“From Untruth, Lead Us to Truth”

Challenges in Working on Peace in Gujarat, India

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The process of peacemaking following the 2002 carnage in Gujarat has been slow and difficult. The author offers a snapshot of India’s diversity and the current tensions it faces, explains the outcomes of investigations into the bloodshed and the current climate in Gujarat, and explores four themes in the quest for peace and justice there.

The Upanishads is one of the most sacred scriptures of the Hindus. There is a very challenging dimension that is highlighted, in which the devotee says this prayer to God:

Lead me O Lord
from darkness to light,
Lead me O Lord
from untruth to truth,
Lead me O Lord
from death to immortality.

That constant urge and search for truth became the cornerstone of Mahatma Gandhi’s campaign to provide freedom from colonial rule for India. He called it satyagraha (“force of truth”), and he based it on the doctrine of ahimsa

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(“nonviolence”). These two principles, satyagraha and ahimsa, which in latter years epitomized Gandhi, were the ultimate weapons in pursuit of freedom. That India achieved this goal by using these weapons is as clear as daylight. That India has not succeeded in mainstreaming these values in almost sixty years of independence can be seen in the brutal and fragmented world so many Indians live in today.

For Mahatma Gandhi, Gujarat—a state in northwest India—was home. It was here that he established his famous ashram on the banks of the river Sabarmati in Ahmedabad. It was from the walls of this ashram that Hindus, Muslims, and Christians sang together that celebrated hymn Ishwar Allah tera naam, sabko sanmati de Bhagwan (“Whether we call you Ishwar or Allah, we ask You to treat us as one”). Mahatma Gandhi also held in very high esteem John Henry Cardinal Newman, who some years earlier, in his search for truth, wrote that immortal poem, “Lead kindly light amidst the encircling gloom.” Gandhi had it translated into Gujarati, and it became one of the favorite hymns of the ashram, too. A man committed to peace, Gandhi fully realized that peace is always in the context of truth.

Today, the very Gujarat that became the launching pad for Gandhi’s assault toward freedom has become a battleground as politicians manipulate people in the name of religion. Peace and harmony have given way to violence and communalism. However, there have been positive responses not to allow the torches of truth and peace to be totally extinguished. This article looks at some dimensions of this response after first trying to understand the nature and reality of the violence that grips so much of the society today.

Situating India

India is regarded as the cradle of great civilizations. The Indus Valley civilization is comparable to the civilizations of the Greeks and the Romans. The artifacts and seals found in its ruins indicate a highly sophisticated way of living that can rival even some of the current civilizations of the world. For centuries, India has been a potpourri of cultures and has embraced diverse faiths and traditions from the world over. This is partly due to “foreign” domination—the Aryans (who came from the plains of Central Asia more than three thousand years ago); the Mughals; the Dutch; the French; and finally the British, who ruled India for several centuries. It has been the nature of Indian society to assimilate and be assimilated into the wealth of diversity that came along. This steady influx has made India the rich palimpsest of civilizations that it is.

All through this history, religion has played a significant role in determining the cultural and moral ethos of the country. “Religiosity” seems to have gripped the country from the Indus civilization. The Vedic age, traditionally regarded as
the start of the Hindu Era of the country, contributed to the fact that the vast majority of India’s population is of the Hindu faith (with all its diversity). However, there are sizeable sections of the population who follow Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism. There are also small percentages of followers of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and other faiths. A good section of the tribal population of India is fundamentally animist, and the sizeable dalit population of the country would categorically state that they do not belong to the mainstream Hindu faith.

Over the years, within India too, there has been a long history of migration, displacement, and even relocation. In most parts of India, you can find people belonging to different cultural, ethnic, and religious groups. The recent happenings in Assam and in Maharashtra where Biharis were attacked are a blot on India’s tradition of accepting one and all. Indians also have a long tradition of “settling abroad”: Indians live in every corner of the globe from Chicago to Canberra and from Manchester to Melbourne. This migration speaks strongly that India not only desired to embrace all but also tangibly wished to be embraced in return.

Into this melting pot, the ascent of globalization has brought newer needs and a different value system, especially in urban India. Celebrating Valentine’s Day, listening to rock music, eating at a McDonald’s, or connecting to cyberspace have jettisoned a fairly large section of India into a virtual global village. On the other hand, there is a rise in orthodoxy, with more emphasis given to ritual practices and even to questionable acts of superstition and obscurantism. There is a proliferation of “places of worship,” and one can easily see the mushrooming of temples in India by the side of modern high-rise buildings.

India is truly at the crossroads! There is a raging debate between the Nehruvian model of “temples of modern India” (namely dams and the whole baggage of industrialization) and the proponents of the Babri Masjid-Ram Mandir agenda that has literally taken the country a few centuries back. On the one hand, India seems to be poised to take its place among the “superpowers” of the twenty-first century. On the other hand, there are forces that seem to be determined to take the country back to parallels of the Dark Ages of Europe.

Today India’s pluralistic traditions are challenged from all quarters, and there is no other place where this is so overwhelmingly manifested than in Gujarat.
1990 one sees here not merely the emergence of fundamentalist forces but also a “new culture” that has captivated the middle class—a concept of one nation, one language, one culture, one belief, yet with all the blessings that the trappings of modern civilization can bring. This culture finds expression in intolerant and violent behavioral patterns—far from the traditions and heritage of India’s past, so vividly epitomized by Ashoka and Akbar, great rulers of bygone years, and Mahatma Gandhi, who is essentially a son of Gujarat.

The Gujarat Carnage

To frame my reflection on the horrific violence and bloodshed that broke out in 2002 between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat, I want to evoke a famous landmark. In the very heart of the city of Ahmedabad, the commercial capital of Gujarat, stands the Sidi Saiyed Mosque named after its builder. The most exquisite craftsmanship in stone carving can be seen in this mosque, built in 1572. The distinguishing features of this mosque are the ten intricately carved stone windows. One of the windows depicts the tree of life with delicate intertwining of the branches of a tree. For years, this motif was the symbol of Ahmedabad and, in fact, of Gujarat. In a way it symbolized all that India meant and stood for: diverse cultures, faiths, languages, traditions, and peoples—everything that makes up a great civilization, a unity in diversity. The window is a unique, interwoven “tapestry” whose multicolor hues shone as the light of the sun and the moon pierces the gaps of the window. It is magnificent!

Yet a few years ago, when the Hindu right-wing government took control of power in the State of Gujarat, one of their first decisions was to ensure that this replica of the stone trellis was no longer used as a symbol of Gujarat and of Ahmedabad. They quickly replaced it with the replica of a temple. The move was significant because in one stroke it demonstrated all that India is about today: a country with a great and rich past but a very tenuous future. The diversity that characterized this civilization has now become the source of bitter division, hatred, and violence. Religion is used as a tool to manipulate people for petty political gains. The intricacy and the beauty of the tree of life literally stands to be poisoned at its very roots. In February/March 2002, the tree of life of Ahmedabad city that was intrinsic to Gujarati society was shattered beyond recognition. This destruction was already occurring in the years prior to 2002. So much of India has also not been able to sustain the wealth of our diversity. This is totally true of Gujarat, where over the years the beautiful and interwoven tapestry has just been destroyed to shreds. In Gujarat, it was not just “a once and for all.” It emerged over a period of time in subtle, covert, and insidious ways.

The unfettered violence, murder, arson, and looting that took place in Gujarat began on February 27–28, 2002. This violence followed the burning of the S-6
component of the Sabarmati Express Train in Godhra (in eastern Gujarat) and the death of fifty-nine people. The details of the carnage are gory and horrendous: almost two thousand Muslims were killed; many more were injured or brutalized; several hundred women were raped; and the extent of damage to homes and establishments can hardly be quantified. Gujarat has not yet recovered from the massive losses incurred by every strata of society during that period.

On November 21, 2002, the Concerned Citizens’ Tribunal consisting of several eminent citizens and headed by Justice V. Krishna Iyer, a former judge of the Supreme Court of India, made public a report entitled, “Crime against Humanity,” on the Gujarat carnage. This report was based on more than two thousand oral and written testimonies both individual and collective from victim-survivors and also independent human rights groups, women’s groups, NGOs, academics, and others. The tribunal’s findings and recommendations clearly indict the government of Gujarat and hold them responsible for what took place.

The details of what took place in Gujarat have already been well documented in studies, analyses, and reports by fact-finding teams, human rights groups, statutory bodies like the National Human Rights Commission, and the media, besides others in both India and abroad. It is not necessary to recount details here. The major trends that emerged from each of these reports (including the Human Rights Watch Report of 2003) and that corroborate the findings of the Citizens’ Tribunal are:

- What took place in Gujarat was not merely communal violence or riots; it was a genocide, a carnage, an ethnic cleansing, designed to wipe out or to ostracize a whole community.
- The carnage was well planned and well executed. It was not a “spontaneous” reaction as it was made out to be. The preparations must have taken several months.
- The carnage was meant to break the backbone of the Muslim economy. It has succeeded to a great extent.
- The middle class (including several well-to-do and educated women) were blatantly involved in the violence. Very few were willing to come out and take a stand to prevent what was happening.
- In some areas, tribals and dalits were very effectively used in the arson and looting of Muslim homes and establishments.
- It was a state-sponsored genocide. The Citizens’ Tribunal has clearly indicted, besides the chief minister and politicians, several high-ranking bureaucrats, and police officials were actively involved. The Sangh Parivar was given a free hand to do what they wanted.
More than four years later, the ground situation in Gujarat has only worsened. In October 2003, the Gujarat government spent a huge amount of money in an exercise called “vibrant Gujarat” in an apparent bid “to pretend normalcy.” They sought to attract foreign investors to put their money into Gujarat. This turned out to be a big fiasco, despite the government’s well-oiled propaganda machinery.

Fortunately, for Indian society, the Supreme Court of the country has been playing a proactive role in the context of Gujarat. There have been some favorable judgments that have been helpful to all that has been happening here. However, the reality in Gujarat is:

- A Muslim today in Ahmedabad cannot buy a house or own a shop in the western up-market part of the city. Muslims are normally confined to ghettos in the eastern part of the city or in some rare pockets in the western part.
- Most Muslims in Gujarat continue to live in fear and insecurity.
- An insignificant incident can spark a major riot.
- State-sponsored terrorism continues with frightening regularity.
- In the central jail in Ahmedabad, there are two hundred detainees under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). All of them happen to be Muslims.
- Some of those who are accused of the violence against the Muslims have been elected to official positions, and even the Gujarat judiciary has been tampered with.
- The Sangh Parivar continues its vicious campaign against the Muslims, Christians, and other vulnerable groups with impunity.

The Godhra incident provided a trigger to fundamentalist elements, unrest, and violence that can be traced from March 1998 when the Hindu nationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party) won a two-thirds majority in Gujarat. All that has followed is bitter history. On May 1, 2006, the dargah (tomb) of Rashiduddin Chisthi in the Fatehpura area of Baroda was razed to the ground, sparking another round of communal violence that claimed six lives, leaving many others injured and homeless. The dargah of this revered saint was frequented both by Muslims and Hindus and is believed to be more than two hundred years old. This insensitive act by a callous administration is a clear indicator of how one religion can be pitted against another even when efforts are made to restore communal harmony. The bottom line is that Gujarat is still on the boil, but the fact is, efforts are being made day in and day out for the establishment of a more peaceful and harmonious society.
Our Efforts

What we have presented above is the reality of Gujarat in a highly polarized and divided society. It is in contradiction to wider Indian society that has been the cradle of great religions, cultures, and customs that definitely share not merely a common heritage but also shared values, beliefs, and systems. The efforts of PRASHANT, the Jesuit Centre of Human Rights, Justice, and Peace, to respond to this reality have been aimed at four interrelated dimensions: justice, reconciliation, advocacy and networking, and truth-telling.

Justice

Paul VI boldly proclaimed, “If you want peace, work for justice.” The situation in Gujarat is about a state that has institutionalized justice. At the receiving end are the minorities, mainly Muslims, Christians, the tribals (whom we call adivasis), the lower castes (called dalits), and of course, women.

A good part of our energies have been focused on bringing justice to the people, especially the victims of the Gujarat Carnage of 2002. We have made some headway in this, thanks to the linking up with another NGO called “Citizens for Justice and Peace,” based in Bombay. A clear victory in recent times has been when a fast-track court in Bombay convicted several of those who were responsible for the massacre of thirteen Muslims on the night of March 1, 2002, in the infamous Best Bakery Case of Baroda.

In our efforts to demand justice, together with others, we have succeeded in getting the Supreme Court to reopen almost two thousand cases related to the Gujarat Carnage. Justice, we believe, is the critical first step toward helping the restoration of confidence in a community that has been bashed up, demonized, and ostracized. Our efforts to facilitate the process of justice have definitely brought a glimmer of hope to people who had almost given up their fight for survival.

Reconciliation

At the heart of our attempts to work toward a society that is able to live and work together, we have been promoting the need and importance for reconciliation. But this is much easier said than done. Reconciliation abhors a vacuum. Our constant dilemma is “how does one reconcile groups and individuals who have very strong prejudices, mistrusts, and suspicions about the other?” We have been meeting; we have been bringing children of different communities together at different times; we have been facilitating groups that seek to work for reconciliation.

The brutal fact, however, is that communities in most parts of Gujarat are totally polarized. Most Muslims are forced to live in ghettos as we said earlier. There is no place where children of different faiths can interact. The question of even
praying together often does not arise. At the heart of reconciliation is forgiveness. Forgiveness can be sustained only in an environment where threats, doubts, fears, and misgivings give way to more positive attitudes and ultimately actions.

**Advocacy and Networking**

We no longer live in isolation. In a world overwhelmed by mass media and highly advanced technology, networking with others at the local and global levels is not merely essential but mandatory. As an organization, PRASHANT has been doing its very best to network with all people and organizations of goodwill, hoping that one day our dream of establishing a society that is more just and humane will actually prevail.

We have tried to bring the reality of Gujarat to the attention of the world. We have kept in regular contact with individuals and groups all over, knowing full well that our efforts to establish peace in Gujarat will not succeed if we work on our own steam. We have knocked on the doors of several world governments; we have spoken on university campuses in various parts of Europe and North America; we have organized people and mobilized opinion throughout India. This has definitely paid rich dividends because the world has really not forgotten the tragedy that has befallen the people of Gujarat. Networking and advocacy play an important role in providing people a vision in the building of a new tomorrow.

**Truth**

The biggest casualty in the wake of the Gujarat Carnage has been truth. Falsehood, deception, and lies have literally paralyzed a good part of Gujarati society and they are unable to rise. There is a common belief that all Muslims are terrorists, all of them are antinational, and so on. When asked to prove or authenticate their statements, the propagators of such lies are unable to do so.

Standing up for the truth and speaking truth to power, however, are fraught with risks. In these past four years, both as individuals and as an organization, we have been harassed, intimidated, investigated by the police, and have received death threats. We are certain, however, that it is a small price that we have to pay for what we believe is the greater good.

**Daily Steps**

Peace, we believe, is not an empty word but the realization of very specific actions, attitudes, and relationships. Through these years, we have not only tried to realize this “peace” in simple, small, ordinary things of daily life but also in the wider context of establishing a more just and humane society in Gujarat.

In these past years, we have been able to take some satisfaction that we have done “some work.” But we also feel small at the immensity of the task that looms
large, ahead of us. At this juncture, we try to make the words of our Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore a reality, as we pray:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high,

Where knowledge is free,

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls,

Where words come out from the depth of truth,

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection,

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sands of dead habit,

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action,

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake!

“FROM UNTRUTH, LEAD US TO TRUTH”