

Muslim-Hindu attacks leave Ahmedabad awash in mistrust

HINDU POLITICAL GROUPS GAIN HOLD IN ISLAMIC CENTER

By Mayank Chhaya

An apocryphal tale about how the western Indian city of Ahmedabad was founded in 1411 may offer some guidance toward understanding the horrific sectarian violence that took more than 500 lives there over a week ago.

Ahmed Shah, a Muslim sultan, was walking his dog on the outskirts of what was then the small town of Karnavati. To his surprise, a hare leapt out of a thorny bush and attacked his dog. Ahmed Shah is said to have thought: "If the hares of this area are so self-assured, its people must be quite something." That is when he decided to found Ahmedabad, which he named for himself and made the capital of his sultanate.

For the better part of the past 600 years, the people of Ahmedabad, and by extension, those of the western Indian state of Gujarat, have more than proved Ahmed Shah's intuitive assessment with their legendary industriousness. During the past 20 years, Gujarat has emerged as India's second-most-industrialized state after the neighboring state of Maharashtra.

Gujaratis have a history of being pragmatic about political and religious priorities. But over the past three decades, as the state has shifted from an agrarian to an industrial-based economy, and as the population has shifted from the village to urban areas, Gujaratis have felt a growing need to define their identity.

Hindu groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or World Hindu Council, and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) were early to sense this quest for identity among Gujaratis. In the 1980s, the pro-Hindu groups and their political extension, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), began tapping into that search.

Cradle of Muslim culture

At the same time, Gujarat has also had a long history as a center of Islamic culture in India, going back to the days of the Mughal empire. And the state capital, Ahmedabad, has particularly been the focus of the Islamic presence. Every time a riot occurs, many of the rioters play back some 1,000 years of Indian history and the tales of Muslim invaders who swept across the country, looting and pillaging.

Over the past two decades, Ahmedabad has become clearly divided between Hindus and Muslims. The situation is not very different in the rest of the state where some 50 million people live, nearly 8 million of them Muslims.

Since 1969, incidents of religious-based violence have become increasingly frequent in Gujarat. That year, religious violence between the city's Hindus and Muslims claimed 5,000 lives, according to official figures — private groups estimate the death toll at twice that. Since then, through the 1980s and 1990s, frequent riots in Ahmedabad and many other smaller towns and cities of the state where Mahatma Gandhi was born have resulted in 2,000 deaths.

In a region where sectarian riots are just a rumor away, a train carry-



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ATTACK IN GODHRA: On Feb. 27, a train of Hindu volunteers was returning from a religious service in Ayodhya. The train was surrounded by a mob of Muslims who killed 58 people, including several children, by burning them alive.



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RETALIATION IN AHMEDABAD: The next day, Hindu mobs across Gujarat state began their revenge. They destroyed businesses and trapped Muslims in their homes and burned hundreds to death over the next few days.

ing hundreds of Hindu volunteers returning from a controversial religious service would be a potential source of trouble. The volunteers were returning from the northern Indian religious town of Ayodhya, which since 1990 has become a flash point between Hindus and Muslims.

In December 1992, Hindu zealots razed a 16th-century mosque known as the Babri Masjid, claiming it stood on a place they believed was the birthplace of their most revered godking, Rama. The land on which the structure stood has been a subject of a court case for decades because both groups claim it.

Early on the morning of Feb. 27, the Sabarmati Express was in the last four hours of its journey from Ayodhya to Ahmedabad when it briefly halted at Dahod station. Many passengers disembarked for the popular breakfast of tea and *fajitas*, a sort of Dorito made from chickpea flour. Some reports said a few Hindu volunteers had an altercation with vendors over the price and left without paying.

In any other place, this would have been a petty mercantile dispute. But

some people claimed the volunteers did not pay the vendor because he was a Muslim. The Hindus ridiculed the charge, saying it was absurd to suggest they would not pay a few rupees to a poor vendor.

History of violence

The trouble began just outside Godhra, which has long been a communal tinderbox and the site of many riots in the past two decades. Someone aboard the train pulled the emergency chain, and within minutes the train was surrounded by a mob of Muslim men armed with rocks, Molotov cocktails and other weapons.

According to witnesses, the mob deliberately shut the doors of the three cars carrying the Hindu activists and pelted the cars with heavy rocks and the flaming Molotov cocktails. The attack appeared to be highly focused to create maximum damage. Fifty-eight people, including several children, were roasted alive.

The ferocity and precision of the attack led to suspicion that it was premeditated. Although the local police have not established that it was planned, enraged Hindus wasted

hardly any time in retaliation. Within hours of the grisly attack, the city of Ahmedabad, with nearly 5 million people, was turned into a gory revenge ground by thousands of Hindu activists.

They unleashed what seemed like a mini-pogrom against Muslims. Thousands of armed Hindu men roamed Muslim neighborhoods looking for things and people to destroy and kill. The means of murder were medieval as scores of Muslim men, women and children were systematically burned alive. More than 500 people died in attacks across Gujarat state, most in Ahmedabad and its suburbs.

The aftermath of the unnerving violence could be harder to live down than the actual violence. The legacy of mistrust between Hindus and Muslims will be difficult to overcome.

It is impossible to fairly apportion blame. What the state needs now is to return to its widely acknowledged tolerance and pragmatism. Gujaratis are among the most peace-loving and enterprising people in India. It is tragic that some of them forget that — with such brutal consequences.

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