knives. Neighbouring Gujarati families hid us for two days and provided saris and *bindis* to save us from the mob.”

Nasimbanu Mohammedhai Mira, 20, a resident of Kamal Park Society, Bombay Market:

“On December 6 there was nothing unusual. The trouble started on the night of December 7. There was a great deal of shouting and noise. As a precaution we went upstairs to the house of our Gujarati landlord, Chandubhai Patel. We decided to go to Bhavnagar the next day, but it was impossible. The whole area was surrounded by a big mob. We decided to take shelter at our landlord’s place.

“People came searching for us on December 8 at around 11 a.m. They

broke into our house, looted it and put it on fire. In the evening, the mob came again, armed with knives, hockey sticks and iron rods. They had somehow come to know that we were in Patel’s house. They forcibly entered the house and severely beat my husband and his elder brother. They took both the brothers to the terrace of the third floor, while constantly beating them. A fire was lit in front of the house. First they threw my brother-in-law from the terrace down into the fire and then my husband. Thereafter they dragged my sister-in-law and me. We passed ourselves off as Hindus and told them that we had come from Saurashtra. We said that we were Patel’s guests. The mob was not convinced. They started beating my sister-in-law. She and her child also met the same fate as my husband and brother-in-law.

“Then they came towards me. I insisted that I was a Hindu. They asked me my name, my husband’s name and also the name of our family deity. I unhesitatingly told them that I was Manuben, my husband was Vallabhai and that we believed in ‘Khodiyar Maa’. I told them that I had come from Saurashtra with my husband and that he had gone to another town for some work. They also checked whether my two sons were circumcised or not. Luckily we were saved because they had not somehow undergone the circumcision,

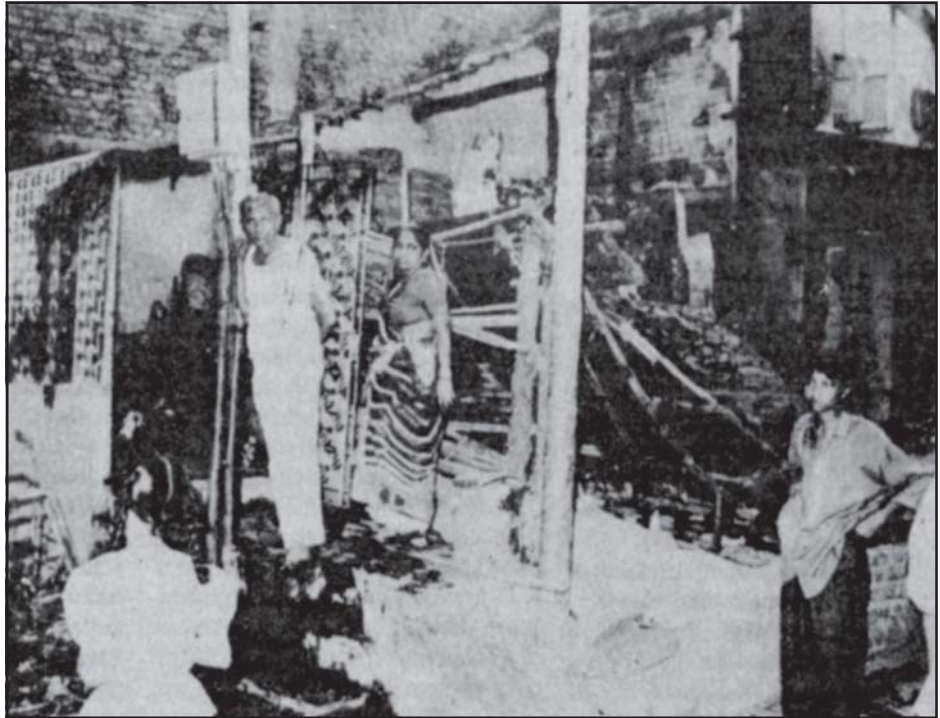
“The half burnt dead bodies of my family members were lying on the road. The police came and asked the mob to somehow burn the bodies fully and leave no signs. The mob mercilessly beat Chandubhai, our landlord, for giving shelter to Muslims. I cannot recognise these people because they were all outsiders.”

...contd. on page 54

December 6. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had organised a victory procession to demonstrate support for the *kar seva* in Ayodhya. An estimated 1,000 processionists, among whom were the leaders of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh (RSS) and other organisations, shouted provocative slogans such as, “*Mandir wahin banayenge*”, “*Ek dhakka aur do. Babri Masjid tor do*” and “*Desh mein rehana hai to Vande Mataram kehna hoga*”.

The city was somewhat tense as news filtered in about the demolition of the Babri Masjid. A small group of Muslim youth gave vent to their anger on the night of December 6 by damaging the sign boards of some shops in the old city. They also set fire to old tyres in the middle of the road. The Bharatiya Minority Suraksha Sangh (BMSS), a small organisation with a few supporters from the Dalit and Muslim communities, subsequently gave a call for Surat Bandh on December 7. (The BMSS is headed by Mahmood Pardewala, a man of dubious character, with underworld connections). A small crowd tried to stop the traffic and compel some shop and factory owners to down their shutters. At noon they threw stones on one factory, damaged the machinery and set material ablaze. A clash between two groups began on the streets.

As if on cue, the organised section of the majority community entered the fray. A relatively small crowd, consisting of anti-social elements and one or two people skilled at unlocking



One of the many destroyed homes in Surat

doors and shutters, began breaking shops owned by Muslims. Goods were brought out and set on fire. Soon other people joined in to help in the destruction, shouting slogans of “*Jai Shri Ram*”. By the noon of December 8, riots spread to various parts of the city. Things got worse by the evening. By midnight, over 61 people had lost their lives. The riots raged on fiercely for the next two days and the police was conspicuous by its absence. However, the newspapers reported that the army (there is uncertainty about the exact strength of the force) had carried out flag marches on December 9.

Systematic Killings

From all indications, the large scale looting, arson and killings were preplanned and systematic. How else could the mob which went on the rampage have been fully armed with lathis, swords, knives, iron rods, *guffis*, acid bulbs, bottles and stones? Several incidents of private firing were also reported. Furthermore, although

petrol pumps were closed, the crowd had enough petrol and kerosene to set ablaze houses, shops and human beings.

The Hindu mobs had carefully zeroed in on their targets. Though a few shops owned by Hindus were also destroyed in mob attacks, their number was insignificant in comparison to those of Muslims. The killings and destruction of property of the Muslims were confined not only to the localities where they were in a minority, but also in areas where they were present in a sizeable number and sometimes even in localities where they were in a majority. Sometimes, even in thickly populated Muslim societies or localities, they were out-numbered by huge crowds from “outside” areas, equipped with weapons and assisted by “local” residents. In several areas where Muslims are in a minority, the local Hindu residents had formed Ekta Samitis with their Muslim neighbours and promised to protect them against

...contd. from page 52

Ruksana, 30, a resident of Vishrampura:

“Our Hindu neighbours tell us that if we go back we should wear saris. And when they say so, we lose trust.”

Yasminbanu Gafar Noormohammed Jaliyawala, 18, a resident of Vijaynagar-2.

Her family consisted of her father, mother, brother and three sisters. She is now at the Ranitalav-Meman Jamatkhana, the biggest relief camp where around 3,200 people have taken refuge. Yasminbanu recounts the nightmarish ordeal that she and other Muslims belonging to Vijaynagar-2 underwent on December 8:

“On December 7, all residents of Vijaynagar did patrolling together. Vijaynagar-2 has a mixed population of Hindus and Muslims, but Hindus are in a majority. They have a good relationship with each other. While patrolling, all of them had snacks and tea together, for which Ayabhai paid. Both the communities had decided to maintain peace and brotherhood. The understanding was that if a Hindu mob came, the Hindus would handle them and if a Muslim mob came, the Muslims would do the same.

“But on December 8, when a mob of 1,500 people came from Varacha Road, the local Hindus joined up with them. Despite their agreement to maintain peace, they started stoning the houses of the Muslims. Around 2 p.m. everybody hid in Ayabhai’s house, which is a three-storey building. Hindu women were throwing stones, acid and hot water from the terrace on those who were trying to escape. The men standing downstairs were beating Muslims with sticks. The Muslims tried to counter attack but it was not possible for them to defend themselves against such a large mob. All they could do was light stoning.”

“Three policemen who were posted there fired three rounds in the

air. Later we heard that these policemen told the Hindus to continue their work.”

“Around 8 p.m. they set fire to Ayabhai’s house where everybody was hiding on the top floor. Since Ayabhai had a sari business, many bundles of saris were lying there and the fire spread rapidly.

“We were on the third floor. They were stoning heavily and finally they broke the doors, so we had to come out to escape. We were almost 40-45 people, the majority of us women. We ran and came out on the road and hid behind the staircase of a house. The mob found us out. Somebody from the mob hit my mother on the head with an iron pipe and she fainted. Then the mob forced Ayesha and Ayabhai’s wife to remove their clothes and pushed them down. I do not know whether they were raped or not because there was no electricity. But they could see us clearly because they had arranged focus lights outside. Later when my mother recovered consciousness, she gave her *dupatta* to Ayesha to cover her body. I don’t know what happened afterwards, but Ayesha was killed.

“These men were mostly from the neighbouring societies and they were married men. There were Devashi Shingada, a BJP candidate for the corporation elections, Soma Demsavala (also BJP), Naresh Kaliya, Piyush Dishwala, among others. This Piyush’s brothers, Ravi and Ashok, clean gutters in the street. (Yasmin used to work as a maid servant at Naresh’s house two or three years ago. When she got a job cutting saris for Ayabhai, she stopped doing housework).

“Then Noori, Ayabhai’s daughter, was raped and killed. Next, they turned to me. They were dragging me on the road. My mother was running after me and they hit her on the head. I don’t know what happened to her, but her dead body was found afterwards. I have heard that my

mother was also raped. Her hands and legs were cut and then thrown in the fire. A photograph of her dead body was published in the newspaper. They also threw my father in the fire after cutting his legs.

“I was raped by 10 men and also beaten. They poured kerosene on me after that, but I somehow managed to escape. I hid in a building which was under construction. They were looking for me, but I proved lucky since they could not find me as there was no electricity. My clothes were wet with blood. I did not have the upper cloth. Stoning was still on, but Kadir Pirzada of the Congress (I) came to our rescue. He was accompanied by the police. I saw the Muslims come out and plead for help. I shouted and told them that I was hiding there but I was unable to come out since there was not a single thread on my body. Somebody threw a bedsheet, I don’t know who it was. We were taken to Vishramnagar. Our people gave me clothes. Then I was taken to Civil Hospital, where I was examined. We gave the complaint on December 10 to the police, but they did not take my signature. I was cross-examined by them for four to five hours.

“I have heard that my father was also beaten badly. Acid was thrown on him and he was beaten with pipes and swords. People told me he was alive till December 9 and then died in the hospital.

“Our house (which was rented from Ayabhai) is completely burnt. My brother got married two months back. Both his and my dowry were also burnt. They looted all the gold ornaments that my parents had collected for my marriage. Everybody says that someone has shot a video cassette of whatever happened in Vijaynagar, but nobody has seen it.

“Some of the women put on saris and *bindis* and managed to escape but that was not possible for me since I was working as a maid servant in many of the houses. So they all knew me. □

attacks by “outsiders”. Eventually, however, many of them succumbed to the pressure of the outsiders and turned against their neighbours.

Careful planning apparently went into the attacks. According to many of the victims from Vijaynagar in the north half of the city, Pandesara in the south and Hidayatnagar in the west, 15 days before the incidents occurred, BJP workers, under the pretext of the forthcoming corporation elections, had collected information about their families and house numbers and promised to renew their ration cards. They believe that this information was used to identify them on communal lines. It is difficult to verify this. But the large-scale plunder and destruction would seem to confirm that “local” residents actively helped communal elements by pointing out their Muslim neighbours. It is alleged that informants were tipped Rs 100 for the identification of each Muslim house or shop. Even during the rampage, utmost care was taken that not an inch of property belonging to a Hindu was damaged — to the extent that even a wooden partition dividing a Hindu home from a Muslim one would be left unscarred, whereas the adjoining Muslim home would be totally charred.

Several victims point the finger at Devashi Shingada, BJP candidate for the Surat corporation elections, for many of the incidents in December. Says Sarifabanu, 28, a resident of Vijaynagar-2, who managed to survive a mob attack by her neighbours by taking shelter with a Hindu family: “Devashi Shingada is one of the main leaders responsible for the riot in our area. He initially assured us of our safety, as did most of the people from our area. But the same people attacked us with weapons. We were cheated by them because we were totally unprepared for such attacks

and relied on their assurances. While our belongings and property are extensively damaged, fortunately all our family members escaped unhurt.”

“People from our neighbouring societies of Udaynagar and Prabhunagar, who are North Gujaratis and Harijans respectively, joined the mob. I can identify some of the neighbours who took active part in the attack. They are Naresh “Kalia”, Bhikha Koli, Narayan Harijan, Gulab Daruwala, Raju Batka, Raju Machhimar, Ashok “Gutlerwalla”, Piyush “Dish wala” and Ravi. Amongst these, Naresh “Kalia” and Raju Batka were the ones who raped women, whereas Piyush and Ravi have prepared a video film. Others will

not say it openly because they are scared.”

“When the mob went on the rampage, we were taking shelter with one of the Hindu families. Twice or thrice, people came in the guise of being policemen to the place where we were hiding. They announced to all who were hiding that they should come out and not be frightened. But some of us went out and verified that they were fake police. Only when the real police came did we come out of hiding. The police took us to the relief camp. Now we won’t go back to Vijaynagar, nor would we send our children to work under a Hindu employer.”

During the rampage, provocative

Political Background

Surat was ruled by Muslim nawabs in the seventeenth century. Though the city has a large Muslim population (15 percent of the total population, according to the 1981 census), it has recorded a decline from 30 percent in 1951. The Muslim population in the city seems to have declined in proportion because of large scale immigration by Hindu workers. The Muslims in the city belong to both the Sunni and Shia sects. A sizeable section of the local Muslims, mainly Memons, Patni, Dawoodi Bohras and Khojas, are traders and manufacturers in the art silk industry. The poorer ones are workers in the art silk industry. The recent immigrant Muslims who have come to Surat over the last 20 years are employed mostly as weavers in the art silk industry.

Among the local Hindus, the dominant groups are the middle castes — Kanabi, Khatri, Ganchi and Gola Rana, who have made their fortune after the Second World War. The dominance of the traditional upper caste Vantias and Brahmins has

declined. Along with the middle castes are the Jains who constitute around one percent of the population and are in business and industry.

These Hindus and Muslims have worked together in industry and business. The last communal riots in the city were in 1927. Though many urban areas of Gujarat were convulsed by repeated Hindu-Muslim riots since 1969, Surat remained free of such incidents till 1990. Two years ago, on the eve of the Lok Sabha elections, there were two or three isolated incidents of rioting but they were localised. One was on the periphery of the old city and another was in the western side of the new area, across the river. Things have changed since the BJP began to build up popular support. The party won the Parliament seat and three out of four Assembly seats of the city in the 1989 and 1990 elections. Though the party does not have a majority in the corporation, it controls the local government with support from some independent members and a splinter group of the Congress (I).

slogans and abuses were shouted. In the two worst affected areas of Vijaynagar and Pandesara, the “pandits” from the temples made provocative speeches, over loudspeakers. In these speeches Hindus were warned against being soft to Muslims and threatened that they too would meet the same fate as the Muslims if they helped them.

The madness, it seemed, knew no bounds. In Vijaynagar and Pandesara, roads were blocked by creating 10 to 12-foot high walls of bamboo and other material so that the victims could not run away. Telephone, water and electricity lines were disconnected. Special floodlights were installed to watch the movements of victims. Not only were holy books, places of worship and people set on fire, but raped women were made to walk under floodlights. Local imams and maulvis in Vijaynagar were humiliated and forced to utter “*Shri Ram*”, after which they were cut down in two or three parts. One imam was thrown alive into a fire. The frenzied crowd did not spare anyone, whether young or old, man or woman. Children were struck on the head and cut into two pieces. The old were also beaten and killed. People had their heads and hands chopped, were thrown down from the upper floors of buildings, killed and burnt or burnt alive. In order to destroy the evidence of the large scale killings, the dead bodies were either burnt fully or thrown into the gutters. In one instance, the crowd took many dead bodies to a nearby pit where construction work for a gutter was in progress. They filled the pit with the dead bodies, covered them with the looted household goods and set them ablaze.

Women, as pointed out earlier, were often at the receiving end of the attacks. A few were raped, then beaten and killed. Some were gangraped. In



“Shri Ram, Hindu makaan (house) written outside a home

one case, some passengers travelling in a train were thrown out and killed.

Many women were witness to the killings of their husbands and children. Cases of miscarriages and grave mental shocks are also reported. Jaminabanu Nabiulla, 28, a resident of Vijaynagar, is a concrete example. She was six-months pregnant when her husband and three children were killed by a mob in front of her own eyes. One of her children was torn apart by people pulling his two legs. She has lost her mental balance ever since and is now under treatment. More shocking, though unverified, is the report by many victims from Vijaynagar, such as Sarifabanu (quoted above), that some of the miscreants videotaped the mob attack, including the incidents of rape.

While carrying out their attacks, the leaders of the crowd had a list of shops, factories and other properties belonging to Memons, Khojas and Bohras. They did not spare even the last two communities, which are generally regarded as mild and harmless by the Hindus. Apparently confident of the success of their mission, the miscreants even went so far as to warn shop and factory

owners that their premises were to be plundered shortly.

In some areas, looting and arson continued for four days without intervention from the police. It is impossible to generalise about the participants in the looting. The free-for-all was joined alike by upper and lower castes, rich and poor, rustic and anglicised. Women entered the jewellery shops where they frantically searched for the correct size of gold and silver bangles or rings. They went into furniture shops to hunt for furniture of their taste, inside sari and readymade garment shops to match blouse pieces for the looted saris and pick up the right size of dresses. They also took shoes that would fit them from the footwear shops. The looters came on foot or by scooters and cars to help themselves to whatever they desired.

The areas near Payak Mohalla and Borwada, where Hindu houses are surrounded by Muslim localities, were the target of Muslim attacks on December 8. A few houses were damaged by the crowd and one person was killed. Many Hindus, fearful for their safety, vacated their houses. In some other areas such as Limbat,

Udhana and Mandarwaja, crowds from both communities clashed with each other. Both were equipped with swords, acid bombs and bottles of petrol. In such clashes, some Hindus lost their lives. Some shops owned by the Hindus in Muslim localities were looted and burnt by crowds consisting mostly of people from the minority community. Two days later, there were chain reactions and counter reactions from both the sides.

Heartening Instances

Even amidst the mayhem, however, there were heartening instances of people of one community coming to the help of another. Both communities helped each other reach safe places, even if it meant changes in name and dress. Take, for instance, Bombay Market which is a poor and middle class locality. Around 12 families of the minority community had settled here. The people of the area had not experienced any disturbances since October 30, 1990. There were some differences between the men of the minority and majority communities, but the womenfolk of both communities had good relations with each other. On October 7 and 8, when a few *larigallas* were set on fire, they still had confidence that peace would be restored quickly. But when they had to run away to save their lives, Hindu neighbours helped them to run away. In many cases, Hindu women gave Muslim women saris and *bindis* to protect their minority identity. Thus, Khajaben and Fatima Bibi, originally from Marathwada, who have been casual labourers in Surat for the last 20 years, say, "We were offered saris by a Khandeshi neighbour when our house was set on fire."

Julekhan Bibi, also from Bombay Market, experienced both the viciousness and compassion of her neighbours. As she says, "Initially the

Hindu mob which came to our locality was prevented from attacking us by people who told them that it was a Hindu locality and there was no Muslim house. But later a woman called Kusumben Pradhan showed all the Muslim houses. However, a Hindu man who owns a bungalow in the area helped us to escape by providing us saris and *bindis*. He also hid women and children in his house when the mob was present and thus saved their lives. Seven men were burnt to death. Gulzara *bava ni* Dargah was also damaged."

In a number of localities, Hindus protected the shops of the Muslims and vice versa. The two communities sometimes formed joint committees and protected their areas from outsiders. Even in the worst affected areas, we came across a number of cases where Hindus sheltered Muslims at grave risk to themselves. The Muslims did likewise. In a number of slum areas with a mixed population, Hindus and Muslims protected each other. Though the slums, in which one-third of the city's population lives, were not free of violence, the destruction was minimal. However, no political party or union can take credit for this. It was only local efforts that imparted a note of sanity as law and order broke down in the city.

Proliferation of Rumours

As elsewhere, in the Surat riots too, rumours were used systematically and skilfully to provoke and mobilise people on the streets to attack members of the minority community. The well thought out and well planned rumours were spread through telephones and cable TV. The types of rumours were also selected carefully to get the desired result. For example, the rumour that a popular police inspector of the Patidar community of Saurashtra had been seriously injured in an attack and

women of that community had been molested and raped, provoked people sufficiently to come out in the streets and indulge in large scale looting, burning and killing.

Absurd rumours also gained currency. In the posh area of Athwa lines, for instance, a rumour spread that a few people (the exact number was also given) in a white Maruti were coming with loaded guns to destroy the temple of Amba, located at the periphery of the area. Tension built up as people, even residents of bungalows and large apartments, said that the news had been confirmed on telephone and cable TV. People were led to believe that the purveyors of the news were speaking from the BJP office, thus giving legitimacy to the rumours.

Police Inaction

Anarchy and lawlessness prevailed in Surat between December 7 and December 12. Curfew was imposed on December 8 and the army carried out flag marches in some localities. There were several reasons for the breakdown of law and order. Firstly, the police force in the city was inadequate since the state government had directed its attention at preventing riots in Ahmedabad and Baroda following the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Since the state government did not provide an adequate police force to the city in time, things went out of control.

Secondly, the police force was highly communalised. Thus the police chose to remain inactive when the mayhem was at its peak or went into action when everything was over and they were sure that their entry would not disrupt the rampagers from their activities. There were several complaints against the police from both the communities and victims reported that despite their shouts for help, the police did not come to their rescue.

One popular explanation for the police inaction is that it was an expression of their resentment against P.K. Dutta, who had been newly appointed as chief of police in the city. Until Dutta came to Surat, the city was a haven for bootleggers and other anti-social elements. When he came, however, he cracked down firmly on them. As a result, the boot-leggers suffered losses in their business and the police, who were raking in a regular



Courtesy: India Today

Selective targeting of Muslims; photo from Ahmedabad riots

income from the former, were also affected. Dissatisfied with their new boss, they avenged themselves by turning a blind eye to the killings and destruction, thereby pinning the responsibility for the Surat riots on Dutta.

There were some exceptions, however. Vajidaben of Vijaynagar 2, recalls an incident during the riots when the humane face of the police came to the fore. In her words, “At 7 p.m., our entire family, which is in the business of polishing *zari*, shifted to a neighbouring house. Heavy stoning and throwing of acid bulbs was on. In one room there were around 25 people. Because of the heat of the fire, we took off the clothes of the children and stuffed them in their mouths so that their cries could not be heard. After some time we heard people shouting “*Allah-o-Akbar*”, and thought that people from our community had come to our rescue. Two or three men went down to verify and they were killed by the mob standing there.

“After some time, we saw a group of people in khadi uniform who we thought were policemen. But that was

a fraud. Around 12:15 a.m. the police actually arrived. All the hiding Muslims came down and asked for help. We were shifted to the neighbouring society of Vishramnagar. On our way there, we saw Yasmin, a girl of 18 from Vijaynagar, bleeding badly. She was trying to cover her naked body with her torn salwar. She also joined us and reached Vishramnagar. We experienced humane behaviour of the police. The police offered their shawls to cover the naked bodies of children and gave them confidence.”

The government machinery too failed abysmally to control the situation, as admitted to by the collector of Surat himself at a public meeting on December 9, 1992. Both the district administration and the municipal corporation were ineffective in rescue, relief and rehabilitation work. Political parties were busy in apportioning blame to each other, rather than extending help to the victims of the riots. One minister even admitted that since they were politicians, they had no credibility in the eyes of the people. But one of the

exceptions seems to have been Kadir Pirzada, a local Congress (I) leader and a corporator. Johrabanu Ayubkhan Pathan, 25, a resident of Vijaynagar-2 and a riot victim, says, “Kadir Pirzada came to our rescue. But for this, the toll would have been even more.” Mostly, however, people were left to fend for themselves.

The city is still tense. Night curfew continued to be imposed all over the city upto the end of February. Incidents of stabbing and looting were reported almost every day during February when we prepared this report. The economy of the city too has been devastated. Production came to a halt as industries remained closed for over two weeks. About 40 factories were badly damaged and are still not in a functioning condition. Many industrial workers had to go without wages for several days and a week after the riots, workers from Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, UP and Bihar migrated back to their home towns. They have not returned to work so far. In some sensitive areas, night curfew continued until the first week of April. □