

Massacres and the Media

A Field Reporter Looks Back on Gujarat 2002

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I come from Gujarat, a place where I was born and brought up, where I made my career, where I have my family, my friends, my relatives, my dear ones. But today, sometimes I feel it is an alien land, a land that has suddenly disowned me. Today, all the people who once used to look at me with respect question me and abuse me. They do this because I represented a publication whose medium is English and because I reported human misery in its right perspective.¹

What pains me today is not that many of my friends see me in a different light, but that the way they look at me reflects the poison injected into them. They don't realize how tactfully it was all fed to them. A senior Gujarat police official told me recently, "Darshan, you are blacklisted"; a friend who came to meet me after a long time said, "...all of you from the English language media have tarnished the image of Gujarat".

What my friends think of me may not be that important, but I think that it is important to understand why they say this. It doesn't just concern me, it concerns each and every journalist who wishes to report the facts as they are and analyze them in their (correct) perspective. So, what happened in Gujarat? Why were the English language journalists demonized? This is exactly what needs to be understood.

Politicians have a nose for news. The merely skilled politician can stomach adverse news. But the genius smells it, swallows it and uses it to his advantage. In India, there is only one such politician, and he is one of his kind. Naming him here will be stating the obvious. But you still had to name him, and precisely this, the fact that you had to name him, was his USP. He could smell the fact that the aggressive reportage of the news of communal violence in Gujarat could flatter him. He swallowed the tirade, used it against the same media that made it and carved out a victory of sorts. They say you cannot have your cake and eat it too. He showed he can, and how.

Today, the 'common man' in Gujarat hates the English language media. The Gujarati language media hates the English language media. Even a section of the English language media hates the English language media. This is an achievement painstakingly planned and excellently executed by one single man. Remember, this genius of a politician doesn't hate the media. He laughs at it and with it. He mocks it. He smirked when he rode to victory in Gujarat, riding roughshod over the media hype against him. Today, he is laughing, and laughing loudly. He continues to ridicule the media, and ironically, he does this with the help of the same media. His strategy was simple and straightforward: just remain in the news. Hate

him, love him, but you just can't ignore him. Throughout his Gujarat *Gaurav Yatra* (Gujarat Pride Campaign), across towns and villages, across every nook and cranny of Gujarat, he ensured that the media chased him everywhere. Despite the fact that he repeated the same rhetoric, the media followed him – in case he said something controversial. And he did not disappoint them.

It made news when he referred to Sonia Gandhi (the leader of the opposition Congress party) as “Italy ki beti” (the daughter of Italy). It made news when he spoke of “miya Musharraf” to refer to Muslims in general. It made news when he called “James Michael Lyngdoh” by his full name to let people know that he (Lyngdoh) is a Christian, to insinuate that therefore he is close to Sonia Gandhi. It made news when he said, “Hum paanch, hamare pachhis” (“We are five, and we have twenty-five”). For those who had not heard it, he repeated, “Hum paanch, hamare pachhis, pachhis key chhe-sou-pachhis”, and told the reporters to note it properly.²

He referred to the massive coverage of the post-Godhra violence by the English language media as biased and thundered, “Were the deaths of Godhra not deaths?” He characterized the reportage which continued to expose his government's complicity as a ‘hate campaign’ against fifty million Gujaratis. This strategy worked and the election results showed how. His media bashing still continues, with the media reporting every word of it. During the last several months, he has gone hammer and tongs after the English language, national-level media and used the same media to do so. In this process, if he was lambasted by the media, the latter too was not spared. The accusations bounced back on the media. The wily politician acquired a martyrdom of sorts.

The VHP (*Vishwa Hindu Parishad* – World Hindu Council) firebrand Pravin Togadia played the same trick. His strategy: the cruder you are, the more space you get in the media. Call Sonia Gandhi an “Italian bitch” and hog the headlines on page one. Assert, “We will give Godhra's reply, today in Gandhinagar and tomorrow in Delhi”, and announce that “India will be a Hindu *Rashtra* (state) in two years”.

On the day of polling, Togadia pulled a fast one when he howled before TV channels, “James Michael Lyngdoh has removed my name from the voters list”. It was on air and channels kept repeating it, even before anyone bothered cross-checking the allegation. As it turned out, his name was actually on the list. By the time this entire drama had played itself out, his attempt to influence voters by his allegation that the election commission was playing tricks with Gujaratis had proven effective.

Around the same time, several TV channels showed our great politician atop a platform in Maninagar, telling indignant ruling party workers that he can't help it if the election commission had deleted their names and that they should keep calm. Very tacitly, he was telling the voters what Togadia was saying directly to them. The media was used to persuasively address apathetic and fence-sitting voters even on the day of polling. Looked at another way, the media had to carry it when Togadia said his name was deleted. The media was also bound to carry it if there was a resulting commotion and the Chief Minister, the genius politician, was trying to calm things down. After all, it made news.

When I think about this, I remember my days as a cub-reporter in the late eighties. There were riots going on in Ahmedabad. It was my first year as a reporter, and I was on

the night shift. Around midnight, I called up the city police control to find out what was the 'latest'. I was told that there was one incident of a shop being torched and stone pelting in the town, and that the police had opened fire to disperse the mob.

I started my report like this: "The police had to open fire on a mob pelting stones, etc". Our resident editor called me and asked what was up. I informed him about the incident. But he wanted me to read out what I had written. Just as I read, "Police had to open fire", he interrupted with the question: "Why do you defend the police?"

I could not make out what he was saying. He asked me, "If you were not at the spot, how could you say, 'Police had to open fire'? Are you sure that they had no option left but to open fire. Why can't you write a straight copy, saying that the police opened fire to disperse stone-pelting mobs?"

In contrast, here was the case when Togadia was shouting before reporters that his name was struck off from the electoral rolls, and it was dutifully reported, verbatim, while it did not deserve any publicity at all. Why should we report some weird allegation without confirming it? Similarly, there was the recent case of a sex scandal involving two Punjab ministers in Gujarat. The Minister of State for Home Affairs in Gujarat calls a press conference and declares that two ministers from Punjab enjoyed sexual favours from call girls. At the same conference, he also says that their names are not in the first information report (what we call the F.I.R). But still, the allegation was reported.

I am not commenting as to whether the allegation was true or otherwise, but should the media not be wary, or at least sceptical, with regard to unsubstantiated allegations? In earlier days, such allegations were not carried. And, if at all they were, they were carried in tandem with analysis that pointed out their unsubstantiated nature.

To return to the days of communal violence in Gujarat and the elections last year, politicians employed other ways to spread their influence too. A little known Gujarati paper, *Gujarat Today*, run by people who happen to be Muslims, carried an ad from a lesser-known Muslim clergyman appealing to the minority community to deliver a hundred percent turnout on Election Day.

The politician genius and Togadia were quick to release counter-ads in mass circulated Gujarati dailies displaying the appeal, calling it a "*fatwa*" (a religious edict), and then telling the Hindus to vote a hundred percent. Simultaneously, hundreds of photocopies of the "*fatwa*" were distributed in the villages of Gujarat. It made a big impact, just as was desired, and even those (Hindus) who never vote for anyone as well as those who never vote for the BJP came out in droves to vote.

Similarly, compact discs containing messages that worked to create a fear psychosis were widely distributed and even played on TV sets. The CDs had a simple message: If a certain party came to power, the Muslims would start on a killing spree. Here are some of the specific things that the CDs said:

- > you are travelling in a train, you might be attacked.
- > you are in your prayers, you may be assaulted.
- > you are walking in a crowd, you may be lynched.

With the media playing the great politician's complete speeches, word for word, the last day of campaigning before polling day (December 12th, 2002) saw the chief minister

asking the people, "You may have *gaadi*, *waadi* and *laadi* (car, land and wife), but what if your son doesn't return home in the evening?" He appealed, through public meetings reported exhaustively by the media and through ads in the papers, to turnout to vote "a hundred percent".

The media reported everything; the politician genius ridiculed all of its reportage, and the media reported that too. On December 15th, the media was reporting his victory, analyzing it and ending up finding faults with itself. Later, the same English language media had armchair columnists spitting venom on the same English language media.

A series of commentaries in this vein started appearing in the media after the election results in Gujarat. Criticizing the media became easy after everything was over, but journalists, who had seen communal polarization closely and suffered for it, know better.

The common thread running through all such articles was that the national-level English language media had demonized the politician of the day to such an extent that the people of Gujarat responded with vengeance to give his political party a landslide victory. In simple words, the accusation was that the English language media had played a game in favour of the opposition party, but the people of Gujarat had seen through it. They also argued that by its exposés on the macabre violence in Gujarat and the obvious complicity of the state, the English media had defamed the fifty million people of the state.

What was, and is, unfortunately, being glossed over is how this genius of a politician converted the stinging tirade against him, his party, its affiliates and his government into a criticism of the people of Gujarat. There has not been any article seeking to analyze how and why this politician was successful in portraying, though deceptively, the media exposés of his government as an assault on the collective pride of the people. Instead, especially after election results, self-appointed media critics begin saying exactly what the politician had been saying before the results.

To establish that the media had gone overboard with its alleged 'demonization' of the politician, these commentaries that came out after the elections sought to fish out stray reports in the English press to bolster their case. Attempts were made to show that certain reports were deliberately twisted to level accusations at one politician. One such instance cited in one of these articles was a report in *the Indian Express* that carried the headline: "Dial M for Modi, Murder?"³

Here, this media critic says the story had nothing on the chief minister of Gujarat but on two of his cabinet colleagues sitting in police control rooms in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar when mobs went about killing Muslims on February 28th. (Remember, the major killings in Gulberg Society and Naroda Patia happened on this day). The article says that *the Indian Express* story said that the two ministers were dictating police inaction when hundreds of innocents were being killed, without corroboration from the police.

This critic, unfortunately, had not read the story properly before judging the integrity and credibility of reporters. The report never said that the ministers were directing police inaction. It said that when major massacres were taking place on February 28th, and when desperate telephone calls to police control rooms were not being attended to, the two ministers were sitting, in the police control room at the Ahmedabad Police Commissionerate. The story quoted Additional Chief Secretary (Home) Ahok Nrayan as well as both

the cabinet ministers to confirm that they were indeed there at the control room. And this was not denied by anyone later.

The article goes on to say that there was no reference to Narendra Modi (the Chief Minister of Gujarat) in the story despite the aggressive headline. The critic should have known that in Gujarat at that time, the Home Ministry was under the Chief Minister, while neither of the two ministers present at the control rooms had anything to do with the Home Ministry for they held the Health and the Urban Development portfolios. Does this media critic expect us to believe that the ministers were checking on the health of the cops and discussing urban development with them when the state went up in flames? If they were there to ensure prompt police response to people in danger, there was little sign of this. Last, but not the least, should we believe that the Chief Minister had no idea that his two senior cabinet colleagues (one of them his spokesman) were helping the police in the control rooms?

Reference is also made to an essay by Arundhati Roy in *Outlook* magazine about Gujarat, where she (mistakenly) mentions the death of Ehsan Jaffrey's daughter.⁴ She (Roy) wrote that Jaffrey's daughter was raped and killed while it was later found that she was actually alive. This was definitely a *faux pas* and the magazine was quick to carry a prominent apology by Roy to that effect.⁵ Media critics conveniently gloss over this fact (of the writer correcting her mistake through an apology). They also wish away the fact that one stray case or even a few stray cases don't make an adequate case for a generalization of bias. They know that if they recognize these facts, it will take away the very weapon that they have deployed.

The question that we need to consider is – how would the allegations made against a report such as the one we have just discussed stand against an objective scrutiny of the mass circulation Gujarati language press? Was the perspective of the Gujarati papers so objective that they did not need any review? And if it was actually so, why don't these media critics pat them on the back? They should have given them marks and cited the Gujarati press as an example to hold out against its English language counterpart. They did not do so. Why? Was it because they can't read Gujarati, or because they did not think the Gujarati press was so objective, or because such a review would destroy the basis of their analysis?

I am steering clear from any remarks on the Gujarati language press because, as a field journalist, I know that vernacular paper reporters also work with the odds heavily stacked against them. How could one forget that a senior reporter of a prominent Gujarati daily lost his job because he refused to bow down to the diktats of his editors and write a false report. This false report, was carried prominently. How will critics explain another report in a mass circulated Gujarati daily which carried a headline about the abduction and killing of a Hindu woman in a Muslim-dominated area, while the copy of the story that went under this headline said at the very end that the woman was not actually kidnapped but was traced to her native village where she went of her own accord.

Those who cannot write, criticize. Those who cannot report, recoil later. Let us begin at the beginning, and undertake our own little analysis of the Gujarat events vis-à-vis the national English media. The Godhra train carnage happened on February 27th, and the retribution began from the very next day. Each and every national-level paper (English or

otherwise) had banner headlines about fifty-eight *kar sewaks* (VHP volunteers) being burnt alive, and ran editorial columns condemning the incident.

The event, as it happened, was reported and displayed in the English language press in all its seriousness. It got greater prominence than the reportage of the budget sessions in the national Parliament and in the Gujarat assembly. Had nothing happened after Godhra, the English language media would have continuously followed up on the train carnage. But other events started happening and continued for far too long, obviously taking up major space in the papers.

Assuming that the media critics are aware about the functioning of the newsroom, it is obvious that the alarming killings post-Godhra would take prominence for, unlike Godhra (which was a one-off incident), they kept on happening. A large number of Muslims got killed and (in this instance) they suffered the most. This was a fact and it was reported as such. Besides, whatever may be the deafening propaganda to the contrary, the media had adequately reported the suffering of the Godhra victims. The gory scenes were shown and the cries of the victims were registered in detail.

Yes, the volume of reporting on the post-Godhra massacres was greater than the volume of reporting on the Godhra incident for the simple reason that they (the post Godhra killings) kept on happening. There was no deliberate design to ensure that they should be given more prominence in the English language press. The Gujarati press also covered the same violence, and displayed the news sometimes even in red banner headlines. There may have been instances of exaggerations and biases in the English media (I will not speak of the Gujarati press), but the biases were no more than reflections of the extent of the gruesome killings, which the media covered, as it was bound to.

The English language media professionals did not plan Godhra, or what happened in its aftermath. There is a bizarre allegation being made against the English media that the aftermath of Godhra would not have been so gruesome had the English language, national level media criticized Godhra in adequate terms. Do the media critics and politicians who make this allegation mean that the killers read the English language papers, weighed the adequacy of the coverage of Godhra, and decided that it was not good enough before starting their job on the morning of February 28th, 2002? It is unfortunate that there may be many people who may have believed in this brilliantly rehearsed rhetoric of our wily politician genius, but must our media critics too fall into the trap?

The violence in Gujarat was largely one-sided and more of a pogrom than a riot. This is in sharp contrast to the past when there were riots in the form of clashes between groups and it really was difficult for the media to decide about the extent and involvement of the different actors. This time it was so very obvious.

Another criticism levelled against the English language media is that they were quick to reason that the post-Godhra violence was the result of a conspiracy, but did not pay attention to the possibility of Godhra itself as being part of a conspiratorial design. An objective reporting of the events will suggest that it is difficult to prove a conspiracy in Godhra while it was actually obvious in the events thereafter. This writer, as a field journalist, went to Godhra looking for an ISI (the InterServices Intelligence agency of Pakistan) conspiracy, but the government's own officials, railway authorities and the cops told him something else. Physical verification in the

field suggested that the officials were right. Even today, investigating agencies have not been able to put together all the pieces of the Godhra incident.

Last but not the least, the English language media is targeted for not registering and acknowledging the popularity of the politician of the day, our politician genius. It is argued that the English language media deliberately did not wish to see the popularity of the politician for they were working for the opposition Congress party. Wrong – it did report the aspect of his popularity, but it also did more than that; it analyzed the politics of the making of a communal divide and the impact that this had on society and the economy.

The job of the media is not to campaign for a party but to analyze the processes that unfold before it. If, because of this, a party wins or loses an election, so be it. If while reporting the facts, a section of the media is portrayed as working for a political party even if this is not the case, so be it. Osama bin Laden may be popular among a section of people, Adolf Hitler was popular in Germany at one time, Indira Gandhi was popular and her death led to a ghastly pogrom against the Sikh community in 1984, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha, is popular despite her scandals. Does this mean that in each such case we should be carried away and go ga-ga over their popularity? Or should we report what these politicians really do, and how they do what they do?

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NOTES

1. Darshan Desai, a journalist based in Ahmedabad, reported on the Godhra carnage, and the killings that followed in its aftermath for *The Indian Express* in 2002.
2. A twist on the well-known 'family planning' slogan used by the Indian Government – "*Hum do, Hamare do*" ("We two, and our two") coupled with a jibe at Muslim customary and personal law in India, which entitles Muslim male to have four spouses, hence the "we five". A particularly lethal reference here to the untenable myth that Muslims are breeding faster than ever before, and that polygamy is a conspiratorial device used by Muslims to ensure that they will eventually outnumber Hindus.
3. Desai, Darshan and Joydeep Ray. "Dial M for Modi, Murder", *The Indian Express* (Sunday, 23 March, 2002, Ahmedabad), see <http://www.indianexpress.com/ie20020324/top1.html>.
For a comment critical of this report, see "Why the Media lost Gujarat", *The Pioneer* (22 December, 2002, Delhi) http://www.topscan.net/Channels/Archives/Ar_jan_03/Ar_1.htm
4. Roy, Arundhati. "Democracy: Who's She When She's At Home", *Outlook India* (6 May, 2002).
5. Roy, Arundhati. Letter to the Editor, *Outlook India* (27 May, 2002).