

They are not Humans Anyway

Report >
South Asia

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'What is the Endlösung going to look like? What are they going to do with 120 million Muslims?' Professor Breman did not shy away from comparisons, 'It made me think of Kristalnacht: I was handed out flyers with texts like "don't buy from Muslims" and "don't employ Muslims". People were seen as "Untermenschen" who need a "final solution". Horrifying.'

By Ward Berenschot

It was a grim mood that hung over the ASiA panel of the Forum on Violence in Gujarat; after the projection of the documentary *In the Name of God* by Anand Patwardhan, the panel engaged in analysis of the violence in Gujarat with one recurrent feeling: a deeply felt uneasiness about the direction that Indian society is taking. 'I'm sorry to end with such a sad note', were the closing words of Yoginder Sikand's contribution, 'but I see really little hope'.

lady from the audience, adding that 'over the last years, they have done better than ever before'. This might be due to the many changes in Indian society, Jan Breman argued. The increased assertiveness of the lower castes has threatened the interests of the Hindu middle class. 'They have the feeling it is not their society anymore. They assert their identity by distancing themselves from "aliens". I believe some parallels with recent developments in Holland can be made here.'

Gitandri Shri remarked on how many people are insensitive to what is happening next door. She believes that the

poor condition. State relief had not reached them, while 98 per cent of the victims of the violence were Muslims. Yoginder Sikand came across the same attitude when he tried to raise money for the victims. He was shocked by the indifference and hostility he met.

A new, distressing feature of the violence in Gujarat was the extent of involvement of the Indian state in the rioting. The police facilitated and supported the violence. They did nothing to stop the violence and in some cases even pointed out where the victims were hiding. According to the panel, the ruling BJP wants to capitalize on the violence. BJP politicians are thinking about holding elections now, because they hope that the riots will help them to regain the Hindu vote. 'This is not a simple Muslim-Hindu riot', Gitandri Shri concluded, 'this is a shrinkage of democratic space: an attack on the space of freedom'.

The violence even had its repercussions in the Netherlands: before the elections the Dutch VHP advised its members to vote for Pim Fortuyn. According to Breman, this was because of the anti-Muslim stance of Fortuyn. After this announcement, VHP members in the Netherlands received letters with death threats, signed by 'al-Qaeda'.

Dalits?

Low-caste people, Breman believes, have done the killing. 'There has been a structural shift in caste relations. Hindu parties have been playing down the differences between high and low caste people, including all groups in the Hindu "family". The low castes have to pay the price for that. The price for their inclusion is to distance themselves from the excluded: Muslims.'

He argued that low-caste Hindus have been employed by the middle class to do their dirty work. Economic changes have made this possible: 'Ahmedabad had a lot of textile mills, employing 160,000 workers. These mills have been closed down, sending people to the street, where they have been living in terrible conditions. In the era of globalization these people have nothing and they can be recruited to do work for

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'The same environment that frightens me a lot, gives a lot of confidence to others. Many middle class people feel the need to assert their identity. They say things like "we are Hindus, why are we not allowed to say that?"' Gitandri Shri had visited the burned train in Godhra, which had sparked off the violence in Gujarat. 'When I entered the train, I heard a middle class Hindu couple remark: "they should show this to the human rights people and secularists. There is really no place for Muslims in this country". The sight produces an entirely different reaction in me.'

'How come this middle class feels so insecure?', asked a

middle class is untouched by the suffering because the affected people are from another class and have a completely different lifestyle. 'They pass by a slum and feel that the inhabitants are not humans anyway.'

This might help explain the complete lack of remorse or shame about the violence. Jan Breman quoted the chairman of the Hindu-nationalist organization VHP as saying '[t]he Muslims had it coming. Our boys had to do it'. Breman had visited the relief camps for the victims of the violence and noted that the Hindu camps had been visited by numerous politicians, and that the camps for Muslim victims were in

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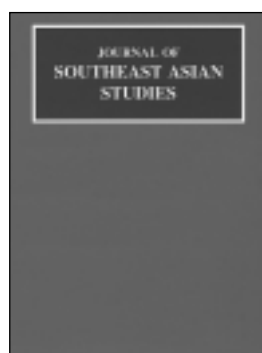
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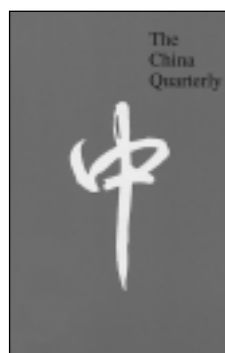
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the middle classes, the backbone of Hindutva'. Yoginder Sikand added that the weakness of the low-caste (Dalit) movement in Gujarat made the state very fertile for communal violence. An alliance between Muslims and Dalits in states like Bihar had prevented violence, he argued.

An idea of who participates in communal violence is often related to one's explanation for the occurrence of violence. A speaker from the audience argued that the middle class youth was more involved in rioting than Jan Breman admitted, claiming that hooliganism was for them an important motivation to participate. 'You have to be initiated into using violence', Breman answered. He believed that direct and actual participation in violence does not come so easy to the middle class.

Leaving history to tradesmen

'We historians need to break the artificial boundaries. We should not study a Hindu or a Muslim history, but we should simply look at the process of state-building.' Together with Shahid Amin, historian Barbara Metcalf broke a lance for a rethinking of Indian history. They emphasized how critical a historical narrative has become for the continuing of communal violence, and how dangerous it is to leave history to common sense. In colonial times, a narrative of Hindu-Muslim differences has come up to legitimize the English presence in India. This version of Indian history has become national common sense and is repeated over and over again to widen the rift between Hindus and Muslims. 'Just after independence, an Indian politician cautioned rightly that "we should not leave history to tradesmen". An uncanny remark, given the nature of the current regime.'

A history of conquest and consequent suppression by Muslim invaders, Shahid Amin argued, is full of essentialist notions. A Hindu identity has become bound up with ideas of the 'otherness' of Muslims. 'Hindus have inscribed in their collective psyche that the bigoted, fanatical Muslims have come to attack us.'

Instead, Shahid Amin believes, attention should be paid to the forms of Indian syncretism that have come up over the centuries. Non-sectarian histories should be written, which pay attention to the composite culture of India. Historians should write new versions of the encounter between Hindus and Muslims. 'It is time to write professionally about the facts of our medieval past and memories of Muslim suppression. We cannot run away from it and leave it to the nationalists to give us the definitive history of Muslim conquest. Our nation can never be made habitable by ruining the dwelling in which Indians have lived together for centuries.'

What does the Gujarat violence hold for the future? Jan Breman recounted how he met a Muslim woman living in a Hindu neighbourhood. She worried that the nearby Muslim slum was going to attack her (Hindu) neighbourhood. Three days later, she was sent away by her Hindu neighbours 'for her own safety'. 'The violence is segregating Indian society. Many young Hindus do not know a single Muslim, while Muslims make up 20 per cent of the population of cities like Ahmedabad.' 'When segregation goes too far', Breman concluded, 'there is no going back'. Shahid Amin remarked that although the Indian constitution reserves the right to propagate one's faith to all Indians, in practice this right is only given to Hindus. Gitandri Shri stated that '[t]he Hindu-Muslim violence is also a conflict between those who believe in a plural society and those who believe in a multicultural society'. ◀

Ward Berenschot, MA recently graduated in Political Science at the University of Amsterdam with his thesis 'The Hifi People versus the Cheap People: Fertile Soil of Communal Violence in Bombay, India'. musiu@dds.nl

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The Forum on Violence in Gujarat was organized by Asian Studies in Amsterdam (ASiA), University of Amsterdam (UvA). The ASiA panel consisted of the sociologist Jan Breman (UvA), the Islamist Yoginder Sikand (Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, ISIM), historian Shahid Amin (Delhi University), historian Barbara Metcalf (University of California at Davis), novelist Gitandri Shri, and was chaired by the anthropologist Peter van der Veer (UvA).

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