

# Religious Fundamentalisms and Communalism: The Case of Sahiyar



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Sahiyar (Stree Sanghathan)  
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### Our Understanding of “Religious Fundamentalisms” in the Indian Context

In a globalized world, India has come to be known as a fast growing and “emerging” developing economy. With a population of more than one billion, it claims to be one of the world’s largest democracies, yet it continues to experience new levels of conflict along the lines of caste, class, gender, religion, region, culture, sexual orientation, language and ethnicity. The complex history of conflict and co-existence among these identity groups and their intersections with patriarchy has resulted in a variety of contradictions and paradoxes. The struggle for women’s rights is shaped by these contexts.

This case study focuses on the experience of resisting Hindu and Muslim fundamentalisms and communal forces in India and the state of Gujarat, where religious fundamentalisms and communalisms<sup>1</sup> are closely connected. In this multi-religious context, fundamentalisms of all kinds thrive on one another’s actions and reactions, and the spread of communal ideology and violence is an important fundamentalist strategy. In India, Hindus represent a majority, constituting 83% of the national population, and 89% of the population of Gujarat and the city of Vadodara. Muslims are the largest minority group, representing 13% of the national population and 9% of the population of Gujarat and Vadodara. Majority and minority communalisms are equally dangerous for women, yet those of the majority, through the use of “nationalist” ideology and popular mobilization toward the establishment of a Hindu Nation, create an additional threat: an Indian variety of fascism.

Religious fundamentalisms use religion, along with culture, caste, ethnicity and nationalism, to further their political goals. Religious fundamentalists spread an ideology of hatred and intolerance towards those from other religions or who do not agree with their specific religious interpretations. They also employ coercive methods to

control people, and they use direct violence to silence opponents from outside as well as within the community. Presenting the “threat of the others,” religious fundamentalists muster the consent of the masses and sometimes offer a short-term power-sharing arrangements to marginalized groups. They spread misinformation about the “golden age” of the past, but use modern technology and management methods to achieve their political ends. In their autocratic, patriarchal ideology and methods, they pose a threat to democracy and to women’s rights.

Women are central to religious fundamentalist strategies, as they play a dual role both as reproducers of the community and as symbols of family, community and religious “honour.” Religious fundamentalists seek to control the mobility and sexuality of women of their own community, and consider sexual attacks on women of other groups as one of the most effective strategies for dishonouring that community as a whole.

In the struggle for women’s rights in India, we need to understand, respect and work with various identity-based groups and at the same time also resist the divisive effect of these forces on women’s movements. This complexity is captured by the theme of the women’s movement’s national conference in 2006: upholding the politics of justice while affirming diversities and resisting divisiveness.

### The Context of Sahiyar’s Work for Women’s Rights

Sahiyar (Stree Sanghathan) was founded in 1984 in Vadodara, Gujarat, by women and for women. We see the oppression and subordination of women as intricately linked to all other forms of marginalization, and seek to build a common front for human rights and communal harmony with other progressive forces in the state. As a part of India’s autonomous women’s movement,<sup>2</sup> Sahiyar campaigns on a range of issues including domestic violence, personal laws, sexual harassment, dowry, sex-selective abortion, rape, custodial rape<sup>3</sup> and sexual violence during caste and communal riots.

Vadodara (formerly Baroda) is situated in central Gujarat on the Mumbai-Delhi line. The people of Vadodara proudly tell visitors that their city is a *sanskar nagari* (“city of culture”). Modern Vadodara owes its beauty, its educational institutions and its architectural masterpieces to the insight and vision of Sayajirao Gaekwad III, Maharaja of Baroda (d. 1939), who initiated a series of bold socio-economic reforms including compulsory primary education and girls’ education, a law against female infanticide, a library movement (the first of its kind in India) to support an adult education initiative, and the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Vadodara.

The city once had a rich composite culture that sees expression even today, with a population that is culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse. Yet Vadodara has not been unaffected by the general deterioration in communal relations in Gujarat and India. With the rising intensity of communal violence in the city since the 1990s, and increasing control by right-wing Hindu organizations over the Maharaja Sayajirao University, the city’s image as *sanskar nagari* has been eroded. Vadodara is now considered to be one of the most communally sensitive cities in the state.

In 2002, Gujarat, including Vadodara, experienced unparalleled violence, principally targeted against Muslims. A series of riots in 1985, 1990 and 1992 preceded the events, and several fact-finding reports have termed the violence of 2002 “genocide.” In this state-sponsored<sup>4</sup> violence against minorities, women’s bodies served as a key battleground. Rumours regarding minority attacks and rape of Hindu women were routinely used to justify the gruesome and widespread sexual violence against Muslim women. After the carnage of 2002, Gujarat was openly pronounced a laboratory of Hindutva, the Hindu supremacist political ideology that drives the call for a Hindu Nation.

The struggle for women’s human rights in Gujarat must contend not only with communal polarization, but also with the state’s aggressive neo-liberal economic policies. One of India’s most industrialized and urbanized states, Gujarat has a population of more than 50 million, with 37% in urban areas. The state rates highly on macroeconomic indicators, with a higher per capita income than the national average, a literacy rate of 69% and female literacy at 57%, but it lags behind in other social and human development indicators. The sex ratio, for example, is 920 females per 1,000 males, and the child sex ratio is only 883 girls per 1,000 boys.

Since 2004, in the campaign for the state assembly election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been showcasing Gujarat as a “development model” to be followed by other states. The pursuance of economic growth and various “development” projects has been undertaken through the large-scale displacement of people and at the cost of the environment, land, water, air and other natural resources, with complete disregard for the right to life and livelihood of the people dependent on these resources. This process has been facilitated by the communal divide, which diverts people’s attention from the real issues of livelihood and survival to the fabricated threat to “security” from the “other” community. Gujarat is thus a clear example of the deadly combination of religious fundamentalism and neo-liberal economic policies that affects the lives of marginalized people, particularly women.

## Major Fundamentalist Forces, Their Local Presence, Strength and International Links

The major fundamentalist forces in Gujarat are Hindutva groups connected to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the chief ideological centre of the “family” of Hindu nationalist organizations popularly known as the Sangh Parivar.<sup>5</sup> The BJP, the political wing of the Sangh Parivar, is the largest national political party after the Congress and has significant influence within the bureaucracy, police and educational institutions. The BJP has been the ruling party in Gujarat since 1995, and was in power at the national level in 2002. Under the leadership of Chief Minister Narendra Modi, the ruling BJP government in Gujarat has been successful in subverting (central/federal) state power at all levels.

Other organizational members of the Sangh Parivar,<sup>6</sup> which focus on youth, students, education and women, respectively, have influence over social, religious and public activities. One of the major strategies used by these groups is to control educational institutions and curricula by appointing supporters of Hindutva ideology at all levels, particularly to decision-making positions.

Gujarat has a very large middle class with an international network, with a presence in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Hong Kong, Australia, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Trinidad and other countries. The Gujarati/Indian diaspora plays a significant role in facilitating the activities of the Sangh Parivar in non-resident Indian communities. In an effort to preserve their roots and identity, many among these communities knowingly or unknowingly support and provide large funds to fundamentalist organizations that claim to do social work in India. Registering themselves as charities in their respective countries, they mobilize resources from funding agencies and the corporate sector in the name of development or relief or education. After the violence of 2002, several progressive groups in the diaspora, such as the [Campaign to Stop Funding Hate](#) in the United States and [AWAAZ South Asian Solidarity Group](#) in the United Kingdom, have tried to expose these links and have initiated campaigns to halt these funds.

Fundamentalist forces are also present within the Muslim minority community. Among these are the Muslim Personal Law Board, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, and various local religious leaders. Some of these groups receive financial support for their activities from other countries.

## The Struggle against Fundamentalist and Communalist Forces

Three major aspects of our struggle are:

1. Discriminatory personal laws;
2. Communal violence and ideology; and
3. Fundamentalist control over women’s lives.

In this case study, we will elaborate on the first two aspects. They are interconnected, but for the sake of simplicity, the following section will discuss them separately.

### Struggle against Discriminatory Personal Laws: Historical Background

The Indian women’s movement faces somewhat unique features of patriarchy. Uma Chakravarti identifies this form of patriarchy as Brahminical patriarchy,<sup>7</sup> a system in which caste<sup>8</sup> and gender hierarchies serve as organizing principles. Though it is a defining marker of Hinduism, in the South Asian context, caste cuts across religions as well. To escape extreme oppression by upper castes or to gain access to educational and economic opportunities, lower-caste people often convert to other religions yet continue to follow Hindu practices and customs. The persistence of the caste system is such that even after conversion, people are not able to gain equal social status in their new religion. They remain Muslim Dalits or Christian Dalits.<sup>9</sup>

The nexus of caste, religion and patriarchy took a new turn with the social reform movement of the 19th century, in the context of British colonization. This movement was centred on such issues as widow remarriage, *sati*<sup>10</sup> and the conditions of child widows. All of these were primarily upper-caste practices, and the reform of Indian society at that time was seen as reform within upper-caste Hindu practices.

While laws against sati and for widow remarriage were passed before the beginning of the nationalist movement, struggles over the issues of child marriage and age of consent brought out the true nature of British colonial rule and the patriarchal positions of the nationalists. In reaction to the colonial projection of Indian culture as barbaric, two distinct trends emerged among reformers and nationalists. While moderates believed that traditional practices needed to be reformed, traditionalists or revivalists, who feared losing their control over women, invented the golden age of Vedic civilization and argued that the British had no right to interfere in matters related to Hindu faith. One of their arguments against increasing the age of consent for girls’ marriage from

ten to 12 years was that “Hindoo society is so constituted that early marriage is a necessary institution for the preservation of our social order. Its abolition would destroy the system of joint family and caste.”<sup>11</sup> In response to a court case against Rakhmabai, an educated woman who was married in childhood and who in 1884 refused to live with her uneducated husband, the revivalist nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak wrote that the women’s education movement was the route “for an attack on our ancient religion under the cover of Rakhmabai with the intention of castrating our eternal religion.” The British, more interested in maintaining colonial rule than in reforming the status of women, succumbed to revivalist forces. The Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) was passed only after pressure from the emergent women’s movement in the early 20th century.

The rise of cultural nationalism, and the denial of equal rights to women in the name of religion and culture, has its roots in this period. The controversy between liberal and traditional nationalists arose again with regard to the reform of civil laws during debates in the Constituent Assembly in the 1950s.

The government of independent India proclaimed a policy of building a secular democratic nation, but this secularism was defined as equal respect for all religions, rather than the separation of religion and State. The main sacrifice of this definition was women’s rights in the family. Major aspects of women’s lives, such as marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody of children, guardianship and adoption, and property and inheritance rights were to be governed by the personal laws (civil codes) of different religious communities. The demand for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) was brushed aside in favour of the right of religious communities to practice their own traditions with respect to personal status. Thus, women were viewed primarily as members of their communities, not as citizens of independent India, and were left by the State to struggle with the fundamentalist forces of their respective communities. In the 1980s, many attempts were made by individual women and the women’s movement to challenge the discriminatory nature of various personal laws and several important cases spurred major debates and campaigns:

- Sarita challenged a section in Hindu personal law on petitioning for restitution of conjugal rights by a husband if the wife refuses to live with him (High Court of Andhra Pradesh, 1983);
- Shehnaz Sheikh petitioned against several aspects of Muslim personal laws, including triple *talaaq* or divorce and polygamy (Supreme Court of India, 1983);

- Mary Roy (Supreme Court of India, 1986) and Therasammal (High Court of Kerala) cases both challenged property rights in Christian personal law;
- and Maki Bui and Sonamuni Kui challenged property rights in tribal customary laws (Supreme Court of India, 1986).<sup>12</sup>

In response to pressure from the women’s movement, several discriminatory aspects of Hindu personal laws have been withdrawn through piecemeal amendments and progressive legal interpretations by courts. However, as the overall logic of Hindu personal law is still based on patriarchal and heterosexual family norms, the struggle continues for women’s equal rights in the matrimonial home, guardianship and custody of children and some aspects of property rights, as well as acceptance of other forms of family and live-in relationships.

The struggle for gender-just civil laws received a major setback when the issue of women’s rights was communalized in the controversial Shah Bano case. Shah Bano, a 62-year-old Muslim woman, was divorced by her husband in 1978. In order to secure maintenance, she approached the Supreme Court under section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which is applicable to all communities. Ruling in her favour, the Supreme Court also remarked on the need for a Uniform Civil Code. The wording of the judgment created controversy across the country. While women’s groups and progressive Muslims supported the judgment, fundamentalist elements argued against it as a danger to Islam. Muslim fundamentalists mobilized protests and a series of violent demonstrations, and Shah Bano was forced to withdraw her claim. Meanwhile, the Hindu right sought to portray the entire Muslim community as backward and opposed to women’s rights. In 1986, the Congress government passed the Muslim Women’s (Protection of Rights upon Divorce) Act, thereby excluding divorced Muslim women from secular rights granted under the Criminal Procedure Code. This move was attacked by the Hindu right as evidence of Congress’ appeasement of the Muslim community.

### Sahiyar’s Response

As part of the autonomous women’s movement, Sahiyar has been involved in the struggle against discriminatory family laws in all religions since our inception in 1984. The most contentious issues regarding our strategies have been in relation to the personal laws of minority communities, particularly Muslim personal law.

When Shehnaz Sheikh challenged discriminatory aspects of Muslim personal law, Sahiyar offered support by participating in a signature campaign in her favour. Similarly, during the controversy of the Shah Bano case, we published a press statement and organized a public

demonstration to support her claim and to raise our voices against the communalization of women's issues by fundamentalists in both communities. In our demonstration, we put forth a key question: "Why were Hindu fundamentalists, who remain silent on injustices toward Hindu women, making a hue and cry about the rights of Shah Bano?" Using street plays and posters, we reminded people that the same Hindu fundamentalist forces had recently supported *sati*, the public burning of a young widow, 18-year-old Roop Kanwar, at a grand festival in Rajasthan, and that they continue to remain silent on dowry deaths, when at least 16 women succumb to unnatural death in Gujarat every day. In our campaign, we opposed the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights upon Divorce) Act, as it denied divorced Muslim women the right to maintenance, and asked Hindu fundamentalists how they could consider this an example of appeasement of the Muslim community, when women, who constitute half of this group, would be losing their rights.

### The Struggle for a Gender-Just Civil Code

We have confronted major challenges in the struggle for a gender-just secular civil code. Among these is the lack of strong liberal leadership in the Muslim community. This may be a result of a section of the educated Muslim middle class migrating to Pakistan during Partition. Since then, those who remained in India, due to systematic discrimination and class prejudice, have sought to distance themselves from a Muslim identity, supporting progressive, secular, rather than religious, initiatives. The few radical liberal alternatives that are emerging from within the Muslim community have arisen not from the elite but often from lower-middle classes or working classes, and still need time to gain momentum given the lack of educational advantages and other exclusions faced by Muslim minorities.

With the rise of communal violence, preceded and followed by hate propaganda from the Hindu right, the Muslim community faces the loss of lives and property and the erosion of civil rights. Their faith in the will of the State to protect their rights is deteriorating. Over the years, as part of the electoral strategy of treating the Muslim community as a vote bank, major political parties have promoted orthodox and religious leaders as representatives of their communities. The Indian state, media, and of course the Hindu right, are happy to project and promote such fundamentalist leadership to the detriment of more progressive elements. Muslim fundamentalists are thus able to prevent positive change by labelling it as an "attack on our religion," and leave women to face triple *talaaq* (unilateral divorce), *purdah* (gender segregation), polygamy and several other forms of injustice and lack of control over their everyday lives.

Another major challenge is that the demand for a Uniform Civil Code has been co-opted by Hindu fundamentalists. Though Hindutva forces have never put forth a specific draft for debate, there are legitimate apprehensions among secularist and minority groups that their campaign is aimed at imposing a Hindu fundamentalist construction of family law on all communities, rather than developing a secular and gender-just code.

In this context, the women's movement is divided on the strategy for legal reform in the personal laws of minority communities. Many feel that our demand for a Uniform Civil Code will only be interpreted as an attempt to impose Hindu law. Others argue that in order to separate our campaign from that of the Hindu right, we should clearly articulate a demand for a "gender-just secular civil code" and not one that is merely "uniform," as the latter might simply keep women from all communities uniformly subordinated.

Questions of identity and who has the right to demand change have also come up in debates. Many feel that the mainstream women's movement is dominated by non-Muslim women and groups and must therefore not intervene in internal community politics, as reform can only come from within. The counter-argument is that the strategy of reform from within leaves women alone to fight the patriarchal-fundamentalist forces in their own communities. Indeed, fundamentalist forces in all communities, though engaged in fighting each other for political gain, are united in their patriarchal attitudes toward women.

Yet another contentious issue within the women's movement is whether to demand the rights accorded to women by religion or go beyond these. One segment argues that we should propagate feminist religious interpretations and frame our demands using religious terminology because this will appeal to more women and create less fundamentalist opposition. Those who oppose this view argue that the rights provided by religions are inherently limited, as all organized religions define and perpetuate the secondary status of women. They argue instead that the demand for change should be based on the universal values of human rights and women's rights. There are also a few groups, including Sahiyar, who are trying to work in ways that do not dichotomize these strategies.

To debate these issues and carry forward the agenda of women's rights among Muslim communities, Sahiyar joined the Muslim Women's Rights Network. Created in 2000, this national network has the following objectives:

- to create awareness about the rights of Muslim women within the Muslim community;

- to generate debate and discussion on legal reforms for Muslim women;
- to work towards gender-just laws for Muslim women;
- to build alliances with women's organizations to further the rights of Muslim women; and
- to support the struggle against communalism and fundamentalism.

Sahiyar became part of the Muslim Women's Rights Network at its inception. It was an important decision for us, as our organization works for women's rights irrespective of community, as opposed to working specifically for Muslim women. Some of the questions raised among us were: Why should we join this network? Do we need a separate network based on religious identity? Will it not lead to divisions within the movement?

The decision to join reflected our understanding of the women's movement in India. We understood that the concerns and perspectives of religious-minority and Dalit women are not well represented in the mainstream women's movement, which consists mainly of women who are born into the Hindu community. Creating a space to voice these concerns would not divide but rather enrich the movement and make it more inclusive. The existence of personal laws based on religion also requires debate and discussion about the experiences of women in various religious communities. We believe that it is not strategic to divide our struggle against patriarchal forces by leaving women of different religions alone to fight the battle within their communities. It is the responsibility of all activists to support such initiatives.

When we started sustained work with women in Muslim areas after 2002, most of our core group members were Hindu by birth, and attempts to challenge fundamentalists at the community level would have raised questions about our authority to speak about issues faced by Muslim women. But the Network provided an opportunity for grassroots Muslim women to interact with other Muslim women activists, and the impact was very different. Our practice of sending activists from other communities to participate in the Network meetings alongside Muslim women facilitated a better understanding of their realities, and women gained strength from the fact that many others in the country were fighting against fundamentalist forces. The Network also provided a useful training ground to learn about the range of views in the struggle against communal, fundamentalist forces within the community.

Many groups working on these issues have participated enthusiastically in the network. Several meetings, programs and discussions have been held in various parts of the country to draft a model *nikaahnama* (Muslim marriage contract), and to begin discussions on personal laws, the role of the Muslim Personal Law Board, and other issues. As more and more women's groups and NGOs joined the network, the debate on strategy intensified. A section of women argued for religious interpretations from women's perspectives. According to them, the Quran provides women with many (some would argue equal) rights and the demand must first be for these. While many women are comfortable with reform within the boundaries of Islam, as they feel it will enable them to gain community support, others do not want to restrict their struggle to the rights accorded by Islam. The debate has reached a point where those who argue for reform within the purview of the Quran have formed a separate network at the national level. The result is the initiation of parallel processes in the movement for Muslim women's rights, and a lack of coordinated initiatives. Sahiyar's stand is that these strategies should not be considered mutually exclusive in a network of various organizations from different backgrounds, traditions and local situations, but rather that the Network should make space for both.

With the intensification of communal violence, several donor agencies have supported peace building and justice efforts for the victims of violence. As a result, large numbers of Muslim women have entered the NGO field as grassroots workers. Most of them are the first women in their families to step beyond their traditional roles. If they are more comfortable working within the boundaries of Islam, feminist organizations should be open to this strategy, while drawing on the learning gained over years of work from human rights and women's rights frameworks. Though often underestimated, grassroots women are more radical in their positions against fundamentalist forces than NGO leaders might expect. Their understanding of feminism is gained through everyday life experience, and their resistance to fundamentalist restrictions on women's mobility is often essential to their very survival. In the network's meetings, we have argued that there must be a space for healthy debate and discussion, where we can agree on a common minimum program and continue to work from the perspectives of our own organizations. Within Sahiyar, we have sought to provide grassroots women and activists with exposure to a range of viewpoints on the reform of personal laws.

To emphasize the patriarchal and discriminatory nature of personal laws within all communities and to bring the focus of debate back to the need for a gender-just secular civil code, Sahiyar is exploring the possibility of public interest litigation along with two Mumbai-based women's organizations, Awaaz-e-Niswan and Forum Against Oppression of Women.

## Communal Violence and Ideology: Historical Background

The challenge of communal forces has become acute since the 1980s, but the roots go back to pre-independence British colonial rule. Though there is some evidence of conflict between various communities in the pre-colonial period, it was colonial rule that changed the nature of communal relations through communal politics. The colonial state fostered the construction of identity on the basis of religious community through population enumeration on the basis of religion, separate legal provisions based on religious texts, and electoral representation along religious lines. The early 20th century saw the emergence of organizations like the Muslim League (1906), the Hindu Mahasabha (1907) and the RSS (1925).

The nationalist movement against colonial rule was contaminated by communal politics. The use of community-based identities for mobilization and the use of religious symbols in the name of culture created a fertile ground for the growth of communal politics. The divide-and-rule policy of the British combined with emerging communal politics resulted in the partition of the country at the time of transfer of power. Partition in 1947 led to the worst communal violence in the history of the subcontinent, barbarous killings, lootings, rapes and abductions of women that have left an indelible mark on the psyches of people.

During the early period after independence, reasonable economic growth, the inclusion of various sectors in the sharing of power, and the hope for a better life among the masses in independent India contributed to relative harmony among various religious groups. The Hindu right could not significantly expand its support base during these years, as the involvement of Nathuram Godse, an RSS member, in the assassination Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 created widespread disapproval of the movement.

During this period, major political parties continued to use communal identities in electoral politics and thus kept the divisions alive. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the economic policies of the ruling class could not deliver to marginalized sections of society, movements of peasants, workers, tribals and students emerged throughout India.

In 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of emergency, with gross violations of democratic and civil rights that provoked large-scale protests. During the realignment of political forces in the struggle against autocratic rule, the Jan Sangh, the political front of the Hindu right, gained credibility as part of the common front against the Emergency. The struggle ended with the overthrow of the Indira Gandhi government, replaced by the Janata Government in which Jan Sangh was a major player. While the real issues of poverty and unemployment

remained unresolved, the ruling classes were able to restrain people's movements by dividing them more and more along caste and communal lines. Since the 1980s, the Congress government has openly resorted to wooing Hindus on one issue and indulging Muslim fundamentalist forces on another; for example, passing the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights upon Divorce) Act was perceived by some as appeasing Muslim fundamentalists in the aftermath of the Shah Bano case, while opening a disputed structure, the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya, responded to the demands of Hindu fundamentalists.

As economic conditions worsened and popular resistance weakened under the pressure of caste and communal identity politics, the Hindu right gained ascendancy. After 1985, the country experienced communal riots in several areas. The mobilization by Hindutva forces on the Ayodhya issue in the late 1980s resulted in the demolition of the 16th century Babri Mosque (a site claimed by the Hindu right as the birthplace of Lord Rama, *Ram Janmabhoomi*) in 1992. The demolition sparked a series of communal riots across the country, leading to the deaths of over 2,000 people. The worst of the communal violence was in Mumbai and Surat in Gujarat and also affected Vadodara.

## Sahiyar's Response

In 1985, an agitation of upper-caste, middle-class youth against reservations<sup>13</sup> for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes<sup>14</sup> in education and government jobs devolved into communal violence. While most of the middle class, including women, supported the anti-reservation agitation, conscious efforts were made on the part of Hindutva forces to break Dalit-Muslim unity, which had been forged out of their similar status in the Hindu social order and their consequent proximity in residential areas.<sup>15</sup>

Sahiyar was a young organization in 1985, formed by university students and dominated by middle-class, mainly upper-caste members. After long and heated debates, we decided to support Dalit groups against the agitation. The similarity between the status of Dalits and women in Brahminical patriarchy was our common ground. Though it was token support that we were able to offer, as we were a small voluntary organization, it was an important ideological position for us to take.



Our first action against communal violence took place in this same year when, along with other like-minded groups, we organized a street theatre festival in riot-affected areas of Vadodara. Several progressive cultural groups from all over the country were invited to perform their plays. By providing an opportunity to watch the performances of eminent cultural groups, we were able to mobilize people from Hindu and Muslim communities to attend. For the first time after the divisive riots in their localities, they stood among each other.

In the 1990s, the domination of Hindutva forces increased in the political and social life of Gujarat. In September of 1990, on the occasion of the Hindu festival of *Ganesh Visarjan*, Vadodara saw its worst riots. During the festival procession and in broad daylight, elected BJP leaders directed a well-planned attack on a Muslim neighbourhood in the presence of the police as well as thousands of people. The historic Juma Mosque was also attacked. Rather than act to prevent the violence, police fired 80 rounds of bullets into the small Muslim area to stop residents from coming out to protect their property or the mosque. A minister of the state government in Gujarat personally directed the police firing. The vernacular press coverage provided a biased picture of events, claiming that Muslims were the first to attack.

Sahiyar, along with four other organizations—Vadodara Kamdar Union (a trade union), Swashrya (a women’s organization), Parivartan (a cultural organization) and Inqilabi Communist Sanghathan (a Trotskyist group)—travelled to the affected areas to assess the situation and prepare an evidence-based account of the events. Women from the minority area were disturbed and traumatized by the events and the biased role of the police. Though there had been incidents where women had rescued and supported women and girls from other communities, these stories had been blacked out by the media. To counter the vicious campaign of Hindutva forces and communal media, we published a series of small leaflets with facts about the event, the role of the police and political leaders, our analysis of the communal politics, and first-hand stories of women from both communities who protected and supported one another.

To promote critical thinking, the leaflet series was entitled “Know the Truth... Think Serenely.” Each leaflet began with the real experiences of women (anonymous) in their own words to ensure the authenticity of the message. The first leaflet talked about the fear, insecurity and helplessness that minority women had felt when attacked by the mobs, and the part that police had played in the violence. The second discussed the role of rumours in generating misunderstanding and mistrust between communities. The third carried the experience of a Hindu girl who had been trapped in a riot when she visited the home of her Muslim friend. In the leaflet, the Hindu girl related the attack on her Muslim

friend’s house by Hindu fanatics, and how her friend’s family had protected her and arranged to send her safely home even while their own house was under fire. It also described how this Hindu girl reciprocated by offering shelter to the Muslim family when she visited the next day to find that the riot had left them homeless. To set the context for the girl’s story within the larger event and to deconstruct communal propaganda, we followed her testimony with a commentary about the role played by the police, politicians and communal forces and the impact of the violence on people. Finally, we appealed to people to ignore the rumours and propaganda and to remain united against communal forces.

The leaflets were written in simple Gujarati language, and activists distributed 2,000 copies of each throughout the affected areas, as well as in markets, the city bus terminus and other crowded public places. We were welcomed in minority-populated areas as they felt that we were giving voice to their side of the story. In many Muslim areas, people came out of their homes to speak with us and to share their feelings and anger. Leaflet distribution thus frequently turned into small street-corner meetings. In Hindu areas, our effort disturbed community leaders and the response to it was lukewarm. Some Hindu youth tried to intimidate us and to prevent our activists from distributing leaflets in their areas.

Sahiyar followed up this effort by undertaking a small study in collaboration with the Women’s Studies Research Centre of Maharaja Sayajirao University. We interviewed women from both Hindu and Muslim communities to understand their perspectives on the violence and to plan our strategies to counter communalism.

## The Backlash

In reaction to our sustained campaign in the months following the riots, Hindu communal forces associated with the BJP started a whisper campaign<sup>16</sup> asking why Sahiyar, a women’s organization, would get involved in political and communal violence issues. In their minds, our activities should be restricted to “women’s issues” such as dowry, rape or family counselling. These groups tried to create fear among our members, one of whom, a lawyer, drew closer to the BJP and was instigated by its leadership to disrupt our activities. We observed that she did not participate in any activities against communal violence and raised objections to this work in our meetings. When she could not convince the majority of our members to avoid engaging in the issue of communalism, she began launching standard fundamentalist accusations against us, calling us westernized feminists without regard for our culture and religion, and claimed that we received funds from Arab countries to support Muslims. She published these accusations in



local newspapers and filed a case against us in the office of the Charity Commissioner, with a baseless charge about malpractice in our accounts.

Following this slander campaign, Hindutva forces mobilized their student wing, Akhil Bhartiya Vidhyarthi Parishad (ABVP), to organize a rally on March 8th, International Women's Day, at the same place and time as an event that we had organized. Understanding the move as an attack not only on women's rights but also on the very roots of democracy, we planned a strategic response and sought to form the widest possible alliance on the issue of communal violence. We sent letters and made personal appeals to trade unions, cultural organizations and all of the progressive organizations and supporters with whom we had worked during the communal riots and whose struggles we too had supported. We launched an effective program near the town hall with placards, slogans and songs for women's rights, human rights and communal harmony. About 1,000 people were mobilized to attend. The ABVP had not expected such a turnout. A hundred of their members passed by the site of our program and organized their meeting nearby.

Next, we organized a well publicized meeting and invited all the progressive organizations and women's organizations from Gujarat and Maharashtra for a day-long program to discuss why women should struggle against communalism and fundamentalism. Representatives from 36 organizations participated and organized a public demonstration in the heart of the city that evening. Leaflets about why women and women's organizations oppose communalism and fundamentalisms were distributed to the public. The leaflet was drafted in simple Gujarati, so ordinary women and men could understand the issue, and was prefaced by a touching line based on a powerful Hindi poem:

If you can sleep in the next room when the other room of the house is burning, if you can sing when there is a dead body in your house, if you can coolly pray when the dead bodies are rotting in your house, this leaflet is not for you.

The heading was followed by the words of women affected by communal riots in various ways: "What about our livelihood? Our future? Where do we go?"

With examples recorded during fieldwork, we also demonstrated how daily wage-workers and women vendors could not earn an income due to the city's curfew, and how control over women and girls increases during and after communal riots, limiting women's education, career and livelihood options. Our analysis used simple words to explain that because women are considered the community's property and

the symbol of its pride, sexual attacks are used as a tool to violate the "honour" and "property" of the "other" community. Through historical examples, we described the long-term impact of intensifying fundamentalist control over the daily lives of women. We also discussed the real issues faced by ordinary people, including women, such as inflation, unemployment, poverty and the divisive impact of communalism on our united struggle against these problems. The leaflet concluded with an appeal to women to assert their identity as women and as human beings, rather than as Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Sikh, and to challenge the communal and political forces that use religion for personal and political gain.

To counter propaganda about Sahiyar's financial malpractice, we declared that as a public organization our accounts are transparent and that anyone could scrutinize our account books during the public demonstration.

The strategy of offensive action toward right-wing forces, while keeping our faith in ordinary people, was successful, and even the vernacular media, which is otherwise communal, was sympathetic in its reporting on the event.

## The Violence of 1992

The communal violence that broke out in Surat in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 foreshadowed the incidents that were to occur all over Gujarat in 2002. The visible participation of Hindu women in the violence was observed in the Surat riots. Though there were some cases where women supported and rescued women of other communities at the cost of their own security, the majority of women identified with and acted on behalf of their own religious community.

In these riots, Muslim women were raped, mutilated, paraded naked and burnt alive, but there was a blackout in the media about the brutality of the violence against them. This blackout reflects two major issues related to the rising power of communal and fundamentalist forces in public life and politics. First, that communal ideology is heavily pervasive in the mindset of most reporters and editors of the vernacular press, and second, that the threat of physical assault by fundamentalist forces, and their legal impunity, is widely understood.

Sahiyar was one of the few organizations that went to Surat and conducted fact-finding missions, with support from local women activists. A short fact-finding report was prepared in English and Gujarati. It was important to have an English version to reach out to state machinery like the National Women's Commission, the Human Rights

Commission, and people outside the state of Gujarat. The Gujarati report was necessary for wider circulation within Gujarat. The method and the various media of dissemination were also carefully considered in order to reach different strata, as most people were not aware of the scale, intensity and brutality of the events due to the partial media coverage. We organized several meetings on the university campus for teachers and students, to show solidarity with survivors and to gain people's commitment to the issues. With a memorandum addressed to the Home Ministry and the National Women's Commission, we conducted an extensive signature campaign demanding justice and rehabilitation for victims in Vadodara and at the national level. These efforts succeeded in pressuring the National Women's Commission to visit Surat.

We published a two-page leaflet to communicate women's experiences of sexual atrocities, and prepared a street play to shake the sensibility of the Hindu majority and convey our feminist understanding of the events. The play, *Aapane tolu bani gaya chhe (We Have Become a Crowd)*, brought out the plight of survivors by depicting actual events symbolically and with very few words, using only short dialogue and songs. The message for the majority community was that we hardly realize the impact of our actions while acting in a crowd. We may or may not directly participate in violence on another community, but in a crowd, like a herd of sheep, we intentionally or unintentionally support those who perpetrate violence or spread the ideology of violence. We try to hide our crime against humanity in the anonymity of a crowd, and in that process we also lose our humanness. For women, the message was that if you keep silent about atrocities committed against women from other communities, next time, it might be your turn. Above all, it is important to uphold our identity as women and as human beings, rather than as members of one or another religious community.

These activities were organized outside of Surat, as we did not have a base in that city and most of our local contacts felt that the communal mindset of the majority community was too ingrained to challenge. Our actions in this case were not sufficient to secure justice for the victims or punishment for the perpetrators, but it did have a role in documenting and creating dissent in the overtly communal context of the country and the state. Eventually, as a result of such interventions, some local groups from Surat were motivated to bridge the divide between the two religious communities. A university-based youth organization, the National Social Service, organized a citywide festival of street plays about communal harmony and invited several secular groups, including Sahiyar, to perform in the most sensitive areas where communities had been torn apart. There were apprehensions and

security concerns about the program, but the overwhelming success of these public performances and the participation of men, women and children from both communities was evidence that Hindutva could not claim a total victory over people's hearts and minds.

## The Violence of 2002

On February 27th 2002, near Godhra Station, a coach on a train was set on fire and 58 people were burned alive. The fire occurred in the aftermath of a conflict between vendors, Muslims and Hindu-right activists, on their way back from Ayodhya. While the real cause of the fire is disputed and those responsible have yet to be brought to justice, the incident was used to sow hatred and violence against Muslims in the cities, towns, villages and tribal areas of north and central Gujarat. The government and state machinery came out with a number of justifications for the carnage, calling it a "spontaneous reaction." Their vocal support brought huge mobs onto the streets for the first time in Gujarat's long history of communal violence. For days, armed mobs of thousands attacked, looted and burnt homes, shops, *laaris* (hand carts), cabins, and factories owned by Muslims. More than 100,000 people lost their homes and means of livelihood. At least 2,000 people lost their lives and equal numbers were still missing a year after the incident.

Some of the vernacular-language press played a role in instigating the violence, while rumours about the rape of Hindu women were used to justify brutal sexual assaults on Muslim women. Many Muslim women were stripped, raped or sexually harassed in full public view. Several were burnt alive to destroy the evidence of gang rape. It is not possible to ascertain the actual number of women who faced sexual violence because even in normal circumstances women have difficulty reporting such experiences. In this specific context, it was almost impossible for them to report the violence as those responsible acted with impunity. Several women activists and fact-finding teams recorded information about the experiences of women. At least 300 such incidents have been recorded from various parts of Gujarat.

In Vadodara, women did not report rape but related their experiences of severe sexual harassment by police. In the second phase of violence after March 15th, we documented several reports of police brutality during arbitrary combing operations<sup>17</sup> in minority areas. Women were abused, dragged out and beaten by police. In the words of one woman, the experience was like "verbal rape." Pregnant women were specifically targeted. In spite of oral and written complaints recorded by human rights organizations in investigative reports, even "First Information Reports" in police logs<sup>18</sup> were not registered against the police officers in question.

The significant participation by women, Dalits, tribals and other marginalized groups in inflicting violence on Muslims is the most disturbing aspect of the events, and presents a major challenge for any strategy to confront communal and fundamentalist forces.

### Sahiyar's Response

To respond to the situation, Sahiyar allied with a number of progressive organizations and individuals to form the People's Union for Civil Liberties and Shanti Abhiyan (PUCL-SA).<sup>19</sup> All of our human and financial resources were diverted to this forum for several months following March 2002. The women activists within PUCL-SA formed a very active women's caucus to integrate women's perspectives into the forum's activities. Some autonomous women's organizations from other parts of the country, including Awaaz-e-Niswan, Forum Against Oppression of Women (Mumbai), and Saheli (Delhi) provided valuable support. The range of activities undertaken by the PUCL-SA included:

#### *Organizing Peace Committees*

Peace committees and vigils were organized in localities where we had a strong presence and contacts with both communities. During the height of the riots, our activists went to stay in the affected areas and contacted people from both communities to ensure that they would not initiate attacks. We also informed the police about our presence and thus pressured them to take immediate action in response to the threat of outside attack. These actions created an atmosphere of trust and confidence among local residents, and helped to secure peace amid the violence that engulfed the city and the state.

#### *Raising Awareness and Holding Demonstrations*

The forum organized peace *dharnas* (demonstrations) when the violence started. On March 8th, International Women's Day, a demonstration was organized by all women's organizations associated with the forum to demand an end to the violence. The protest conveyed that there were voices in the city that would not remain silent in the face of communal riots and religious fundamentalism. Activists from women's organizations and trade unions, academics, artists, and students, along with women, children and men formed a human chain and took an oath to fight communal ideology and violence. Large demonstrations were organized in several public places in collaboration with educational institutions, and teachers and students from various schools participated.

#### *Working with the Police and Administration*

We worked as a pressure group and liaison with the Police Commissioner to secure help for citizens. It was almost impossible for common people

to contact the police during the emergency, as the control room phones were constantly busy, and the police did not respond immediately to prevent violent incidents. To put pressure on the Police Commissioner, a team of reputable PUCL-SA activists organized a meeting and offered voluntary services to maintain a state of calm in the city. We gave the authorities the names and phone numbers of our activists from various areas and asked for curfew passes to travel in the affected areas. We promised that our activists would provide authentic information, but in response, we expected immediate action on the part of the police and administration. Due to the reputation of PUCL and those associated with the Vadodara branch as defenders of human rights with direct contact with the National Human Rights Commission,<sup>20</sup> the authorities could not refuse us curfew passes. We circulated some of our phone numbers in affected areas so that people could contact us at any time, like a crisis support centre.

We also developed a strategy to put pressure on police to take action on our information. We decided to communicate everything on paper rather than only orally or over the phone. Each emergency phone call was followed by a fax to the Commissioner's office with the details of the conversation, thus preventing them from denying or distorting the facts afterward. We advised people living in sensitive areas to send faxes to police commissioners with copies marked to PUCL-SA and the National Human Rights Commission. Through this strategy, we were able to help prevent the intensification of violence in several cases.

#### *Fact-Finding and Making Representations to Various Commissions*

Organizing our members to conduct fact-finding missions in the city and surrounding areas was a major focus of our work, as well as supporting fact-finding teams and journalists from other areas to obtain first-hand information about the events. PUCL-SA prepared a fact-finding report entitled *Violence in Vadodara*, as well as a separate report about the experiences of women, entitled *At the Receiving End*.

These reports were presented to several national and international human rights forums, including the National Human Rights Commission, the Editors' Guild of India, Defence Minister George Fernandes, the president and prime minister of India, and the National Commission for Women. We also organized public hearings for the Concerned Citizens' Tribunal, headed by retired Supreme Court judges and other eminent figures in Vadodara.

#### *Supporting the International Initiative for Justice in Gujarat (IIJG)*

We supported the IIJG<sup>21</sup> initiative to develop a feminist critique of justice and democratic governance in the context of the genocide in Gujarat. In December 2002, an international panel of feminist jurists,

activists, lawyers, writers and academics from all over the world visited Ahmedabad, Vadodara, and the Dahod and Panchmahals districts of Gujarat. Their report, *Threatened Existence: A Feminist Analysis of the Genocide in Gujarat*, was released on Human Rights Day, December 10th 2003, in Bombay and later in Vadodara by Professor Uma Chakravati.

#### *Working for Relief and Rehabilitation*

In light of the government's apathy and failure to provide relief to the victims of the violence, we worked closely with relief camp organizers to provide material like food, footwear, clothes, and supplies for children. We also supported rehabilitation by providing basic household necessities and means of livelihood.

Aside from direct violence, one of the weapons used by the Sangh Parivar to break the strength of the Muslim community was economic boycott, a form of "slow genocide." In several cases where Hindu employers had fired Muslim employees, we convinced them to take these employees back. In a few cases, our intervention was helpful. We worked as a pressure group to get support from the State on various occasions. Our activists also assisted affected people in filing First Information Reports, writing complaints to the police and other authorities, and demanding compensation from the government.

In addition to supporting this work, Sahiyar also undertook specific relief for women. Our volunteers regularly visited women in the relief camps to provide emotional support and counselling, and raised specific funds for the provision of undergarments and sanitary supplies that were not being distributed with other relief items.

Most women were looking for traditional livelihood work like sewing and tailoring. We provided these women with links to organizations that teach these skills. As part of these livelihood programs, we also encouraged young girls to build non-traditional skills through computer training.

#### *Engaging in Satyagraha against Injustice and Police Atrocities*

During the later phases of violence from March 15th onwards, women were subject to extreme forms of harassment, including sexual harassment during police combing operations. In many cases, this occurred when men had fled their homes out of fear of police repression. Police refused to give us curfew passes to visit sensitive localities, yet people continued to contact us by phone. Women routinely broke down on the phone as they recounted their horror stories and constant fear of abuse. When no action was taken to put an end to these atrocities, PUCL-SA protested against police brutality through an open letter to the Police Commissioner.

Every day from April 30th to May 3rd 2002, a group of Muslim women and men, along with forum activists, courted arrest in a silent martyr-march, peacefully breaking curfew orders to deliver themselves unarmed to police abuse. The strategy of *satyagraha*, or non-violent resistance, used by Gandhi against the British in the freedom struggle, was suggested by senior Gandhian leaders associated with Shanti Abhiyan. We agreed that it was the only possible way to resist the communal state machinery. The argument of "action and reaction" first used by Chief Minister Modi in defence of the genocide was being used to constrain minority communities in every city in Gujarat. Ours was a calculated risk, as it was possible that any action for self-defence might be turned against the community. We publicized the action, and letters poured in to the Police Commissioner's office from nationally and internationally renowned figures and organizations. In response to this pressure, the Commissioner met with us on the fourth day of the march and promised to undertake an inquiry against guilty police personnel.

The demonstration's most significant impact was that many Muslim women came out onto the streets for the first time in their lives. The experience of arrest alleviated their feelings of helplessness and frustration, and raising their voices against injustice gave them confidence.

#### *Sharing Our Experiences and Analysis*

In order to prevent another "Gujarat genocide" in other parts of the country, we shared our experiences and analysis of the situation with a wide audience across India to make them understand the real nature of the carnage and its impact on women and the nation's secular democracy. Though Gujarat has hundreds of NGOs working on development and gender issues, only a handful took a public stand against the violence, and many could not see its connection to their projects and/or project areas. In many cases, the employees of NGOs were themselves victims of communal propaganda. Many organizations tactically decided not to get involved in the issue as the State government headed by Chief Minister Modi was not only defending the carnage and invoking Gujarat *asmita* (pride), but also accusing those who spoke against the violence of being anti-Gujarati and supporters of "anti-national criminals." In this context, it was important for us to provide authentic accounts of what was happening at the ground level. The violence was not a spontaneous reaction but rather the result of years of groundwork by fundamentalists and communal forces, which were present in other states as well. Hindutva forces had claimed Gujarat to be their laboratory, and they were bound to repeat the experiment in other places.

Our representatives were invited to make presentations as speakers or resource persons on the issue of communal violence in several public meetings, training programs, workshops and seminars. We also lobbied

along with others for a space in the plenary session at the 10th National Conference of the Indian Association for Women's Studies in October of 2002. It was important to discuss the issue not only with activists and social organizations but also with academics in a position to influence the education system.

#### *Attempting to Forge Links*

We consistently attempted to appeal to the conscience of women from the majority community, speaking on the lack of widespread social condemnation of the violence and the lack of hope for legal justice for the survivors. We also explained the serious long-term consequences of silence that would affect women of all communities, such as the normalization of violence against women within the family and in public spaces, the use of violence to settle even simple differences, and the dehumanizing brutality of sexual violence.

On March 8th 2003 we invited a range of organizations to join the celebration of International Women's Day. Nineteen organizations participated in a common program against all forms of violence ranging from the declining sex ratio, domestic violence, sexual violence and communal violence. More than 500 women attended the public program.

### **Initiatives after 2002: Community Work with Women**

An indirect outcome of the 2002 crisis was the emergence of women's leadership in several Muslim communities. In many cases, where men were arrested or immobilized by the fear of police abuse, women shouldered the entire responsibility for families. Many young women had the chance to meet and work with human rights and women's rights activists, which was valuable exposure. We identified and worked closely with many of them in 2002 during fact-finding missions, relief work and the satyagraha campaign. An informal group was formed among these women leaders to network with Sahiyar and with each other to gain strength and support. They were involved on a range of women's rights issues taken up by Sahiyar, and we supported them to help the community with the follow-up from legal cases and compensation claims, and in dealing with local police and government offices. They became our link to the affected community.

Sahiyar's efforts to promote communal harmony took a new turn when some of these women approached us in February of 2004. In the last few days of Muharram (the Shia month of mourning), a procession to commemorate the martyrdom of the the Prophet Muhammad's grandson was attacked and a Muslim boy died in police firing. Subsequently, some Muslim youth from the area stabbed a Hindu youth. In a series of stabbings over one week, five innocent people, three Muslims and two

Hindus, lost their lives. One stabbing incident occurred just outside the homes of a few Muslim women activists, who felt strongly that they should approach the Hindu women whose family members had died. In an atmosphere of total mistrust and ruptured communication between the two communities, this was not an easy task. After discussions, we decided to address these feelings systematically by approaching Hindu and Muslim women from several sensitive neighbourhoods in the area and drafting a letter to convey our support and share the grief of women from both communities who had lost loved ones.

Several organizations were also invited to join the efforts, and 600 women from Hindu, Muslim, Christian and other communities signed this letter. A representative team went to meet with women from each affected family to present the letter and received a very positive response. On April 14th 2004, the public holiday of Ambedkar Jayanti,<sup>22</sup> a *mahila sammelan* (women's meeting) was organized among the signatories and about 300 women from various parts of Vadodara participated. The event featured no long speeches by experts or leaders, but rather the experiences of women from each area. They voiced aspirations for peace, justice and security, protests against unemployment and price increases, and anger against political parties, politicians and police who had provoked or supported communal violence and inflicted atrocities on ordinary people. The women marched from the venue to the middle of the town. Near a statue of Gandhi, we remembered Dr. Ambedkar and his contribution to the inclusion of women's rights in the Indian Constitution. At the end of the program, women took an oath to work for peace, harmony and justice, and to not allow religious identity to prevail over their primary identity as women and human beings.

As communal disturbances and other crises have become part of the everyday reality of these areas, women must deal with various aspects of the state, such as the police, the justice system, and various government offices. They also face internal issues such as domestic violence and conflicts within the community. An important recent initiative is the Women's Leadership for Justice, Peace and Communal Harmony program. In this program, Sahiyar organizes trainings for grassroots women leaders from Vadodara's communally sensitive areas to enable them to intervene in crisis situations and to address local and community issues and women's rights. These trainings are part of a long-term strategy for challenging patriarchal social structures and value systems. Sessions cover feminist concepts as well as collective functioning in an organization, and also build an understanding of the legal system, constitutional and fundamental rights, personal laws, strategies to combat communal politics and violence, and practical skills. Within the first year of training, participants gained self-confidence,

began working on a number of community issues such as sanitation, water and other civic amenities, and gained recognition within the community and among civil society groups and government institutions.

The training process also reflects an understanding of the pressures that organizers and leaders face in public life, such as pressure by political parties to join their campaigns, and resistance from established male leadership. To provide a network of support, the women have formed an informal organization, Buland Awaaz (“Powerful Voice”), and a second group of women is now pursuing the training program.

## Challenges

### *Women’s Participation in Fundamentalist Movements*

The significant participation of women in support of religious fundamentalist forces presents a key challenge to our understanding of fundamentalist strategies. With the growing strength of fundamentalist and communalist movements in India since the 1990s, the manifestation of patriarchal control over women’s lives has assumed new forms, among which are attacks on inter-faith relations or marriages, imposition of dress codes and restrictions on freedom of movement, communalization of cases of sexual violence, and *fatwas*<sup>23</sup> pressuring women to resolve legal matters within the community rather than through the official judicial system.

Despite the negative impact of fundamentalist forces on their rights, women are not only participants but also vocal leaders within these organizations, frequently occupying public positions and platforms. Apparently contrary to patriarchal norms, they feel “empowered” by fundamentalist movements, but they have legitimacy in public spaces only if they stand in defence of their men, family and community. If they transgress the boundaries of family, caste or religion, women face extreme violence. Thus, while Hindutva forces encourage women to be on the frontline during violent actions in order to protect their men, women having affairs or relations with men from other communities provoke brutal violence.<sup>24</sup> It is important that we deepen our understanding of the methods used by communal and fundamentalist forces to control women’s freedom, and that we refine our discourse to enable women to participate more fully in discussions of gender and patriarchy.

Fundamentalist forces have effectively mobilized women through the use of religious symbols and gatherings. In recent years, large-scale mobilization through festivals has increased manifold and has proven particularly attractive to young people. In mass celebrations, the public show of strength provides a sense of power to alienated youth. Such events offer simplistic solutions to the most complex problems, such

as economic uncertainty, unemployment, precarious employment, and competition for jobs and admission to educational institutions. The ideology of “us” versus “them” provides a visible target or enemy in all of these struggles, most often minorities and other marginalized groups.

The challenge for us is to develop counter-strategies. Many women’s organizations also use religious symbols and festivals to attract large numbers of women, yet this strategy is questionable in multi-religious, multicultural societies, and in a communal political environment where the use of symbols from one religion might alienate women from another religion. The task before us is thus to construct new secular festivals and symbols. One example from our context is the innovative use of *garba* (Gujarati folkdance). We have used popular traditional *garba* tunes along with modern lyrics, sharing secular and feminist messages in order to effectively reach out to women and young girls. *Garba* songs with appealing tunes can often convey complex ideas that we would otherwise find difficult to explain in a two-hour session, particularly to women with less formal education.

*Uttarayan*, a kite flying festival, is another event celebrated by people from all religions in Gujarat. During this famous festival, we have produced kites with feminist and secular slogans and symbols. As one kite changes hands at least four to five times, this message travels to many people. A slogan against domestic violence, for example, was *Stree par thay jo atyachar ame padoshi javabdar* (If there is violence against women, we as neighbours have a responsibility to stop it). Against sex selective abortions, the slogan was *Dikarine janmava do, khilva do, akashe ambva do* (Let the daughters be born, blossom and reach the sky). The slogan for communal harmony was taken from a very famous song, *Mandir, masjid, girjaghar ne bant liya bhavan ko; dharti banti sagar banta, mat banto insan ko* (Temples, mosques, gurudwaras have divided up god; we have divided even the earth and sea; let us not divide human beings).

### *Sustaining an Integrated Approach*

In our efforts to work with other organizations to challenge communal forces, we have found some to be hesitant where women’s rights are concerned. When women attempt to resist the patriarchal, fundamentalist control of their own minority communities, these organizations have sought to dissuade us from assisting in their struggles out of fear of losing the support of community leaders in challenging communalism. Sahiyar, however, believes that the struggle against all manifestations of fundamentalism should proceed simultaneously.

In the face of increasing economic crises, unemployment and the absence of progressive organizations, youth are becoming easy tools

in the hands of fundamentalist and communalist forces. One limitation that we have faced is the lack of male volunteers to work with young boys of both communities. We are planning to overcome this challenge by starting to work more concertedly with youth in the area.

We also seek to develop sustained links with groups working on environmental issues, workers' rights, and women's access to and control over natural resources, as we need to connect with the struggle against neo-liberal economic policies and their "development" model.

#### *Resisting Attempts to Discredit Us*

Fundamentalist and communal forces have attempted to discredit the resistance by labelling us as western, pseudo-secular, anti-nationalist, etc. The discourse of Gujarat *asmita* (pride) was particularly used by Chief Minister Modi to depict secular forces as anti-Gujarati. Through concerted propaganda, Hindutva forces have sought to create the opinion that secular groups receive foreign funds to conduct activities against the interests of the nation or the state.

Sahiyar has survived the onslaught of propaganda through carefully adopted practices. We maintain transparency in our fundraising policy, avoiding large contributions from foreign funding agencies and relying instead on small funds from individuals and organizations with similar objectives. We take a principled stand on even very controversial issues, never making opportunistic alliances with one communal force in order to challenge another. Finally, we work on multiple issues in which traditional women's organizations can participate, without compromising our own agenda and views.

#### *Internal Challenges*

Sahiyar has also faced internal challenges, the most significant of which is the communalization of our own activists. In 2002, for example, we had to abandon the implementation of a government project because many of the women involved could not sustain the pressure of propaganda by communal vernacular media. We need to remain constantly vigilant over this challenge, as we are operating in an overtly communal state and social context where most of the women have absorbed communal feelings to a lesser or greater degree. It is not possible to work in the field without dialoguing with them, but if we want to win them over, this dialogue must be very different from the way we communicate with the leadership of fundamentalist and communal movements. At the same time, we have to be careful about the infiltration of communal elements into the organization.

## Reflections on the Strategies: The Process of Transformation

In the early years, Sahiyar's activities were restricted to fact-finding and generating awareness through demonstrations and street plays. These were not sustained efforts, but rather like firefighting exercises in times of crisis. At first, we were not willing to engage in large-scale relief work, as we believed that there were other organizations that specifically undertook such activities. We became involved in relief and rehabilitation for the first time when we witnessed the apathy of the state and civil society groups toward the survivors of the Gujarat violence. Though most of our core group members were born to Hindu families, our efforts to support the struggle for justice and provide concrete help toward rehabilitation created the possibility of working closely with a minority community.

In its transformation from a small autonomous group into a mass-based organization, Sahiyar has evolved diverse strategies to resist fundamentalisms. We have reached out to a range of social groups through various media, including fact-finding reports, public protests, leaflets and the use of cultural art forms like street theatre, *garba* and songs. We have combined study and struggle in an effort to understand religious fundamentalist strategies and to develop counter-strategies. Our leaflets, street plays and discussion groups are based on the insights we gain from our research, and reflect an understanding of both theory and women's lived experience. These programs have had the greatest success where we have understood the pulse of women's inner experiences and translated this into political action.

An important strategy for a small women's group such as Sahiyar is to build the right kind of alliances according to the demands of a situation. We network not only with women's organizations, but also with secular and democratic forces such as human rights groups, trade unions, and social and political formations with various ideological backgrounds—from Gandhians to far-left groups—as well as non-governmental organizations, academics, artists and other secular individuals at local, national and international levels. While all of the groups in a collective may not agree on all the issues and strategies, we have insisted on staying united on a common minimum agreement. Considering all opinions in the decision-making process and sharing credit for successes are strategies that have helped us to assume a leadership



position in collective forums. The organization has been able to survive the onslaught of fundamentalist and communal forces because of its supportive relationship with various groups. The key to accessing support in times of crisis is to provide such support wholeheartedly when others are in need.

Looking at the strength and spread of fundamentalist forces at local, national and international levels, we need to be prepared for a protracted struggle. While the defeat of the BJP at the national level in 2009 came as a relief in some sense, Narendra Modi is likely to sustain their fort in Gujarat. The Congress party has the electoral benefit of people-oriented initiatives such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Right to Information Act, enacted under activist pressure and with support from the left. However, at the ground level, and where neo-liberal policies are concerned, ordinary people may find little distinction or choice between the two parties.

As the civil rights of minority communities and the rights of poor people face continued erosion, and women's rights are increasingly attacked through social, domestic and fundamentalist violence, there is a need for grassroots resistance that can address these inter-connected issues. The Women's Leadership for Justice, Peace and Communal Harmony training program for grassroots women is a small step toward this end. Fostering an alliance among women and girls from different communities is a process of sustained work. Our hope is that these women community leaders will develop their network into a mass-based organization that can serve the need of the hour—to combat the communal, fascist and fundamentalist forces that control the state and the everyday lives of ordinary people.

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### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Communalism is defined as a belief that people belonging to one religious community have common social, political and economic interests and that the interests of one community are opposed to the interests of the other. Thus there is constant suspicion, fear or hostility between communities. Communalism involves political mobilization based on this fear and hatred towards other communities.

<sup>2</sup> As defined by the conference of the Autonomous Women Movements held in Kolkata in 2006, the autonomous women's movement includes women and organizations who are "autonomous"—i.e. non-governmental, non-electoral, not affiliated with a political party, non-violent, and not associated with underground groups or funding agencies. These are groups, both formal and informal, that form a distinct political stream united by a broad critique of society, patriarchal institutions, and the intersections of caste, gender, class, religion and sexuality.

<sup>3</sup> The term "custodial rape" refers to rape by persons who are in a position of authority, e.g., police officers, jail wardens, hospital staff, etc. See "[Rape Laws of India](#)," undated, MyNation website.

<sup>4</sup> Fundamentalist control of the state is discussed in the following section.

<sup>5</sup> For details about the emergence and spread of Sangh Parivar organizations, see: Tapan Basu *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> These include the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP/World Hindu Council), Bajrang Dal (youth wing), Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (student wing), Vidyabharti (educational wing) and Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (women's wing). Education is one of the most strategic means through which Hindutva forces have spread their influence. The booklet *Vidyabharti Ek Parichya (Vidyabharati: An Introduction)*, Ahmedabad: Vidyabharati, 2002, claims that Vidyabharti is the largest educational NGO in India, running more than 20,000 educational units, through which more than 2,444,000 students receive education and ethos/traditions from about 102,000 teachers (6-7). In Gujarat, there are 345 schools run by Vidyabharti with 1,334 teachers and 34,655 students (31). Vidyabharti Gujarat is recognized by the National Open School, and is also able to influence remote tribal areas through a network of educational institutions.

<sup>7</sup> The three major devices acting at various levels essential to maintaining Brahminical patriarchy are: (1) the hold of ideology, through which women aspire to attain spiritual salvation through enactment of their roles as pativrata or wives; (2) the imposition of Brahminical codes through law and custom to control women's sexuality and to maintain sanctioned and "legitimate" boundaries in a system where caste purity is central to the social order; and (3) the role of the state in maintaining Brahminical patriarchy, through a system of "benevolent paternalism" where women are rewarded with certain rights, privileges and security when they comply with Brahminical norms. The mythology of "ennoblement" in the ideology of Brahminical patriarchy involves the creation of a logic whereby women are led to believe ("narcotized" as Chakravarti terms it) that power lies in women's ability to sacrifice. Subordination is erased as women deny themselves "access to power or the means to it." Brahminical patriarchy thus operates through structures of oppression that are both ideological and material. Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(14), 3 Apr. 1993: 579-585.

<sup>8</sup> Srinivas defines caste as follows: "Caste is a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group having traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchies of castes. Relations between castes are governed by among other things the concept of pollution and purity." The concepts of purity, pollution and caste endogamy are central to the control over women's labour, sexuality and mobility. M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Bombay: Media Promoters and Publishers Ltd., 1962: 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Dalits are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, which perpetuates their socio-economic position as a poor, downtrodden section of society. The Hindu social order considers them "untouchables." They constitute 16% of India's population and 7.1 % of Gujarat's population.



<sup>10</sup> *Sati* refers to the notionally voluntary suicide of a widowed wife by ritual burning on her husband's pyre.

<sup>11</sup> N.K. Sinha, Ed., *History of Bengal, 1757-1905*, Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1967: 408.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of key cases, please refer to: Nandita Gandhi & Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992: 229-259.

<sup>13</sup> Reservation in Indian law is a quota system whereby a percentage of seats is reserved in the public sector, in unions, in state government departments, and in all public and private educational institutions, for socially and educationally disadvantaged communities and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes who are inadequately represented in these services and institutions. This form of compensatory discrimination was included in the Constitution of India due to historical injustices toward these groups, as a means to accelerate their integration into mainstream society.

<sup>14</sup> "Scheduled caste" is a constitutional term used for Dalits. "Scheduled Tribe" is a constitutional term used for Adivasis, ethnic and tribal groups believed to be the aboriginal population. Adivasis constitute 8.2 % of India's population and 14.8 % of Gujarat's population.

<sup>15</sup> For an understanding of the relation of Dalits and Hindutva forces and their role in communal carnage, please refer to "Under-privileged and Communal Carnage: A Case of Gujarat," Ghanshyam Shah, 15th Wertheim Lecture, Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam, Amsterdam School for Social Research, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> A whisper campaign is one in which damaging rumours are spread about a target, while the source of the rumours seeks to remain anonymous.

<sup>17</sup> The police organized raids of people's homes to find weapons or suspects who had participated in violence; these are known as combing operations. This was one of the major tools for harassment used by police in the Muslim areas, as many police officials were supportive of Hindu communal forces and the BJP government.

<sup>18</sup> "First Information Reports" recorded in police logbooks are the first formal step in criminal case procedure in the Indian Subcontinent.

<sup>19</sup> People's Union for Civil Liberty was initiated by Jay Prakash Narayan during the struggle against emergency rule imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. Since then, PUCL has been active at the national level in supporting and protecting civil rights and human rights. A branch of PUCL was started in Vadodara during early 1990s. Shanti Abhiyan (Peace Campaign) was initiated in the mid-1980s in Vadodara. In 2002, PUCL and SA formed a common forum to address the unprecedented nature of the communal crises in Gujarat.

<sup>20</sup> The National Human Rights Commission was the only constitutional body apart from the Supreme Court of India from which the affected people and human rights' defenders could access relief against the overtly communal state government, police and administration.

<sup>21</sup> The IJG was jointly organized by several organizations including Citizen's Initiative (Ahmedabad), PUCL-SA (Vadodara), Communalism Combat, Awaaz-e-Niswan, Forum Against Oppression of Women, Stree Sangam (Bombay), Saheli, Jagori, Sama and Nirantar (New Delhi), Organised Lesbian Alliance for Visibility and Action (Pune) and other women's groups in India.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar, the first law minister of independent India, is considered the architect of the Indian Constitution. He drafted a Hindu Code bill in support of progressive change for women's rights in Hindu personal law. When the bill was rejected by Parliament, he resigned from the post of law minister in protest.

<sup>23</sup> A *fatwa* is a legal opinion responding to a question by a petitioner or relating to an issue of the day, drafted by a *mufti* (a certain kind of specialist in Islamic law).

<sup>24</sup> For example, the BJP government proposed setting up a monitoring cell on inter-religious marriages, which would be responsible for "rescuing" Hindu girls from "forcible marriages" with members of other communities. Through leaflets and public statements and discussions, Sahiyar appealed to women to understand the patriarchal nature of this move. Hindu fundamentalists remain silent on the issues of dowry, domestic violence and other abuses that occur within their own community, yet in the name of "protecting" women, they seek to restrict women's freedom to choose their own partners, and treat them as the property of their family and community.

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#### **Author Bio:**

**Dr. Trupti Shah** is one of the founding members of Sahiyar (Stree Sanghthan), an autonomous women's organization in Gujarat, India. She is one of the leading activists in the women's and human rights movements. Some of the major issues on which she has undertaken research and writing are the women's movement, violence against women, women's work, women in the informal sector, the impact of fundamentalism and communal violence on women, and the impact of globalization. She is currently teaching economics at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.

#### **Organizational Bio:**

**Sahiyar (Stree Sanghthan)** was started in 1984 in Vadodara, Gujarat, by women and for women, with the long-term vision of a society free from any form of inequality, injustice and atrocity, a society in which women have equal status and recognition as human beings. The Gujarati word *sahiyar* means "woman's friend." Sahiyar supports women in their struggles against violence, sexual exploitation, injustice and discrimination and provides counselling, moral and emotional support, legal assistance and practical assistance. We consider Sahiyar to be part of India's autonomous women's movement. Sahiyar sees women's oppression and subordination as intricately connected with all other forms of marginalization, and seeks to build a common front for human rights and communal harmony with other progressive forces in Vadodara and Gujarat.