

Urban Hopes, Sexual Horrors: Communal Riots and the Narratives of Violent and Victimized Women in India¹

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Abstract

Academic discussions of women and the eruption of urban riots in India focus on a range of women's testimonies. From this perspective, Hindu women who belong to prominent and powerful right-wing organisations demonstrate religious and physical prowess, while minority and unprotected Muslim women are victims during outbreaks of communal violence. This article aims, if not to undermine, but to unsettle these gendered binaries in women's experiences as victims or perpetrators of urban violence. We suggest that poor women on both sides of exclusionary propaganda and nationalistic discourses experience the actual violent eruption of hostilities as personal suffering and collective loss. Our analysis highlights how these experiences are intimately related to women's domestic and family relations, bereavement, mobility, their peripheral socio-economic position, anxieties about the integrity of female bodies, etc., over and above women's disillusionment with the state, secular and faith-based organisations.

Keywords: urban riots; gender; survival; narratives; sectarian violence

Introduction

For several decades, women's involvement in various expressions of Hindu nationalist violence, or *Hindutva*, has been the centre of controversy in contemporary India. Whether it was prominent female renunciator Sadhvi Rithambara's venomous speeches urging Hindu men to be virile and eliminate 'the Muslim threat',² or female celibate and right-wing political aspirant Sadhvi Pragya's alleged involvement in orchestrating the bomb blasts that shook Malegaon, a small town in Maharashtra, a western Indian state,³ the imagination of Hindu nationalist women as 'home-grown terrorists' has continued to capture

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the attention of the nation. Muslim women in India are also placed at the heart of the debate around *Hindutva* terror, as they become the primary targets of rape and killing when communal antagonism between Hindus and Muslims eventually spills into street fights and urban rioting. Religious organisations and political parties come forward to support, speak for and protect the rights of both groups of women. For example, the Shiv Sena, the dominant Hindu nationalist political party in Mumbai, the commercial capital of Maharashtra, played a key role in criticising the actions of the anti-terrorist squad which arrested Sadhvi Pragya in relation to the blasts which killed and injured numerous ordinary people.⁴ The Tablighi Jamaat, a pietist Islamic movement in post-riot Gujarat, a state in western India which survived large-scale communal clashes in 2002, became deeply concerned with reforming women in post-riot relief colonies, especially those assaulted and widowed during the violence (Khan 2007).

This article will open a window into the short narratives of two women distressed by divergent yet similar riot-affected political contexts in urban India: it will illuminate fleeting moments from their encounter with communal riots in Mumbai and Ahmedabad in 1992-3 and 2002 respectively (see details below). A small depository of scholarly literature on urban riots in India explores the impact of violence on women through the lens of masculinity and radical politics (cf. Hansen 2001; Banerjee 2005), historical myths and current rumour-mongering (cf. Sarkar 2002; Kakar 2005; Shani 2007), new and old victimologies (cf. Sen 2019, 2018; Bedi 2007; Kovacs 2004; Menon 2005) and the polarisation of values, practices and allotment of blame in Hindu and Muslim localities (cf. Jasani 2020; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Chatterjee and Mehta 2007; Simpson 2006). The authors, both anthropologists, have conducted long-term fieldwork in the slums of Mumbai and Ahmedabad where the experiences and anecdotes of these inter-religious tensions continue to determine not only everyday interactions, but also the territorial reorganisation of localities (see Sen 2007; Jasani 2011).

Without regurgitating issues around political mobilisation of ordinary women into a violent political rhetoric, this article will offer two case studies of (a) a Hindu woman rioter attacking Muslims in Mumbai, and (b) a Muslim woman confronted with Hindu rioting mobs in Ahmedabad. The sequence of events narrativised by these women highlights the fluidities of time, place and identity in the context of riots, and how that bears upon notions of survival and victimisation amongst *both* casualties (Muslim and minority) and perpetrators (Hindu

and majority) of violence. In the current context of a growing 'might of the right' across cultural and national boundaries, we argue that poor women on both sides of exclusionary propaganda and nationalistic discourses experience the actual violent eruption of hostilities as personal suffering and collective loss. These experiences are intimately related to women's domestic and family relations, bereavement, mobility, their peripheral socio-economic position, anxieties about the integrity of female bodies, etc., over and above women's disillusionment with the state, secular and faith-based organisations.

We utilise the narrative interplay offered by this article to make a case for 'long ethnographies' i.e. using extended slices of testimonies of violence to develop a deeper comparative perspective on urban economic and existential crises. In her study of meta-data and testimonies of war in Rwanda, Fujii (2010: 231) argues that random slices of ethnography from prolonged fieldwork in conflict zones highlight how 'conditions in the present shape what people are willing to say about violence in the past, what they have reason to embellish or minimise, and what they prefer to keep to themselves'. She makes a case for reading ethnographies of victimhood not through the lens of seeking out unproblematised truthfulness, but through the intricacies and interiorities of ordinary people's lived experience of violence. It is in these lingering uncertainties of re-memorising the horrors of violence that we place our analysis. Instead of analysing the feminisation of riots through rigid theoretical frameworks, the article brings forth the untainted and uncertain voices of women negotiating complex and contested socio-political spaces marked by poverty and discrimination before, during and after the outbreak of violence.

Connolly-Shaffer (2012) deploys the idea of 'truth telling as tale telling', a phrase that can also be used to describe our choice in bringing together these diverse narratives. When these gendered texts are used in their biographic details, the fragmented truth claims get interwoven and reworked to gain a kind of epistemic wholeness. Large chunks of disorganised storytelling then becomes a 'deliberative exercise' (Connolly-Shaffer 2012: 20) to convey limited but nuanced social knowledge about overlapping women's worlds. According to Nagar (2014), who makes a strong claim against 'pure bodies of study' and the repeated categorisation of women's experiences into 'postcolonial', 'feminist', etc, the politics of writing gendered texts remains implanted in acknowledging and sharing women's memories and mistakes, as well as their fragilities and faith. This 'unchained' reflexivity, what the author describes as

‘radical vulnerability’, forms the foundation of the insights embedded in this text. We attempt to introduce this element of openness within our methodological approaches. We want to amplify a deliberate, lengthy and impressionistic sketching of women’s memories of violence that have the potential to add diversity to studies of gender and politics.

Backdrop of Contemporary Hindu Nationalism and Gendered Vulnerabilities

The rise of Hindu nationalism in India has generated debate about the sexual vulnerability of Muslim women, especially with the expanding discourse on virile Hinduism legitimatising Hindu male aggression, and various Hindu nationalist groups organising their followers along the lines of masculine militancy. This ideology of Hindu male martiality was initiated in the context of the anti-colonial struggle when the nationalist ideologues attempted to reimagine the nation as a female goddess in chains and its citizens as male saviors (Gupta 2001). According to colonial historians of India, having control over their own women and remaining in service of the nation-mother added to the self-respect and masculine honour of disempowered and colonised Hindu men (Banerjee 2006). A number of scholars exploring the growth and success of more recent Hindu nationalist paramilitary camps have argued that this ideology of Hindu martiality, now expressed in everyday forms of combat-training and body-building, suggested that Hindu men were increasingly exposed to a greater range of discursive and embodied sentiments related to not just saving the nation-mother, but also to inflicting violence against *the nation-other* (see Sen 2007; Menon 2010). The latter included the dehumanisation and objectification of women, and sustained fantasies of unrestricted sexual violence against Muslim women during conditions of communal riots (Chatterjee and Mehta 2007). Some scholars argue that this form of ‘legitimate rape’ was born out of the horrors of the bloody Partition of the subcontinent and the mass rape of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim women (see Das 2004). Others show how this could be related more closely to global Islamophobia which increasingly characterised the body of the Muslim woman as both violable and disposable (see Kesic 2002). The increase in targeted rapes of Christian nuns and Muslim women in India, even in the absence of riots, highlights how polluting the bodies of Other women (for power and pleasure) was an integral part of the nationalist ploy to deny and defy the integrity and honour of minority

communities. Many scholars analysing the high brutality of rapes during the communal riots in Gujarat 2002 (discussed below) stated that crude sexual domination was not only a political strategy to humiliate the Muslims, but it moreover represented the function and duty of Hindu men: to desecrate the biological and cultural reproducers of Islamic communities.

Hindu nationalist women's organisations have also used camp spaces to instigate women leaders and cadres to perpetrate violence against enemy communities. For example, Hindu goddesses have been evoked and reinterpreted to inspire ordinary women members to imagine themselves as martial demon-slayers. The Rashtra Sevika Samiti (National Women Volunteers' Organisation) and Durga Vahini (Durga's Army) are two such organisations, which have upheld the legacy of using the imagery of martial goddesses. Gender identities within these organisations are invented, created, resisted and subverted to legitimise the role of ordinary women in violent nationalisms. For most Hindus, Durga is a heroic goddess who slayed demons to protect the gods and humanity from death and destruction (Lama 2001). According to Kovacs (2004), who examines the mobilisation of images of Durga to suit the ideological needs of Hindu nationalist women, Durga's accomplishments are popularised and valorised among women. Durga is a dedicated wife with an inattentive husband-god, Shiva. She still remains committed to him and her children; it is only in times of crisis that she steps beyond the domestic sphere and dons an image as protector and slayer of male demons. She returns to her marital and maternal role after fulfilling her martial role, and does not try to be equal to men in terms of power and mobility. Sehgal (2007), who examined the discursive and embodied processes employed at Samiti paramilitary camps for women, argued that the Samiti used these camps to effectively manufacture a feminised siege mentality. This mentality is a learned disposition in which female members of a community perceive themselves as potential prey to male members of a community of 'outsiders'. The author states: 'The embodied practices include a paramilitary physical training program that masquerades as self-defense training but in fact manufactures a fear of sexual attacks by Muslim men in the public sphere, while deflecting from sources of violence within the private sphere' (Sehgal 2007: 165). Kovacs (2004) concludes that Durga is no longer an iconographic illustration of the nation-mother India, meant primarily to arouse the nation's virile sons. Durga uses violence to remove evil and restores *dharma* (world order).

The author argues: 'For Hindutva, an ideology that has been working for years to cast the Muslims of India (men in particular) as threatening the country's *dharma*, the attraction of this popular goddess may be clear' (Kovacs 2004: 377). This politics of martial warriorhood and invoking the power of Hindu goddesses through the creation of paramilitary training camps has been largely popularised among poor, urban nationalist women.

The actual moment of a communal riot, however, often brought about by the sinister hand of high political instigators, provides essential insight into the violability and vulnerability of poor women. This article tries to show how the subjectivity of poor women can be partially dislodged from such grand nationalist discourses during crisis and conflict, and how women's tangible experiences of physical assault and spatial marginality can become more deeply tied to the support and betrayal of everyday human relations. The imagination of women as Durga and other martial warrior goddesses that are mobilised during ideological lessons and combat training, for example, can be diminished by fear, weakness, unpreparedness and displacement during gritty encounters with rioting, looting, sexual assault, fire and death of children. We argue that the eruption of communal violence can challenge the autonomy and endurance of *all* women implicated in nationalist ideologies. In the context of our research, we find the denial of awareness about the plight of Hindu and Muslim women during urban riots can keep the urban poor divided along communal lines for years to come.

Over the past decades, Sen and Jasani have carried out long-term ethnographic fieldwork in communally tense urban slums in Mumbai and Ahmedabad which has included participant observation, informal interviews, semi-structured group discussions and often co-habiting with slum residents. We gathered a range of data and testimonies related to local women's recollections and re-telling of the violence that they encountered (and even actively sustained) during the outbreak of inter-religious conflict in their neighbourhoods (detailed below). In our publications trajectory, we have discussed multiple ethical concerns and complex positionalities as anthropologists of violence while conducting these research projects (see Sen 2007, 2019; Jasani 2010, 2011). Our data was collected separately for two different research projects. While Sen's project explored how Hindu nationalist women engaged with migration and urban violence in post-riot Mumbai, Jasani conducted her doctoral research on moral and material survival after the

2002 riots in Gujarat. The narratives collected during the course of both our fieldworks underlined difficult memories of violence which impacted the navigation of gendered social life in communalised slum areas.

Brief Description of the 'Riot Moments'

In December 1992 and January 1993, large-scale communal riots broke out in Mumbai, which left over a thousand people dead and several others injured. Following the organised destruction of the Babri Mosque by Hindu nationalists in the contentious Hindu temple town of Ayodhya, small groups of angry Muslims held low intensity protests in Mumbai (in December 1992). The Shiv Sena, a right-wing political party which had established a strong base in Mumbai through an anti-migrant and anti-Muslim agenda, initiated a coordinated and highly divisive backlash against local Muslims. The ensuing violence involved arson, destruction of property and indiscriminate attacks on people, but mostly it created unprecedented displacement and communal polarisation in the city (see Menon 2012). The rioting dispersed from slum areas into labourer colonies (*chawls*) and apartment blocks, and in most localities entailed the systematic targeting of Muslims who comprised nearly 20 per cent of the city's population. Members of the Shiv Sena's women's wing, the Mahila Aghadi (Women's Front), mobilised themselves into rioting groups. These women rioters temporarily brought the relatively marginalised Aghadi into the forefront of nationalist politics in Mumbai. In 1999, Sen conducted research among Aghadi members in a riot-affected Mumbai slum. Over the next decades, she documented the slum women's rationale for politically organising themselves around Hindu nationalist ideologies, and investigated the ways in which their recruitment into the Mahila Aghadi subsequently led to poor women's contribution to communally charged public protests, street fights and open looting.⁵

A decade after the Mumbai clashes, in February 2002, massive riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat, a state with a controversial Hindu nationalist leader (Narendra Modi, currently the prime minister of India) at its helm. This time the outbreak of violence was sparked off by a debatable attack on an express train carrying large numbers of Hindu nationalists that left a number of women and children dead. Over the next three months, the riots spread quite intensely

through Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat, where raging Hindu mobs burned down Muslim housing estates, destroyed mosques and religious shrines and raped and killed scores of Muslim men, women and children. At the end of what several scholars and political commentators described as a 'genocide' or a 'pogrom',⁶ thousands of people were dead, mostly buried in mass graves, and several others were injured, missing or lay unidentified in city morgues. In 2003, Jasani conducted research on the displacement of riot-affected Muslims in Ahmedabad. A large portion of her research was based in the ghetto of Naroda Patiya, where 97 people were killed on 28 February 2002. She studied the Muslim community's engagement with reform initiatives offered by Islamist organisations, and underlined the agency of both men and women in re-aligning their public ethics according to their engagement with the shifting city-scape.

Even though the character and culture of the two urban riots were disparate, Sen and Jasani found a number of commonalities: changes in the spatial construction of the ghettos, the taciturn relationship between migrant slum economies and urban violence, the role of the Hindu and Muslim political mafia in sustaining communal tension, the sordid nature of the violent conspiracies, the well-coordinated and perfectly pre-planned aspects of the supposedly 'spontaneous riots', amongst others. According to prominent human rights groups active in Mumbai and post-conflict Gujarat, incidents of violence and sexual assault were not random and impulsive, but widespread and pre-planned.⁷ As in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the level of extensive sexual violence in Gujarat was conducted with a significant measure of complicity, if not participation, by the state.⁸ The mass rapes were carried out with the knowledge of highly placed state actors, including the police.

Most of the informants that we interviewed during our fieldwork eventually identified the riots as dramatic episodes, which altered their familiarity with the cities they came to inhabit as their home. But most significantly, we uncovered the constant desire of women and children, moving swiftly between discourses of victimhood and agency, to give prominence to their individual and shared experiences of the riots. Emphasis on dominant political histories of communalism in India (cf. Jaffrelot 2007; Van der Veer 1994; Ludden 1996; Pandey 1993) has tended to marginalise the fragmented and fractured experiences of women living with everyday communal tensions. By drawing the reader into the graphic reality of communalised slum life, this article

is an attempt to fill that gap by offering the testimonies of two women who were struggling (in their own words and on their own terms) to comprehend and survive urban riots.

Women's Narratives and Urban Riots

*Radha, 40, Hindu Mahila Aghadi cadre and calendar factory worker, resident of a Bandra slum, Mumbai:*⁹

I had been an active member of the Shiv Sena for many years, well before the riots. The Mahila Aghadi, when it was formed in 1985, gave me so much support. When I was not well or when I was not working, the Aghadi members in my locality got me grain and they looked after my children. Some days when I was depressed or unhappy, they held meetings in my little shack to cheer me up. Other days when my husband was drunk and threatening to leave me, they assembled in my house to show my man that I had the backing of a whole team of women. They did not threaten or abuse my husband, but when my husband came home, he often saw the Aghadi women sitting on my bed and squatting on the floor, simply glaring at him. He grew quite afraid over time. I remember an occasion when one of the Aghadi women got up and made tea for him. While handing him the glass she said in a quiet, cold voice, "You are lucky to have such a good wife". His hand started to shake and he spilled the tea on the floor. His face was red. He was angry but could not express it. I had a double feeling of triumph. I had taught my husband a lesson, and I had been strongly defended by my friends. To you this may not be related to the riots, but I tell you, this is how we slum women gained each other's trust. So when the riots happened, we could "show our daring" together, otherwise real courage cannot be found in "hi hello" relationships.

During the first phase of riots we heard so much "news". You think it's gossip and stories that travel on air. But we lived through the riots in December, we remember clearly what happened to us. I don't care much about Babri Masjid, but I care about my friends and family right here, right now. We were angry in the slums. Did you ever hear about the dead bodies of Hindus that were found in a ditch nearby? They were lying in pools of blood with their throats slit. There were so many more incidents that December: of buses burning, tyres burning, homes burning, Hindu people set on fire as well. In our area, the Muslims attacked temples, they decapitated Ganpati idols, and we were not going to be agitated? Many Aghadi women went out into the streets. But I was scared at that time, so I stayed at home. The women said, "Radha, show *himmat* [courage]". But I thought I should protect my children at home, since they were stuck inside. All the schools were shut down during the curfew. I made small meals for them from food

scraps as the bazaars were closed. I had to keep them engaged all the time so that they did not run out to play in the dangerous streets. But I told my husband so many times: "I cannot do anything. Why don't you do something?" He barked at me: "What can I do? I am hoping that the riots will settle down, and we don't have to relocate to Thane in search of work. Why come all the way from the village in search of work and then have everything ruined by riots?" I remember I murmured to myself: "We will have work if the Muslims are not taking our livelihoods away, ask them to make money in their own land [Pakistan]". You tell me, I have two sons, will any Muslim ever give them a job? No. But my husband is a Hindu carpenter, and he has two young Muslim boys working for him; he feels they have more skills than some Hindu boys who came to ask for apprenticeships. What is the point of being fair to the Muslims when they were not fair to us? But since my husband did not do anything during the riots and stayed at home worrying about his business, my anger became more intense – at the loss of Hindu lives, income, sons' education, temples, safety of our neighbourhoods – I was seething. We women discussed these losses all the time. Many Aghadi women had gone out of the house and joined night patrols and protection teams. And here I was twiddling my thumbs when the Aghadi had already done so much for me.

We had a brief respite between the two phases of the riots. Everything was getting back to normal again. The Muslims probably thought quietness was a sign of weakness. So once again, there were attacks on us. Then these bastards burned down Radhabai Chawl, just because there were Hindu families living in a Muslim gully. So many Hindu people were trapped inside, so many people perished. My Aghadi friends said: "Radha, your name is in that *chawl* [housing colony]". That is all they said, I promise you. Then there was the Suleiman Bakery shooting which everyone was talking about. Muslims stood on the rooftop of the bakery and shot at Hindu policemen with automatic weapons. And the policemen were trying to fight back with their old guns from the time of English rule! The Muslims were trying to show us what? That they have guns? They have manpower and rape-power? No one looked into these cases, because the Muslims were attacking Hindus. *Media-wallahs* and you educated people have sympathy for Muslims, Muslims, Muslims. All riot rations from the state always go to Muslims. Think about what they were doing to us poor people living in the slums. I told myself: "Radha, you have to do something now. Your husband is a coward. You must not let your children think that we cannot do anything, and that they should grow up in the neighbourhood being scared of Muslims living next door".

I don't remember the exact day, but it was in the second week of January. The local women said there were tensions in the street, and they were going to check out the scenario. We could see the fire and

smoke from our area. The skies were completely grey. "You coming, Radha?" they asked tentatively. My husband said: "No. No." I said: "Wait a moment. I will put on my thick shoes. My feet may get cut from broken glass on the street if I wear *chappals* [slippers]". Even when I was leaving the house, I could hear my husband saying: "No Radha, no no. You will be in danger". There was a lot of danger of course, but we women still went ahead. We crossed the edge of the slum and stepped onto the main street. The air was foggy from smoke and heavy dust. The tar from the road was also burning, and the smell was so pungent, we could barely breathe. There were a few policemen running around. They said we should cover our noses with wet cloth, otherwise our throats would sting. The road was full of broken glass and rubble from damaged shanties. The properties at the edge of the slums had really suffered. They were mainly small shops. The contents of the shops were lying around in the rubble. I felt I was in some other neighbourhood, this was not my street. We saw a minibus coming which was filled with men with their pristine white knitted caps. When they saw us, they looked away, thinking: "What will a bunch of women do to us?" They see us everyday: cooking, cleaning, looking after our families, being polite to them in the bazaars while shopping, how can we hurt them? Paravi, one of the younger women, picked up a stone and threw it at the bus and smashed the windshield. She said "*Sarv landyana maroon taka!*" ["Kill all the circumcised bastards", a riot slogan coined by Bal Thackeray, the leader of the Shiv Sena]. We all picked up whatever we could and started throwing it at the bus. The policemen were startled and came running towards us. They thought we were being attacked. But when they saw we had the stones in our hands, they left in a hurry. When the riots happened in December, the overworked policemen were out on the streets for hours, their feet were swollen in their boots. We slum women would take them buckets of water to dip their feet in, and they could barely get them out of their shoes, poor things. One of them told me: "*Tai*, I remember you came with water. I am leaving, but you be careful". In the meantime, the bus swerved and came to a stop. The men tried to rush out, but we kept throwing stones at them. They were running along the road trying to find a place to hide, but we chased them. I lifted my sari above my knees and ran after them, I was beyond shame. The men were bleeding and trying to cover their faces with their hands, but we kept going. Then we heard a big noise, and we realised that the *madarchods* [mother-fuckers] probably had reinforcements coming in. So we turned back and started running towards the slums. We jumped over the ditch and ran into the gullies. We stood panting near a tap and then drank water. One of the girls said: "Next time, we have to carry sticks. This was only a start. We were unprepared so we had to make do with whatever we found on the street. Next time we will be more equipped". And we were.

Afshan Bibi, 40, Muslim mill worker, resident of Naroda Patiya, Ahmedabad:¹⁰

I have lived with my family in Naroda Patiya for almost ten years. My father moved here from Karnataka to work in the mills. He was a joiner in Telco mills. We grew up in Gomtipur, the suburban mill area, and moved to Patiya as the *basti* [slum] was moving due to overcrowding and no work. I worked on a thread assembling machine and went to work as normal on the morning of 28 February [2002]. I realised that the riots had started in the afternoon when some VHP [Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a conglomeration of Hindu nationalist organisations] goons came looking for Muslims working in the factory. The owner shut the factory door and told them it was closed. By then, rumors had spread that riots had started in Naroda Patiya. I was worried about my children as my 16-year-old is disabled and would not be able to escape if our house was attacked. I could hear screams outside the factory saying “*maari nakho*” [kill them], “*kaapi nakho*” [cut them]. I was terrified to leave the factory, but needed to get out to see if my family was safe. I covered my head and wore a *bindi* [vermillion mark] and started walking towards Patiya. On my way, I saw piles of burnt bodies and pools of blood everywhere. *Bhajap* [Bharatiya Janta Party/BJP, the ruling political party] men in saffron headbands were zooming up and down the streets shouting slogans of “*Jai Shri Ram*”. The whole place seemed empty and deserted. I was stopped three times by different groups of men. I felt terrified. I knew in my gut that my family was not in Patiya, and they had been attacked. The piles of bodies had told me that things were not right. I went back to the factory and spent the night there. The next morning, I went to Shahibaug camp and registered details of my family. I had also heard from people at the camp that Naroda Patiya was badly affected, and that rioters had played with the *izzat* [honour] of our girls. I was worried about both my daughters.¹¹

I could not leave the camp as the city was not safe. All I saw were hoards of wounded people, raped women and mutilated bodies being brought into the camps. My fellow campmates warned me against getting out, as the city was full of men in khaki *chaddas* [shorts], saffron vests and black bands on their forehead. There was a curfew, and I knew that the dead in the riots were being buried at a *samshan* [burial ground] near Shahibaug. On making some inquiries, I found out that the residents of Naroda Patiya were at Shah Alam camp. I made my way to the Shah Alam Camp in a *sanstha* [NGO] van, and found out that I had lost seven members of my extended family, including my own daughter. One of my daughters was in Vadilal hospital fighting 80 per cent burn injuries. There were rumors that she was among the young girls from Patiya who had been raped and burnt alive, as the attackers did not want to leave any evidence behind. I haven't had the courage to ask my daughter about the rape. The journey from when I saw her in the hospital to now

has been so challenging, with her undergoing seven operations. I don't want to know, and she does not want to share either. All I know is that the VHP goons attacked the Muslim *mohalla* [neighbourhood] and killed four men who were trying to protect the people. Once their resistance was broken, the Hindu rioters, with the help of the police, stormed inside the settlement, looting and burning everything that came in their way. Residents fled towards Gopinath society, and as the houses of its Hindu occupants were locked, they hid on their terraces.

Jai Bhavani, a local VHP leader, who led the mob along with a police official, assured the Muslims that arrangements had been made for them towards the *maidan* [open ground]. As the group of 90 people [mostly women and children] were heading towards the ground, two mobs attacked them from an open alley. The wall of the ST [State Transport] workshop prevented them from fleeing, and they were all trapped in a small corner near a water tank. The attackers climbed on the roofs of the houses and started dousing them with kerosene and throwing burning tyres at them. It was at this time, that young girls were pulled out of the group, raped and then murdered. 58 bodies were recovered from this site; 27 survivors of this incident were then taken to the Civil hospital or VS hospital at about 7:30 p.m. My daughter was one of them. I do worry about her as she has almost blocked the incident. Yes, so I was telling you, as soon as I got to the camp, I asked to be taken to Vadilal to see my daughter. When I got there she was unrecognisable. Her face and her body on one side had been burnt, including her private parts. The doctors were convinced that she would not survive the burn injuries. She was breathing heavily and was not conscious. The hospital was a very scary place as the VHP goons were walking around in the verandahs. They were also at the entrance of all hospitals making sure that they threatened all the Muslims coming in to get help. There were rumors that the milk had been poisoned, and that they were going to inject poison instead of medication into the patients' bodies. So many people were dying, it was difficult not to trust rumors. We could not even turn to the police, as they would be sharing jokes, smoking *bidis* and drinking tea with the rioters. For my husband, it was easy: he took to the bottle. My middle son who is disabled just became very quiet and did not speak for days. The youngest one, who was seven, looked after both the men. I had no time for them. I had to deal with my daughter in the hospital, the grief of my dead daughter and also try and get my family out of the relief camps.

What to tell you *bibi*, it was like hell. I also had to answer questions from the *akbharwale* [journalists] as my daughter Shabbo was the only young girl who was saved from the lot that were burnt in Naroda Patiya. Everybody wanted a piece of her while she was fighting death for three months in hospital. I am grateful to Bintaben [an activist volunteer, who set up a women's collective], who organised money for her surgery in Bombay. If my girl was kept in VS, she would have died. It was Bintaben

that found us the money to fly to Mumbai and also conduct two surgeries on her. I had become like "*gandi*" [mad] during that phase worrying about what would happen. I wanted her to survive, as I was keen that she give witness in court and bring justice to the girls that had been raped and burnt alive. My husband had fled with my two sons during the violence, and Shabbo along with her sister were left behind. We found no trace of her sister. We suspect that she was dumped in the well close by. The bodies in the well were mutilated by the time they were dug out. I am sure she was in there, as Shabbo was found not far from the well. But, we could not go to Patiya as the city was under the control of goons that led the mobs. There were rumours that anyone who came near Hussein Nagar will be killed. There were threatening messages written in Gujarati on the walls of our Masjid. I only went to see what was left of the house, as we had to register affidavits of loss to NGOs helping us claim compensation. I have never spent a night again in Patiya, though some of our houses have been rebuilt by Islamic organisations. I lost faith in the police system. The NGOs were doing whatever they could to help. It took Shabbo a year's treatment in different places to recover completely. She is still weak physically and mentally, and has not yet visited Patiya. She refuses to attend social functions, and she only leaves the house when she absolutely has to. She has been to the court, though, to give her statement. We had seen riots in the past, but things would usually calm down in a week or two. This is the first time that the rioting continued for so long and has taken place in such an organised fashion. This has become a scary city to live in. But, we don't have any other options as we grew up here. This is home and we cannot go anywhere else.

Urban Violence and Gendered Safety/Survival

It has been 30 years since the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, 20 years since the Mumbai riots and ten years since the pogrom in Gujarat, yet the impotence faced by communities trapped in conditions of extraordinary violence have continued to regulate the ways in which people negotiate the city. Gupta (2011: 3), in his study of the impact of long-term ethnic violence on the social settings of Mumbai and Ahmedabad, states that:

The enormity of a religious clash, such as the one in Gujarat or Mumbai (let us also take the Sikh killings of 1984), leaves little doubt that social relations do not return to an untheorised life world of the status quo ante, or establish a tension-free new one either. There is always a reminder of doubt and misrecognition in all interactions, howsoever repetitive they might be.

The author, along with most scholars and activists debating communal brutalities, concludes that outbursts of violence produce cultures of suspicion and intimidation, and as this article has shown, they have a

significant influence on women's understanding of loss, security and freedom.

The successes of Hindu nationalism in India have generated a volume of symbolism, which sustains a powerful nationalist rhetoric. These imageries also determine public imagination of contemporary communal conflict. One of the more significant images that represents the polarisation of the Hindus and Muslims is the position of women in this political blame-game. While militant Hindu nationalist women are imagined as native Goddess-like ferocious terrorists harnessing ideological and martial histories to legitimise their violent action, Muslim women trapped in conditions of violent interreligious conflict are framed through discourses of extreme victimologies. This schismatic imagery is disseminated not only through multiple media outlets, and through the virtual life of photos and films on violence in the region, but also through visible and visceral everyday experiences (sounds, sights and smells) of political campaigning, such as in posters, pamphlets, booklets, party memorabilia, political speeches, books on nationalist ideology, the excitement of political camps and, importantly, in the energy of party offices. This article, however, tried to highlight the relative continuities in poor women's engagement with communal violence (as participants and victims) on the ground, in the context of two main religious riots in urban India: Mumbai in 1992 and Ahmedabad in 2002. Through the lens of 'long ethnographies', we showed how quotidian anxieties about precarity of life in two impoverished migrant neighbourhoods affect the choices and actions of women during violent clashes. The narratives of slum women move between experiences of victimhood, vulnerability, survival and agency, and migrant women from different religious affiliations lament the loss of place brought about by marriage, migration, displacement and, eventually, factional urban politics.

The two narratives brought forward by us, though collected at different points in time and from different perspectives, show that women's accounts of riot situations raise difficult questions about gender and communal conflict in post-colonial Indian cities. For example, in both narratives, women used the tropes of motherhood and dread of losing their children in order to rationalise their acts of courage; whether it was Radha stepping outside her house into the heart of a volatile street to ward off so-called rioters, or whether it was Afshan Bibi leaving the safety of her factory and striding into a riot-torn alleyway to hunt for her children. Both women eventually tried to fathom how riots changed their emotional engagement with their city, and altered their attitude

towards the make-shift corners that housed their dreams and aspirations. While Radha intended to remain aggressively prepared to counter communal tensions in her slum, Afshan Bibi and her ravaged daughter retreated from a terse public sphere and endeavoured to find safety within the confines of a temporary shelter. We argue that desecration of religious symbols, the role of rumors, state inactivity, the imagination of 'pre- and post-conflict' lives, the fear of losing employment in the communally divided city, battered masculinities and femininities and migrant vulnerability in working class areas are the themes that bind together rather than divide women's memories of violence.

Conclusion

Farmer (1996: 263), while commenting on the pathologies of power and its relationship with human distress, states that: 'The texture of dire affliction is best felt in rough details of biography'. The use of conventional binaries, especially in the media (including violence and peace, good and evil, Hindu and Muslim, majority and minority), tends to cluster riot experiences into well-defined categories, thus pre-empting the possibility of developing comparative images of the riots and their impact on poor women. By giving weight to women's personal expressions of their affliction, we have used long recollections of the riots to challenge simplistic constructions of 'perpetrators' and 'victims' in representations of communal violence. These lengthy and free-flowing biographic narratives exemplified here underline the complex nature of riots and the problematic position of ordinary women within situations of social disorder.

In the process of comparison, the stories of Afshan Bibi come across as starkly more traumatic than that of Radha. Afshan Bibi suffered enormous loss: her family members were subjected to extreme forms of sexual violence, and she was evicted from her neighbourhood. Radha on the other hand was concerned that these experiences of suffering might just be her own fate and that of her family, if she did not resort to violence during the outbreak of the riots. While taking these dramatic differences into account, we have attempted to make a case for more holistic constructions of womanhood during and after communal conflicts in the city. For instance, both Radha and Afshan Bibi lamented being fastened to weak and inept men who were incapable of defending their families in situations of adversity. Both women were poor mothers, and they experienced the riots as victims of situations which

were not in their control in terms of their actions, feelings of vulnerability or even the impact of their actions on others.

We have also shown how the lives of the two women living in a slum were implicated in overlapping patriarchal cultures (produced by religious dictates, nationalist loyalties and urban poverty), which they negotiated by seeking out social solidarities (whether through the Mahila Aghadi or through NGOs). During the outbreak of the riots, however, the women were left to their own devices to negotiate a volatile urban terrain with minimal intervention of trusted networks. Even secular, pro-citizen organisations, including the police, were complicit with Hindu rioters during anti-Muslim attacks, which disallowed Muslim women from seeking their protection. In the end, the onus continued to lie on the two ghettoised women to act as saviors, whether through aggression or emotional anchorage, and safeguard their own protective roles in conditions of poverty and violence. The women were committed to taking on the responsibility and reconstitution of their families – economically, socially and emotionally. Even though they may not don the roles of heroic warrior goddesses as prescribed in nationalist discourses, their survival strategies highlight their capacity for resilience in the face of sexual violence, economic uncertainties and the loss of urban futurities.

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NOTES

- 1 We would like to thank Vera Skvirskaja and our reviewers for their valuable comments on this article.
- 2 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/time-ripe-for-ram-temples-construction-sadhvi-ritambhara/> Accessed on October 24, 2015.
- 3 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/2008-malegaon-blast-case-sadhvi-pragya-singh-gets-bail/articleshow/58356303.cms> Accessed on October 24, 2015.

- 4 <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/nov/12malegaon-thackeray-defends-sadhvi-pragya.htm> Accessed on October 24, 2015.
- 5 For a longer discussion on the layering and (in)visibility in Hindu nationalist women's agency (including passive agency) during communal riots in India, see Sen 2007.
- 6 <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/genocide-in-gujarat> Accessed on October 24, 2015.
- 7 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/06/30/compounding-injustice/governments-failure-redress-massacres-gujarat> Accessed on October 24, 2015.
- 8 <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/india/India0402-03.htm> Accessed on October 24, 2015.
- 9 Interview conducted by Sen on December 19, 2000, Mumbai. The name of the interviewee has been anonymised.
- 10 Interview conducted by Jasani on November 26, 2004, Ahmedabad. The name of the interviewee has been anonymised.
- 11 These camps were organised by community trusts and powerful men from the city, and run by assistance from secular civil society organisations and community donations. Most Muslim shrines and open spaces in Muslim areas were turned into camp sites.

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