

# The Story Of The Bombay Riots

## —In The Words Of Muslim Women

WOMEN do not start riots nor do they take part in the killing of innocent people, yet they suffer the worst physical and mental agonies throughout riots and in their aftermath.

When we, a team from the Forum Against Oppression Of Women, visited the areas affected by the communal riots of May 1984 in Bombay, we were overcome by despair.

We went first to Bhiwandi in Thane district, near Bombay. This town is the centre of the powerloom industry. Many of the industrialists and traders and labourers are Muslims. Most of the labourers are migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. Bhiwandi represents the unorganised sector of the textile industry, which in fact produces more cloth than does the organised sector.

### The Background

After the riots of 1970, in which many Muslims died, the Muslim community has been living in an atmosphere of fear. Government had placed a ban on the Shiv Jayanti procession in Bhiwandi. In 1984, after 14 years, the ban was lifted. The procession, organised mainly by the Shiv Sena, passed through many colonies of Bhiwandi, and raised slogans such as “*Ek dhakka aur do, Masjidon ko phenk do*” (One push and another, Throw out the mosques).

The procession culminated in a public meeting where Shiv Sena leaders Vikram Savarkar and Bal Thackeray called upon Hindus to take up the sword in defence of their religion. It is noteworthy that such a big procession was not taken out anywhere else in Bombay and Pune. It was deliberately

organised only in Bhiwandi where 60 percent of the four lakh population is Muslim. On April 21, speaking at a Hindu Mahasabha meeting in Bombay, Thackeray said that the Muslims were spreading like cancer and an operation was the only cure for this disease.

This aroused anger amongst the Muslims. On May 11, Congress (I) MLA, Khan, garlanded Thackeray's photograph with a string of shoes. Within a week, a Muslim Sena was formed in Bhiwandi. On May 17 and 18, Shiv Sena organised a *bandh* in Parel, using intimidatory tactics. On the night of May 17, the Muslim dominated colonies, Rasulbagh, Ajhamnagar, Gandhinagar, Nai Basti, Shantinagar, were looted and burnt, and many people were killed. Identical weapons and tactics were used in all the areas, simultaneously, which shows that the riots were not spontaneous but preplanned.

In many areas, Hindus and Muslims put up joint resistance. The rioters, in most cases, were outsiders, not local residents. The violence continued for 10 days and was controlled only after the army was called in. By then, 800 people had been killed, 100,000 had been rendered homeless, and 50,000 had lost their source of income. Many people were forced to return to their native villages and 50,000 were in refugee camps.

In many places, the rioters had taken charge of government relief arrangements and were selling the foodstuffs in the black market. About 200 people were killed in Bombay and Thane. In Bombay, house builders took advantage of the situation. They burnt

huts in slums at Chunabhatti, Bhoiwada, Dharavi, Sion, Ghatkopar, Benganwadi, captured the land and resold it, refusing entry to the original residents. In this, they had the full support of the police.

### Govandi—In Ruins

We visited Govandi in Bombay on the afternoon of June 10. There was a dead silence. All shops were closed and no women were visible. We saw about 50 houses burnt to the ground. Children were playing in the ashes and women cooking in the open, a lost and terrorised expression on their faces. Volunteers were supervising the rehabilitation work.

We met a young woman, Rashila Bano, who was eight months' pregnant. We sat in her house to talk. Other women and men joined us.

“In Govandi, 137 huts were burnt, of which 135 belonged to Muslims. Two Hindu huts were right in the midst of the Muslim huts.”

“Even before the riots, women used to be harassed by Shiv Sena men. When we went out to fill water, we would be abused, our veils pulled, our breasts pinched. Now there is absolute terror. To go to work, we have to pass through their area. We have to choose between death by starvation and death at their hands.”

Rashida, a teacher who was helping with relief work, told us that she is so afraid to go to her job that she has used up all the leave due to her. Rashila Bano told us how her house, built with so much effort and toll, was destroyed within a few minutes. Her husband, a carpenter, is forced to go to work in order to feed the family. “Every day, there are incidents of knifing. If anything happens to him, what will become of me ?” she

said, and burst into tears.

An old woman told us that the wives and mothers of Shiv Sainik men catch hold of Muslim women and abuse and beat them. A short while later, we actually saw this happening.

We were told how the police refused to take the wounded to hospital. The police kept screaming : “Under this uniform, we are Shiv Sainiks,” The worst atrocities were committed when the army was withdrawn and sent to other riot affected areas. Then the police here had a free hand. Most of the fires were ignited in the presence of the police.

“We would really like to have an enquiry into the Shiv Sena, where it gets its money from, where its dens are.”

### **Women Worst Hit**

We were told that women volunteers of the Shiv Sena used to give speeches in the women’s compartments of local trains, on the subject of Hindu culture. The essence of their speeches was that the Muslim population was growing at an alarming rate which would soon outstrip the Hindu growth rate. Posters were put up, saying “Traitors, go to Pakistan.”

So terrorised were Muslim families in Madanpura that they stopped their daughters from going to school. When the women had to go to fetch water or to buy food, they would wear sari instead of salwar kameez and would put on *sindur* so as to pass for Hindus, in the eyes of the Shiv Sainiks and the police.

In fact, an FAOW activist, who is not a Muslim but who does not wear a *tika* or a *mangalsutra*, was suspected of being a Muslim by her neighbours who turned very hostile. Her landlord gave her notice on this ground.

In our patriarchal culture, men display their hostility to other men by raping their wives and daughters. Thus, women, in addition to suffering beatings and violence suffered by men, have also to bear this agony and humiliation of rape. In Shivajinagar, the police and Shiv Sainiks dragged out and raped Muslim women. When they were taken to hospital, the Hindu doctors, influenced



**A view of a devastated colony**

by the police, refused them medical aid.

An elderly woman at Govandi told us : “How can women say they were raped ? They only say they were harassed. But many young women were abducted and raped. No one knows what happened to them. In the Jamat Khana, 15 raped women are missing. No trace of them.”

About 25 days after the riots, women of Nai Basti told us : “About 25 women are lost, They are not in the relief camp nor are they to be found at home. They must have been raped and burnt in the huts.”

### **Police Aggression**

The violence at Cheetah Camp in Bombay was not caused by local communal tensions. Local policemen took advantage of the general atmosphere of terror in the city to wreak vengeance on the people of this colony, against whom they have a longstanding grudge.

Until 1976, the residents of Cheetah Camp lived near Deonar in a slum called Janta colony. Although they had lived there for nearly 30 years, they were shifted to Cheetah Camp during the emergency. The population of about 100,000 put up a brave fight against this

eviction. They resisted demolition of “illegal” hutments by the municipality bulldozers. Women have been active in such struggles. Therefore, police inspectors Soni and Shivputra hate them. They often issue threats to them, and try to harass them.

The people have a very good relationship with each other, across community lines. Fatima says : “We had heard about the riots in Bhiwandi and elsewhere in Bombay. But we were relaxed because there is a friendly atmosphere between Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs here in Cheetah Camp. We celebrate the festivals of all the communities here, and visit each others’ houses at festival time.”

Many of the Muslim men of this area have gone to Gulf countries to work as artisans or at the docks. The women are therefore acting as heads of households. They are strong and not easily frightened. The economic condition of many families is better than that of people in other slums.

But the area is plagued by a corrupt and vicious police force which has intimate links with local ruffians and racketeers who deal in illicit liquor and blue films.

“On May 25, some boys saw smoke rising from Shivajinagar slum which is on the other side of the creek. They ran to see what was happening. Just then, the police arrived. They were armed with revolvers and immediately opened fire. In less than 40 minutes, 11 people were dead.

“Then the police charged straight into the alleys. They broke open doors and windows, dragged people out, beat them up and shot them at close range. They made vulgar gestures at the women and kept repeating: ‘Where is your Allah now? Have you hidden him down there? Let us see’. They were dead drunk. They also said ‘Why are you here? Either leave the Quran or leave India’.”

Hajra Begum, aged 45, was shot dead by the police and all her jewels stolen. “Are these policemen or dacoits?” asks Bee Begum, “They stole everything—jewels, taperecorders, radios, from our houses.”

Mumtaz, aged 18, stepped out of the house to catch hold of her small nephew when a bullet passed through her thigh. She collapsed and was taken to Sion hospital. There, she was not given any medical treatment but was locked up and her sister told to give Rs 2,000 as bail for her release. When we met her, Mumtaz found it difficult to sit down. “The police kept hurling filthy abuse at me”, she said, “They made vulgar gestures at me.”

The 11 persons murdered by the police were forced to stand with their backs to the mosque, and were then abused, beaten and shot. The police used all kinds of intimidatory tactics. “Inspector Soni shot Abdullah six times at close range. Then he told the constable to drag the corpse through the alleys, so that people could see him well.”

Yusuf was killed in the open. He was shot at but he did not die. In full public view, the inspector thrust his bayonet into Yusuf’s stomach and killed him. His children were watching, and screaming.”

We asked whether there was any immediate reason for this police attack on the colony. They said that in order to get the help of the Shiv Sena against local

ruffians, some of the Muslims of the area thought of opening a Shiv Sena branch in Cheetah Camp. So they put up a Shiv Sena board on a hut. On May 15, Thackeray insulted the prophet Mohammed in a public speech, so the Muslims who had put up the Shiv Sena board took it down. This may have infuriated the pro Shiv Sena police.

Farida says: “Don’t think we are the kind of women who get easily scared. But what can we do? The police have



**Corpse of a woman who was burnt to death**

pistols. Even though they are cowards, we are helpless against them. Even now, they come and threaten us, saying ‘How long will these social workers and armymen protect you? Ultimately, you have to live with us.’ “

The women are very anxious that the local police officers, particularly Soni, Shivputra Ballad, Farande, D’Souza and Hangalekar, should be dismissed. “They should not be transferred otherwise they will harass others.” They are worried that if these men remain posted in the area, worse reprisals will follow.

### **Communal Government**

These riots have exposed the communal character of organisations like Shiv Sena, Hindu Mahasabha, Patit Pavan Sanghatana, Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh. But the attitude

of the police and government has also been revealed as violently communal.

The attitude of the police was evident in their crime bulletins. Only the names of Muslim rioters were listed at the press conference and the names of Hindu offenders were not given. Names of arrested Hindus were not given. But when the injured and killed people’s names were listed, the Hindus figured prominently with full names and caste, while Muslim victims were not described

in detail. It was merely mentioned that people of “a certain community” had died in a colony.

The government restricted itself to empty platitudes. The chief minister refused to hold a judicial enquiry into the riots. No action was taken against Thackeray and Savarkar for their public speeches and posters inciting communal violence. No attempt was made to stop the Shiv Sena’s activities such as the *bandh*.

Instead, the chief minister severely criticised the Urdu press for fomenting riots. Barely a month after the riots, he shook hands with Thackeray on a public platform, and spared no effort to project him as innocent. Can anyone still believe in the secularism of this government?

*(in part translated from Hindi)*