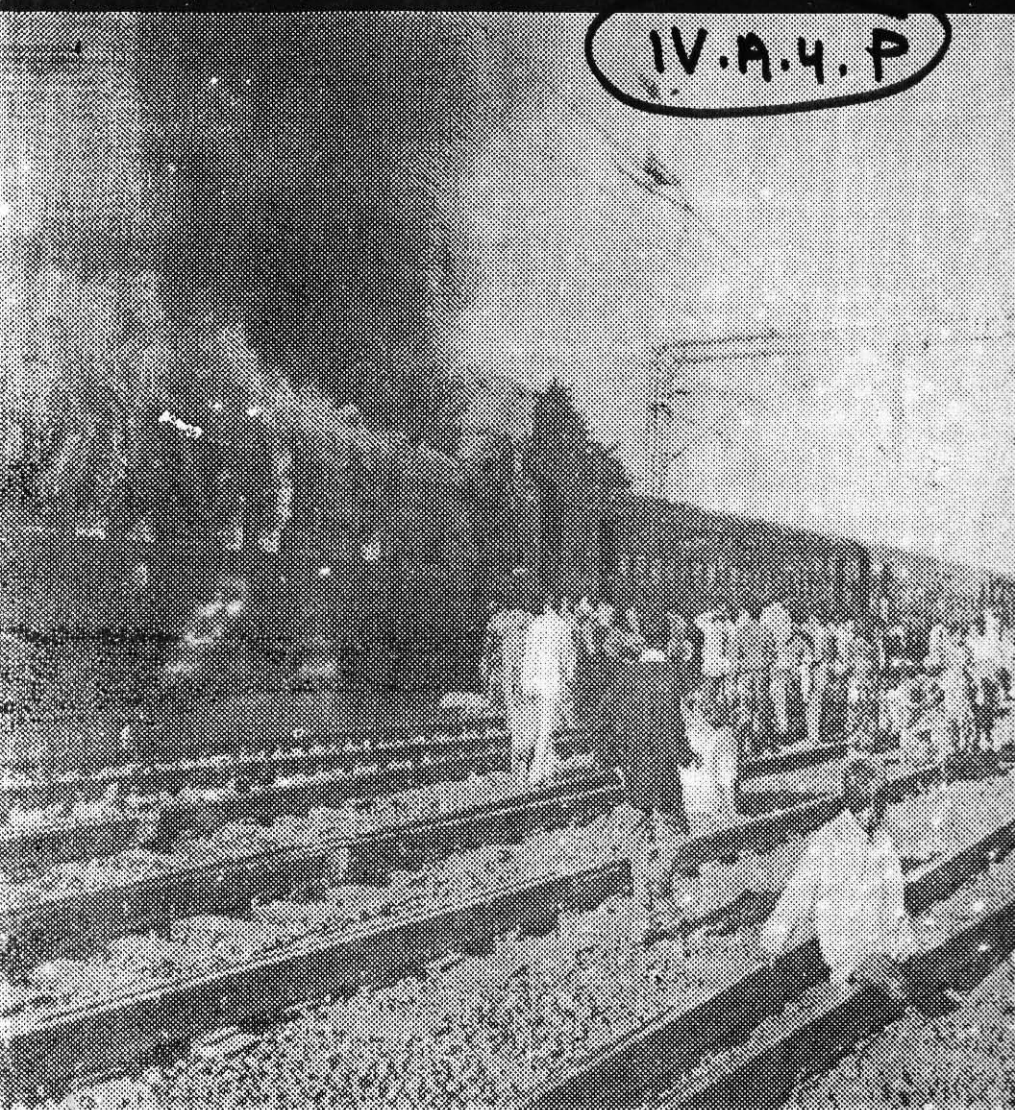


# DATELINE GODHRA

IV.A.4.P



## NIRBHAY BANO ANDOLAN

## **DATELINE GODHRA** by Jyoti Punwani

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Cover: The burning Sabarmati coach

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## INTRODUCTION

The burning of Coach S/6 of the Sabarmati Express on February 27 at Godhra railway station continues to raise questions. Was it a conspiracy? Who did it and why? Even three months after the incident, contradictory versions keep surfacing.

All accounts, including that of the National Human Rights Commission, suggest that the violence against Muslims in the rest of Gujarat which followed this incident, was planned months in advance, and that the Godhra arson was only an excuse to implement the plan.

But how did that 'excuse' take place? Had the Sabarmati not been burnt, would the VHP have undertaken the State-backed pogrom against Muslims that has been going on specially in Ahmedabad, since the last three months? Or would they have waited for another such excuse?

Keen to find out what sparked off this flashpoint, and to talk to those who survived the incident, whose stories had largely gone unreported in the English press, I went to Godhra and Ahmedabad from April 1 to 7.

I met as many eye-witnesses to the incident as I could locate. I also met the District SP, Raju Bhargava, and the Collector, Jayanthi Ravi, as well as prominent citizens and political leaders of Godhra. I also met a few survivors who had been traveling on the train and some of the families whose members had perished in the fire.

The interviews of the Sabarmati survivors were conducted jointly by Sandhya Mhatre and me. Two of these interviews were conducted by Shama Dalwai and Shaila Satpute.

**Jyoti Punwani**  
May 23, 2002

## Chapter I

### FEBRUARY 27, 2002

Godhra is an important station on the western railway line for north-bound trains.

The vendors at the station have had previous experiences of hooliganism by long-distance rallyists, most notably those going for Mahendra Tikait's kisaan rally. In the context of the Ayodhya campaign, the police and the railway authorities seem to have worked out a fairly efficient drill to prevent confrontation between the VHP travelers and the Muslim vendors. They provide additional manpower at the station, make the vendors close shop and divert trains carrying rallyists to platforms other than Platform No 1, which is the only platform with stalls.

Many of the Muslim vendors live in Signal Falia, the sprawling settlement adjoining the station.

The VHP has been sending volunteers to Ayodhya since February 22 from Gujarat. Three batches had gone on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup>. On their way to Ayodhya, the trains halt at Godhra at night. On one of these trips, 101 VHP volunteers from Godhra had boarded the train, and been welcomed by their companions inside the train with shouts of 'Jai Sri Ram'. Police had increased bandobast that night. A Muslim rickshaw-wallah who sleeps inside the station told us that the police had for five days before February 27, been closing all stalls around 3 am, and ensuring that no bearded Muslim remained on the platform.

It is in this context that the incident should be viewed.

#### The Incident

What happened at Godhra railway station?

From interviews with eye-witnesses at the station, the following account could be pieced together:

The train arrived late, at 7.43 AM on Platform No 1. At that time, the station is crowded with residents of Godhra wanting to catch their regular trains to the nearby towns of Piplod, Dahod and Baroda, where they work. Many of them are Muslims and identifiable as such.

This is what the following eye-witnesses told me:

*Umaid Dalal and his friend 'A', who I met separately.*

The two Bohras travel every morning from Godhra to Piplod on the Dehradun Express which leaves at 8 am. Both recalled seeing passengers alight from the Sabarmati Express with hockey sticks and pipes on February 27, orange headbands round their foreheads, shouting 'Jai Sri Ram'. 'A' saw them fling a glass of tea on a bearded tea vendor's face, while Dalal remembered seeing them freely pick up whatever they wanted from the stalls on the platform.

The two friends went up on the footbridge. From there, 'A' saw one of them pull the beard of a Muslim on the platform and order him to say 'Jai Sri Ram'. The latter refused.

Suddenly, they looked up and saw these two bearded Bohras, one of them with a cap. 'Daadhiwale mullah ko maaro,' 'A' remembered the VHP activists shouting and rushing towards the bridge. "At that moment, the whistle blew and the train started moving. They ran towards it and we ran towards the other platform."

Both recalled the Dehradun Express, which left the station at the same time but in the opposite direction, being stoned.

*Anees Piplodwala*

A regular traveler to Piplod from Godhra on the Dehradun Express, he told me he saw the saffron headband-wearing passengers beat up one or two bearded persons on the platform.

“They were saying, ‘*Ek hi nara bolo Jai Sri Ram to chhorenge*.’” According to Piplodwala, one or two Bohras did say it.

Piplodwala also saw them looting stalls and beating a tea vendor. He confirmed that they ran towards the bridge shouting, ‘*Mullah ko maaro*’, but the train started so they ran to their compartments.

According to Piplodwala, a burqah-clad woman came running to the waiting passengers and told them, “You people are just standing there, do something.” Piplodwala recalled remarking to a friend, “It’s good it’s so early, everyone’s asleep at Signal Falia, otherwise there would have been trouble.”

He also remembered seeing the train stop once near the parcel office towards the far end of the platform, and stones being thrown from both sides.

Piplodwala saw three lathi-carrying policemen on the platform, one in mufti. He also recalled the Dehradun Express being stoned.

Some eye-witnesses didn’t want to be named. Three were passengers, bound for Piplod and Baroda, and three are railway employees, two of them Hindu. They confirmed that the VHP passengers had sticks in their hands and were chasing bearded Muslims on the platform. One vendor, a Hindu, saw the tray of a cigarette vendor being upturned. They also saw three lathi-carrying policemen, one in mufti, not intervening while all this was going on. The other Hindu eye-witness deplored the behaviour of the VHP passengers: “In a democracy, you can’t impose your religion on anyone else.”

One of the passengers traveling to Piplod saw the VHP passengers pick up stones from the tracks. Another heard them say: “Don’t let them get inside the train”, probably referring to the Muslim vendors.

A bearded Muslim vendor related how he coped with the situation: “As soon as I saw these people with their orange headbands and sticks, shouting slogans, I ran off and hid outside the station. I told my staff to remove their nameplates and if asked, to say that they were Hindus. I told them to say ‘Jai Sri Ram’ if ordered to do

so, and on no account to ask for money. When Tikait's followers had got off here, they had not only grabbed my samosas, but even the tray on which they were kept.

“However, some of these fellows did pay. They also asked one of my assistants if he was a Hindu, and he said yes though he is not.

“I saw these fellows hitting Siddiq Bakr on the leg and head. He was not hit because he asked for money, but because he was bearded. He had to be treated, and he hasn't come back since, though the police need his statement.

“They also molested a girl who had been sitting on the bench on the platform (*uski beizzati ki*).

Almost immediately after Siddiq was beaten, the Muslims began throwing stones.”

Siddiq has been made one of the main accused in the Godhra incident and was underground while I was there. The Hindu railway staffers to whom he used to serve tea described him as a mild and pleasant fellow.

The girl referred to is 17-year-old *Sophiya Shaikh*, whom I met at her home in Baroda. Here's what she said.

“We were going back to Baroda after a long holiday with my mausi in Signal Falia. But hardly had we sat down to wait for the Godhra-Baroda ‘Memo’ (which leaves at 8 am everyday), that the Sabarmati came in. We saw a ruckus on the platform. Passengers with saffron headbands who had got down from the train were shouting loudly and roaming with lathis. We got up to wait outside till the Sabarmati left.”

The mother walked ahead, followed by her younger daughter. Sophiya was trailing behind them when “someone grabbed my arm from the back and began pulling me towards the train, at the same time cupping his hand over my mouth. But I had already started screaming ‘Mummy, Mummy.’ As soon as he heard me, he left me. Perhaps he had thought I was alone.”



The threesome immediately ran into one of the rooms in the station and then went home as soon as they could.

They didn't lodge a complaint, nor do they have any intention of doing so. "We thank God we escaped in one piece. This girl broke out in a cold sweat, she could barely walk," said the mother, who seemed still shaken when I met her. Her husband revealed that he had just resumed work the previous day. Ever since his family returned from Godhra, his wife had taken to bed with a high fever, and was unwilling to be left alone.

Some journalists and activists in Mumbai were keen to host a press conference for Sophiya in Mumbai. When I asked her if she would be willing to relate her story in front of the press, Sophiya shied away with a "Never" even as her father shook his head.

This incident has been cited as one of the immediate causes of the burning of the coach. But said Sophiya, "That can never be. Who committed the crime, and who paid for it!" A Class VIII dropout, Sophiya said she has Hindu friends and this experience had not changed her relationship with them.

"We don't like living without our Hindu neighbours, we attend each other's weddings and eat together," added her mother, giving me her contact phone number. It belongs to a Hindu neighbour.

"Baroda is called *sahaj nagri*," said Sophiya's father, "where Hindus and Muslims live in peace. For the last 10 years nothing of this kind happened. I don't know what happened this time."

"We go to Godhra very often, nothing of this sort has ever happened," the mother kept repeating. "Sophiya still trembles sometimes at the thought and tells me she can see it all happening."

The railway police had recorded Sophiya's statement at her house.

Almost to a man, Godhra's Hindus refused to believe Sophiya's statement, alleging that she had been set up by her community. If

that had been so, Godhra's prominent Muslim leaders would have made an exhibit of her. Instead, it was with some difficulty that I could trace out her mother's uncle, who rang up his niece in Baroda to inform her that I would be coming. Even then she wasn't ready to receive me when I arrived: she was asleep, not exactly the behaviour of someone set up to tell a false story. Sophiya's father was very suspicious, checked my identity card and seemed reassured only after his wife informed him that I had come through her relative. Even then, he didn't seem happy with my interviewing the women.

Since initial reports spoke about trouble at Dahod, the station before Godhra, we spoke to railway employees, vendors inside and outside Dahod station, coolies as well as prominent residents of Dahod. However, all of them said that nothing at all had taken place there, except the raising of slogans by the VHP members who had alighted from the train which left Dahod at 6.48 am. Senior rail officers at Godhra and the Collector, Godhra, confirmed that no message had been received from Dahod regarding trouble there.

The train left Godhra station in three minutes. In those three minutes, passengers who had converged there to catch their regular trains to work were told to remain outside – specially those who had beards. By the time the train was to leave, the situation had become so volatile that the RPF constables on duty were “pleading” (according to one of them) with the VHP members to get back on the train. None of them however, stopped the latter from tormenting the Muslims.

### *The stoning of the train*

Almost as soon as the train moved, the chain was pulled and it stopped again. Even while it was still within the platform limits, the stoning began by some Muslims at the station. It continued even after it was set on fire, according to accounts given by the RPF constables, railway employees and survivors. Debashis Bhattacharya, returning from Lucknow, told *The Times of India* that he had to choose between being burnt inside and being assaulted by the mob outside. (*TOI*, Feb 28)

When the train stopped at Signal Falia, about 1 km from the station, railway employees posted there saw a large mob, which included some women, surround the entire length of the train and stone it. The stoning went on for about 10-15 minutes. The mob was armed, they said, with pipes and other implements.

One of them heard members of the mob say "*Hamara aadmi ander hai.*" Bhattacharya told *The Times of India* that the mob was "roaring": *Maar dalo sabko and Ek ko bachne nahin denge.*

An RPF constable told us that when he reached the burning train, the Muslim mob was stoning it from the Signal Falia side. A few Muslims had gathered on the other side of the tracks too, whom they could disperse easily. When we visited the coach, we found a stone still stuck between the bars of the window in Coach S/5, which was slightly burnt.

Women in Signal Falia told me they woke up to the sound of stones falling outside their homes. This may sound far-fetched, but there is no doubt that the VHP travelers also threw stones. Bajrang Dal boys traveling on the train told us they had stoned the Muslim mob in self-defence. Malaben Rawal, national organizer of the Durga Vahini, told us that the Muslims first tried to attack other coaches, but were repulsed by the VHP members, one of whom hit a Muslim with a 5-foot long trishul. She was not a passenger, but an admission such as this from a VHP functionary needs to be taken seriously.

Secondly, as reported above, some passengers who crossed the tracks to board the Dehradun Express saw the VHP travelers pick up stones from the tracks. They also said the Dehradun Express was stoned.

The first chain-pulling seemed to have been done to enable those left behind to get on.

### *The burning of the train*

I could not find a single eye-witness who could describe how the coach was set on fire. One rail employee stationed near Signal Falia that day, said the fire began around 8 am. Everyone first saw

smoke emerging from the train and then flames. Three theories were put forward about how the train was burnt:

1. Survivors who were inside the train said the mob broke the windows and poured inflammable liquid inside, then threw burning rags and cotton balls inside.
2. An RPF constable who was the first to reach there told us that the mob must have set fire to the buffers between the two coaches, since rubber catches fire fast. They must have also poured diesel inside the toilet windows which, unlike the other windows, were not closed, he said. The fire spread to the coach from both ends, trapping the passengers in the centre.
3. Eye-witnesses saw flames coming out from the windows on the track side. Janakidevi Chaurasia, who was an ordinary traveler not with the VHP, told *India Today* that after the windows and doors on the platform side were shut to avoid the stones, her son spotted fire on the other side and bottles landed inside the coach from those windows. It is possible that the inflammable substance was poured in from the track side.

Survivors say the smoke was overpowering, choking them. One of them, Mandakini Bhatia, couldn't speak for days. That might explain why no screams for help were heard from the coach.

Gayatri Panchal lost her parents and two sisters in the fire, and managed to escape by jumping off and crawling under the train to the other side. She remembers a strange smell in the smoke which made it difficult to breathe.

### *Unresolved questions*

1. The second chain-pulling brought the train to a halt about 1 km from the station, ie, near Cabin A, outside Signal Falia.

Who pulled the chain? It has been traced to S/6, the coach that was burnt. The driver's complaint, which is the FIR, ascribes it to the same mob who burnt the train.

There is some doubt as to whether the chain was pulled at all. A railway employee said that the mob broke the vacuum pipe, thus neutralising the chain pulling mechanism. A GRP constable said that the fire had burnt the vacuum pipe.

2. Why wasn't any attempt made to disperse the mob which stoned and set fire to the train? We could find no satisfactory answer to this.

GRP men told me that though they are always armed, they normally leave their rifles at their outpost at the station because they are too cumbersome to carry all the time.

An RPF constable, probably the first to reach the site, told us that they managed to disperse the mob from the station, but they came back from the road – a gap in the boundary wall separating the tracks from the road, was cemented after the incident.

However, the GRP did fire. A GRP constable told us that as she came to work around 8 am she heard the sounds of firing. A railway employee said firing dispersed the mob.

The SP who reached there at 8.26 am, said he saw no mob there - they had dispersed by then.

### *Fire Brigade's version*

The Fire Brigade got the first call at 8.20 am. Two employees told us that they left the Fire station at 8.21 am. But en route they were stopped by a Muslim mob, led by a fair, tall, clean-shaven, strapping man whom they said "looked demented, the way he was waving his hands at us". On the right side, they said, was Haji Bilal on a motorcycle. The Fire Brigade employees knew him as a councillor who often treated them to tea.. He made a gesture signifying that they should turn back. As the driver braked suddenly, Bilal gestured to the public gathered there, and they began stoning them so intensely that the glass of the wind-shield shattered, hitting the helmet of the man seated next to the driver.

They finally drove through the mob, but the detour delayed them, they said. It also forced them to stop some distance away from the

burning coach, necessitating a water pipe of 150 feet instead of 50 feet. "Had it not been for all this, we may have been able to save a few more lives," they said.

As they reached, they saw flames raging from the windows. A woman, her face black, could be seen coming towards the doorway and going back again and again. This sight haunted them for a long time. "We could have at least saved her," they told us. The SP also spoke of this woman at the door, her face all black.

When the Fire Brigade reached the spot around 8.26 am, the passengers of the Sabarmati were already on the tracks. Some of the passengers were shouting that the mob had kidnapped some of their women, said one fire-fighter.

The fire took some time to die out. But the coach was so hot, said one Fire Brigade employee, that when he entered it after the fire had been extinguished, and his shoulder accidentally touched the door, his skin got burnt through his wet clothes. "The flesh flew off the bodies as water touched them," he recalled, "so intense was the heat."

### *RPF's role*

The RPF was probably the first to reach there. An elderly constable told us that they had to shout to the passengers inside to open their doors and windows. Ultimately the RPF broke the windows on the track side, and found some of the passengers unconscious.

Having worked in the Fire Brigade for 22 years, this constable volunteered to enter the burning coach and could manage to save a few people, holding a blanket borrowed from the other passengers, as a shield behind him, till it caught fire. Passengers were bringing blankets he said, to wrap around those who were being rescued from S/6.

### *At the station*

Meanwhile, the other passengers in the train had got off. Both the RPF constable and the SP commented on the behaviour of the

VHP passengers, saying that they seemed more interested in getting the police to go after the Muslim mob, than helping save their own people. They did not tell the SP that their people were trapped inside the burning coach.

About an hour later, a clash did break out between the VHP-led Hindu mob, including the VHP travelers, and the Muslims of Signal Falia. Calls were made from one of the mosques near the tracks for Muslims to come out in defence. Police fired, killing two Muslims: Irfan, aged 17, and Tyeb Jadi, aged 32, both shot in the chest. Both the GRP and the city police claim credit for the firing. Curfew was imposed at 10.55 am.

The SP said that the fire was controlled around 10.45 am, and at 11 am, the train was set to go ahead with the forward-bound passengers, after coaches S/5 and S/6 were detached. But he said, the VHP passengers refused to allow the train to move till action was taken against those who had burnt it. It finally left at 12.40 pm.

The rescue operation began only late in the afternoon, after the coach had cooled down enough for people to enter it. A Fire Brigade worker said many bodies were piled one on top of the other in the middle of the coach, almost as though they had been arranged. One mother had died while feeding her child..

It was only at that time that the enormity of the crime was realized. Everyone had anticipated that there would be just a few bodies, specially since no screams for help were heard from the coach.

## THE FALLOUT IN GODHRA

The immediate fallout of the burning of the Sabarmati in Godhra was retaliatory violence against Muslims. The two communities fought each other on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup>. Police fired, killing two Muslims.

The next day was the VHP-declared and BJP-supported bandh. Mobs went on a rampage destroying Muslim properties. In all, property worth around Rs 20 crore was destroyed in Godhra town on February 27 and 28. These included 12 factories and/or showrooms in the GIDC area, one big and six small mosques, one school and three highway hotels. The Navjivan Paints factory and the showroom of Mahindra & Mahindra tractors were two of the biggest properties destroyed. Both were owned by Bohras. All this took place during curfew.

On February 28, the Municipality demolished illegal garages just behind the station in Signal Falia. This naturally caused resentment among the residents there, who felt this was an unnecessary diversion of security forces which could have been deployed in the areas just outside Godhra, where large-scale destruction of Muslim property was taking place.

However, the Collector justified this act saying that she had received frequent complaints from the police that these garages were fronts for illegal activities by anti-social elements. The authorities were determined to prevent a recurrence of the February 27 incident at any cost, specially since they knew other VHP batches would be returning, she told me. Demolishing the garages also cleared the area, making it easier to patrol. She denied that the RAF had been diverted for this purpose, saying it had been brought in primarily for Godhra town.

Two weeks later, several structures were demolished in the Muslim-dominated Polan Bazaar, when tension was still high. Again, this created bitterness. The Collector said this was done on



the written request of the army, which wanted broader roads for effective patrolling.

Though large-scale destruction of Muslim property took place, no Muslim was killed in Godhra, though many Godhra residents must have seen the burnt and disfigured bodies of the Sabarmati passengers. This disproves the theory of "natural reaction" used to justify the continuous killing, raping and burning alive of Muslims in Ahmedabad, Baroda and other places.

Why did Godhra escape this "natural Hindu anger"?

The swift imposition of curfew helped, though mob violence did take place even during curfew on February 27-28. More than two months after the incident, night curfew continued to be in force almost throughout the city.

The main factor, however, seems to have been the decision of those who normally riot, not to do so this time.

Geographically, Godhra is divided into community ghettos. For Hindus to attack Muslims, they would have had to take them on in their strongholds. The Sindhis, who settled here after Partition, are regarded as the only ones capable of doing so. There have been fierce riots between one section of Muslims: the Ghanchis, and Sindhis in 1965 and 80. In 89-90, as a fallout of L K Advani's rath yatra, violence broke out leading to police firing. This time, it was not restricted only to Ghanchis and Sindhis, but included other Muslims and Hindus.

Ironically, Ghanchis and Sindhis have more in common with each other than they do with others of their faiths. Sindhis and Ghanchi Muslims lived next to each other before 1980. In the '80 riots, the Ghanchi Muslims responded to a rumour about members of their community having been killed by Sindhis, by burning alive a family of five Sindhis in Signal Falia. After that, Sindhis moved out of Signal Falia. Sindhi violence resulted in Ghanchis moving out of Chithiyawar, which is now a Sindhi stronghold.

This time, said a leader of the Sindhi community, Kishorilal Bhayani (former president of Godhra municipality), the Sindhis decided they would not retaliate for four reasons:

1. No one from Godhra had died in the Sabarmati Express;
2. Business was prospering and any riot would set it back by years, without any gain. By gain he meant evicting people of the other community and taking over their property. That process had been completed in the last two riots, he said. On the other hand, the losses in terms of rehabilitation and legal work would be tremendous.
3. The Sindhis had already suffered a lot by the destruction of Bohra shops in the villages, because they were the wholesale suppliers to the Bohras. They normally supplied on credit and now they could not ask them to pay up.
4. They didn't want other Hindus to fire from their shoulders as they had always done. "We know we are the only ones who can confront the Ghanchis, but we haven't taken the contract for doing so. This time we told the other Hindus: "You go ahead, we will be with you."

Hence the Sindhis advised their boys to be ready for defence, but not to attack.

In Godhra, the first incident, ie. the burning of the train, and the clash that took place immediately thereafter, remained confined to the VHP and the Muslims of Signal Falia. Other Muslims and Hindus remained unaffected. Even as the Sabarmati was waiting at the platform, Muslim passengers who had gone to the station to commute to work, told me that they were asked to wait outside by Hindus who had already reached there. Similarly, Hindus who were on their way to the station, unaware of what was happening there, told me they were told to go back by Muslims who had already reached the station.

In the first week of the post-Godhra violence, Bohras in Godhra, grounded by curfew, received the news about their shops in Piplod and Mora being burnt down by VHP activists under the nose of the police, from their Hindu neighbours/employees there.

All this again gives the lie to the theory of "spontaneous Hindu upsurge".

### *Psychological divide*

Though no killings took place in Godhra after the burning of the Sabarmati Express, the psychological and social divide was complete when I reached Godhra. It was not just rickshaw-wallahs of one community who refused to go into areas where the other community lived. So deep was the mistrust that parents were not willing to let their children travel in the same bus as their classmates of the other community, to appear for their final exams.

This fear cost at least one life: a young Muslim woman died after childbirth as her family hesitated to rush her to her gynaecologist, whose hospital was in a Hindu area.

Even friends who had worked together for communal harmony didn't visit each other's homes. Rakesh Joshi and Nilesbhai of the National Youth Project said they had talked on the phone to their fellow-activist advocate Ehsaan, about issuing a joint peace appeal, but neither was he willing to come to meet them in their area, nor did he think it advisable for them to come to his area. Ultimately, the peace appeal was never issued because every time they broached the subject to other Hindus, the latter rejected the idea.

The NYP had, over the last 11 years, worked through social programmes to bring the two communities together in Godhra. Godhra town saw no riots in December 92, and the NYP took some of the credit for that.

This time however, Rakesh and Nilesbhai themselves seemed to have fallen prey to the prejudices against Muslims being voiced by Hindus. Despite that, all through the weeks following February 27, they guarded their Muslim friend's hospital, situated in a Hindu area.

Like the rest of Godhra's Hindus, these activists had not ventured into the Godhra Relief Camps, where about 3000 Muslims hounded from the villages around Godhra had poured in. But they were worried about the mood brewing among the camps' inmates.

Hence they had drafted a memorandum asking the Collector to give the inmates work on daily wages to keep them busy.

When asked why they had not given even some token donation to the camps in their own town, the Hindus' response ranged from: "it has never occurred to us" to "Why should we? To enable them to eat, sleep and riot at night as they do in Ahmedabad?"

The depth of the divide between the two communities could be measured by the pre-February 27 intimacy between them. Though in Godhra, all communities live separately, they are inter-dependent in their daily life, and not just in business dealings. Hindus and Muslims even dance the garba together.

A Muslim rickshaw-driver who took me to the house of a railway officer in the predominantly Hindu railway colony, was surrounded as soon as he stopped, by children from the adjacent bungalows, lisping, "Uncle, why don't you come here these days?" They pulled him affectionately into their home, from where he emerged quickly to say he could not wait there any longer. One railway officer told me he had informed his regular rickshaw driver that he no longer trusted him to take his children to school.

The complete breakdown in relations between the two communities soon after the Sabarmati incident was partly due to the two Gujarati newspapers read in Godhra : *Gujarat Samachar* and *Sandesh*. Both overplayed the Sabarmati incident and underplayed the retaliation outside Godhra. As a result, Godhra's Hindus didn't know the extent and nature of the pogrom taking place against Muslims. They believed that not only did the Muslims begin the violence, but that they hadn't suffered at all in Godhra because not one Muslim had been killed in retaliation. In fact, one young Hindu hotel employee told us to visit nearby Pandharwada where they had "wiped out the Muslims", and, almost rubbing his hands in anticipation, told us that after the PM's visit, violence against Muslims would begin. Another railway employee used the words "umeed hai" (we hope so) when asked whether there was any possibility of retaliatory violence against Muslims in Godhra.

The attacks on property which had already taken place in Godhra and the surrounding villages were dismissed as a "natural reaction", as were the attacks on Muslims in the rest of the state. The crucial difference between the burning of the train and the reaction to it, ie, the participation of the State in the latter, was not seen at all. The police were helpless said the Hindus, given the sheer magnitude of the Hindu mobs. They repeated Narendra Modi's argument that never before had so many people died in police firing, as an indicator of how hard the police tried to control the riots. No one had told them that most of those who had died in police firing were Muslims.

The Gujarati papers had also deliberately not reported the incidents on the railway station, preferring to portray the train burning as a pre-planned conspiracy. A reporter from *Gujarat Samachar* confirmed that Sophiya Shaikh had been molested. But his paper did not report it.

Instead, *Sandesh* reported that Hindu female passengers fleeing the burning train were abducted by Muslims and raped in the nearby mosques, where their mutilated bodies were dumped.

This news was declared false by the Collector, the DSP (who immediately conducted a search of the mosques) and even the CM. However, the Collector and the DSP did not go out of their way to announce to the public that the news was false, nor did they contradict it in *Sandesh*. The Collector told me that any such contradiction would have been buried inside the paper, and if she were to make a public announcement specifically on this matter, it would be opening a Pandora's box. The SP however, said that *Sandesh* was likely to be prosecuted.

But even had the Collector and SP made a public announcement that this was a false rumour, the Hindus may not have believed them. They were not willing to believe the CM's denial, seeing it as a statesman-like strategy to prevent further violence.

They also refused to believe that the VHP's travelers had created any trouble at the station. At the most, they said, there might have been an argument over money: "these Ghanchi chaiwallahs are

such cheats", or the Ghanchis may have objected to the VHP travelers shouting 'Jai Sri Ram' – further proof of their fanaticism.

Some Hindus found devious ways to get round the fact that the VHP passengers misbehaved with the Muslims on the platform. Was Siddiq a licensed vendor? they asked. If not, whatever was done with him did not matter. "Did Sophiya complain about what happened with her? If not, she can't be believed. You know how aggressive Ghanchi women are!"

This was the first time Bohra properties were attacked on such a large scale in the villages of Panchmahals district. Though the Hindus repeated over and over again that Bohras were "different" and never caused any trouble, they didn't seem pained by these attacks. The VHP had given them ways of justifying them: "Bohras are financiers of Ghanchis." Or, "The Adivasis (who had attacked the Bohras in many villages) had finally realised they had been exploited by the Bohras for years."

Had these Hindus simply talked to their Bohra neighbours in Godhra itself, whose timber marts and ration shops were burnt down, they would have known the names of the VHP/BJP leaders who directed this violence, as well as the policemen who let it take place. Umaid Dalal recounted how on the day of the bandh, he had requested the Mamlatdar of Baria to shift the six barrels of kerosene lying in his ration shop to a safer place. The mamlatdar, one Gohil replied: 'We have no orders from the government. But I'm telling he PSI that you must not allow anyone to loot Mr Dalal's government shop.'

Among the most vicious lies spread by the VHP was that that every Muslim railway employee on duty on February 27 was involved in the 'jehadi' conspiracy to burn the train and derail the Ram Mandir movement. Already, two Muslim officers had been transferred out of Godhra; a third in Dahod was stoically awaiting his turn. Many of their Hindu colleagues testified to the integrity of these Muslim employees. They also told me that their actions on that day had been above board. But VHP supporters were furious at this "light" punishment.

The Gujarati press helped deepen these misconceptions by not publishing statements from Muslims condemning the incident and calling for peace. The very first such statement came from Zainuddin Vali, a respected Bohra. Since curfew was on, it was faxed to the *Sandesh* on March 4. It never appeared. When Vali asked why, he was told that the deluge of news pouring in left no space for his statement.

Again, the courageous apology for the burning of the train made more than once at the Collector's peace meetings by Maulana Hussen Umerji, chief maulvi of Godhra, on behalf of his community, was not reported in the press. Nor did the Collector think it important to publicise it.

On April 7, Maulana Umerji along with leading Ghanchi Muslims made an appeal for peace, condemning the Sabarmati incident, asking for punishment to the guilty and praying for the souls of those who died. No local paper carried it. He has also been advising restraint at every Friday sermon, talking specifically against confronting the police.

Thus, thanks to the local press, and partly the administration, the Hindus of Godhra had one unchanging picture of the Ghanchi Muslims after the Sabarmati incident: they burnt the train for no reason, they didn't apologise for it or even condemn it, and they didn't even suffer for it. It was their duty, felt the Hindus, to give the police the names of those who burnt the coach, because it was thanks to those people that Gujarat was being destroyed.

At the other extreme, Muslims – including many non-Ghanchis - blamed the burning of the train on the VHP, pointing out that the fire began from the inside, and the mob was outside. They talked about gas cylinders inside the coach which may have burst; they suggested that no Muslim could have got inside S/6 and pulled the chain, and finally, they even suggested that the 59 who died (one died later) were all Muslims, killed en route from Ayodhya to Godhra. This was a VHP conspiracy to defame Muslims and ruin them in Gujarat they alleged.

However, in a long meeting held with a few leading Ghanchi Muslims, they admitted that the burning of the train was a reaction

to the continuous insults to their religion by the VHP. They pointed out that never before in Godhra's history had such a clash taken place between passengers and vendors. "Vendors earn barely Rs 50-60 a day. How can they withstand passengers refusing to pay?"

But this was not the first time passengers had refused to pay, as mentioned above. What seems to have enraged the Ghanchis was the religious humiliation heaped upon them by the VHP passengers. Said Maulana Hussien Umerji, "Even a mother who loves her child sometimes gets provoked enough to slap him. There is a limit to patience. All we have is our religious honour. *Bardaasht ki bhi had hoti hai.*"

But were those insults enough to burn 59 persons alive? "*Shaitaan sawaar ho jaata hai , is baar donon taraf shaitaan sawaar ho gaya,*" said the Maulana.

### *The Ghanchis*

Most Hindus described the Ghanchis as criminal-minded, illiterate, fanatic, violent, pro-Pakistani...

Ghanchis make up the majority of Godhra's Muslims. Descendants of Afghan soldiers and local Bhil women, the Ghanchis are known (as are some other communities on the sub-continent, for eg the Pathans or Jats) for their impulsiveness, their tendency to act first and think later, and their aggressive nature. They are largely poor and uneducated, with 10 madrasas to a school, as Zainuddin Vali, a senior Bohra citizen, put it. "None of these madrasas teach anything objectionable, but they don't take the community forward either," he observed.

The madrasas have mushroomed over the last 10 years since the Tableeghi Jamaat, a body of religious preachers who advocate a return to 'pure' Islam, stepped up its activities in Godhra. Zainuddin Vali was not alone in describing the Tableeghi Jamaat as a reforming influence among the Ghanchis, which has helped them turn away from crime, by making them more religious.



The Tableeghis have, for the last 20 years, been holding their ijtemas or large gatherings at Godhra, but in the last two years, their activities are being looked upon with suspicion by Hindus all over India, because they seem to fit the international media-built stereotype of the intolerant, orthodox Muslim.

However, the Ghanchis' intolerance pre-dates the Tableeghi influence. Stories are told by other Muslims, about how, in pre-Independence days, they would live in constant conflict with the Hindus; how, till recently, no one dared annoy a Ghanchi. Be it a teacher who slapped a Ghanchi's child, or a doctor who could not cure a Ghanchi, they faced the risk of being beaten themselves. Bohra Muslims recall Ghanchi children tormenting their own by taking away their pencils, etc, when the first generation began attending school. Today, there is a growing educated section among them, most notably lawyers.

Equally well-known is their aggressiveness: few Godhra residents have forgotten the burning alive of the Sindhi family during the 80 riots, and the stabbing of four Hindu teachers – two male, two female - inside Saifiya school in 1990, to avenge the burning alive of eight members of a Ghanchi family near Mora (in the post rath yatra violence).

Their women are said to be specially aggressive. A Gujarati Muslim businessman from Mumbai recounted how, during the gold smuggling days of the 60s and 70s, customs officers at the airport would be rendered speechless by the string of abuses let out by Godhra's Ghanchi women who, everybody knew, were carrying gold bars on their person. Ghanchis themselves confirm that the police are no match for their women, who have mastered the art of surrounding police jeeps and preventing them from entering their stronghold. Railway police jeeps had to beat a retreat from Signal Falia in early April after facing a steady shower of stones when they tried to get into the heart of this maze-like settlement to search for those who burnt the train. (It must be said here that women have similarly been used against police during riots, most successfully in Ahmedabad by upper-castes during the 85 anti-reservation riots, and in Mumbai by the Shiv Sena in the 92-93 riots.)

Most non-Ghanchis have found it difficult to live among Ghanchis. Ironically, Sindhis seemed to have had no problem living with them, till the two communities drove each other out in the 1980 riots. Ghanchis share little but faith with other Muslims, specially Bohras, with whom they have clashed in Godhra.

One non-Ghanchi Muslim (not a Bohra) told me he fled twice from Signal Falia, desperate to find another home. "My neighbours had extended their home to make it a garage, blocking the entrance to my house. I protested, but in vain. They made life hell for my wife and children while I was away at work."

A highly educated Bohra of Godhra recounted this experience, relevant in the current context: "I was once stuck in a train full of Shiv Sainiks going for Bal Thackeray's birthday rally in Mumbai. They occupied my berth, threw their weight around, intimidating the TC too. Everyone advised me to keep quiet, and I did. Which decent person can confront such fanatics? You have to summon up all your reserves of tolerance to avoid a fight."

It is important to note here that though a few Bohras did say 'Jai Sri Ram' to save their lives at the railway platform, the Ghanchis preferred to risk being assaulted rather than say this.

The reason for this was given by a young, educated and pleasant-mannered Ghanchi. "Why should we say it? Our religion does not allow it. If someone slaps you twice, you will want to slap him at least once. Why submit?"

What if you are outnumbered? What if they kill you? Aren't you worried about leaving behind a helpless widow and children, I asked him.

"*Allah bahut badaa hai,*" he replied. "Everything happens according to Allah's will. If he wants us to die, we shall die. He will look after our families. Our community sees to it that the families of those who die like this are looked after. People give *zakat* during Ramzan only for such families."

However, this boy admitted that it was the thought of their families that was keeping their anger against the police in check.

According to Advocate Ahmed Kalota of the Janata Dal (S), the Ghanchis are not converts, but have always been Muslim. As proof he points to their language: Gujarati with a heavy sprinkling of Turkish, Persian and Urdu; their diet, which includes *khulma*, dried goat intestines stuffed with mince, a Central Asian dish not eaten by any other Muslim community in India; and their features, which resemble those of Afghans.

Indeed, a walk down Polan Bazar in Godhra takes you back in time to medieval India, with strapping, bearded, Afghan-looking men in long kurtas, and women who seem to have stepped straight out of old Sind.

Kalota traces the arrival of Ghanchis to Godhra and its green environs after successive droughts forced them to leave the nearby Champaner district where they had come as soldiers in the army of Mehmud Begda in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They were harvesters, refiners and traders of sesame oil. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had become farmers and timber merchants. Today they are also transporters.

1948 was a turning point for the Ghanchis. After a major riot with Hindus led by the Hindu Mahasabha, the government decided to drive the Ghanchis out from Godhra. Their homes were reportedly set on fire by the police. The fire spread to adjacent Bohra homes, resulting in many Bohras becoming homeless too. Some Ghanchis fled to Pakistan, but many returned to their roots, greatly impoverished and therefore easily attracted to petty crime. Their present condition can be traced to this act of terrorism by the then government.

Today, it is common knowledge that many of those living around Signal Falia specialize in railway crime, with the connivance of railway officials and police. Railway employees told us they had seen Haji Bilal and Salim Shaikh, both councilors arrested for the burning of the Sabarmati, being given mobile phones by their relatives, while they were in the custody of the rail police at Godhra station. Bilal has a criminal record.

However, the Ghanchis are known to be completely trustworthy. The same Hindus who today don't tire of criticizing them trust them with their children and their homes. After railing and ranting about the Ghanchis for an hour, a Hindu railway employee told me that whenever he goes to his native place, he leaves his home - "all almirahs open" - to the care of a Ghanchi. And even after February 27, Hindus continued to work in Signal Falia's workshops.

A young medical assistant had this to say: "After the bulldozers demolished half our buildings, Polan Bazaar looks so forlorn. Previously, it was known as the mohalla where you could get a meal any time, except between 2 am and 4 am. Ask any traveler who has lost his way at Godhra railway station. He would have been fed the most lavish meal at Polan Bazar, and then put on the right train, his ticket paid for - all of this done by us Ghanchis."

Nights are when the community comes alive. "Nowhere else in Godhra except in Polan Bazaar will you find so many people out on the streets after the last namaz, gossiping, or discussing politics, with the aroma of various meats all around, the place all lit up," says a Bohra doctor enviously. This trait, coupled with the heat, has made the current spell of night curfew intolerable. In the first week of April, the police were stoned by some Ghanchi youth when they tried to enforce night curfew strictly. The police fired on them but fortunately, no lives were lost.

This incident was related laughingly by a young Ghanchi, as was this story: whenever the police set off for a combing operation towards Signal Falia, the residents are informed through a call on a mobile phone. Before the police can reach the settlement, the males have all managed to make their exit from the many by-lanes, knowing that their women will be able to handle the police.

These two conversations highlight the disregard most Ghanchis have for the law. Stoning the police is not seen as an offence. In fact, in the specific post-Sabarmati atmosphere, the police are seen as an enemy, who have arrested Ghanchi councilors not because they are guilty, but due to political pressure.

This is not the Ghanchis' subjective perception; everyone in Godhra, including senior officers in the administration, agreed that the prime accused Md Husain Kalota, who was till his arrest, president of the Godhra Municipality, had little to do with the burning. The DSP told me that Kalota and Bilal were already there when he reached the station, trying to arrange for water. "I told him to take Bilal (who is bearded) out of there for his own safety."

The two complaints which deal with burning the train and other offences are so full of contradictions, it is obvious that political pressure has taken the place of investigation. Just last year, Kalota ousted the BJP's Raju Darji as Municipality President by engineering defections.

The continuous combing operations by the police in Signal Falia have further embittered the Ghanchis. Said one of them, "Our mothers have told us, 'Do anything, jump into the nearest well, but don't fall into the hands of the police, because they are brutal.'"

Add to this the continuous pouring in of Muslim refugees into Godhra's relief camps, hounded out of their villages for no fault other than their religion, by VHP activists supported by the local police, the complete black-out of this process by the local press, and the indifference of the town's Hindus to these refugees, and the alienation of the Ghanchi Muslim (indeed, of all Muslims) from the system becomes complete.

Given this background, the expectation of Godhra's Hindus, that the Ghanchis should give the names of those who burnt the train to the police, seems unreasonable, even though this would also put an end to the combing operations they so dread.

### *Signs of hope*

If Godhra was the flashpoint, the most encouraging signs of reconciliation also come from Godhra. A peace rally was taken out by the Godhra Nagar Biradari on April 2. About 500 senior and eminent citizens of Godhra, Hindu and Muslim, led by the Collector, marched through Hindu and Muslim areas, and was stoned only once in Polan Bazar. In the second week of April, the Sindhi businessmen invited their Ghanchi counterparts to re-open

their shops in the sensitive area bordering the Sindhi stronghold of Chithiyawar, giving them a guarantee of safety. The latter lost no time taking up the offer.

And, in a bid to resume their peace efforts, no matter what their internal prejudices were, Hindu and Muslim NYP members held a blood donation camp in Bhorwad, a predominantly Bohra area.

An interview with Arvind Panchal, who drives hired taxis, provided the strongest ray of hope. "I just don't understand why so much bloodshed has taken place," said Arvind. "I understand the anger at the burning of the train, but killing so many people?"

Arvind was brought up by a Muslim family who named him Farooq. Near the steering wheel of his ambassador was a picture of a dargah put up there by the previous driver. He was advised to remove it since he traveled on the highways, where many Muslims had been burnt alive. He did so. "I began having lots of trouble with the car. Then I had a dream where I was told to put back the picture. I did, and the trouble went away."

Along the highway, Arvind showed us entire stretches of land with not a tree on them: this was where Muslim homes had stood in villages.

The violence hadn't affected Arvind's friendship with Muslims. As he took us to Dahod from Godhra railway station, the Ghanchi rickshaw drivers lounging outside the station greeted him warmly. "They buy me a cup of tea and tell me which areas to avoid. But I go everywhere, protected by the dargah picture on my dashboard," said Arvind.

## Chapter III

### FLAWED INVESTIGATION

The world knows that the Sabarmati Express was burnt on the morning of February 27 at Godhra. The complaint by the train's driver, which is also the FIR, times the incident between 7.47 am and 8.20 am. The offence was registered at 9.35 am with the railway police.

But documents filed by the railway police before the courts, time the event as having taken place on the night of February 27.

The driver's complaint mentions some persons being arrested on the spot. In the remand application of the first 30 to be arrested for the crime, accused Nos 1 to 15 are said to have been arrested on the spot. But the time of their arrests has been given as 21.30 hours, February 27.

This is only the most glaring of contradictions in the case papers of this crime, which sparked off the Gujarat violence and which is described as a deep-rooted all-India conspiracy.

There are two offences registered about the train incident. The first, CR 9/2002, names unknown accused, and deals with the entire incident from the time the train arrived at Godhra station. The complainant here is the driver.

The second, CR 10/2002, is based on a complaint filed by PSI Jhala of the Gujarat Railway Police. It pertains to offences that allegedly took place at the railway station after the Sabarmati Express was burnt. 11 Muslims have been arrested for this offence. Jhala's complaint forms part of their remand application.

The complaint tells a hitherto untold story. More importantly, the facts in it do not tally with those in CR 9/2002.

PSI Jhala's complaint says that after the burning of the Sabarmati Express, the local police and the RPF had rounded up 15 persons, who are the accused in CR 9/2002, ie the train burning offence.

While the police were interrogating them, at around 11am a mob of 3000 armed with kerosene and lethal weapons tried to snatch the 15 from the police and began pelting stones at them.

The complaint says that the mob tried to murder passengers and set fire to the other bogies of the Sabarmati. The police dispersed them by lathi-charge, tear gas and finally by firing, in which one person, who was carrying a sword, was injured. Here it is worth mentioning that the post-mortem reports of the two Muslims who died in police firing on February 27 at Godhra, time their death at between 10 and 10.30 am.

This complaint was filed at 23.40 hours, February 27 – 11 hours after the offence took place. The railway police station is at Godhra railway station itself.

The question arises: who were these 15 persons arrested on the spot for burning the Sabarmati, who were being interrogated there itself? Were they the same as accused Nos 1 to 15 in CR9/2002, who are also said to have been arrested on the spot for burning the train? But their arrest took place at 21.30 hours.

Significantly, neither policeman nor passenger is shown to have been injured in the second offence. And though Sec 436 IPC has been applied to the accused, which deals with burning homes, PSI Jhala's complaint makes no mention of such an attempt being made.

Who pulled the chain which led to the train stopping outside Signal Falia, is a question yet unresolved. But the Sabarmati driver has, in his complaint, stated that the residents of Signal Falia did so.

This implies that some of the Muslims of Signal Falia entered the train and pulled the chain, while others outside stoned and then burnt the coach. It is worth noting that the second chain-pulling has been traced to S/6, the very coach that was burnt.

Strangely, in his detailed complaint, the driver has failed to give any description of those who made up or a least led the mob at Signal Falia – neither their age, sex, nor physical appearance.



Some of the first 15 accused – supposed to have been arrested and interrogated on the spot, but whose arrest has been timed at 21.30 hours - have stated in court when their remand was being asked for, that they were picked up from their homes or workplaces. Godhra's senior police officers reveal that combing operations began only on the evening of Feb 27, after the CM reached Godhra.

The office record of Inayat Jhujhara, aged 57, a government servant and one of the accused, shows him to have been at work on the morning of February 27 between 9am..and 12.30 pm. This means that according to the police, he burnt the Sabarmati coach early in the morning and then went to work. Jhujhara, due to retire soon, was suspended from his job on March 15.

If the case papers of this crucial offence are so full of loopholes, it is hardly surprising that those of CR 66/2002, relating to the violence which took place in the town after the Sabarmati incident, are even more questionable. The most important anomaly here is that the four main accused in this offence, are the same four accused of burning the Sabarmati: President of the Godhra Municipality Md Husain Abdul Rahim Kalota, councillor Haji Bilal, Salim Shaikh and Abdul Rahim Dhantia alias Kaankatta.

This single offence covers four different incidents of rioting in four different areas. But only Muslim properties were damaged and burnt in them. This means that according to the police, after leading the mob which burnt the train, Kalota, Bilal and Co went on to lead four mobs which fought Hindus at one spot, and damaged properties belonging to their own community in three different areas of Godhra. These three are all Hindu areas, in which showrooms and shops owned by Muslims, a mosque and a Muslim school, were damaged and burnt.

In this CR, Faroqbhai Kasimani, whose shop and godown were looted and burnt, has been made an accused in an offence regarding looting of his own shop!

(Courtesv: MID-DAY April 22)

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY GODHRA

The week-long encounters with Godhra's citizens and the survivors of the Sabarmati Express, convinced me that the burning of the train was a spontaneous but gross over-reaction to the incidents which took place on Platform No 1 on the morning of February 27. It is being said that reports of the misbehaviour of the VHP passengers with Muslims in the train had already reached the Muslims of Signal Falia, but I could not verify this. Nor could I verify that the VHP passengers created a ruckus at every station along the way. Debashis Bhattacharya told *The Times of India* that at every station, the VHP passengers would alight on to the platform shouting slogans. Bhattacharya gave another important detail: stone pelting on the train began from Rudiwali station near Lucknow itself.

A young Muslim from Rustompura near Godhra told me about his neighbours, a Muslim couple traveling in the same train who were ordered to say 'Jai Sri Ram'. The husband did so, the wife refused and she was beaten for that. I could not meet the couple, but the young man was a credible source.

*Indian Express* also quoted one Akbar Shah saying that a fellow-passenger Gulshan Khatun had been advised at Faizabad itself to remove her burqa before getting on to the train. Shah told *Indian Express* that the VHP passengers had asked another family in Coach S/6 to shout slogans, but they had refused. "Finally, that family was forced to get off at a station midway." (IE, Dt March 10)

One question remains unanswered: why didn't the railway authorities at Faizabad inform Godhra and indeed, all stations en route to Ahmedabad that the VHP passengers were returning on the Sabarmati, so that adequate precautions could be taken to avoid communal clashes?

The reason perhaps lies in the benevolent attitude which has always been taken by the administration at all levels towards extremist Hindu organizations. Their aggressive assertion of their

religious identity, which is invariably manifested through insulting behaviour towards non-Hindus, has never been looked upon as a criminal offence by the administration. It took a judge of Justice B N Srikrishna's standing to pronounce that the slogan: *Is desh mein rahna hoga to Vande Matram kahna hoga*, for long a favourite of the RSS/Shiv Sena, was a communal slogan. (Srikrishna Commission Report into Mumbai riots of December 92-January 93)

That the VHP behaviour was taken seriously by the authorities in Godhra perhaps stems from the very large presence of Muslims there and Godhra's own communal history. They knew the explosive situation that could arise when the two clashed and hence tried to avoid it.

But once the confrontation began, the policemen on duty did nothing to nip it in the bud. Had they swung their lathis at one or two VHP passengers, it may have acted as a deterrent. Were they afraid of being outnumbered by the lathi-wielding unruly passengers, or as always, simply reluctant to beat up Hindus? Remember the RPF constable's remark: "We were imploring them with folded hands to go back into the train."

This is not the first time the police have "implored" Hindu rioters not to break the law. The same police think nothing of using their guns against Muslim rioters. The inexplicable factor here is that this time, the railway police and the RPF didn't use their guns even against the stone-throwing Muslim mob which set the train on fire. Both Hindus and Muslims in Godhra told me that had a few members of the mob died in police firing, the 'backlash' may not have been so severe, as effective action would have been seen to have been taken. (However, this theory may not hold good given the evidence of advance planning that has come through in the attacks on Muslims in Ahmedabad and elsewhere.)

Given the volatile situation created as soon as the VHP passengers alighted, the fact that a 1000-strong mob collected in a few minutes is not unbelievable. The garages just outside the station were a handy source of diesel and other inflammable materials.

But why did the incidents on the station provoke such a horrendous over-reaction? Did those who saw Sophiya Shaikh being molested think she had been pulled inside? She and her mother and sister immediately left the platform; people yelled at her mother to take her out from there. Their sudden disappearance may have led to the rumour that she had been abducted.

Did any vendor enter the train to recover his money or fight with the VHP passengers? As mentioned above, one railway officer heard the stone-throwing mob say, "*Hamara aadmi andar hai.*" Was the mob trying to get Sophiya or their own man out by stoning the train, hoping that everyone would come out?

Why was the coach set on fire? Did the mob want to get its own person out, or to give vent to its anger?

Whatever the reason, this unimaginably inhuman and barbaric act cannot be justified. It has helped strengthen the stereotype of the violent Muslim.

The Muslims at the station had two choices - within the legal framework - when the VHP passengers began assaulting and tormenting them: suffer the abuses silently or call the police for help. They did neither.

A more reasonable spontaneous reaction would have been to have a free-for-all with the VHP passengers. But the latter had lathis and sharp-edged trishuls. The vendors were unarmed.

The more important question is: why did the VHP passengers, most of whom were Gujaratis, choose to harass the Muslims at Godhra? Surely they knew the reputation of Godhra. Were they in a mood to provoke a riot, heady with the venomous rhetoric they had heard in Ayodhya? Were they angry about the BJP's electoral defeats? Or were they just high on their own strength, as all large mobs are? Or was it all part of a conspiracy to provoke a riot and then start decimating Muslims?

Until every passenger on that train is interviewed, it will be difficult to get to the bottom of this incident. The actual culprits may never

be found, because only the Signal Falia residents know who took the lead in burning the train. If the police continue filing FIRs with no evidence to back them, bitterness among the Muslims will increase. The accused will probably be acquitted, as they were by the Supreme Court in the Radhabai Chawl case in the Bombay 93 riots. This will in turn lead to more bitterness among the Hindus, and worse, a lack of faith in the judiciary .

Had Godhra not happened, would the Muslims in Gujarat have been targeted? Perhaps the VHP would have continued looking for ways of provoking them.

There's no doubt however, that Godhra provided the VHP with the perfect excuse to "teach them a lesson". Even today, despite all the coverage of the shameful brutalities against women and children, there are a not insubstantial number of Hindus even in Mumbai who feel this to have been a proper 'retaliation'. The involvement of the State in exterminating its own citizens is lost on them. The continuous propaganda of the extreme Hindu organisations has made many Hindus regard Muslims as unequal citizens. Godhra has, in their minds, sanctified such prejudice.

## Chapter V Sabarmati Victims

We tried to meet the families of those who died in the Sabarmati Express through various voluntary and human rights groups in Ahmedabad and Baroda. However, none of them knew how to reach them. Hence we had no option but to go through the VHP. The VHP has identified 38 of the 59 passengers who died as having traveled with them. They have made a colour poster with their photographs on one side, and pictures of the burnt bodies and Narendra Modi stepping out of the burnt Sabarmati coach, on the other. This poster has been put up in their office and is being freely distributed.

For the VHP, these 38 passengers (one died later in hospital), are martyrs to the Ayodhya movement, and their trump card in the 'retaliation' against Muslims all over Gujarat. As they took us from family to bereaved family, it became obvious that this was the message and consolation they were conveying to the grieving families.

The VHP had been meeting these families regularly, specially those to whom they were already close, and those in whom they saw the potential of new recruits. Not all those who died were VHP members. Most had been drawn into their campaign through friends/neighbours. These people, mostly lower middle class or working class, obviously believed that the Ram mandir should be built in Ayodhya.

With an eye on getting thousands of Hindus to Ayodhya on March 15, 2002, and also to expand their base, the VHP had thought of a simple campaign: getting as many Hindus as possible to recite the 'Ram Nam mantra' for two and a half months continuously. The Hindus were given a mala, and told to recite Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Ram continuously for 65 days. These Hindus then qualified to accompany the VHP to Ayodhya to make their ritual offering in the maha-yagna which was scheduled to begin there in February.

Maharashtra's Bajrang Dal secretary, Shankar Gaikar, had explained to me the significance of this mantra: "This was the

mantra given to Chhatrapati Shivaji by Samarth Ramdas which enabled him to defeat Islam and establish Hindvi Swaraj. The strength of this mantra will enable the Ram Temple to be built without bloodshed. But if bloodshed is necessary, we are ready for it." Asked whether people agreed to chant the mantra out of faith, or because they agreed with the VHP's theory, Gaikar had replied, "We tell them that terrorists are waiting at every corner. At every kilometre, there's a masjid or dargah, and these are storehouses of weapons. We tell people that building the Ram Temple will free our country from the clutches of the two kinds of terrorism crushing it today: Islamic and Christian, because we shall crush anyone who tries to put obstacles in its way."

the VHP had distributed enrolment forms for this programme. Those chosen to join the Bajrang Dal had been given trishuls, saffron headbands, as well as a `Ram Sevak's card. 2000 people from Gujarat had enrolled for this programme, 80 of them from one area in Ahmedabad: Amraiwadi .

Most of the 38 VHP travelers who were burnt in S/6 were such Hindus, a large number of them women, for whom the trip to Ayodhya was like a pilgrimage with neighbours, all arrangements made by the VHP. Some of these women were grandmothers, free from household drudgery; others were housewives, to whom this was an exciting break from such drudgery. The idea that it could prove even remotely risky hadn't even crossed their minds.

The families we met had undergone a double trauma: first, the completely unexpected deaths, second, the condition in which their family members' bodies were recovered. Many of the men - husbands, sons, fathers - had spent hours identifying their family members through the charred remains of their body parts, and their belongings/jewellery.

11 of those who died were from Amraiwadi in Ramol village on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. The VHP had tried to build a base here over the last decade. As more and more Muslims moved in to buy houses, the VHP decided to oppose them. In doing so , they claimed to have succeeded in bringing all the different castes living in this still developing area under their umbrella.

We could not verify these claims. All through our meetings with these families, our VHP escorts continued their anti-Muslim rhetoric. Perhaps cowed down by them, the families didn't contradict them. But a report in *Indian Express* dated March 2 was revealing. It spoke of Hindus and Muslims of Ramol jointly paying homage to those who died in the train. The report mentioned the name of one Barkat Vadmania chanting the Gayatri mantra and helping in the preparations for the final rites. It also reported that Muslim women joined the funeral procession. It further quoted one Vijay Rawal as saying: "People like Barkat have always been our friends...they have always shared our tears as much as our happiness. This time too, after receiving news about the attack, they all came out and condemned the act as an attack on humanity."

The bodies of the 11 were taken in a joint funeral procession on the 28<sup>th</sup>, led by the VHP and joined by thousands of Hindus. Acharya Giriraj Kishore was to join this procession, but they did not wait for him.

After the bodies were cremated, the returning processionists began the violence in Ahmedabad. This violence did not have the sanction of all the bereaved families, though it was done in their name. Some of them had close Muslim friends, and despite the VHP's best efforts to convince them that no Muslim could be trusted, a few remained unconvinced.

The VHP's stock question to these families was: "Shouldn't these people (Muslims) be cut?" Not everyone agreed. That these families stuck to their views in the presence of the VHP members was all the more remarkable because apart from the VHP, BJP and Shiv Sena, no other political party/leader, not even the CM, had bothered to meet them. The National Human Rights Commission had called them to the Circuit House, but the VHP had obviously dissuaded these families (except one) from going there, pointing out that if the Shankaracharya (they didn't specify which) could visit the homes of these families, why couldn't the NHRC?

It can be argued that these families were not victims of human rights violations by the State, hence their plight was not specifically



the concern of the NHRC. But neither the all-party delegation led by Sonia Gandhi, which included Union Minister Pramod Mahajan, nor the National Minorities Commission, nor any of the voluntary organisations, including women's groups, had thought fit to meet these families, though they too were innocent victims of communal violence of the most ghastly kind.

Hence the VHP remained their only support group, and their frequent visits gave them the feeling of belonging to a close-knit group which looks after Hindus. The VHP propaganda of 'Muslim appeasement' was to them a reality.

The VHP also drove home the point that though L K Advani had been elected from Gandhinagar, he had not come to visit these people. Nor had the railway minister, though what had taken place was worse than a rail accident. Even the CM hadn't come here.

Though these 38 persons were killed because of the VHP, the VHP members we met felt no responsibility for their deaths. But Malaben Rawal, the national organizer of the Durga Vahini, admitted that when she first went to offer condolences, she had gone prepared to listen silently to their abuses. However, when we asked 70-year-old Veljibhai 'Dada' who took us to these families, whether they felt guilty for the deaths of so many innocent persons, he simply shrugged and replied, 'Death comes some day to everyone. I saw my own son die in a road accident in front of my eyes. He was just 25.'

As for the remaining 20 travelers who died in the Sabarmati, the VHP made no mention of them. Said one of them: 'They will get compensation from the railways.'

Significantly, the VHP members themselves didn't look in the least bit mournful. On the contrary, they had an air of triumph about them as they made remarks such as : 'This time, the Hindus really gave them a fitting answer' or, 'This time, unlike in previous riots, people, not just property, have been targeted' or 'Where can we give you lunch? All the restaurants have been burnt.'

## *Interviews*

### Neha Soni and her mother, Vastraal Road

22-year-old and already divorced, Neha and her mother are the only women left in their one-room home in Amraiwadi. Neha's father Mansukhbhai (50) and his son Jesalbhai (23) perished in the Sabarmati.

The mother said nothing through the interview, but wept silently. Neha, who studied upto the IX<sup>th</sup>, told us she had tried to persuade her father not to take her brother along to Ayodhya, as "there would be no man left in the house", but the brother was adamant. He leaves behind a 21-year-old wife and 7-month-old daughter. His wife has gone off to her parents' home. The VHP members accompanying us were determined to force her parents to get her married again. "We will see to it that the Sonis face no problems," they said.

Mansukhbhai was retired and received a pension of Rs 1800 a month. His son, who had studied till Std X, worked as a labourer in a jewellery manufacturing unit.

The women got the news from a local VHP pracharak Bipinbhai around 1 pm on the 27<sup>th</sup>. The son's body was identified by his watch and wallet. The father was identified by his dentures (they pulled them off to identify him) and the photo of his guru in his wallet.

The two women, though now all alone, are determined not to leave their house of 20 years and return to their village. "We have good neighbours here, there's nothing for us in the village." Neha said she was very keen to join the VHP. "My brother is gone, my father is gone, I feel I should also immerse myself in *sewa*. But my mother won't allow me. She asks, '*Mera kya hoga?*'"

### Gayatri Panchal & her 3 sisters, Jantanagar, Ramol Road

Gayatri and her mother's sister Yogina Panchal, survived the fire, but she lost her parents and two elder sisters (Chhaya, 17 and Pratiksha, 21) to it. When we met them, the remaining four sisters, aged 14 to 19, were staying with their aunt, having been forced to

leave their home, they said, after Muslims in their area threw stones on it on March 25. Interestingly, immediately after news of the Sabarmati incident reached Ahmedabad, the Panchals' Muslim neighbours did come to console the wailing sisters. But after that they hadn't shown up.

Gayatri's father Harshadrai Panchal (51) had been a carpenter, while his wife Nitaben (48), a member of the Durga Vahini, had been the supervisor of the local school's mid-day meal programme. Her job would now go to the eldest of the surviving sisters, who had just finished a teacher's training course. The younger three were still studying. These four had not gone to Ayodhya because of their exams.

Gayatri told us that nothing untoward took place en route from Ayodhya. "We were so happy when approaching Godhra, because we knew we'd soon be home," she said. At Godhra, the train had barely stopped for two minutes when Urmilaben, in charge of their troupe, told them that people were throwing stones and they should close their windows.

When the train stopped a second time, some people broke the windows from outside and poured petrol inside the compartment which fell on their luggage. The seats soon caught fire. Smoke filled the compartment. "It had a suffocating smell," said Gayatri.

She and another girl tried to escape through the broken bars of the window. They fell out amid a volley of stones but Gayatri managed to crawl under the compartment to the other side. From there she could only watch the burning coach, knowing her parents were inside. Her mausi who was in S/7 soon joined her. S/7 had also been stoned, she said.

Gayatri's mother was identified by the Swaminarayan *mala* around her neck and her sisters by the silver chains they wore.

Did Gayatri regret having gone to Ayodhya? "Yes, but what's the use of feeling sorry now?" she asked in a deadpan voice. "My family won't come back."

Did she feel like avenging their death? "It's already being avenged," she replied.

“*Khoon ka badla khoon*,” said one of her sisters, a little self-consciously. “If given training, I too will go out and take revenge.”

Though their aunt said she would see to it that they finish their studies, the VHP members accompanying us announced that the family was their responsibility. VHP leader Pravin Togadia, they said, had already promised to do their kanyadaan. He had also instructed the VHP to shift the sisters to a flat in a safe area.

Significantly, the sisters had met the NHRC team in the Circuit House, while the other families had not.

All through the interview, an old woman sat silently: their grandmother. She had come from their village, Kalol, where her daughter-in-law had just passed away, leaving behind two small children.

#### Dr Girishchandra & Ashwin Rawal, Jantanagar, Ramol Road

Ashwin Rawal accompanied us to most of the families, including his own: his mother, 62-year-old Sudhaben was one of those who had been burnt alive. But Ashwin declared that even 5800 dead bodies would not deter them from building the Ram mandir. However, he was bitter about the government’s handling of the issue. “How many Hindus and Muslims have died because of this,” he said. “But the government doesn’t care. It wants to keep it alive for vote politics.” He agreed that his own party was in power, but expressed regret that it had “turned its face away from the temple”.

A committed VHP member, Ashwin had spent four hours at the Shola Civil Hospital trying to identify the dead bodies through their charred remains. “They say anyone who works in a crematorium automatically attains *vairaagya*. I feel I have attained it.”

“One should not reveal one’s feelings,” he continued. “We must harden our hearts. Once we have decided to work for the Hindus, any sacrifice is too little.”

Ashwin had a word of advice for Md Husain Kalota, the main accused in the burning the train. “Were he to go to Pakistan, he

wouldn't even get a cup of tea. He's better off here. Let him just re-convert to his ancestral faith and come back."

Ashwin's father presented a completely different picture. Steeped in scripture, the old man recited shloka after shloka to describe his feelings. Overwhelmed with grief, he rambled on about the state of the nation and his personal tragedy.

"Our scriptures talk of world peace, but that feeling has vanished because governance has become so slack. Parties fight and we suffer. We are deprived of our rights; our own government doesn't work for the majority Hindus.

"Had my wife died a natural death, it would not have been so bad. But to die an unnatural death, to be burnt alive...As a doctor I know what goes on in a person's mind at such a moment. You feel helpless, knowing no one can save you. Such barbarity has never been seen before."

Dr Rawal had practised in his colony for 22 years. His Muslim patients had come to offer condolences, he said.

He had seen his colony change into a Muslim-dominated one after the 69 riots. The Muslims displaced at that time had settled here, and slowly bought over houses from the Hindus. Today, when he went to drop his grand-daughter to the bus-stop, he resented the Muslims hanging around there, staring at her.

"Mohammedans have surrounded Ahmedabad. The minority is not *bechara* anymore. One day they will overtake the Hindus. Already, they are more moneyed than the Hindus. Where do they get their money from? They buy up the police.

"In our area riots are planned, but all the government does is talk. Our boys come out in defence, because today standing with folded hands in front of your oppressor won't help. There is no justice for Hindus, hence self-defence is the only way out. Those who began the riot are not arrested. But our boys are put inside for 6 days.

"I had sent my wife to take a *darshan* of Ramchandraji, though we are followers of Swaminarayan. I had told her, 'take your best

sarees, take enough money.' I've lost my partner. In youth, husband and wife live joyfully. But the best part of marriage is when husband and wife live together happily. This they spoil. There are no words to describe this blow I have suffered.

“So many Sanskrit shlokas about virtue have lost their meaning today.”

Did he feel that the violent revenge being meted out against Muslims in Ahmedabad was right?

“There's no talk about revenge in Hindu religion. We have been taught to think well of even one who commits extreme evil, even our enemy.”

At this point the VHP members in the room asked him to express his instincts. “Don't you feel angry? Don't you feel like burning them all?” they asked him.

“Of course I feel angry,” replied Dr Rawal. “But as Hindus we must control our anger. I feel such rage that I would like to burn the entire society. But my religion doesn't permit me to do this.”

### Prakashbhai Chaindagar, Bharatbhai Panchal, Jantanagar, Ramol Road

Both these men had lost their wives and having deposited their little children with their mothers/sisters, were hanging around the “relief camp” run by the VHP. The camp was a school where the men had been spending the nights since Moharram, when the Muslims had begun attacking their homes.

Neelimabehn Chaindagar (30) used to be in the Durga Vahini. She left behind two children, aged 3 and 5. Her husband was supposed to follow her to Ayodhya on March 10.

He had been informed by the VHP around 11.30 am that there had been an accident, and discovered exactly what had taken place only when the train carrying the rest of the passengers reached Ahmedabad in the evening. He had identified her by her socks and shoes: half her leg was intact.

Bharatbhai had identified his wife Jyotikabehn (32) by her mangalsura and her earring.

Both of them said that when their wives left, they had full police protection. They were at a loss to explain why the same protection hadn't been given on their return.

There was a Hindu pocket surrounded by Muslim colonies. Bharatbhai used to drive Muslim children to school in his rickshaw. He was ready to do so again - "but will the parents send them?" he asked. Had his Muslim neighbours sympathised with these young widowers? "Even if they had wanted to, how could they come to our houses? The atmosphere was so terrible on both sides from the next day itself," replied Bharatbhai.

The next day, February 28, was the VHP bandh. It was also the day that all 11 bodies from the area had been cremated at one time. Those returning from the funeral had been stoned by the Muslims, said Prakashbhai.

Prakashbhai was ready to work whole-heartedly for the VHP. "Now I have no ties left," he said.

Sonia Gandhi had apparently sent word that she wanted to meet these families, but they had refused to go. "If the Shankaracharya could come to meet us, so could she."

Jyotikaben and Neelimaben had persuaded Mala Mhatre, a 38-year-old housewife, to come along with them. She was at first reluctant to leave her 9-year-old son in the care of her sister-in-law, "because he is so mischievous", offered her 12 year-old daughter.

Her sister-in-law asked the VHP members accompanying us: "Shouldn't you have thought twice before taking with you women less than 50 years old? Who will look after their children now?"

#### Rajeshbhai Patel, Amraiwadi

22-year-old Chirag Patel's handsome framed photograph dominated the small room where his mother and two sisters wept silently. His father Rajeshbhai, is a textile mill worker.

Chirag, a factory worker, had been persuaded to go to Ayodhya by his friend, though his parents weren't too pleased with his decision. His friend survived the attack.

Chirag was recognized by his earring.

Did his father feel the horrific death of his only son was being rightly avenged? "No, this is wrong," was all that Rajeshbhai would say.

#### Anusuya and Vilas Jadhav, Amraiwadi

60-year-old Sadashiv Jadhav had been a VHP activist since his retirement from Ambika Mills, and had gone to Ayodhya despite his family's opposition to the journey. "He had been there earlier," revealed his son Vilas. "This time, he wasn't well. But his close friends were going, so he decided to go." "Once he made up his mind on anything, no one could stop him," added his wife Anusuya.

This family has not been informed by the VHP. They saw the news on TV and phoned the VHP office. Vilas identified his father because he had had no teeth.

Vilas said he felt enraged by the way his father had died. He agreed with the revenge being meted out against Muslims. He would have liked to join the VHP, but his job as a turner left him no time, he said. He used to accompany his father to the VHP's programmes.

Vilas had always had misgivings about Muslims, which had changed to hate after this incident.

#### Navin Brahmabhatt, Amraiwadi

Openly weeping, Navin Brahmabhatt recalled jumping out of the burning coach in which his wife of 18 years, Niruben, was trapped with the other women, while he was with the men. When the stoning started at Godhra station, they closed the windows and the women were told to climb onto the upper berths for safety. The mob broke the windows and threw burning rags and balls of cotton inside. Many became unconscious because of the



overpowering smoke. Others lost their voice and died where they were, unable to scream for help.

The fire was at their feet, the stones were on the windows. Somehow, Navinbhai and a few men in the adjacent coach managed to jump out.

“It was all laughter right up to Dahod,” he recounted. “We had no inkling that Godhra would turn out to be full of murderers.”

The Brahmbhatts were drawn into the VHP campaign through their neighbours, and for them, the trip to Ayodhya had meant a lot: their plastics factory had been shut down for long and they had planned to reopen it after the *darshan* at Ayodhya. Niruben (38) used to be a great help in running it.

Today, Navinbhai is left with his old mother and sons aged 11 and 14, wishing they had never made the trip. Breaking down, Navinbhai said his brother-in-law identified his wife by her *payals*. “This was the first time we had gone to Ayodhya. We are not VHP members, we only wanted to make our offerings to Sri Ram,” he said.

But Navinbhai stopped crying and sat up straight when asked whether he agreed with the revenge being taken against Muslims. “Why don’t they show their anger to those in Godhra who burnt the train?” he asked. “Why to our own people? The Miyas do business with us. We have no hatred for them. Those who live here didn’t do anything. Why are they being killed? I call up my miya friends everyday, but they all seem to have left the city.”

### Shantubhen and Ashok Prajapati, Vastraal

From the time we entered Shantubhen’s home, till we left, she didn’t stop sobbing for her husband Jhaverbhai. He had joined the VHP about three years back, but said his daughter-in-law, he never went anywhere for either *darshan* or pilgrimage, believing that “it’s all here in your heart”. He preferred instead to do his puja everyday for two hours, and spend his time with his grandsons, who would drag him for an ice-soda every evening.

"This time he was determined to go," recalled his wife. "I told him take me along, but he said women didn't do such things." Even as they were talking to her, Shantubhen was reciting the Ram naam Mantra on her mala. Despite her grief, she felt her husband had been fortunate to have had a *darshan* of Sri Ram in Ayodhya. "He died for Sri Ram."

Jhaverbhai had persuaded his friend Mansurbhai Soni to come along, but pointed out son Ashok, "Soni made the mistake of taking his son with him. Now both are dead."

Ever since his elder brother died two years ago, 51-year-old Jhaverbhai would visit his aged mother in Kathiawad every month. "For those few days, my son would not stop asking for his grandfather," recalled his daughter-in-law. "But now, since he's gone, my son hasn't asked for him once. Only one day he asked another old visitor to take him for an ice-soda, saying: 'My grandfather used to take me everyday.'"

On February 27, Ashok, Jhaverbhai's elder son, had gone to Baroda to arrange for a long pilgrimage for his parents: "We could afford it only now. My father too had finally felt free to go, since his construction business was being looked after by me and my three brothers. I was so excited for him," he recalled. There he heard the news and rushed to Godhra. "I had to identify him among those charred bodies," he recalled, "and since none of the families of those who died were in Godhra, I felt it was my responsibility to look after them. 12 hours I spent with them, trying to sort them out, give them some dignity. I became like a machine, didn't have even a drop of water."

Jhaverbhai's face and skull was gone, his son recognised him by his driving licence.

"I just didn't know how my sons grew from babies to school-going children, I didn't even know where the gas office is – my father ran the house completely," said Ashok. "Now I'm learning everything from scratch."

All the while, Jhaverbhai's old mother stared vacantly. Both her sons were now dead.

### The Dabhis, Mazoor Gaon, Kankariya

"Jeeviben was very smart. She used to tell us that we shouldn't just sit at home. We must go out so that we get to know the world around us. We will increase our knowledge by meeting educated people. We may also get work...". This is how the 10 women who had accompanied Jeeviben (55) and Premaben (50) Dabhi to Ayodhya, described Jeeviben.

These Vankar (scheduled caste) women had stepped out of their homes for the first time in their life, persuaded by their neighbour Jeeviben. They were accompanied by Bharatiben, an upper caste activist of the VHP whose address and contact number they did not know.

On their return trip these women had got into different compartments, wherever place was available. Jeeviben and Premben were in the ill-fated S-6 compartment, whereas the other women got into adjoining compartments. As the train started from Godhra, they were startled by the stones that were pelted from outside. Immediately, the passengers closed the windows on the platform side. Soon after there was smoke all over, so thick that they could not see anything.

Suddenly the train stopped. There was a big noise and total chaos. Somehow with the help of some young people, these women managed to get out of their compartment on the other side of the train. After some time they came to know that compartment S-6 had been attacked by Muslims miscreants with stones and petrol bombs and the entire compartment was engulfed in fire. Realization then dawned that they had lost their two friends forever.

It was a terrible tragedy for Mazoor Gaon which is a basti of textile workers, most of them belonging to the Vankar caste. About 15 years ago, many people from this area worked in the many textile mills of Ahmedabad. However, the last ten years had seen the steady closure of the mills and retrenchment without compensation. As a result, many people are today at home.

Jeeviben's husband also was a textile worker retrenched without compensation, and forced to take up whatever work is available in the informal sector. We asked the women what they did. The women and youngsters, both said that they do *phaltu kaam* (low level useless work). The men worked either as casual labourers or did some job work at home. Women did the same, or worked as domestic servants nearby. They were mostly daily wage earners. No work on a particular day meant *chulah bandh*, the kitchen fire could not be lit. As the violence in Ahmedabad continued in their name, making it impossible for their families to get any work, the *chulhas* in Jeeviben and Premabhen's homes remained *bandh*.

### Govindbhai Makwana, Naroda

Umakant Makwana, 26, the only son of Govindbhai Makwana, had been a court clerk who was persuaded to go to Ayodhya by his colleagues. His father is a government servant.

Naroda was one of the two areas of Ahmedabad which saw the worst kind of brutalities on women and children on February 28, even as Umakant was being cremated. While burning and raping the Muslim women there, the attackers spoke about the burning of their people in the Sabarmati Express.

But violence seemed the last thing on the minds of Umakant's family when we met them. Umakant's mother, grandmother and sisters wept as his father said, "We are ruined." Govindbhai had been quoted in *The Times of India* of March 3 as having said, at the post-funeral ceremony of his only son: "I am extremely disturbed over what is happening in our area. I had pleaded with folded hands to all who came to my son's cremation to please restrain themselves and maintain peace. Killing other people is not the solution. Losing a son is shattering, and I want no father or mother to suffer from this feeling."

### Neelkanth And Mandakini Bhatia

This couple had miraculously survived the fire. Mandakini had lost her voice for a few days, and Neelkanth's legs were burnt. But this RSS couple was cheerful when we met them in Dr Pravin Togadia's hospital.

They had climbed up on the upper berths when the stone throwing began. When the mob broke the window and set the coach on fire, this couple squeezed themselves out of the window grills. They had also thrown stones to counter the mob, they said.

They had no regrets about going: "This was God's work," they said. "Those people become mad after their religion, why shouldn't we?"

They sent their children to RSS shibirs, they said. It was for the good of the nation and the religion.

Neelkanth Bhatia was fully in agreement with the violence against Muslims. "It's not revenge, it's our answer to them," he said. He was even more enthusiastic about the economic boycott against them being imposed by the RSS. When we pointed out that Muslims made the kites and the crackers which Hindus used for their festivals, Neelkanth said he was ready to stop celebrating these festivals till Hindus began to make these things.

#### Mukesh Shah & Rajesh Patel, Bajrang Dal

Mukesh Shah survived the fire because he had left S/6 before Godhra. "Our coach had more women in it," he recalled. He revealed that a Muslim woman had told him to leave the coach before the train reached Godhra. "This means their people had already boarded the train," he said.

He was on the platform when the stone-throwing began. "We also threw stones back on them," he said, "and told the ladies and children to get in and close the windows. I got into another coach. When they surrounded us, we made the women get on to the upper berths. When smoke began entering our coach, we all got off. The smoke was so much that some people became unconscious."

Mukesh had some Muslim friends. Did he still meet them? Before he could reply, the VHP 'Dada' accompanying us interjected, "They were friends, they became enemies. Say it straight," he advised a confused-looking Mukesh. "These people's eyes have opened after Godhra. We used to tell them that Muslims are like that only, but they wouldn't listen."

Mukesh is now more determined to continue in the Bajrang Dal.

Rajesh said that the stoning began as soon as people got down from the train. According to him, all the coaches, "from the first to the last, were ours", not just S/5 And S/6.

Rajesh jumped down when the smoke got too much. He joined in throwing stones on the Muslims to drive them away.

### Deepak Deshpande, Dahod

The last time Deepak Deshpande saw his wife alive was when she stepped into Coach S/6 of the Sabarmati Express at Dahod early morning on February 27. In a hurry to reach her Income Tax office in Baroda, 32-year-old Pooja decided to skip the local train she took everyday and travel in a through train. Coach S/6 was full of women, just the company she liked.

She was to go on leave from March 15, and wanted to finish all her work before that, revealed her soft-spoken husband.

The next time the station-master saw his wife was late that afternoon. Deepak had reached Godhra by 10.45am, seen the burnt coach, searched for her among the throng of people standing there, and then rung up her office.

Unable to trace her anywhere, he decided to join his colleagues in the rescue team. Hers was the 56<sup>th</sup> body to be taken out of the coach. By then, Deepak and his colleagues were almost sure she'd escaped the inferno. Her forehead and eyes were burnt, but the rest of her body was identifiable, and her trademark double lunch-box, which always contained his 'tiffin', was still in her hand. (Incidentally, she would often leave Deepak's lunch with the tea vendor Siddiq Bakr, a mild-mannered man who had recently grown a beard, revealed Deepak.)

"Seeing those bodies, even someone who has never hit anyone would have felt ready to kill," said Deepak, hurt still writ large on his face.

Did he agree then, that the violence against Muslims in Gujarat was a "natural reaction" to the burning of Hindus in the Sabarmati?

Answered Pooja's inconsolable mother-in-law. "Will that bring our daughter back? Those who did this should be hanged. But no innocent's family should be ruined the way ours has been."

Pooja was obviously the fulcrum round which the family revolved. "She was very close to my parents," said Deepak, a trifle embarrassed by his mother's open display of grief. "The three of them were always together. That's why they've taken it so badly."

But as he pointed to the dates marked on the calendar by his wife: "This is her hand-writing" Deepak himself could barely control the tremor in his voice and the tears that welled up. Looking at his six-year-old playing quietly in a corner, he said roughly, "This boy just doesn't let anybody talk."

Pooja's son had lit the pyre, in accordance with Hindu custom. "So now he knows she'll never come back," said Deepak. "This child has never cried," added his grandmother. "Just once he asked, 'why couldn't she have got into (coach) S/5?'"

What made it more difficult for the family to get over the loss was that Pooja's office was to shift to Dahod from April 1. "She had been offered a transfer to Godhra, but she hated Godhra," recalled Deepak. "This was the life span destined for her," sighed her mother-in-law. "But to burn like this...It's enough to make you lose faith in God. All our life we've worked hard and honestly, but this is what God had in store for us." Asked whether she considered Pooja a martyr for the Ram Mandir, her mother-in-law replied, "Sacrifice and all that is ok, but our house is ruined."

Pooja Deshpande's name was not mentioned even once by the Godhra unit of the VHP in the hour I spent with them, despite asking them repeatedly whether anyone from Godhra had died.

## INTERVIEWS

### *MAULANA HUSSEN UMERJI*

The chief Maulvi of Godhra, Maulana Umerji is also president of the Godhra Relief Committee which runs three camps for Muslims fleeing the villages around Godhra. The Maulana had been instrumental in restraining the youth from confronting the police during the continuous combing operations which were then being conducted in Signal Falia.

Maulana Umerji headed the Muslim delegations in the Collector's meetings, and also when the PM and Sonia Gandhi visited Godhra.

I interviewed him a few hours after PM Vajpayee had visited Godhra on April 4.

Q How did you find the PM when you met him?

A He looked angry.

Q Anyone looking at the burnt coach would be angry, don't you think?

A Yes, but normally when you meet a lot of people, you don't show your anger. You smile. But there was no smile on the PM's face. He didn't change his expression throughout.

Q What did you tell him?

A We told him we regret the incident. But the main question now is to resettle these people who have fled to our camp. They continue being threatened in the villages. He didn't reply.

Q You don't seem happy with the meeting.

A I am not. The meeting confirmed our feeling that we can expect neither protection nor justice from this government.

Q What will you do now?



A What can we do? Our community is poor by birth. We shall beg and feed our guests till they are able to go back home. We shall depend on the *zakat* of our people.

Q Has no one else helped?

A The Red Cross has given clothes, and Ahmed Patel and Vadilal Kamdar of the Congress have also helped, for which we are grateful. But apart from these, no one, neither any party nor any group has shown any sympathy, or shed tears with us. Only the Sarva Dharm group (led by Swami Agnivesh) tried to comfort us, and told us that all of Bharat is with you.

Q You don't believe them?

A I'm afraid not. The way the VHP and all of them have gone about... Muslims have nothing but their religion. We know that whatever we possess belongs to Allah. He can take it away any time. We are taught that Allah has created us, he can destroy us anytime. We have been taught to be patient. So all this we are facing today, we shall suffer it. But what makes me angry is when they question our patriotism.

Do they know that 14000 ulema had been hung from the trees of Delhi for fighting for the freedom of our country? My own guru is Fakhruddin Saheb. He was in jail in Malta for six years. For six years he fasted without *iftaar* (the meal taken to break the fast). The British promised him freedom and a lot more if he only gave up Gandhiji. He refused.

These people call us traitors. I fear the country is not safe in their hands. The country will break into pieces, it will be ruined. *Hindustan ka naam log zillat se aaj le rahen hain.* (People today take the name of India with disgust.)

Q How are you coping with the situation here?

A We pray to God and advise everyone to be patient. But there's a limit to patience. If constantly our religion is dishonoured... When our boys get into a rage, they can even beat me up. The other day we advised them not to give their X and XIIth std exams in these uncertain conditions. Some of them did go. The rest then pounced upon us, saying you are preventing us, while others are going.

And constantly refugees are pouring in. 90 people came from Pandharwada, totally ruined. If you are angry at what happened to the Sabarmati, kill a hundred Muslims from Godhra. Why attack the villagers who don't even know what a rail coach looks like? These are simple people, dependent on the mercy of the landlords. What was their fault?

Q Have Godhra's Hindus said anything about all this?

A Peace-loving Hindus are so cowed down today that they dare not come out openly. They don't come to the camp nor do they phone us. First I felt bitter about it, but after a few days I accepted this too.

Q Have you condemned the burning of the train?

A Shall I shout my condemnation from the roof-tops? Whoever has come here; be it the PM today or Sonia Gandhi, I have expressed regret for the incident.

Q But when it happened?

A Where was the time? The very next day was the Gujarat bandh, then an all-India bandh. They decided everything. Curfew was imposed from Day 1. No public activity could be done. And from March 1 itself, the attacks began around Godhra and refugees began pouring in.

Q How are you managing the camp?

A We spend Rs 25,000 a day, we collect donations, rations, milk.

Q Have you received any help from the Hindus here?

A No. And since you are asking this again and again, let me tell you. There's a Sadvichar group here, they feed poor patients in hospitals. But they told their volunteers not to give food to my people, patients from Pandharwada.

Q What is your personal opinion about the burning of the train?

A I really can't say who did it. People say they were woken up at 9.30 am with abuses, stones, trishuls being rained on them.

It's worth thinking: so many trains pass through Godhra. For 150 years no Muslim hit or even abused any passenger. Then how could they do this? If the starting point had not been there, if the

*badmaashi* had not begun from Faizabad itself, would they have broken this 150-year record?

Q But burning so many persons alive...

A What do you do when the devil takes over? *Shaitaan sawaar ho gaya tha, donon taraf.*

### The VHP in their own words

*Malaben Rawal, national organizer of Durga Vahini:*

“Since the last one year, we have conducted many programmes in Gujarat. We commemorated 50 years of the reconstruction of the Somnath temple by stepping up our campaign for the Ram temple. If the first Parliament of Independent India could pass a resolution to rebuild Somnath, they why can't this Parliament resolve to build the Ram temple?

“We had many constructive programmes. The Bajrang Dal is not a terrorist organization, as is propagated in the media. During *shraawan*, our boys guarded the village ponds wherever melas were held, to prevent people from drowning.

“Because of our programmes, all over Gujarat, 2.25 lakh persons joined the Bajrang Dal. They became *trishuldhaari*. We make it clear to them that the trishul is not for personal use, but for protection of their dharm.

“We conducted jalabhishek programmes in Gujarat's villages. People in one area had to say Shri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram, till altogether it was said 13 crore times. Wherever this was done , became a *siddh kshetra*.

“From November 26, when we began our programme, thousands of people participated in it. These were the persons who were ready to go for the yagna in Ayodhya. Three groups left from Ahmedabad in February: on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>. We left on February 22, reached Ayodhya on the 24<sup>th</sup>. On the 25<sup>th</sup> we participated in the yagna and that same evening, we returned. I was to travel with them to Ahmedabad, but I got off halfway.

“No one expected this to happen. Of course, we were all travelling unreserved. We had bought 2-300 tickets mainly in the names of the office-bearers.

“Nothing happened all through the journey, nor on the platform. All the talk about a girl being kidnapped is wrong. Her mother was so cunning, she raised a hue and cry that her daughter’s been kidnapped. We consider woman as our mother. The VHP, Bajrang Dal - can we ever do any such thing?

“In fact, our member Dr Muktaben from Nadiad saved a Muslim couple in the train from harassment. You know how it is: Hindus are always tortured by Muslims wherever the Muslims are in a majority. So it becomes natural to retaliate when we find ourselves in the majority. In the train some of our boys began harassing a Muslim couple, but Muktaben saved them, and saw to it that they got down safely in Godhra.

“When we went to meet the families whose members had died, we were ready to listen to all their abuse silently, with head bowed. But none of them were angry with us.

“We have no hand in what is happening now all over Gujarat. In fact everyday, we get phones: give us weapons. What can we give them? We have only trishuls, and they are all less than 6 inches long, as per the rule. They are only a symbol. All we can say is: we have been telling you for years to arm yourselves.

“For the first time, Muslims have got a fitting reply. Previously, it used to be individual stabbings. But not this time. We always say, Gujaratis have a national approach. These people have put Dr Abul Kalam on their hit list – which Indian wouldn’t get angry?

“Since 93, we have been organizing camps during Diwali. We train girls to use airguns, in karate, yoga, sports. We also inculcate in them religious, social, and character-building values. We talk about the country’s history, love of the country.

“We tell the girls: you are not a commodity. Don’t allow yourself to be sold. And don’t get into *lafdaas*. That’s not your concern, your

parents will take care of your marriage. We have a leaflet titled *Savdhaan!* In that we have given the example of Divya Bharati and Sajid Nadiadwala, to show what happens to our girls who marry Muslims. We get so many of our girls escaping from such marriages.

“Do you know the Muslims have set aside a budget specially for enticing Hindu girls? The entire plan is discussed and coordinated in masjids. They have an Adam Sena. Handsome Muslim boys stand outside girls’ schools and colleges. We stumbled upon this in the Bardoli case four years back. One Varsha Shah married a Muslim. He kept a diary in which he wrote that in 365 days, he slept with her more than 365 times. Naturally she would be mad after such a man.

“Our girls get carried away by these boys because they see in them Shahrukh Khan, Aamir Khan, Salman Khan. They get blinded by the glamour of these boys. Then you know our Hindu boys. We believe in family planning, so normally a Hindu boy is the only son. He has to look after the family business, he will be a little sober. Those people have 10-12 children. Not all of them are going to work. So they go about *bindaas*, like heroes.

“And the marriage is not aimed only at converting one more Hindu to Islam. The girl not only gets converted, once she’s married, she is brainwashed against her family. In some of the cases where we have helped parents challenge these marriages, these girls come to court and don’t hesitate to abuse their parents.

“Now we have begun a scheme to get those girls remarried who run away from these marriages.”

*Narendra Patel, VHP Regional co-ordinator*

“The Godhra incident was a challenge to Hindu society. I am not saying all Muslims are of that mentality. Some are pro-Pakistan, some do such things for money, some to spread Islam. All Muslims are not anti-Bharat.

“The VHP has a long-term plan to counter this: to convert Muslims back to Hinduism. 157 Muslims have become Hindu in the villages.

“We also have taken up a campaign to counter the work of the missionaries in Adivasi areas. It's called single teacher, since school. We train a village boy to become a teacher in his own village and pay him Rs 800-1000. Because of this scheme, missionaries in many Adivasi areas of Gujarat could not succeed. These boys would just follow them shouting 'Jai Sri Ram'. This resulted in an awakening among the Adivasis: this time in Panchmahal and Choteudepur, they didn't allow even one Muslim to stay in the villages. 800 villages have become 'Muslim-free' in Panchmahals. In these villages, there were just 5 to 15 Muslim families dependent on the Hindus for survival. In such villages we tell them you were Hindus till only a few years back.

“We succeeded in reconverting Muslims in Rajashthan. The Muslims there were descendants of Prithviraj Chauhan. In 91, 60,000 of them became Hindu. We used to take out Ashapuramata yatras on the highways. Even the Muslims used to worship her. The special factor was that the organization of the yatras was left to the Muslims.

“But we don't take up such activities unless we are sure that a large section of them will become Hindu. There's no point converting 10 or 20 families. Because then they are left nowhere: they've turned their back on their community, and the Hindus aren't willing to accept them. If a while village converts, they continue inter-marrying among themselves.

“We shall be looking after the families of the 225 Hindus killed in Gujarat after Godhra. 10,000 Hindus have been arrested. Secs 302, 306, have been applied to them. They are likely to be inside for two-three years. We have to provide for their food inside jail and look after their families.

“The Gujarat violence has shown the Hindus that the VHP is the only organisation on whose strength their security depends. Hindus are these days constantly telling us: we want to become members, we want to be part of the Bajrang Dal, we want trishuls.

The VHP believes all Hindus are its members. Those who have been awakened, come to us. Those who are still lost in enjoyment (*masf*), will one day wake up and they will have to come to us for their own protection.”

**Acknowledgements:**

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Mumbai: Vrijendra, Malik Sher Mal, Asif

## EPILOGUE

Be it the terrorist hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight to Kandahar, the RSS slogan that the safety of the minorities lies in the goodwill of the majority, or Gujarat CM Narendra Modi's visit to Mumbai, Nirbhay Bano Andolan has always turned out in strength against those who use religion for non-religious purposes, to divide people and terrorise them, be it individuals, groups or the State itself.

While many fact-finding groups have reported on the State-sponsored pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat, none have done so on the Godhra incident. Nirbhay Bano Andolan feels that all communal killings, provoked or unprovoked, are unjustifiable.

Nirbhay Bano Andolan and Mumbai Shantata Samiti were the first in Mumbai to hold a demonstration against the Godhra incident. Held on February 28, a day after the incident, it drew a very enthusiastic response from the people, 99 % of whom said they wanted to be allowed to live in peace.

We cannot work for communal harmony without sharing in the grief of all victims of communal violence – be they Hindus or Muslims. We cannot ignore one group of victims only because it belongs to the majority community. This leaves the field open for communal groups to exploit this suffering for their own ends. It also fuels the resentment many Hindus already feel towards groups working towards communal harmony. Most importantly, it reeks of double standards.

That is why we felt it necessary to bring out this booklet on Godhra. It narrates what happened, why it happened and examines the questions raised by the incident. It also condemns the incident unequivocally.

Shakeel Ahmed Convenor Nirbhay Bano Andolan  
May 2002



What about this 'great Indian tradition'?

रहिमन धागा प्रेम का मत तोड़ो चटकाए  
टूटे तो फिर न जुड़े, जुड़े तो गांठ पड़ जाए । ।

Bhakti poet Rahim wrote: don't break the thread of love.  
Once broken, it's difficult to join it. Even if gets joined, the  
knot will always remain.

सन्तो राह दोऊ हम दीटा । ।  
हिन्दू तुरूक हटा नहिं मानैं, स्वाद सबनको मीटा । ।  
हिन्दू तुरूक की एक राह है, सतगुरू इहै बनाइ ।  
कहहि कवीर मुनो हो सन्तों, राम न कहेउ खोदाइ । ।

Kabir, one of the greatest bhakti poets wrote: Hindus and  
Muslims may not agree, but the path to salvation for both is  
the same, whether you worship Ram or Khuda.

अयं निजः परो वेति गणना लघुचेतसाम ।  
उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् । ।

This famous sloka says: Only the petty-minded think in  
terms of 'mine' and 'yours'. For the large-hearted, the whole  
world is one family.

## STOP PRESS

A startling new development has taken place. In May, the Ahmedabad-based Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) conducted an experiment to find out whether the Sabarmati coach could have been set on fire from outside. Their conclusion, reported in *The Times of India* dated July 3, 2002 and *The Week*, dt July 7, 2002, was that this was not possible, and that the inflammable liquid had been poured from inside.

The investigators threw water from outside on another coach (of course without the presence of a mob), first while standing on the tracks, and then on a mound of gravel-stone three feet high, but 14 feet away from the bogie. In the first case, the water fell outside the bogie, since the height of the window was seven feet. In the latter case, only 10-15 % of the liquid entered the bogie.

Had such a major portion of the inflammable liquid used at that time fallen on the tracks and around the bogie, it would have caused damage on the outside of the bogie and under it, says the report. But, "after inspecting the bogie and the tracks, it was found that there was no effect of fire below the windows. Taking this fact into account and the burning pattern on the outside of the bogie, the conclusion is that no inflammable liquid was thrown into the bogie from outside. It also does not look possible that any inflammable liquid was thrown in from the doors of the bogie."

The investigators then threw 60 litres of water with the help of a bucket into the passage of the compartment from one side, and then a large part of the bogie was doused. "On the basis of this experimental observation, the conclusion is that standing in the passage of seat No 72, using a container with a wide opening, about 60 litres of inflammable liquid had been poured and immediately a fire had been started in the bogie," says the report, filed by the FSL's assistant director M S Dahiya.

The report surmises that three of the four doors of the compartment were open when the fire was raging inside, while all the windows were closed.

The FSL's inspection report states that the window grills had been broken from the inside, or, they had melted in the fire. But some of the window panes had broken because of the stone-throwing.

These conclusions, which are at variance with some of the survivors' accounts, cast an even bigger question mark on who set the coach on fire and how.

## Nirbhay Bano Andolan

As the name suggests, Nirbhay Bano Andolan was set up to bring into citizens' lives fearlessness and a rightful assertion of their rights. Democracy is useless without an aware populace and without popular initiative to make those in power accountable to the electorate. Despite more than five decades of democratic rule, the large majority of Indians continue to be easy victims of police atrocities, civic indifference and government graft. The NBA has been working to build a responsible and active populace that does not hesitate to demand its rights from civic and law-enforcing agencies.

At the local level, the Andolan provides legal aid and education. Through jan adalats, sections most susceptible to political brutality and highhandedness are educated on their rights and encouraged to voice their protests democratically. The Andolan has fought against illegal police detention, custodial deaths, corruption in police stations and the politician-criminal nexus. The campaigns against illicit liquor and hafta collection by the police received tremendous response from citizens.

Having been formed in the immediate aftermath of the 92-93 communal riots in Mumbai, to provide relief and help to the riot-affected, the Andolan has ceaselessly lobbied for the implementation of the Srikrishna Commission Report. From street corner meetings to poster campaigns, to appeals to human rights bodies, government officials and MPS, to helping in the victims' legal and administrative battles for justice and compensation, the Andolan has kept alive the hope that the Commission's Report offers to the thousands who lost their loved ones during the riots. It has also carried out a campaign for the implementation of the Gundewar Commission Report into the police firing which killed 10 Dalits in July 1997.

## Appeal for Peace

*“ We condemn the unfortunate incident which took place outside Godhra railway station on 27-2-2002. All those found guilty should be punished. We offer our condolences to the families of those who died in it and pray that their souls rest in peace. We have conveyed our feelings of condemnation to all those who have so far visited Godhra.*

*We thank the Collector and the DSP, Godhra, for saving the lives of Hindus and Muslims, for ensuring the safety of the Haj pilgrims who returned home and for their help in running our relief camp.*

*We believe in peace and request citizens of Godhra to maintain peace. We also request the administration to adhere to Rajdharm as advised by the Prime Minister, and provide security to all affected citizens so that they can get back to their residences.”* \*

Translation of Gujarati appeal for peace issued by Maulana Hussen Umerji, chief maulvi of Godhra and prominent Muslims of Godhra: Usman Beli and advocates Yakub Bhatuk and Yusuf Charkha, on April 7, 2002.

No newspaper in Godhra carried it.