RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN A GLOBALISED SOCIETY

Challenges and Responses in Africa and Asia

With a Comparative View from Europe 55 Years after the Bandung Asian-African Conference 1955

EDITOR : **Darwis Khudori**

BANDUNG SPIRIT BOOK SERIES

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RAPHAEL SUSEWIND

Unity in Diversity? Muslim Civil Society and Muslims in Civil Society in Gujarat, India

ABSTRACT

In spring 2002, the Indian State of Gujarat witnessed the worst communal riots in the country since decades. With more than tacit State support, more than 2000 people – most of them Muslims – were murdered and ten thousands permanently internally displaced. While sizeable stretches of Gujarati civil society reacted with reluctance or even ignorance to the riots of 2002, a number of organisations, networks and professionals joined hands and form an undoubtedly small yet impressively striving 'peace community'.

Given the communalist roots of the riots, the proposed chapter asks: does this 'peace community' consider religious diversity as a condition, a motor, an obstacle or a goal of sustainable development? And, to begin with, how does it reflect religious diversity in its own ranks?

The chapter is part of a larger project and builds on field research in the Gujarati 'peace community' in spring 2008. It demonstrates how NGOs were taken off guard by the extent of communal violence in 2002, which initially united them in their efforts at relief and rehabilitation. Once a first hue of normalcy returned, however, this unity in diversity faltered and gave way to considerable tensions. Two differences in particular emerged: between those organisations preferring to work in conflict as opposed to work on conflict – and between faith-based trusts and many of their secular counterparts. Both categories of organisations were, however, internally diverse: actors who draw strength from religion cannot only be found in faith-based organisations nor does everyone in secular NGOs subscribe to this particular creed.

The chapter therefore dissects the internal diversity of Muslim civil society and Muslims in civil society to emphasise that it is not only important how civil society sees religious diversity, but also how it represents and respects such diversity internally. By looking both at the 'reality' of social life among faith-based and secular initiatives and at the discourses surrounding this life, the chapter would bridge the two angles of analysis envisaged for the edited volume.

KEYWORDS: India, Gujarat, Communal Riots, Hindus, Muslims, Civil Society, Peace Activism, NGOs, FBOs

In spring 2002, the Indian State Gujarat witnessed the worst communal riots in the country for decades. With more than just tacit State support, over 2000 people – most of them Muslims – were murdered and ten thousand permanently internally displaced (see Varadarajan 2002; Engineer 2003; Shani 2007; Wilkinson 2007). Sizeable stretches of Gujarati civil society reacted with reluctance or even ignorance to the riots, including – in the Mahatma's homeland – quite a few Gandhian organisations. Others however joined hands and form an undoubtedly small yet impressively striving 'peace community'. Given the communalist roots of the riots, this chapter asks whether this 'peace community' regards religious diversity as a condition, a motor, an obstacle or a goal of its activities? And, to begin with, how does it reflect religious diversity in its own ranks?

The critical answers to these questions stem from field research for a wider project, undertaken in spring 2008 (Susewind 2013). The data demonstrate that many activists were taken off guard by the extent of communal violence, a shock that initially united them in their efforts at relief and rehabilitation. Once a first hue of normalcy returned to the refugee camps, however, this unity in diversity faltered and gave way to considerable tensions. Two differences in particular emerged: between those organisations working *in* rather than explicitly *on* conflict – and between Islamic charitable trusts and many of their secularist counterparts. These tensions were tangible in everyday interactions rather than general approach.

At the outset, peace-building was new to practically everyone in Gujarat; most "NGOs were 'taken off guard by the extent of communal violence in 2002' and very quickly realised the need for a long-term strategy" (Powers 2009:157; Ganguly et al. 2006; Lobo & Das 2006; Jasani 2008; Oommen 2008; Robinson 2005; Gupta 2011). Nearly all organisations who began to work for peace initially joined makeshift action platforms to coordinate their relief efforts: in the immediate aftermath of the riots, cultural and ideological differences gave way to the pressing needs of shelter, food and safety. After a couple of months, however, this unity in diversity began to falter. While some faith-based organisations remained focused on material rehabilitation, others began to oscillate between 'spiritual reconstruction' and missionary work, and yet others as well as most secular organisations did venture further into more political interventions. Today, some groups provide victims with relief, others organise legal counsel and press for accountability, while others still promote dialogue, treat psychological trauma or raise awareness of communalism in the public sphere.

The emerging diversity of approaches and goals quickly complicated what counts as legitimate peace activism, a quarrel reflected in the multitude of Hindi/Urdu/Gujarati terms for ‘peace’ used by the various actors. The following are just some of the most frequent ones (McGregor 1993; Sen 2010:20-22 and Robinson 2005:215):

- *shanti*, meaning 1) calmness, quiet; stillness; peace (of mood). 2) rest, repose. 3) peace (between factions, powers) – bearing a sanskritic connotation of cosmic balance and harmony.
- *sukun,* meaning quiet, rest, peace – in a rather more personal sense than cosmic *shanti*; the word originally stems from Arabic.
- *aman,* meaning 1) security, safety. 2) assurance of safety; quarter, mercy – an understanding of peace restricted to absence of violence; the word again stems from Arabic.
- *nyay*, meaning 1) right or fitting manner, or method; 2) justice. 3) law; entitlement, right. 4) just or proper act, or judgement. 5) adjudication, decision (in a case). 6) the Nyaya system; logic. 7) demonstration, fitting illustration (of a case) – justice understood in an encompassing sense not limited to lawfulness.

Which of these terms would most adequately capture ‘peace activism’ is contested among local practitioners, and quite a few of them also changed and adjusted their own approach several times during the years of experimenting and learning post-2002. In particular, many activists grew increasingly sceptical of interventions that focus on peace as *shanti* (cosmic balance) at the expense of peace as *nyay* (lived, real justice; see Gupta 2011). Beyond its implication of stabilising an unjust *status quo*, *shanti* seems particularly problematic since the term is most frequently found among expressly Hindu organisations, which easily smacks of ill-suited denial of the depth of religio-political abyss on their part. Yet on the other hand, it is equally clear that “while justice must always be worth striving for, for ordinary people the resumption of life in the everyday demands compromise and negotiations of a far more complex and nuanced kind” (Robinson 2005:217).

Such negotiations transcend terminological debates; intentions, motivations and aspirations of those classifying one way or the other can thus better be traced in their comprehensive ‘mission’ and ‘vision’ statements. The long established, Muslim-run yet avowedly secularist NGO Sanchetana, for instance, describe their strategy as follows:

> [We] identify the common problems of the common poor people, work with them

> to create awareness about the commonality of their problems. This could lead to a possibility of forming organisations of people from various religions to address the issues afflicting them. The bondage thus created can be strengthened by jointly planning action programs. This breaks the alienation and sense of separateness. [...] Their identity of being religious persons can be broadened to various identities (NGO brochure).

It is Sanchetana's strong belief that, in the words of a participant in one of their workshops, Muslims "have sharpened our identity of being Muslims a little too much", have paid too much attention to faith and attached too much emotional importance to their in-group. Accordingly, Sanchetana organised 'leadership development camps' to help young Muslims to strike free from the grasp of the *ulema* (religious scholars). The motivation was to form 'secular' citizens, who disavow religion in the public sphere. Like many in Gujarat, Sanchetana argued that religion has been instrumentalised by politicians in 2002. Consequently, it would be more promising to weave a strong social fabric which can resist such instrumentalisation than to start interfaith dialogues, which only reinforce a 'misleading' emphasis on religion. Thus Sanchetana based its interventions in what peace researchers call a 'contact hypothesis': the NGO tried to engage people from different communities in cross-cutting issues *other* than peace-building, communal relations or faith, working mostly *in* conflict, not explicitly *on* conflict (Varshney 2002).

Other civil society organisations however decided to venture into explicit peace-building, i.e. began to work *on* conflict. They argued that even if it is wrong to assume that "religion is the main culprit and the whole fight is religious", "this is the general perception – and in this context it is perception which matters, not reality[.] We must deal with the religious aspect as well as all the others, so as to create a spirit of co-operation between the two major religious communities of India, Hindus and Muslims" (Engineer 1995:284). An example is the approach of the NGO Samerth:

> In the year 2005, Samerth initiated the process of networking with schools to conduct sessions with the children on peace-building using the peace education modules. [...] One of the staff comments: "if children ingrain these values, change in their attitudes will definitely ensure peace and harmony" (NGO brochure)..

Here, communal conflict itself is the focus of intervention. One tension between Sanchetana and Samerth thus concerns working *in* and *on* conflict: which approach is best to follow, contact hypothesis or peace education? Both NGOs share, however, an explicitly secular framework, as the former, too, "envisions promoting secular and rationalist education" (as they write in the same pamphlet).

The other and, arguably for this book, the more important fault line in the Gujarati 'peace community' lies therefore between 'secular' and 'faith-based' organisations. Indeed, many beneficiaries retain doubts about the interventions of traditional NGOs which on purpose do not touch (or even acknowledge) some of the deeper dynamics of religion and conflict (Oommen 2008:194). While NGOs thus ignore victims' self-expressed needs for 'spiritual reconstruction', FBOs, in catering to this need, both fill an important void left by NGOs – and further their particular religious agenda.

A prominent example of such a faith-based organisation is the Gujarat Sarvajanik Welfare Trust (GSWT), part of the Tablighi Jamaat movement which "was one of the most important groups which had the resources to organise relief and rehabilitation work after the post-Godhra violence of 2002" (Chakrabarti 2010:619). Its board of trustees is populated by *muftis*, *shaikhs* and *ulema*, and their mission is clearly communicated in religious language:

The communal riots of 2002 in the State of Gujarat was a challenge to the trust of saving human lives and their rehabilitation. The trust accepted the challenge, struggled hard and with the mercy of Allah, achieve the goal (GSWT flyer).

The trust – and most similar FBOs – already began to open up to 'mainstream' civil society after the earthquake that hit Gujarat in 2001. Post 2002, they gradually slipped into relief and peace-building work. As "it is difficult for any Muslim organisation, no matter how peaceful its goals, to obtain funding from abroad" (Powers 2009:142, in reference to GSWT), Muslim charitable trusts often had to rely on traditional forms of philanthropy to sponsor their projects. In addition, their leaders often took funding from their own pockets and began to work out of personal consternation and genuine shock, without any explicit strategy – missionary or otherwise (Chakrabarti 2010). It is therefore both astonishing and important to acknowledge that "the bulk of the funds and human resources for food, housing and water came largely, though not exclusively, from FBOs" (Gupta 2011:49).

As a reaction to such traditional charitable endeavours and in search of access to hitherto ignored Muslim communities, some of the non-faith-based organisations – including Sanchetana – began to deepen their earthquake-induced collaboration with GSWT and similar trusts. The rationale behind these efforts was clear: "being an organisation that made deep inroads and gained considerable goodwill, particularly among the Muslims of Ahmedabad" (Oommen 2008:156), the trust provided a reliable grass-roots partner in a community so far neglected by 'mainstream' civil society.

However, the trust's strong roots among Muslims "is a source of strength as well as weakness in some respects. Working in an extremely polarised situation, its intention can easily be taken as suspect" (Oommen 2008:156). The particular strength of Muslim charities thus had to be balanced against suspicions about the potentially negative impact of their orthodoxy on these very communities. Moreover, Sanchetana and other NGOs were deeply committed to the 'contact hypothesis' of peace-building, as we already saw. Thus "a major criterion was that anything an organisation proposed had to be inter-communal in the target population" (Powers 2009:132). Most Muslim groups fell short by this standard. Even though they frequently shared the 'contact hypothesis' in principle and wished to overcome communal boundaries in cross-cutting initiatives, they and their beneficiaries were also afraid to engage with Hindus after the riots. Demanding inter-communal contact in this context is arguably easier for NGOs rooted in majority society than for Muslim activists who were often victimised themselves. Hindu and secular initiatives did not always acknowledge this contextual distribution of power and trust – and neither does the academic literature on the horizontal integration of civil society pay enough attention to vertical hierarchies (Basu & Roy 2007:19).

Furthermore, "the growing influence of [missionary] organisations had little co-relation with their resettlement plans and policies" (Jasani 2008:431). Of course, FBOs by definition pursue more than a mere material agenda of reconstruction, and this wider agenda impacts on the subjectivities of Muslims. Still, it is important to perceive and represent Muslims not as mere passive recipients of such missionary activities, but as active participants, who have a say in their identity. Many Muslims are well able to resist, subvert or selectively appropriate discourse – be it the discourse of FBOs or the 'missions' and 'visions' put forward by mainstream civil society. It would be dangerous and illiberal to put religiously motivated agency *per se* under suspicion and "the fact that the GSWT constantly feared being labelled anti-national in itself could [and should] be a learning experience for civil society groups working in conflict situations" (Oommen 2008:151; Gupta 2011).

Rather than learning from this experience, however, the 'peace community' in Gujarat remains structurally blind toward its Muslim members. Many secular NGOs consider their faith-based counterparts highly communalised, but at the same time do not recognise non-observant Muslims who work for peace as Muslims. The leadership from within Muslim communities is rejected as illegitimate because it is faith-based, and, if it is not faith-based, it is not recognised as legitimately Muslim: lack of leadership may then be the inevitable

consequence of these presumptions rather than an empirical fact. Or, to put it bluntly: that mainstream civil society leadership has not reached out to Muslim communities in the past does not mean that only the advent of NGO interventions among Muslims can bring about Muslim leadership.

This realisation has far-reaching consequences. Simpson (2006) argued that "by isolating Muslims from economic resources and political representation, the organisations of Hindu nationalism enliven their own foundational myths, which state that the Hindu majority is in need of protection from the troublesome, isolationist and secretive Muslim minority" (p. 331). Well-meaning civil society activists might unintentionally tap into the same fallacy by imagining a 'Muslim community', distinct from their own circles, 'isolationist and secretive', 'out there' and in dire need of leadership. Surely, those articulating such views want to reach out and support this imagined community of victims, which sharply contrasts *hindutva* projects. But they still miss the fact that Muslim activists are not just 'out there', but actually exist amidst themselves, and by no way passively so.

In this context, it is also important to note that neither institutional affiliation nor a preferred peace-building approach necessarily imply a certain way of 'being Muslim and working for peace'. To the contrary: 'faith-based actors' can very well be found beyond the realm of Islamic charities; 'secular technocrats' sometimes work for explicitly Muslim organisations; and 'doubting professionals' and 'emancipating women' spread across the whole range of organisations and approaches (Susewind 2013).

A whole layer of complexity could arguably be brought in here, but for the purpose of this chapter, the contestation over definitions of 'peace activism', the conflicts over strategy and the difficulties of cooperation between NGOs and FBOs alone should demonstrate that Muslim civil society and Muslims in civil society constitute a rather complex array of actors. While many of these actors, both faith-based and not, consider religious diversity a strategic goal, they fare badly when judged on that criterion in respect of their own everyday activities. It is thus important to emphasise not only how civil society *perceives* religious diversity, but also how it *represents* such diversity in its categorisations, strategies and co-operations. This not least cautions against an uncritical belief in contemporary 'diversity talk' around the globe, which is likewise not always put into practice.***

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