

REPORT BY THE WOMEN AND MEDIA GROUP SEPTEMBER 1985

Four representatives of the Women and Media Group, Bombay -- Ammu Joseph, Jyoti Punwani, Charu Shahane and Kalpana Sharma -- visited Ahmedabad for three days in the first week of August. We had set out with the following objectives:

1. To identify the specific problems faced by women during the last five months as a result of the violence arising from the anti-reservation agitation.
2. To understand how women view the violence and disturbance and how they responded in such a situation.
3. To assess how the communal and caste violence affected a secular women's organisation like SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association).
4. To piece together differing versions of incidents involving women, in particular.

Information on these points was obtained by meeting a cross section of people in Ahmedabad with the invaluable assistance and active participation of Sujata Patel who had been in Ahmedabad during the entire period of the agitation and had studied various aspects of the resultant violence in the city. We met Ila Bhat and other organizers and workers of SEWA, Ila Pathak of the Ahmedabad Women's Action Group (AWAG) Deputy Police Superintendent Deepak Swaroop, Fire Brigade Chief F. Dastoor, BJP Corporator Harin Pathak, Achyut Yagnik of the PUCL and SETU, Megha Chitalaya, women's organiser of the Navrachana Samiti, and women in Dariapur, Kalupur, Bandheripol, Ambedkarnagar and Raipur.

While preparing this report we also referred to newspaper clippings of English language newspapers printed in Ahmedabad, and reports prepared by a citizens group, Editors' Guild of India, SEWA and Asghar Ali Engineer.

Before going into the details of our findings we would like to state one point at the outset. After a visit to the city we understood more clearly than we had done before how counter-productive it is to make generalisations in a situation such as the one that has prevailed in Ahmedabad over the last five months. Each incident of violence or confrontation with the authorities had several explanations depending on the economic, political and caste/communal equations that prevailed in that specific locality. From one locality to the next these equations varied.

A common point that emerged during our talks with people of both communities, Hindu and Muslims, in Ahmedabad was that by and large people felt the government was somehow responsible for igniting the communal violence in order to detract from the reservation issue. The only group that did not subscribe to this view were Harijans who felt that the violence had resulted directly from the reservation issue and that they were the victims of upper caste anger. They were not even conscious of the communal violence. The Muslims, however, also felt that some Hindu organisations had played a part in arousing anti-Muslim feelings and showed us several anonymous leaflets that had been circulating in the walled city. The leaflets had headlines like "Muslims, leave India, the entire Hindustan area is only for Hindus." "Wake up Hindus, your mother is calling", signed "Jai Hindu Rashtra". Another leaflet, which was signed by "Krishna Bhagwan" read, "Hindus, wake up and fight the Dharam Yudh". Two weeks before independence day, a BJP supporter and several Muslims told us that the story doing the rounds in the walled city was that the Muslims would hoist the Pakistan Flag on August 14. It became apparent during our talks with people of both communities that such rumours had played an important role in rousing communal feelings and sowing distrust between the communities.

While going through the clippings of Bombay-based English newspapers some of which also have Ahmedabad editions, we were struck by the lack of coverage of some major incidents in which women, specially Muslim women, had been involved. For instance, thousands of Muslim women sat on the road in Dariapur on June 2 and protested against the killings in their area on that day, following the Rath Yatra, and also against curfew which had entailed considerable hardships for them. However, barring a passing mention, this went unreported. Similarly, a dharna in front of the town hall on April 22 by women from 29 organisations who protested against police atrocities, was not reported. In contrast, an inordinate amount of attention was given to just two incidents, namely the beating up by the police of Pramila Patel and some other women in Asarva and Gontipur incident, where the women were confronted by abusive and allegedly naked policemen. Both incidents involved upper caste women.

#### SPECIFIC IMPACT ON WOMEN

We found that amongst the women we spoke to, political consciousness and understanding of the situation varied greatly depending on caste, class and community. For instance, the harijan women of Ambedkarnagar were vaguely aware that the recent disturbances were due to reservation. They seemed unaware of how their own people had benefitted from reservation. Ila Bhat, who works mainly with poor muslim, harijan and backward caste women, found that most of them understood only part of the political picture but not the whole of it. It is only amongst the upper caste and upper class women that one found knowledge and understanding of the various political strands at work in Gujarat. They were also articulate and well-versed in the details of the reservation issue. In the walled city such consciousness was exhibited only in Khadia, a mainly upper caste area which has long been an opposition stronghold and prides itself on its vociferous anti-establishment history.

Poor Muslim and Hindu women, who are part of the informal sector in the city and comprises the thousands of vendors, beedi workers, chindi workers etc. (many of them are organised by SEWA), faced particular economic hardships during the disturbances. For five months most of them have not been able to work. They could not go out to get the raw materials or to deliver the finished product if they were home-based workers. If they were vendors, their areas were curfew bound. This loss of income meant direct hardship for many families -- SEWA has found that 29 to 33 percent of the women they organise are sole supporters of their families and substantial percentage of the others earn more than the men in their families. It is also a commonly accepted fact that a woman's earning goes directly towards feeding the family whereas men often gamble, smoke or drink their wages away. A combination of all these factors has meant that the loss of income of women employed in the informal sector has resulted in considerable deprivation for many poor families in the city. SEWA found that government relief efforts had not taken into account the loss of livelihood for thousands of these women which was a direct outcome of disturbances.

On the question of the confrontation between women and the police, women did go out and risk being beaten up by the police but their motivation for doing this varied greatly. For instance, the thousands of Muslim women of Dariapur who went out on the streets following the incidents around the rath yatra, did so spontaneously and out of concern for their men and due to their own frustration caused by curfew. In contrast, in the upper caste Hindu area, women were involved in the anti-reservation movement and their confrontation with the police was part of the movement's tactics. On another level, non-political women's groups, joined with anti-reservationists and some political groups to protest against police atrocities and as a result had to bear the brunt of it themselves.

Both the Hindu and the Muslim women we spoke to complained about men using sexual gestures to embarrass and harass women. While the Muslim women in Dariapur complained that men participating in the rath yatra and some of the SRP personnel had made obscene gestures at them, Hindu women complained that the SRP and city police were guilty of doing this. It is difficult to establish the veracity of these complaints in the light of the political colour given to the now infamous Gomitpur incident. But as women we know that poor women especially have often faced this kind of intimidation from men in authority even at normal times. Therefore it would not be surprising if women did in fact experience some of this kind of harassment even if their accounts now appear exaggerated.

The unquestioning way in which the press has picked up and repeated accusations typically used to discredit women and justify brutality towards them -- by dismissing the women involved either as "ladies of easy virtue" (Asarwa) or as traditionally aggressive abusive and rebellious (Khadia-Raipur) is an indication of one of its inherent biases. The point in the first case, of course, is that women's virtue (or lack of it) should not enter the picture at all in this context of police atrocities; morals are surely no bar as far as democratic rights are concerned, just as caste, community and sex are not. The ready acceptance of and repetition of such insinuations reveal the male bias of the press because they are based on concepts such as : only sexually "pure" women have any rights as women or as human beings; "good" women are quiet, submissive, passive, seen but never heard.

#### MOST DISTURBING FACTOR

The issue of police atrocities and the involvement of women brings us to what we feel is one of the most disturbing outcomes of this period of disturbance in Ahmedabad. This is the manner in which the participation of women in the anti-reservation movement and the outcry

against police atrocities on them has been made into a political issue. There have been a number of editorial comments and reports on how women have been used in the agitation. Against this background, we would like to make a few general observations.

The recognition or, rather, assumption that women (and children) will be treated with more restraint by law-enforcing agencies, used to full effect in Ahmedabad, raises at least four disturbing questions :

1. Is the assumption justified ? Historical evidence, as well as experiences in Ahmedabad itself, suggest that it does not always hold good. Most accounts confirm that women were beaten up by the police, not only during public demonstrations (even peaceful ones like the dharna) but in their own homes (Asarwa, Khadia-Raipur and Gomitpur). The Fire Brigade Chief said in an interview that he would have not hesitated to "thrash" women if they obstructed to the Brigade's work. A Deputy Commissioner of Police, who said that he personally thought violence should not be used against women also said that there were no rules to the effect that women who were "misbehaving" should not be treated any differently from men in the same situation. The Army is said to have been rendered helpless by demonstrating women. But historically occupying/liberating forces have not been very kind to women; in fact, they often use rape as a weapon to subdue the community.

2. Is this assumption leading to women's exploitation by organisers/supporters of the agitation? It seems likely that women are being used to neutralize the law-enforcing authorities during demonstrations as well as during riots. Are the women aware of this? Even if they are willing agents, are they conscious that if the assumption is proved false in even one instance, they are the ones who are going to receive the first blows/bullets? If they are conscious of this, would they take their children along on these dangerous missions as they have done in Ahmedabad ? Such use of women is a dangerous, if effective, strategy that can be used by all kinds of interests and should be guarded against.

3. Is it right for women to use society's supposed perception of their vulnerability even to support causes they care about? What will such deliberate exploitation of the fact that they are women do to the struggle for equality and the status of women in general? Does it not perpetuate regressive notions about women which are not even borne out in daily life (If society felt so deeply about protecting women, they would not be at the receiving end of so much violence inside as well as outside their homes).

4. If women continue to use this tactic or allow themselves to be used in this way, they are probably inviting new, more sophisticated, forms of oppression. The DCP interviewed admitted that they are thinking seriously about ways to deal with situations in which women form a vanguard in agitations. He quoted Rajiv Gandhi's televised address to IPS probationers in which he (albeit lightly) suggested that they will now have to think of effective ways of dealing with women agitators, including recruiting more women into the force.

In the following pages, in four separate sections, we have given greater details about : the attack on harijans in Ambedkarnagar and the view of poor Muslims and Hindu women in the walled city; the impact of the Ahmedabad disturbances on SEWA and the organisation's peace efforts; an account of the different incidents of atrocities on women; an account of a discussion with Megha Chitalaya, convenor of the women's wing of the Navrachna Samiti.

## APPENDIX A

### VIEWS OF MUSLIM & HARIJAN WOMEN

Death of their menfolk and curfew - this is what the last four-and-a-half months have meant for women in the riot-torn areas of Ahmedabad. The combination resulted in a confrontation between over 5000 muslim women with the army on the evening of Id-ul-Fitr - June 21, an event which must have few precedents.

What does curfew mean? In Bombay, parts of which were under curfew from dusk to dawn during last year's riots, residents returning from work after curfew started were questioned by the army, often roughly. But in Ahmedabad, curfew was imposed round the clock, often for as long as 7 to 10 days, and even touched the maximum limit of 500 hours.

In the riot-hit areas like Dariapur/Kalupur and Vadigam, in the old city, the houses are small, population density very high. The population is largely lower middle class and working class, the men mill workers/shopkeepers/hawkers, and the women either unemployed, or working at home for readymade clothes dealers on a piece-rate basis, or making quilted blankets (earning Rs. 350-450 per month), or self-employed as hawkers. These days, with the mills being closed, (some due to the crisis in the textile industry, some after the April 22 police strike) many of the men are also unemployed.

Curfew meant a total stoppage of work, as nobody was allowed out of their homes. Even those women working at home suffered, as delivery of raw materials as well as of finished goods was stopped, and the dealers themselves found their stock not being lifted.

Curfew forced large families (average 7 members) to survive for days on the stock of provisions they happened to have at home when curfew was announced - often at 2 in the night - and given the above conditions, this stock was never enough. The Muslims were the worst hit - firstly, because of greater poverty among them, and secondly because at least in areas we visited like Dariapur/Kalupur, they were dependent on the Hindu pockets for their daily needs - the vegetable and grain shops fell in these areas, and milk too came from there. For the same reasons, as well as their relatively better economic condition, the Hindus were not as badly affected by curfew, as they themselves testified. "We always knew in advance when curfew would be imposed, so we'd stock enough," the Hindus of Bhandaripol in Kalupur said. But for the Muslims, even such knowledge would not have enabled them to stock enough provisions. On women fell the task of managing the difficult situation - of feeding a hungry family with nothing but onions, besan and flour, of pacifying children with black tea.

Almost the entire month of Ramzan was spent under curfew. Sometimes families whose houses were vulnerable to missiles (including burning petrol-soaked rags) from adjacent terraces (this applied to both Muslim and Hindu houses) spent the night at their neighbours' but when it was time to break their fast at dawn, they had to return home, and risk getting caught in the bylanes by the jawans. "Badi musibat hai humko," old Alima Bi kept repeating till the tears came to her eyes. "We're just praying to Allah to end this." Her husband had resigned his mill job after the spate of stabbings in the mill area.

This time the army thought of a new technique - obviously utilising the fact that though women suffer during riots, it is rarely they who participate in the violence. They started off relaxing curfew for an hour - only for women - to enable them to buy essentials. As mentioned above, Hindu women didn't have to go far, but the Muslim women would venture out in groups of 15 - 20, only to find by the time they finished shopping, that the hour was up, and that they were breaking curfew yet again. "The queues before each shop were so long, we could never finish in time," they grumbled. For this they would be punished by the army jawans - made to sit in the sun for 2 hours, holding their ears! This was recounted laughingly - few of them had anything harsh to say about the army. Yet it was with the army that the most significant confrontation of women took place - when over 5000 Muslim spontaneously came out onto the main road of Dariapur/Kalupur and in their own words, "offered satyagraha" there through the night of June 21 after the army had fired at and killed 7 of their men during the rathayatra which passed through their area.

After almost the entire month of Ramzan had gone by under curfew, on the last day, i.e. Id, curfew was relaxed only for 3 hours so that the Id namaz could be offered, between 9 a.m. and noon. In the afternoon, people were sitting at their doorsteps and talking, or moving around in their narrow bylanes wishing each other, with the jawans preferring to ignore this violation of curfew, when the rathayatra of the Hindus, an annual festival, crossed the Prem Darwaza and entered Kalupur - despite instructions to the contrary and curfew regulations in the force. The mahant of the temple from where the yatra starts had insisted that the procession would follow its normal route despite the troubled situation, and his supporters broke the army cordon with the help of 4 elephants heading the procession, which flung aside army vehicles parked in the way. Thousands of Hindus participated in the procession, and as always happens, in a communally tense situation, used it to provoke and attack the minority community. Muslim women alleged that the men in trucks

were carrying stones in their bags which normally carry prasad, which they threw on the houses on either side of the road and on the onlookers who lingered on to watch the procession from inside the bylanes, behind the jawans who were trying to drive them inside their homes to avoid a confrontation. According to all the women, the men made obscene gestures at them - holding the lathis they carried at their groin and waving them at the women, and even pulling down their trousers (a tactic which seems to have been used also by the police and the SRP). Newspaper reports say that stones were thrown at the procession which provoked the army to fire, but the women alleges that it was the Hindus who threw the stones and it was towards the Muslims that the army fired, killing 7 of them there itself. (The women said nothing about their men throwing stones at the processionists or even retaliating, but one of them said, revealingly, when we asked her whether the woman tried to prevent their men from indulging in violence, "The processionists threw chappals on our masjid, when they do such things, how can we stop our men?")

That was the provocation for the women to turn on the army - the moment the yatra passed, some of them went up to the jawans and grabbed them by their collars, snatched their rifles, demanding why the miscreants had been let off while their men had been killed. Almost at once, all the women had come on to the roads, demanding of the army why they had to celebrate their biggest festival under the shadow of curfew while the Hindus had been allowed to celebrate theirs as they did normally. They told the jawans, "Shoot us, what's the use of living when our men have been shot?" The jawans tried in vain to answer them; the women say they revealed that they didn't have orders to shoot on the processionists; when the jawans tried to get them back into their homes, threatening to shoot at them, the women declared their intention to remain there even if it meant getting shot. "We were dying anyway, even when sitting at home."

Such was their onslaught that the major who had to come to the spot asked them to give him time for an explanation. Till then the women laid out their durrees on the road, said their prayers and ate their dinner - and refused to let the men come out. "We didn't want any more killed." Finally, when the major returned, they were in no mood to listen to his request for a meeting. He had to approach some of the local leaders - men, ofcourse - to persuade the women to listen to him. The major explained that the army had not deliberately shot at the Muslims, but had done so in trying to control the situation, and he apologised for this. The women then asked him to promise that curfew would not be reimposed. When he agreed, they asked him to give it in writing, and he did so. Only then did the women disperse. Even after this incident, the women harboured no ill-feelings towards the army, so it seems that the major really had to give them what they wanted. It was a victory wrought by them alone.

What prompted them to do such a thing? Everyone of them gave the same answer : "When our men were being killed for no fault of theirs, and when the Hindus were being let off despite having broken curfew, we decided it was better to fight it out and put a stop to this injustice, even if it meant dying. How could they have been so unfair?" In these areas, there had been limited intermingling between the two communities : the women shopped at the same stores, spoke to one another, participated in each other's festivals - they would welcome the rathayatra every year, but didn't visit one another. They therefore blamed Madhavsingh Solanki for injecting communal feelings into an issue which didn't concern them. However, one of the more conscious women, a SEWA worker, admitted that every time the reservations issue was raised, they feared it would turn communal, and the situation was so bad that even anti-price rise agitations in the areas often turned communal, that's why they had stopped participating in them. Others blamed 'outsiders' for the violence that originated from their neighbours' homes against them - both the Muslims and the Hindus. Old Mrs. Bhatt, wife of a respected

school teacher in Bhandaripol, whose house had been partially burnt by her neighbours, and whose grilled door connecting it with the adjacent Muslim family had been broken down (and now replaced with a brick wall), kept repeating, "They are our brothers (bandhu), we have never fought with them." Her husband explained that this was all "Madhavsingh's political game".

Women of Baluchawad in Kalupur recalled that even in 1969, their area had remained untouched, and that was the reason this time it too had been affected. "The outsiders felt, why should this area remain so calm when everything else is burning?" said one woman. She said she had tried to get together with Hindu women she knew to have a keep-outsiders-out pact, but failed. Similar peace efforts had been made by the Chandiwalas, a very rich business family living in . Mrs. Chandiwala is a Jain by birth and a lawyer by profession, and she, along with her husband, had ventured into a Hindu-dominated pol where some of their "very good Hindu friends" lived, only to be booed out by "outsiders" gathered there, while their friends watched helplessly.

However, such peace initiatives by women were few. Mehrunissa Mansuri, a Sarvodaya worker in Kalupur, tried in her own way to prevent violence, by advising people of her area not to get provoked by the rath yatra, even into venturing out on the road, but in vain.

But at the same time, if peace efforts were few, women were atleast not belligerently against the other community, the way some of the men were, especially those Hindus who claimed responsibility for having made the decision to take out the rath yatra, despite one of their young women repeatedly saying that it was the mahant who had decided this. She was 'corrected' by one of the men who said, "Not the mahant, it was the public." Why, we asked them, when the atmosphere was so tense? "Because we are in a majority in Ahmedabad, and we must show this. These Muslims say their ruler built this city, as though it still belongs to them."

The rathyatra was also the turning point for the few Muslim women who were trying to pacify the more hot-headed amongst their men. "After that, we felt we had no right to say anything." But there were also occasions when women actually encouraged such elements, and supported them actively. One such was at Dabgarwad. (See Appendix C).

While the women in these areas actively interacted with the authorities during the riots, those of Ambedkarnagar, a Harijan lower middle class slum colony, were just passive victims of a savage attack on their homes by bhaiyyas who lived nearby reportedly in harmony with them till then. On April 22, the day of the police strike, a mob of about 500 bhaiyyas, armed with lathis, knives, rags and kerosene, stormed through the lanes of Ambedkar Nagar, setting the brick houses on fire, beating up anyone they found, and in the process killing an old woman. The inhabitants ran away, but their homes were looted bare - all their meagre and not-so-meagre possessions, in some cases, radios, fans, ornaments, and clothes" irons (also a means of livelihood), were taken away. The women recounted how fans which they had installed just two months back had been stolen, they showed us once-fancy sarees burnt into rags, steel utensils smashed out of shape. Most of them had been generously helped by their relatives and to an extent by the government.

While they could say very little about the communal clashes taking place elsewhere, they knew why they had been attacked: "because we are SC and they don't want us to progress, because of reservations", though none of them could afford to send their children to college and thus avail of reservations. The pride of their colony and the symbol of their dignity - a big board bearing Dr. Ambedkar's photograph and name, ceremoniously installed outside their colony in 1982, had been the first target of the attackers - it had been uprooted out of the earth.

While the women in Dariapur/Kalupur were grieving and full of woe, the women here were more bitter and cynical. "Don't waste your paper writing about us," said one of them, setting the others also laughing cynically, "others too have written and gone. Nobody's done anything. Do something if possible, otherwise why come here?"

In contrast were the two widows of a Pathan family in Dariapur which had lost two brothers this time, and one cousin in the 69 riots. The women observed strict purdah, had never moved out of their homes unescorted, and had no idea of what they would do now. Their aunt, who'd lost her son in '69, had been told by the authorities then that she and her community were foreigners in India, and now she repeated the same line when asked what their plans were of starting life again. "We are foreigners here," she said resignedly, "We can't expect any help." The Chandiwalas women, however, were far more agitated about the same prejudice - the Gurkha regiment, they alleged had said that for every 10 Muslims caught, two 'traitors' were caught. "Why do they throw Pakistan at our face all the time?" they asked. "We have lived here all our lives, we'll die here."