

Tehelka Magazine Issue Dated Nov 3, 2007

the Truth

GUJARAT 2002

IN THE WORDS OF THE MEN WHO DID IT

The Most Important Story of Our Time

FULL coverage

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GUJARAT 2002
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Tarun J Tejpal
Editor-in-Chief

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dance of hate

The truth behind Naroda Patiya, the grisliest massacre of 2002. Ahmedabad police's collusion in the pogrom and its cover-up. Gory details of how former Congress MP Ehsan Jafri was hacked limb by limb at Gulbarg Society, in the words of those who did it. [READ >>](#)

godhra mob fury, not terror

How spontaneous mob fury was shown as a premeditated conspiracy by the police who produced fake witnesses by bribing, coercion and torture. [READ >>](#)

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The Big Picture

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Read. And Be Afraid

TARUN J TEJPAL

IN AUSCHWITZ the exposed-brick barracks sit in neat rows, in a calm so deep it must necessarily rise out of death. The tidy paths cut each other at right angles, and the trees are stately and still. The sweet boxy buildings could be town houses, or school blocks, or military quarters. Or killing factories that smoothly sucked in human beings, separated them from their clothes, their hair, their gold teeth, their reading glasses and their children, and then processed them in a furnace. The electrified barbed wire fences that run in straight lines held up by concrete pillars could have kept out unwanted intruders, or kept in helpless innocents.



The Nazis believed in the differences in men, and believed in the extermination of these differences. The imagination can never fully get around the horror of Auschwitz — and adjoining Birkenau — where in less than three years the Nazis gassed and incinerated nearly one-and-a-half million men, women and children, many no more than a few years old. In a world full of memorials to our creativity and genius, this is a memorial to the darkness that ever lurks in the heart of men.

As you walk through those surreally peaceful double-storey blocks, you will invariably find yourself tailed or led by a crocodile of teenagers — scrubbed shining, brightly attired, speaking in hushed voices — winding their way through a byway of history to which they — and each one of us — are deeply connected. Round the year, ceaselessly, the Jews ship out their children from all over the world to show them the beast that resides in us all. By their own long suffering they understand that the battle of life against death is the battle of memory against forgetting. That to not look the beast in the face is to have the beast on your back all the time.

There is nowhere in India that you can take your daughter if you wish to level her with the beast of Partition, the beast of the 1984 Sikh riots, the beast of a hundred communal and caste massacres, or the beast of Gujarat 2002. Because we do not remember, we repeat; because we do not look the evil in the eye, it dogs us all the time.

There is nowhere in India that we enshrine our cruelty so that we can look at it and be dismayed and be afraid.

Well, read this special issue of TEHELKA and be dismayed and be afraid. Ashish Khetan's extraordinary six-month investigation — one of the finest in the history of Indian journalism — peels off all kinds of masks, and shows us the beast in us. For five years since the carnage, we have heard charges and counter-charges. We have heard the victims, the government, the police, the judiciary, and the civil rights groups. Now for the first time hear the story of the killings from the men who did it. Put to rest your doubts about the foetus that was pulled out from its womb; about the systematic slicing of Ehsan Jafri's limbs and torso; of the raping and chopping and burning of women and children; of law officers who turned on the victims; of the collusion of the police and the government.

Read it and be afraid.

One problem is we live in an age of spiralling hype and sensation. An age of cheap spectacle in which the indulgences of sports and cinema can be so easily deemed landmark and historic. An age in which words like chilling, appalling, inhuman, outrageous, have all lost their charge. We are all desensitised viewers set upon by a turbofuelled media. Image is chasing image at such blistering speed that we dare not hold on to anything — lest we burst. This issue of TEHELKA, perhaps, can be a kind of litmus test. Read the following pages and see if you



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rediscover the meaning of some words — barbaric for one; for another, heartbreaking.

Read it and see if you can still be made afraid.



Illustration: Uzma Mohsin

Of the many things that are uniquely appalling about Gujarat 2002, three are particularly disturbing. The first that the genocidal killings took place in the heart of urban India in an era of saturation media coverage — television, print, web — and not under the cloak of secrecy in an unreachable place. The second that the men who presided over the carnage were soon after elected to power not despite their crimes but seemingly precisely because of them (making a mockery of the idea of the inevitable morality of the collective). And finally — as TEHELKA's investigation shows — the fact that there continues to be no trace of remorse, no sign of penitence for the blood-on-the-hands that — if Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky are to be believed — is supposed to haunt men to their very graves.

Like Germany and Italy once, Gujarat begs many questions. How do a non-militant people suddenly acquire a bloodthirsty instinct? Does affluence not diminish the impulse to savagery? Does education not diminish the impulse to bigotry? Do the much-vaunted tenets of classical Hinduism not diminish the impulse to cruelty? If tolerance and wisdom will not flourish in a garden of well-being and learning, in the very land of Mahatma Gandhi, then is there any hope for these things at all?

Are we all, finally, only making a reckoning of differences and numbers? Would we all, given the advantage of numbers, and protection from the law, gleefully brutalise anyone who is different, or in disagreement? Today it is the overwhelming question in the mirror. Each of us needs to see it and to answer it. For the violence that bloomed so bloodily amid the Gujarati is also all around us. Every day brings news of a fresh mob attack, a fresh case of vigilante justice. The strong will tame the weak — if only law and order will look the other way for a moment.

Is it possible that contrary to all the hoopla we may have already lived out the high tide of our democracy? Many Indians may get richer and richer but as a people — a deep civilisation — we will now only get poorer and poorer? Is it possible that a country sprung from the vision of giants can now only sustain small men with small concerns? Once a few good men shaped a modern egalitarian nation out of a devastated colony; are there none now to staunch the rot?

FOR MORE than three years there has been a government at the centre that claims a legacy of the founding vision. Amazingly it has not once lifted a finger to alleviate the grief of Gujarat. There has neither been a display of the impartial steel of law and order, nor the soothing balm of any efforts of peace and reconciliation. Shining names like Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh present abject report cards — full of the desperate calculus of votes and seats; fully bare of any act of courageous morality. On the other hand, there is the bravery of the bigot: with élan Narendra Modi walks the talk and flings the gauntlet. And the idea of India dulls by the day.

Great leadership — power — is a complex duet of control and vision. India lives with a generation of politicians who at any given time only possess one of the two. The resulting catastrophes erupt around us like rash on an allergy.

Today India has a thousand mutinies awaiting an opportunity to violence, but this is *the most*

important story of our time because the schism in Gujarat is the biggest slap in the face of the idea of India. We would do well to remember that there were once other contesting ideas to that of the liberal secular democracy. We would do well to remember nothing is forever. We could still become other things, the beast within us could still tear us apart — as has happened in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar — if we do not do what we need to do, if we do not look into the mirror and fix our face.

The face can neither be an angry snarl nor a glassy-eyed indifference. And it certainly cannot be the vacuous grin of the shining Indian. In equal parts it must reflect concern and memory and compassion. Read the following pages and know why. Read the following pages and be afraid.

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Editor's Cut

Lest We Forget Our Shame

HARINDER BAWEJA

FOR ALL of us at TEHELKA, Gujarat 2002: The Truth is the most important investigation of our time. Some may argue against this but in so many ways, it is more urgent than Operation West End. Exposing corruption in the procurement of arms was critical. That the gravy chain ran long and deep — through top political echelons — was a revelation in the national interest.

But unlike West End, which dealt with greed and avarice, Gujarat is about our fundamentals. It is about ourselves. It is important because the hopelessly one-sided perpetration of violence on hapless Muslims is one of the biggest ruptures of recent times. A corrosive rupture. A nation's shame.

We all knew that the State had conspired in the events of 2002. That the rioters — or is assassins the right word? — had political protection. But we had no faces. The perpetrators were part of large amorphous mobs. We didn't know the details. We had no idea of the extent to which the masters and their men plotted and executed the genocide.

This investigation lays bare the anatomy of the rioters. The groundbreaking exposé — entirely the work of one gutsy, truth-hungry journalist, armed with nothing but two buttonsized cameras — takes the lid off all that was known but never established. The chilling details come first hand, from the accused themselves. The accused damn themselves — they tell us how everything, every last thing was planned and thought through. How bombs were manufactured in factories owned by members of the Sangh Parivar. How arms were smuggled in from other states. How, for the men in uniform, the colour saffron meant more than khaki. How Narendra Modi, custodian of the law, volunteered to let his state resemble a killing field.

The revelations are important because they are entirely voluntary. They were not made under any inducement. Wads of notes were not brandished to elicit them. Extraordinary stories need extraordinary methods, we often say. This extraordinary investigation, in fact, is an account of what the killers willingly narrated to the reporter who

approached them as a student researching Hindu resurgence. What they said was checked and cross-checked — through field visits, through other accused.

Some were cautious, but most were willing to talk with a little bit of goading. They gave out horrifying details without batting an eyelid. Their testimonies are not just an insight into their mindsets — they are accounts that should have been in official police records — in FIRs and chargesheets. Accounts that fit different sections of the IPC. Accounts that lend themselves to the criminal procedure code. Babu Bajrangi, the Bajrang Dal zealot, confesses to how he slashed open a pregnant woman's womb and wrenched the foetus out.

Suresh Richard, an accused in the Naroda Patiya massacre, confesses to rape. He tells you he is not lying, because he is admitting to it in the presence of his wife. He tells also of how he and his fellows killed Muslims when they heard that some of them were hiding in a gutter, hoping to escape the marauding mobs. Haresh Bhatt, a sitting MLA, similarly needs to be



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questioned, to be proceeded against because he reveals how rocket launchers were assembled in a factory owned by him. In over 40 hours of tape, none, save one of the protagonists, expressed any remorse. Frighteningly, they all said they would like to kill many more.

THIS INVESTIGATION is important for so many reasons, the two most important being that the Police and the Judiciary — the two pillars that ordinary Indians bank on — stand naked. Two public prosecutors are on camera acknowledging allegiance to their faith over their profession — paying homage to a warped sense of religion over nobility of duty. Details of how they are actually working to help the guilty escape the law. How they have even turned brokers and have already helped an accused — who had used a sword to cut a man to pieces — by offering money to the victim's family.

This story is about the subversion that continues at different levels, political and judicial. The Gujarat government's own counsel casts aspersions on the two-member Nanavati-Shah Commission. It took us six months to unearth the startling truth behind Gujarat 2002. Five years since, it is clear why the government in the state is not interested in delivering justice to its own victims.

The investigation begs attention. We need police reforms urgently. Thousands of victims — eyewitnesses to the genocide — are looking for justice to courts outside Gujarat. A Delhi High Court bench recently took suo motu notice of reports that pointed a finger at YK Sabharwal, the former chief justice of India. This investigation deserves all the attention the judiciary can pay it. It is a nation's shame. Our collective shame.

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Reporter's Diary

Voyager Between Two Worlds

Having been undercover on the shadow lines between sanity and mayhem, **ASHISH KHETAN** retraces a quest for truth



I HAD JUST finished breakfast and was settling down to the newspaper when my cellphone rang in the next room. Before I could reach it, the caller had disconnected and left an SMS. Call me, it read. The sender was Tarun Tejpal, my editor. I had returned from Gujarat only a couple of days ago, having completed a sting operation on Chief Minister Narendra Modi's involvement in a spate of fake encounter killings. The story had exposed, fairly conclusively, that the Gujarat cops — more hitmen than cops — had made quite a practice of killing Muslims in these “encounters”. I wondered why Tarun wanted to talk to me so early in the morning (it was almost 11, but that, for most journalists, is an early hour). Maybe it was about the story's fallout. Maybe those exposed had sent a legal notice.

I dialled Tarun with questions crowding my mind. “Ashish, have you heard about the vandalism in Baroda”, asked Tarun. Of course I'd heard. For years, Gujarat had been in the news for all the wrong reasons — this was one more instance of a few lunatics, doped out on “Hindutava”, going on a rampage. This time their target was the Fine Arts Faculty of Vadodara's Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU). “It's appalling,” said Tarun. The hooligans had already been on more than one TV channel, articulating their twisted ideology, announcing loudly to the world how the “obscene” portrayal of Hindu deities had hurt their religious sentiments. But there seemed a larger motive behind the targeting of a few Fine Arts students and professors, Tarun argued. Find out who these people are, what they do and above all what their views in private are as opposed to their public postures.

As I put the phone down, I felt a sense of melancholy enveloping me. Three back-to-back investigative reports (we had also exposed Sanjay Dutt for his involvement in the 1993 serial bombing and Maharashtra DGP PS Pasricha for his illegally-gotten wealth) had made me a bit battle-weary. I had repeatedly failed to honour my promise to take Chris, my wife, on vacation. It had been a while since I'd spent time with my nine-month-old daughter. But there I was, within a few hours of that call, packing my bags to leave for Gujarat, a place that evoked foreboding every time I went there.



Illustration: Sudeep Chaudhury

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My first visit to Vadodara had been in the winter of 2004, after Zaheera Sheikh — the prime witness in the Best Bakery massacre — had made yet another retraction in court, playing yet again into the hands of her tormentors. As the autorickshaw took me from Vadodara airport to Alkapuri, the city centre where all the hotels are, I passed places I'd visited then — the station, the roundabouts, the restaurants. I remembered how incredible that visit was. But the familiarity of the place, half-blackened by shadow, half illuminated by streetlights, only made me the more sombre. Now, as in 2004, I had set out for a story, armed with nothing more than a couple of spycams and some daredevilry.

Now, as then, the biggest question was where to start? And, now as then, I knew nobody, not a soul in this alien land. A magic, perhaps divine intervention had seen me through my 2004 visit — within a fortnight of my arrival, I'd been sitting right before Zaheera's chief tormentor, BJP MLA Madhu Srivastava, the local ganglord, in his own front garden, he on a swing, I on a shabby plastic chair, with a spycam on my lap. Then, as now, my brief was simple. Nothing was adding up in the Zaheera episode, Tarun had said. I was to join together the scattered pieces and complete the picture. And when completed, it added up to a nice round figure: Rs 18 lakh. The sum Srivastava had paid Zaheera to buy her silence. But that was then. Miracles don't happen everyday, I told myself. Still I had to give it a shot.

After a frantic search for a reasonably priced hotel room, I checked into Hotel Aditi International, Room No 506. Except for its name, there was nothing grand about the hotel. The peeling paint and the murky light of the bare room, did little to cheer me up. Maybe a few cigarettes would bring some clarity. Then, an idea floated up, above the plume of self-doubt and nicotine. Since I didn't know where to go, why not take a few small steps on every lane that opened up? And then see which road would lead to my goal?

I hastily made a few calls to rights activists protesting the events at MSU; I also got in touch with a contact in Mumbai who had friends in Gujarat. I told him to put me in touch with people in the BJP's Vadodara unit without telling them I was a journalist. "Tell them I'm Piyush Aggarwal, a research scholar from Delhi University, writing a thesis on Hindutva in Gujarat." He said he'd give me a few references in the morning. The next day, I called him at 10am. He did not respond. I called several times, to no avail.

I then decided to line up meetings with a few activists. Later in the day, one of them put me in touch with Prof Iftikhar, who was among the few at MSU to come out openly against the saffron hooligans. Iftikhar spoke of how the BJP had crowded the MSU senate and syndicate — its two governing bodies — with men affiliated to either the RSS or the VHP. One's appointment, promotion, even authority in the university all hinged on which side of the ideological divide — Right against Centrist and Left — one was.

My Mumbai contact finally answered my call. He gave an excuse for not having been available earlier. I was more interested in getting the names and numbers of local BJP men. He obliged with a few. "I hope you've told them I'm a research scholar, not a journalist," I said. My contact assured me this was exactly what he'd done. I called up Mr A. He was a bit probing, asking questions about the nature and purpose of my research. He didn't sound like I'd convinced him, but he put me in touch with Mr B., who in turn put me in touch with one Dhimant Bhatt who, I was told, was personal assistant to the Vadodara BJP MP and would introduce me to the right people.

From the news, I already had the name of Neeraj Jain, the BJP office bearer who led the ruckus at MSU. I called up Bhatt and told him I wanted to meet Neerajbhai Jain (bhai is an essential suffix to most names in Gujarat). At the appointed time, I walked into the high-ceilinged reception room of the Vadodara BJP party office. Half an hour later, Jain walked in, a short man in his late 30s with a newly-acquired paunch. He was fixated with Muslims, whom he evidently considered the root of all evil. But his hatred for Muslims did not seem to flow naturally — it seemed more a matter of political expediency, of routine. From ordinary Bajrang Dal worker to Vadodara BJP general secretary, Jain had travelled a long enough path to know that Hate Muslims was his ticket to political success. Vandalising paintings in the name of Hinduism had only enhanced his reputation.

JAIN'S MUSLIM phobia did not make a story for me. A day passed before I decided to meet Dhimant Bhatt who, besides being a BJP man, was the MSU chief accountant. At 11:30am on May 19, I walked into Bhatt's second floor office in an administrative block on the MSU campus. Struggling between perusing files and answering a near-incessant string of phone calls, he was most hospitable, offering me water, then tea, then showing me the way to the toilet (where I switched on the two spy cams I was wearing). Fifteen minutes into the conversation, after Bhatt was convinced I was as staunch a Hindu as he was (love for Hinduism being displayed on both sides by heaping abuse on Muslims), he uttered a few lines which would not only redefine my story but also, I believe, the way the nation sees the Gujarat riots. "I was involved in burning down the houses of Professor Bandukwala and the bureaucrat, Peerzada... Disguised as a peacekeeper, I supplied weapons during the riots... We should put the Sangh's lathis aside and take up AK-56s instead."

My head began to reel. Bhatt might be an accountant by day, but his true vocation lay in tormenting religious minorities. Destroying paintings was, for him, a small skirmish. The real battle had been fought and won five years ago, in 2002. And five years ago was where the real story lay, I told Harinder Baweja, known also as Shammy, my immediate boss. Both Tarun and Shammy agreed, and told me to go after the story. Resources and time were no constraint, said Tarun. "Let your story be the last word on the Gujarat riots," Shammy said.

And thus began a sixmonth journey. A journey that would take me back in time, looking to rewrite the history of the year 2002. A journey in which my only companions would be fear and hope — hope of finding the truth and fear of being consumed by it; hope of hunting down the murderers and fear of being hunted myself. Hope, which is so rare for so many in Gujarat. Fear, a permanent shadow, almost an extension of your being, always lurking at your shoulder.

I set out to meet as many VHP, BJP and RSS men as I could. I asked Bhatt for a few introductions to members of the 'Parivar' — all the Hindu organisations are known collectively as 'Parivar' or one single family — in Ahmedabad. He readily agreed. And the journey continued. In Ahmedabad, one man would put me in touch with another, another with a third. A pyramid of contacts rose and kept rising. A few days later, I asked a BJP man if he could send me to Godhra — a small town that had leapt out of obscurity to become one of the most important words in the Indian political lexicon, a tragic conundrum yet to be solved.

Next day, I was in Godhra, sitting before Kakul Pathak, a BJP man and an eyewitness to the Sabarmati Express fire. He referred me to Hareesh Bhatt, former Bajrang Dal president, now a BJP MLA from Godhra. Bhatt was an extempore speaker, a man who preferred being heard to having a discussion. For a journalist, such men, particularly if they have things to reveal, are a blessing. After 45 minutes of tiring discourse on Hindutva, I edged a question in. "We" (meaning the Hindus; Bhatt was convinced I was an adherent of the militant religiosity he had preached all his life) "never keep arms. How then could we manage to kill so many Muslims in 2002?" "If I tell, do you promise it won't be in your book?" (I had said I was writing a book to propagate the VHP's brand of Hindutva.) "I made bombs, rocket launchers, swords, and distributed them across Gujarat. Firearms and swords were smuggled in from other states as well. It's the first time I'm telling anyone this outside the party circle," he said. For a moment, I was numbed with fear.

That was June 1, 2007. Over the next few months, I would meet many who had been charged with rioting and killing and many who had worked behind the scenes. Along the way, I negotiated dead ends, spells of despair, moments of sheer terror. I was travelling once with Bhatt in his car from Ahmedabad to Godhra. Mid-way, he received a phone call. After disconnecting it, he turned to me and said he had just been informed that a journalist from Delhi was carrying out a sting operation on the Sabarmati Express incident and that he had been told to be careful. Oh, really, I said, with a straight face.

A FEW MINUTES later, Bhatt's driver steered the car off the main road and turned into a narrow, deserted, kutchra road. As the car stopped outside a desolate, one-storey house, another car pulled up and two men got out. Bhatt and these men went into the house and told me to wait. I had two spy-cams on me and all it needed to blow my cover was a body frisk. I prepared myself for the worst. Twenty minutes later, Bhatt returned and we set out for Godhra again. The two men went off in a different direction. Bhatt told me he'd had been doing business with them.

On another occasion, Bharat Bhatt, a Sabarkantha public prosecutor, became suspicious about my identity. Having told me how he'd threatened and bought off Muslim witnesses, Bhatt called me as soon as I'd taken his leave and said he had serious doubts I was an RSS man. Within a few minutes, another VHP man I'd stung a few days earlier called and asked for my location. However, I survived these close shaves and kept sailing. Whenever the tension became too much, I'd make a quick trip to Mumbai, to my wife and daughter, my home, my cocoon.

For six months, I remained a voyager between two worlds — my world, where I was Ashish Khetan, a journalist with a Catholic wife, a daughter with a French name and no fixed religion, and a host of Muslim and Christian friends. And then there was the other world, where I was Piyush Aggarwal, a member of the "Parivar", a Hindu zealot, a religious fanatic, with only murderers and rapists for friends.

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