

Geography and economics of Gujarat's violence

J SRI RAMAN

The ground has been shifting from states like Uttar Pradesh with Muslim ghettos to those where India's largest minority has acquired affluence and assertiveness. My unfriendly caller was doubtless as agitated about the affluence of Muslims working in Dubai as about the distant Somnath. The grisly events in Gujarat, among other things, point to the new geography of communalism in India. The violence also had its economic dimension. There is an obvious need to understand both as also the dominant political strand that led to the violence.

The geography of violence has, in fact, not gone entirely unnoticed. The riots have shocked the Indians not only by their scale (with the toll rising to 2,000 in three months) but also by where they have occurred, the unlikely territory so to speak. True, Ahmedabad has long been considered a "communally sensitive" city (as the persistent colonial coinage still puts it); also, the Bharatiya Janata Party has been in power here. Yet, no one expected the whole of Gujarat to behave like another Uttar Pradesh, the state which forms the heartland of the militant 'Hindutva' creed. Gujarat is Mahatma Gandhi's land, his legacy. How could this come to pass in Gujarat? Secondly, how could this happen in a state, to which one could readily apply an old aphorism about America: the business of Gujarat is business. Whoever expected communal passions to move the 'Patels', the generic name for the commercially successful immigrants from the coastal State in the USA, the UK and Africa? The practitioners of the politics of historical revenge, however, say they expected Gujarat to blow up as it did. One of them, apparently an ordinary member of the extended Sangh Parivar in the southern city of Chennai, phoned me after a public rally on Gujarat. Did I know, he said, that Gujarat had its 'mandir (temple)' issue long before Uttar Pradesh acquired its in Ayodhya? That the Somnath temple had been pillaged by Mahmud of Ghazni? Yes, I knew the story from the school textbooks. And some of us thought that the militarists of Pakistan had dealt a cleverly provocative blow to our cause by naming their new missiles 'Ghaznavi'. But, did Somnath, or deep-rooted revanchism, suffice to explain the latest riots? Romila Thapar, one of the historians whom the 'Hindutva' camp would like to outlaw, raised an uncomfortable question in this context. She drew attention to a Sanskrit-Arabic inscription of AD 1264 from Veraval-Somnath, recording acquisition of land for building a mosque. "The land was acquired through the agreement of the local pancha-kula, a high-level administrative body whose membership included the Shaiva priest presumably of the Somnath temple, the merchants and the elite of the area. The maintenance of the mosque was also arranged through the purchase of the estates of various temples. No mention is made of the raid of Mahmud on Somnath". Nor does it find mention, she notes, in Bilhana's history written not long after the raid.

Asks Thapar: "Were memories surprisingly short or was the destruction of the temple... exaggerated in the Turko-Persian accounts? Or were the profits of trade - doubtless the lucrative horse trade of Gujarat - of surmounting concern for the priests and elite of Somnath? Or were the Arabs and Persians from the Gulf treated in a friendly fashion...?" A different question can be raised in today's context. If economic interests shortened memories then, do similar interests serve now to perpetuate the theme of historical revenge? Indicative is the choice of the land of hard-headed businessmen as the first "laboratory of Hindutva" (as the high priests of the

ideology have labelled it). Especially, if seen in the light of the fact that this is only the latest in a series of signs pointing to the communalism shifting its ground. Recall this decade's major communal violence - in Mumbai, Maharashtra, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu - where pelf seems to have played a bigger role in what seemed crimes of passion and politics. The ground has been shifting from states like Uttar Pradesh with Muslim ghettos to those where India's largest minority has acquired affluence and assertiveness. Some of the Muslim names associated with Mumbai's underworld have been used to communalize the country's financial capital. My unfriendly caller was doubtless as agitated about the affluence of the minority community working in Dubai as about the distant Somnath. Television interviews of Gujarat's tribesmen testified that they were influenced by propaganda against Muslim "exploiters". The assaults on the prosperous Bohra community, spared in the past riots, are an additional illustration. The minority has become an unlikely substitute for Jews of the Shylock-like image to indigenous fascism.

Those using the fig leaf of "cultural nationalism" have provided more such evidence with looting by members of a "respectable" middle class during the riots. Says Arvind Lodaya, an Ahmedabad designer: "When I overheard two neighbours in my apartment block discuss the goodies they had looted, I started wondering if this was the right place for my kids to grow up in." The hope is that many more parents will begin to ask themselves the same question. The writer is a journalist based in Chennai, India. A peace activist, he has contributed the main essay to "The Media Bomb," a study of Indian media responses to India's nuclear-weapon tests of 1998. He is also the author of a sheaf of poems under the title 'At Gunpoint' Geography and economics of Gujarat's violence