I. Introduction

On the 6th of August 2002, the Common Security Forum organised a meeting at King’s College, Cambridge, entitled ‘Violence, History and the State: Gujarat 2002’. From the end of February 2002 onwards, the Indian state of Gujarat has been the scene of violence of a horrific magnitude against its Muslim citizens. The immediate provocation was an attack on the Sabarmati Express at Godhra railway station, in Gujarat, on the 27th of February. Fifty-eight people were burnt to death inside a railway coach dedicated to kar sevaks returning from the contested site of Ayodhya. In retaliation, a bandh (extra-legal halt to all economic activity) was called the next day by the VHP The World Hindu Council or Vishwa Hindu Parishad, one of the wings of the Hindu Right Wing family, the Sangh Parivar). Soon thereafter, Gujarati Muslims from all socio-economic backgrounds were made the victims of prolonged violence in ‘revenge’ for the Godhra incident. Houses were burnt down, business establishments ransacked, women raped and butchered in front of their families. These events continued for a number of months while the rest of India and indeed the world looked on. The victims, including thousands of children, remain displaced and traumatised within insalubrious and over-crowded ‘relief camps’, afraid to return to their former homes in case of renewed attacks.

1Kar sevak: a term that has come to be used for volunteers for Hindu religious duties, particularly for volunteers associated with the Ram temple movement from the 1980s. The term was originally used for Sikh volunteers who engaged in ritual services such as cleaning, serving food and manual labour for atonement or spiritual gain at gurdwaras.

Ayodhya: A town in north India that is associated with the birthplace of Hindu hero-god Rama. Hindu revivalist groups have insisted that a temple to mark the birthplace lay under a sixteenth-century mosque built during the reign of the Mughal ruler Babur. In 1989, the mosque was torn down by thousands of kar sevaks as political leaders from the now-ruling Bharatiya Janata Party looked on. Hindu nationalist groups have since made repeated efforts to build a temple at the site of the destroyed mosque, but without success so far. The issue remains contentious in political and legal terms.

VHP or World Hindu Council has its origins in the 1960s, but from the 1980s it took on a more aggressively political form, actively mobilising volunteers for Hindu political action, particularly around the issue of reclaiming mosques alleged to have been built on sites formerly occupied by Hindu temples. Unlike traditional Hindu nationalist groupings, the VHP also harnessed resources from prosperous Indians resident in the West.

Sangh Parivar: The VHP also became a key factor in the emergence of the Sangh Parivar, the ‘family’ of Hindu nationalist groups of which the parliamentary face is the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party or Indian People’s Party. The Sangh Parivar is united by belief in Hindutva or Hindu-ness, specifically, Hinduism as political ideology, and aims at the creation of the Hindu Rashtra, the Hindu nation. For these issues, see Tapan Basu et al, Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags : a Critique of the Hindu Right (London: Orient Longman, 1993); Thomas Blom Hansen, The Saffron Wave (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) and, on the origin of the VHP, Lise McKean, Divine enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist movement (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
To observers both within and outside the country, there is something wearily familiar about the spectacle, at least as old as the nation’s founding moment of Independence and Partition in 1947, of different religious groups pitched in inhuman battle against each other. Yet, even in an India all but anaesthetised to such events, the nature and scope of the violence in Gujarat stand out as extreme, and its political and ethical implications profoundly disturbing. At least three features immediately declare this situation to be different from that of the ‘ordinary communal riot’ in India: the sustained inaction of the State, as manifested in the BJP government of Gujarat led by Chief Minister Narendra Modi, as well as the BJP-led coalition government in New Delhi headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee; the complicity of the Gujarati Hindu middle class both in participating in the violence against Gujarati Muslims from all socio-economic strata and in condoning the State’s inability, or unwillingness, to step in; and the backdrop for this all-pervasive complicity being the fact that Gujarat, ruled by a BJP government, has been for some years the prime laboratory of Hindutva ideology and practice.

II. Aims of the meeting

Have the events in Gujarat been, then, entirely predictable? Is there something specific to the nature of Gujarati society, in its imbrications of caste, class and religion, which has led to the current state of affairs? Can we learn any lessons from its history, and from placing Gujarat against the backdrop of more recent, pan-Indian interactions of democratic processes and Hindu revivalist politics? The aim of the CSF meeting was to examine these questions from the perspectives of historians and political scientists working on Gujarat, and to bring together, for this purpose, Gujarat specialists and academics with a general interest in South Asia.

The twenty participants were asked to use the colloquium as an opportunity to update their own work on Gujarat in the light of the violence and its aftermath; provide analyses of the historical roots of the violence; offer comparative views from other regions in India; and theorise about the role of the State in aiding and abetting the violence.

III. Structure of the meeting

The organisers sought to address these issues by structuring the meeting around two broad themes:

- The State and violence, discussed during a long morning session
- Gujarati culture and politics in historical perspective, to which two shorter afternoon sessions were devoted.

A concluding session helped summarise the themes that had emerged in course of the meeting, as well as return to issues that had not been discussed at length during the day.

In the first session, Ornit Shani presented a paper in progress, ‘Whither India’s Democracy? Some inferences from the Gujarat riots’, to which Joya Chatterji provided a response; Raj Chandavarkar commented on a pre-circulated paper by Upendra Baxi (who could not himself be present), ‘The Second Gujarat Catastrophe’; and Amartya Sen spoke on ‘Implications of Gujarat 2002’.
In the second session, Nalini Delvoye presented a Tribute to Z. A. Desai, late scholar of Gujarat, Samira Sheikh and Kaushik Bhaumik spoke from their paper in progress, ‘State and Religion in Gujarat: Some Readings’, followed by a response from Joyita Sharma.

In the third session, Parita Mukta summarised and updated two previously published articles, ‘The Culture of Political Authoritarianism’ and ‘The Public Face of Hindutva’, to which Prashant Kidambi responded.

In the closing session, Ananya Jahanara Kabir summarised the themes that had emerged during the day, focusing particularly on that of language, discourse and reality; contributions were solicited from Priya Gopal on the intellectual as activist; Magnus Marsden on multiple Muslim identities; Nalini Delvoye on syncretism in Gujarati culture, and David Hardiman on the Adivasis (tribals) of Gujarat.

An analysis of the day’s proceedings now follows.

IV. A State of Violence

The participants agreed that the most striking aspect of Gujarat 2002 has been the State’s self-professed inability to intervene in the violence. Participants sought to convey the gravity of this situation through various formulations: thus Amartya Sen referred to ‘complex bloodiness’, Ornit Shani to ‘state-sponsored terrorism’ and Rochana Bajpai to ‘a state that flaunts its incapacity to rule.’ The most damning indictment of all was Upendra Baxi’s description of state power as Rape Culture, a phrase which conjoins in the most graphic manner possible the brutality of the violence and its supporting masculinist discourse, even while enshrining within itself the memory of the women who have been its focus.2

As Shani’s paper demonstrated through its detailed description of the violence in the city of Ahmedabad (to which she had been witness), Gujarat 2002 represented not a real breakdown of law and order, but the State’s willed withdrawal of its responsibility towards the security of its citizens. Complicit in this calculated lawlessness was the police force, ironically the very arm of State machinery primarily responsible for maintaining law and order; also complicit were the political leaders who excused police behaviour, for instance on grounds of their ‘emotional’ response (as Hindus) to what had happened at Godhra. Some participants noted that among the civil service, too, there were less resignations, protests and other signs of autonomy than had been evident during, for instance, the Naxalite movement in Bengal.

The clear message sent out to Indian Muslims is that the State cannot be relied upon to offer them protection— in Raj Chandavarkar’s words, ‘an extraordinary thing to say

---

2 For a similar viewpoint, especially with regard to Constituent Assembly debates surrounding the repatriation and recovery of abducted women during the Partition riots, see Veena Das, Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India (Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
to around 120 million of its citizens, as well to all Indians who can consider themselves as possessing a minority identity.’ It is the unabashed articulation of this position, and the concomitant implication of the State at every possible level, that makes the events in Gujarat different from previous communal riots in India. In fact, as was the consensus reached in course of a lively discussion during Session I, the very term ‘communal riot’ would seem grossly inapplicable to the current situation.

The terms ‘communalism’ and ‘secularism’, however fuzzily employed in the Indian context, are still useful in connoting discursive histories not available to other terms. However, the phrase ‘communal riot’ implies parity between two communities of equal strength, engaged in spontaneous violence against each other. Through this phrase, which is at once a description and an explanation of sectarian violence, and also embedded in a colonial construction of Hindu and Muslim communities, we delimit from the start our modes of understanding what happened in Gujarat. Terms more appropriate for Gujarat 2002 than ‘communal riot’ might be ‘pogrom’ or ‘ethnic cleansing’, not least because they make explicit, by recalling Nazi Germany and Bosnia, the connection between the State’s espousal of an ideology of cultural purism and the violence unleashed on a select group to be purged from the body politic.

Undoubtedly, there are parallels between Gujarat 2002 and other epochal moments of violence in India, such as the Calcutta killings of 1946 and the Sikh riots of 1984. As Joya Chatterji reminded us, a key role has been played in all these moments by the bandh and the curfew, which opens up spaces where the State can abdicate responsibility and different power-groups arm-wrestle and create alliances with the State to establish a new status quo on the ground. Yet perhaps what we witnessed in Gujarat, as Chatterji argued, is the new use of older mechanisms for reconfiguring how power is shared at local levels. In other words, Gujarat might signal not a complete break from previous instances of rioting but the latest stage in a long-term development in the changing role of the State.

If this is indeed the case, the question arises as to why Gujarat and why March 2002? This would help us understand perhaps, why the Gujarat riots did not spread to neighbouring states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. In this context, Sen referred to the strong connection that has emerged in his research between gender inequality and communal violence, with a divide emerging between the north and west of India on the one hand, and the south and the east on the other. Such findings might suggest that immediate fears about similar situations erupting elsewhere should be located within northern and western India; but do they suggest also that the situation in Gujarat was an outcome of modern politics rather than of history? Several answers were offered by the participants, and it will be useful to group them under the following rubrics:

---

4 In this context, see Ashutosh Varshney’s Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India (New Delhi: OUP, 2002), a very suggestive new work on the links between inter-religious civic associations and the prevention of communal violence.
1. Democracy and Hindutva

The events in Gujarat must influence the way we think about India as a democratic nation. As Shani reminded us, India’s ‘successful’ democracy is a matter of both nationalistic pride and scholarly scrutiny. That a democratic State can fail, and what seems the case here, even refuse, to protect its minorities must cast some doubt about the nature and efficacy of its democratic institutions. Gujarat 2002 suggests, moreover, that these institutions have been actively subverted to serve the patently undemocratic agenda of Hindutva.

Both Shani and Baxi pointed out that Indian federalism was invoked by the BJP-led coalition at the Centre to justify its lack of intervention in the ‘internal affairs’ of the state of Gujarat. In other words, inaction was justified as the Centre’s non-intervention within a state law and order issue. In practical terms this meant its refusal to declare President’s Rule in Gujarat, or send the army in without procrastination, or even concede to the demands of the Opposition and civil society groups in Gujarat and elsewhere in the country for the dismissal of the Narendra Modi government.

The ineffectuality of democratic proceedings was starkly evident also in the parliamentary debates surrounding the situation in Gujarat, including the dismissal of Modi, that Baxi went so far as to term ‘the second Gujarat catastrophe’. During these protracted sessions, when Parliament was in fact suspended for nearly a week, the most concrete statement that emerged out of the proceedings was defence minister George Fernandes’s astonishing assertion that there was nothing new about women being raped in communal conflict— the statement that gave Baxi his cue for the phrase ‘rape culture.’

Participants commented also on the connection between the BJP’s poor performance at elections and the events in Gujarat. The Godhra incident and its aftermath followed barely days after the BJP lost or fared relatively poorly in elections in several Indian states, including Uttar Pradesh, the ‘barometer’ of North Indian politics. In retrospect, it seems clear that this timing was not coincidental, and that the BJP’s loss of political power necessitated in some way the assertion of other kinds of power in the public sphere by the Sangh Parivar. If that is indeed the case, asked Sen, could we have anticipated the tactics used by the BJP in its moments of decline as opposed to its moments of victory?

At a deeper level, as Chandavarkar noted, the Gujarat crisis has stemmed from the very ‘success of India’s democracy.’ The growth of literacy and economic mobility from the early twentieth century onwards enabled agrarian groups to assert themselves

---

within the State. If democracy offers low-caste and marginalized groups new political power and means of assertion, then the re-assertion of the right to rule by higher-caste groups can lead to a competition for the resources of the State. This viewpoint provides an answer to the question raised earlier by Chatterji regarding the shifting role of the State vis-à-vis power groups, and the events in Gujarat being seen in that long-term context.

2. ‘Hindu Insecurity’ and ‘Hindu Hurt’

If underlying Gujarat 2002 is a deeper crisis in Indian democracy, it becomes important to read through this lens the claims of ‘Hindu insecurity’ and ‘Hindu hurt’ through which the State justified its lack of intervention in the violence and citizens condoned it. It is not only the Sangh Parivar that makes these claims, but also many ‘moderate’ Hindus, who would not overtly espouse right-wing affiliations. The sense of ‘insecurity in one’s own land’ is usually attributed to the Muslim presence in India—a view that has been strengthened by the post-September 11th rhetoric of global Islamic terrorism. The prevailing belief in Hindu insecurity is predicated on the trope of ‘Hindu hurt’, or the damage supposedly inflicted on contemporary Hindu sentiments by Muslim invasions into India, their subsequent acts of temple destruction and centuries of ‘tyrannical’ rule.

Historians have repeatedly demonstrated that such ‘facts of history’ have less to do with actual events and more with the selective dissemination and deployment of certain collective memories, often from the colonial period onwards. In any case, the idea that Hindus today are rendered insecure by the ‘Muslim threat’ flies in the face of all credibility and evidence regarding the overall disempowerment of Indian Muslims post the Partition of India. One consensus that emerged at the meeting, therefore, was that the causes of this ‘Hindu insecurity’ should be located not outside but within Hindu society, and linked to the changing configurations of power-sharing within India as a ‘successful democracy’.

Thus, Shani located the basis of ‘Hindu insecurity’ within the liberalisation of the Indian economy since the 1990’s, and its reshaping of older caste-class conflicts, with


7 On these issues, see the work of Mushirul Hasan, Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence (London: Hurst, c1997). See also a very recent three-part essay in The Hindu by C. Rammanohar Reddy on the condition of Indian Muslims today:

Deprivation affects Muslims more:

The gap widened during the 1990s:

‘Facts on “appeasement”’:
Dalits, for instance, now desiring greater social mobility. In this context, she argued that the equivalence of Dalits and Muslims within the Indian political landscape is crucial. Although Chatterji questioned whether this ‘Dalit-Muslim transference’ operated within the mind-sets of all elite groups, the concept would explain to some extent the targeting of Muslims that, since the 1980s at least, has occurred whenever higher caste groups have been threatened by lower-caste aspirations and mobilisations.

As David Hardiman indicated, Hindu majoritarianism can then be read as the desire of higher-caste groups to preserve its privileges and powers by controlling the definition of Hinduism, and by speaking for all Hindus. The Other required by this process of self-definition is today the Muslim and in some cases, such as Gujarat itself, the Christian, both groups who are seen as non-indigenous to India. Simultaneously, traditionally oppressed groups that are seen to have arisen from within Hindu tradition, such as the Dalits and the Adivasis, are courted for assimilation within the homogenous vision of the Hindu Rashtra, or the Hindu State. Once all oppressed groups have been othered, marginalized, or contained, Hindu majoritarianism, speaking the language of Hindutva, seeks to take over the entire space of the nation itself.

3. Caste and State in Historical Perspective

What are the historical roots of this fundamental nexus between Caste and State, exemplified by Hindu majoritarianism and exacerbated by the territoriality of the Nation-state? As Nalini Delvoye suggested by referring to the work of Ziauddin A. Desai, any analysis of state, society and religion in India today needs the historical depth provided by scholarship on state formation and inter-group relationships in pre-modern India. Precisely this long-term historical perspective was offered by Samira Sheikh and Kaushik Bhaumik, who connected the present crisis within Hindu society to the history of Hindu state formation especially as manifested in the region that is now Gujarat.

According to Sheikh and Bhaumik, these historical features began to evolve from as early as the twelfth century onwards, when mercantile groups began competing with each other on religious pretexts. The dissolution of the Mughal state in the 17th century enabled the rise of ‘little kingdoms’, of which the BJP’s Ram Rajya is today a continuation, while the triad of Brahmin, Kshatriya and Temple that dictated state formation in Gujarat is also the rhetoric used today by the BJP. Thus the mercantile nature of Gujarat as well as the

---

8 Dalits comprise the constitutional category of Scheduled Castes (low-caste groups); as a political and revivalist term it was coined by B. R. Ambedkar; see, for example, his The Untouchables: Who were They and Why They Became Untouchables (New Delhi: Amrit Book Co, 1948). For a recent articulation of the Dalit position, see Kancha Ilaiah, Caste or Class or Caste-Class: a Study in Dalithbahujan Consciousness and Struggles in Andhra Pradesh in 1980s (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 1995) and his Why I am not a Hindu (New Delhi: Samya, 1996)

9 Adivasis are a subset of the so-called Scheduled Tribes; like Dalit, the term Adivasi represents the postcolonial utilisation of an originally colonial category that was taken over by the framers of the Indian Constitution. The term was until recently used mostly in western and central India, but seems to be transforming into a pan-Indian phenomenon under the combined efforts of NGOs and other developmental groups on the one hand, and Hindutva hardliners seeking catch-all definitions for easier assimilation on the other. There also appears to be a tendency to see ‘dalit’ and ‘adivasi’ rather than ‘dalit’ as an umbrella term for all oppressed groups within the body politic today.
framing discourse of Hindutva rests on two issues overlooked within Indian historiography: the political economy of the Temple and the relationship between State, religion and capital. In their words, ‘the thorough implication of the Indian State in religion (including caste) means that the BJP is the truth of the State which could not be spoken about for long.’

Participants sought to refine this formulation in various ways. Bajpai asked whether the centrality of religion to state formation was the same as the ideology professed by the State. Comparative perspectives from other regions and historical moments were offered to clarify the pertinence of the categories used by Sheikh and Bhaumik as both transcendental and subject to historical change, for example, Temple, Caste and Brahmin. Shailaja Fennell noted that in South India, the combination of Temple and Tank (body of water) occupied a very different position within the local imaginary and political economy.

Fennell also asked whether it was helpful to turn to a neighbouring area, for example, 16th century Punjab, and ask if it offered different spaces for identity formation that then fed into the contemporary Sikh-Hindu relationship. Ananya Kabir inquired into the role of Muslim mercantile groups in Gujarat, such as the Ismailis, and their impact on Hindu state formation. In answer, Sheikh suggested that their lack of overt impact be attributed to the difference between the traditions of secrecy and dissimulation that marked those Muslim groups, and the ostentation and display that marked the development of the Temple networks from the 18th century onwards.

Thus, the interplay of historical trends and geographic and socio-economic factors must nuance a general reading of the crisis in Indian democracy in terms of the crisis in Hindu society, if we wish to use this analytical perspective in understanding the situation in Gujarat. Here, the expertise of the Gujarat specialists proved especially useful. For instance, Sheikh referred to the connection between the western-seaboard orientation of the Gujarat peninsula and the link, in the popular Gujarati imagination, between the Gulf countries, Pakistan, ‘Islamic terrorism’, the Bombay underworld and the Muslims of Ahmedabad. Geography, history and discourse comes together also in the long-standing relationship between Gujarati mercantilism and the Gujarati diaspora in East Africa and, more recently, UK and the USA; a relationship that, as Parita Mukta demonstrated, re-emerges today as diasporic support of Hindutva activities.

4. Gujarati Political Authoritarianism and Diaspora

The historical and political foci of the meeting also came together in Mukta’s formulations on Gujarati political authoritarianism and its diasporic manifestations. Her view of Gujarati political culture as profoundly authoritarian offered a paradigm that linked the rise of the BJP, the violence in Gujarat against Muslims, and earlier against Christians, with the anti-poor developmental stance of the Gujarat government as exemplified by the Narmada Dam controversy. As Prashant Kidambi noted, this authoritarianism can be seen as the Gujarati elite’s reaction against democratisation, and another by-product therefore of the negative side-effects of the ‘success of India’s
democracy. In rejecting the Hindu claim to tolerance as unmanly, and seeking to punitively annihilate all dissent, Gujarati political authoritarianism as analysed by Mukta recalled Baxi’s concept of the Indian State’s ‘rape culture’.

How uniquely Gujarati, therefore, is this matrix of political authoritarianism, and indeed, how does it differ from the Emergency and other phases of post-Independence authoritarianism? An answer lies in the Gujarati genealogy of this aggressively masculinist and authoritarian political culture. Thus Mukta focused on the pride of place occupied within the Hindutva imaginary by Gujarati nationalist and freedom fighter, Sardar Vallabhbai Patel. The antithesis to the feminised passivity of his fellow Gujarati, Mahatma Gandhi, the Sardar’s iconisation derives from his ruthless image as ‘the Iron man’ and ‘the Bismarck of India’, as well as his public declarations that Indian Muslims pass a more stringent test of loyalty to the State than their fellow citizens.

This genealogy of Gujarati political authoritarianism also includes the role of prachariks (preachers) of the Swaminarayan movement, increasingly legitimised by the growth of global Hinduism. Reminding us of the enormous diasporic support for the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Mukta probed the links between Gujarati authoritarianism and the Gujarati diaspora by focusing on the Swaminarayan Temple in London. She thereby alerted us to the institutional bases in which the VHP has found homes, and to the large part of quotidian Hinduism that it has captured thereby. Encouraged by the tendency to view religion as an authentic part of Western multicultural identity, and by the appeal of the trope of ‘Hindu hurt’ to marginalized diasporic communities, Hindutva sensibilities have taken over the familiar and familial spaces of ordinary Hindus.

As Prashant Kidambi’s response stressed, we need analytical frameworks for understanding the relationship between the domestic and the diasporic domains, including how developments in the latter re-enter the former. For instance, while assessing the role of the Gujarati vernacular press in spreading the violence against Muslims, it is not sufficient to conceive of the vernacular simply in opposition to journalism in other Indian languages and regions, since the Gujarati press in the UK too propagated similar inflammatory materials, in this context, the influence of websites must also be considered. As Kabir suggested, we need instead to conceptualise a specific Gujarati linguistic sensibility with a transnational and ‘trans-media’ reach, which Hindutva sentiments have tapped into in order to permeate the hearts and minds of Gujarati Hindus from various social strata in and out of diaspora.

V. A Language of Violence

The relationship between discourse, reality and violence emerged as an over-archimg theme of the meeting. Gujarat 2002 offers several sobering perspectives on how the circulation of ideas through language and images can impact the nature of reality itself. Genocidal violence has been made possible and legitimised by a democratic State largely because the divisive and extremist language of Hindutva has been rationalised as ‘common sense’ by large sections of the Indian and diasporic Hindu population. We have noted how the selective dissemination and evocation of collective memories regarding the acts of ‘Muslim zealots and Mughal invaders’ has built up into a widely-held belief in ‘Hindu hurt’ and the concomitant need for ‘righting historical wrongs’. Narrowing the focus to Gujarat, participants offered several examples of how language has been deployed and manipulated in this task.

For example, Baxi’s paper discussed at length how the Narendra Modi government reached out to the concept of ‘asmita’, or Gujarati self-pride, in public self-exoneration during the worst days to the violence. These invocations to asmita foreground the regional variations in Hindu nationalism and the differences between, say, the localized political languages of Gujarati mercantilism, Punjabi agrarian aspirations and Rajput tradition. Similarly, the idea of Gurjara Desh has been assimilated to Hindu Gujarat, and the language of Bhakti completely appropriated by the Hindu Right to cloak its activities under the guise of benign philanthropy and community service. In short, old tropes and discourses have been redeployed into what Chandavarkar termed ‘a porous political language’ that enables violence to be reconciled to normalcy, and to be justified through appeals to common sense.

These circumstances make it all the more imperative to choose carefully the academic language used for the analysis of violence and its discursive history. It has been noted earlier that terminologies of secularism and communalism were discussed thoroughly within the meeting. Similarly, while employing other categories such as ‘Hindu Rashtra’, ‘Temple’, ‘Caste’, and even ‘State’ in analyses, we need constantly to be aware of the histories underlying each such term. Delvoye’s critique of the discourse of syncretism offered a valuable reminder of the fact that the academic and even popular uses of a term can often conceal histories of contestation, violence and cultural erasure. Her analyses of some typically ‘syncretistic moments’ in medieval Gujarat suggested that alternative terminologies may be sought from within the cultures and historical periods in question, although in this task we need to remain vigilant to the attendant dangers of nativism.

As Mukta reminded us while speaking of the Hindutva appropriation of the space of the family, ‘there are no longer any innocent categories.’ A distinction must be maintained between the development of categories and terminologies within colonial, postcolonial and Hindutva discourses, and the academic use of the same categories and terminologies to explicate those discourses. When the history of violence is the subject of academic scrutiny, we must be more careful than ever not to conflate that subject with the tools of academic analysis. We need, furthermore, to be attentive to the ethical and philosophical implications of reporting, representing and analysing violence. How one takes the suffering of individuals into account within the political and intellectual process is a...
problem for which no adequate and concerted strategies exist yet within South Asian contexts, but which are urgently needed.

VI. Sites of Resistance

‘Violence, History and the State: Gujarat 2002’ enabled concerned members of the academic community to address the wider implications of the horrific violence unleashed by a democratic State on its own citizens in the name of religion, culture and history. As with many other networks and meetings that have been organised following those events, by opening up a space for such academic discussion the meeting itself worked as a site of resistance. But the participants were conscious of the need to develop long-term and outward-facing strategies for resisting the insidious and damaging work of Hindutva at the grassroots level.

As with all fundamentalist movements today, Hindutva views are being propagated exponentially through the new technologies of the Internet that join forces with older media but still effective media such as cassette recordings. Through these technologies of mechanical and now virtual reproduction crude and inflammatory opinion has means of reaching ever-widening audiences. At the same time, unlike Islamic fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism did not in its contemporary forms demand asceticism and denial of material benefits; this attractiveness for the diasporic Hindu was augmented by the succour it provided by linking up to a resurgent India.

To use Priya Gopal’s formulation, it is the duty of the academic as ‘intellectual and activist’ to intervene in these developments within South Asia and the diaspora. Participants felt that their positions within academia in the UK could be of use in alerting the wider community of certain basic facts, such as the discrepancy between the VHP’s status as a registered charity and the true nature of its activities in India; and the discrepancy, too, between the versions of Hinduism, South Asian Islam and all aspects of South Asian history that were being made available to the public by the Hindu Right, and the work of South Asian historians themselves, which illuminates the rich mosaic of local traditions and regional inflections that inform the essentialised categories of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’.

Academic intervention in the diaspora can take the form of making available alternative models of being ‘Indian’ to diasporic youth. This work can be done through purely academic means, such as consulting with the relevant bodies on textbook writing in the UK, or, as Kabir, Mukta and Magnus Marsden agreed in discussion, through tapping the resources of creativity and the imagination. In this venture, we should perhaps not forget traditional modes of resistance and accommodation practised by communities in South Asia. As Mukta reminded us, Bhakti or devotional songs on the figure of Mira have traditionally been a mode of lower-caste resistance in Rajasthan.11 Taking a cue from this, the participants were invited by Mukta to listen together to a qawwali on Mira sung by the Pakistani group, the Sabri Brothers. This act could be seen as transforming the meeting into a space for the recuperation through devotional music a

more tolerant and spiritual strain of Hinduism. Despite the issues of generational divide, it is necessary to transform similarly, for diasporic youth, their already ‘syncretistic’ spaces of music and dance, into spaces of more multivalent resistance.

Finally, it is imperative that all attempts towards resistance must begin from a radical awareness and acceptance of subject position. As individuals we are all implicated to greater or lesser degrees in structures of power. If many South Asian academics exist as what Mukta termed ‘compromised subjects within caste households’, how, as Bhaumik asked, might the individual be recovered from those familial spaces? Extending the idea of compromise further, how can a moderate political and ideological position speak out against fundamentalisms of all kinds without compromising its essential ‘moderateness’?

This observation is especially important with regard to the reformulation of Indian Muslim subjectivities post the traumatic events of Gujarat 2002. The complexities were evident in the meeting itself. Participants argued that the category ‘Muslim’ failed to capture the complexities of the subject positions of the Gujarati Muslims who were victims of the violence. Gujarati Muslims, as Sheikh reminded us, are a heterogenous group of sects and sub-sects: Ismailis, Khojas, Bohras, Memmons, Sunnis and a host of other groups who move between Hinduism, Sunni Islam and Ismailism in varying degrees of partial concealment.12 Historically these groups have wrangled over resources and jockeyed for power by aligning themselves with Hindu powers-that-be. To categorise this heterogenous assortment into ‘Muslim’ or even ‘Gujarati Muslim’ is to erase these complexities; yet, as Shani pointed out, the violence in Gujarat had done precisely that by homogenising them into a single category, that must in turn impact future Muslim self-perception.

Here, it is worth keeping in mind the caveat raised by Sen: in combating barbarity of the kind that has led to Gujarat 2002, we must not allow ‘the nature of the calamity to corrupt the nature of the resistance itself,’ and succumb to the dangers of a dialectical response. It is not by over-emphasising minority and sectarian identities that we must fight our battles against fundamentalism, majoritarianism and overzealous nationalism. Rather, it is through conceptualising other alternative axes of identity formation and consolidation that such battles should be fought, and sought to won.

[Dear Inga Huld:
we need to add to this document, as appendices/ annexes:
  a. schedule
  b. list of participants
  c. documents circulated
Rosie should definitely be in possession of a and b. if c is not available let me know and I shall prepare the info.]