Narratives of Vulnerability and Violence: Retelling the Gujarat Riots

08, Jun 2017

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On 27 February 2002, the Sabarmati Express passenger train was attacked at Godhra, a town in the Indian state of Gujarat. Fifty-eight people were burnt alive in the carnage. Almost all of them were Hindus, many returning after performing religious service at Ayodhya. The violence that followed after the burning was one of the most unprecedented in India. Neither the state machinery nor the ruling party headed by Chief Minister Narendra Modi attempted to control the rioting. With few exceptions, even the administrative apparatus seemed to remain indifferent. At the same time, the media largely interpreted the violence in a standard fashion as a product of secular and communal rivalries (Engineer, 2003).

This paper is a study of the Gujarat riots in 2002. It is an attempt to use the concept of vulnerability to increase our understanding of the riots. As such we deploy “vulnerability” as a site, a theater for emic and etic concepts, providing a mix of personal experiences and official definitions. Memory and time, we will argue, are crucial to understand vulnerability as a central category of experience. In particular such focus allows victims not to be merely the object of violence but to become the subject of history. This approach actually makes room for them to tell their story within a scholarly context as well. Our argument, then, concentrates more on the aftermath of the disaster than on the rioting itself. To arrive at a better understanding of the nature of the violence committed, we argue, one should carefully consider its effects and a posteriori narrative constructions, too. The process of the
return to normalcy should be as much part of the analysis as the breakdown of normalcy.

But let us first provide some basic facts on the context. Gujarat in 2002 was ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), headed by Narendra Modi, who in 2001 had taken office as the state’s chief minister. To sustain its power the BJP had initiated a series of revivalist processions called Yatras. In an etymological sense, Yatra means “journey,” but in a political sense it refers to a symbolic journey, a plea to remember significant events from the past and use them to create an invigorative framework for action in the present. As such, these Yatras were designed to journey to sites of pilgrimage such as Somnath (Gujarat) and in Kashmir, which represent epic memories in the Hindu imagination and trigger a mnemonic of stories about vandalism or violence inflicted on the Hindu majority. Modi in fact rode to electoral power on this revivalist agenda. The Rath Yatra to Ayodhya?

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the state of Gujarat was extremely sensitive to social tensions and rivalries, and every year during Holi, Basant Panchami, and other festivals riots would occur as a matter of routine, claiming a few lives on every occasion (Engineer, 2003, p. 14). Elections were due in 2003 (elections in Gujarat December 2002), and the BJP was rather uncertain about the future after its defeat in assembly elections in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. The controversies that arose in the wake of the earthquake of 2000 (earthquake was 2001 January 26) had also created a sense of unease.

On 28 February 2002, one day after the gruesome attack on the train, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a rightist fundamentalist group financed predominantly by the diaspora, announced a Gujarat bandh, a
general strike resulting in the closure of the state as a symbol of protest. This gave rise to an explosion of violence on a large scale. On the first day alone the death toll rose to about one hundred. The chief minister explained it away as the normal reaction of an angry mob. In fact he described it as a Newtonian phenomenon, with every action triggering an equal and opposite reaction. The rioting would turn out to be one of the longest in Indian history, lasting for some four months and claiming thousands of victims.

Vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability has a multiple pedigree. It stems from a matrix of disciplines each of which has constructed the meaning of vulnerability in terms of the axiomatics of the discipline concerned. As a term, in geography or ecology, “vulnerability” is a systemic property, defining the openness of a system to disruptions, both natural and social. But vulnerability is not just a measure of susceptibility to disruption; it also emphasizes the ability of the system to recover from a disorder. It thus reflects a measure of susceptibility as well as recovery. In this sense it is an emic term, meant to describe a situation in its own terms. This is the conception that we will elaborate here and put to use in an ethnographic style, highlighting analysis of narratives and grounding in individual and collective memory.

To develop our argument, it is relevant to capture a sense of the everydayness of life as lived in a camp. Giorgio Agamben’s (reference?) idea of bare life as lived experience is one example of such effort. To say that hell eludes description does not mean that pain, suffering, or heat cannot be discerned and felt and described.
Capturing such everyday experiences lends subjectivity a new potency without reducing it to the unscientic or the irrational. The notion of social suering probably figures as the most creative result of such ethnographic and narrative-based analyses. Instead of objectifying pain into poverty or disease, social suering opens up a middle space where pain, rather than being reduced to a number or symptom, becomes a story and a mode of listening—an articulated autobiography of vulnerability. Here experience does not get reduced to arid psychology. Instead of being merely constructed as an individual experience, pain serves as a mode of companionship with the other in coping with what is disguised, latent, suppressed, and taken for granted. Suffering may thus be gradually constructed as fragments of lived experience (Das, 2006).

We want to argue that each kind of collective violence generates its own quality of vulnerability. Atrocity results from an ampliation of violence, where a small irritable act by the victim creates a disproportionately large response. Atrocities are rampant in a caste system. What made the Gujarat riots so atrocious was their entanglement with caste in a democratic politics. The freedom of the Dalits[2] and other marginal people became a source of anxiety to the dominant castes. These dominant castes produced the traditional response of a mechanical act of brutality. What created the extra vulnerability was the expectation of justice in a democratic society. The vulnerability of a social system, in other words, increases with the sense of democracy it is perceived to embody.

In India a so-called “police encounter” refers to a violation of the rule of law. It occurs when police officers in particular take the law into their own hands, convinced that the rule of law does not
apply to them. The system becomes doubly corrupt when, as in Gujarat, the top police officers pay others to carry out police activities on behalf of businessmen and politicians. The vulnerability of the system increases when anyone labeled a threat, such as a Naxalite or terrorist, becomes a target for elimination. Innocence has few possibilities of appeal against the subversion of law. Vigilantism occurs when a community follows the law of the crowd. Vigilantism is the violence of the crowd which converts the rituals of law into a kangaroo court. One of the dominant models of vigilantism is the witch hunt, which acquires an epidemic persistence in periods and regions of anxiety. The witch hunt is, paradoxically, the anxiety of the crowd expressed as paranoid violence against individual suspects who are innocent. There is no appeal to civility possible. Investigations hardly pursue the witch hunt. Exploitation is a general phenomenon but some kinds of exploitation are more violent than others. The vulnerability of the system increases when bonded labor which is freed returns to slavery as it has few other options for survival. There is a “baroquization” of the system, because even freedom perpetuates and reinforces inequity.

The interesting concept of “baroquization” was systematically used by Mary Kaldor in her classic study *The Baroque Arsenal* (1981). Kaldor employed the idea to study the involution of innovation to understand the production of weapons in which more and more investment produces less and less impact. One can think of the tank after World War II. The weapon reportedly increased in complexity without producing a corresponding increase in efficiency. Baroquization subverts the system in counterproductive ways. In our study of violence, we witness a baroquization of the rule of law. The systems and institutions of
Democracy, when applied to these systems of violence, make the delivery of justice even more difficult. The baroquization of the system increases the vulnerability of the victim. Instead of being a guarantee of safety, the law has become a ritual of waiting and a parallel system of violence which compounds the traditional violence.

We can see a similar erosion of justice through the baroquization of the rule of law in other instances of genocide and ecocide. Genocide does not always stem from collective violence or brutality. The collective elimination or displacement of a people can take place with the best of intentions. Modern India has created a nation of 40 million internal refugees as a result of the country’s efforts to develop economically. India has thus created more refugees than through the wars it has fought. In all these cases the system of democracy becomes self-subverting, or anti-citizen.

In this perspective, riots may come to serve as an extension of electoral politics. The majority, tired of some minority, uses its majoritarianism as a vehicle to eliminate this minority. Exterminism becomes a property of majoritarian electoral systems. The chances of a survivor from a minority to successfully appeal to the rule of law increasingly grow smaller, causing vulnerability to become part of the logic of the system. This gives rise to the question of what is resistance and the route to survival in such system, or what is the nature of agency and recovery and resilience? Can we still apply Gramsci’s (reference?) model of the “pessimism of intellect and the optimism of will” to such system? Our narratives are a search for an ethnography of survival and hope.

Specifically, we explore how the concept of vulnerability can be applied to survivors of the Gujarat riots. Every structure has its story. It is a rule game of possibilities,
specified synchronically and diachronically. Any notion of normalcy or status demands its rituals of storytelling. Vulnerability threatens storytelling by creating a state of being where narratives are too fragile to be completed. Every life as a story demands closure, whatever the variety of interpretations. Vulnerability as a state of being designates the incomplete, aborted story. Order is not restored. Justice is not complete. It is a perpetual disruption of expected narratives. An incomplete, liminal story has sociological and philosophical consequences. A sense of expectations is distorted. Personhood, which biographically demands a collection of stories and the availability of timetables, is thwarted. Time becomes fundamental to the idea of narrativity.

**Vulnerability and the Violence of Riots**

The Gujarat carnage of 2002 claimed over 2,000 lives. Ironically, it helped Chief Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP to retain power. The Gujarat riots strongly differed from earlier ones, both in terms of the sociology of rioting and in terms of the governance of its aftermath. First, rioting is generally an urban phenomenon, but the Gujarat carnage spread to over two hundred villages. Second, in Gujarat tribal members rarely engage in rioting, but this time they constituted a critical core, which raises issues with respect to political economy or the spread of Hinduization. Third, riots tend to be spontaneous events that peak quickly, but the Gujarat riots lasted for as long as about four months. Fourth, order tends to be restored quickly after a riot: the state assumes responsibility for the aftermath and civil society engages in acts of mourning and solidarity. However, after the Gujarat carnage, the state refused to accept
responsibility for the victims. Fifth, there was also a sense of exterminism, which normally is not part of rioting. In exterminism, one attempts to annihilate the population in demographic terms, denying it the possibility of reproducing itself. There is no space for negotiation, compromises, or the other as part of a future neighborhood. The violence perpetrated has a zero-sum quality in that it aims to eliminate the other. Exterminism seeks erasure, while most riot narratives suggest some sense of adjustment, interaction, and even instances of compassion vis-à-vis the other. A zero-sum relationship both in terms of power and orientation destroys the possibility of reciprocity. Finally, violence which typically has a random and spontaneous component, here appeared to be planned, and acts of rape were performed by neighbors.

Although the bestiality of the event is obvious, the indifference of the aftermath was more profoundly eerie. It was here that the conventional riot narratives lost their footing. A riot as a form of violence is always temporary. It presupposes a wider social domain in terms of state and law. The community in a larger sense intervenes to restore peace. In this sense, riots presuppose a return to normalcy. This includes not merely relief and rehabilitation, but also a sense of repair where society intervenes to heal and to rebuild the normative order. With riots there is always an expectation of healing, of some sense of justice. Riots no matter how violent have a sense of embodying an ethics of moral repair. Riot narratives, for example, include stories of how friends helped each other despite their ethnic divide. In a riot narrative the temporary enemy returns as a permanent neighbor; violence appears as an episodic disruption, never as a permanent state of affairs.
Regardless of the violence, riots also come with the promise of some notion of truth-telling, some idea of justice, and some return to the normal. These three elements guarantee that citizenship for marginals and minorities has some solidity. Citizenship needs order and normalcy, as part of the social contract. Normalcy guarantees that life in a Hobbesian sense ceases to exist and that life is no longer outright solitary, poor, nasty, short, and brutish. Conversely, vulnerability that results in a breakdown of expected narratives and a disruption of rituals and timetables denies citizenship. Such vulnerability is the end of citizenship because it is the end of storytelling as a narrative of return.

In the Gujarat events we are faced with an absurd drama of fragments. The expected narratives of citizenship as a set of narratives of law and order are not available. The idea of citizenship is a claim to normalcy, welfare, and wellbeing within a specified territory. What vulnerability emphasizes is that the standard timelines and the expectations of normalcy may not happen. The victim remains in a state of liminality without hope of rehabilitation, reciprocity, or repair. It is a breakdown of the standard narratives of the life cycle of a riot, which always reiterates its temporariness. The riot is always a fragment of a society gone wrong. The usual expectation is of a return to law and order, to some idea of truth and justice. Vulnerability emphasizes that this wait for normalcy may be a long one, even an incomplete one. The conventional idea of vulnerability sees it as an episodic event. The question we want to raise is what happens if vulnerability is continuous? What happens when crisis is an everyday situation, when there is perpetual fear and threat though not always with the thickness of terror?
The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) once proposed the idea of “thick description” as the task of ethnography. Citizenship involves layers of thick description. It is a skin of narratives, events, episodes. Narratives create the chain of being that we call the citizen. It is when narratives collapse or truncate and time and timetables became so disorderly that vulnerability is born. If citizenship is predictable as a bourgeois novel, vulnerability is a skin of broken short stories, of a person surviving on fragments of narrative. We have organized the following fragments of testimony in two sets of extracts—one about the riots and the other about the camps. The interviews in their entirety were recorded by Teesta Setelvad for first Communalism Combat and then the NGO Citizens for Justice and Peace. (In some cases we have also included direct quotes from the police’s First Information Report (FIR), filed by the victims.)

Testimonies

Set I: Events in February-April 2002, Interviewed at the Godhra relief camp, March 22)

Place: Randhikpur, Panchmahal district

Witness: Bilkees (age 19; Rabia, her neighbor and relative, was with her at the time of the interview)

On the highway just outside the village we were set upon by a mob and 14 persons from my family were butchered and killed — 7 from my father’s family and 7 from my in-laws’ side. (...)

All had lethal weapons in their hands — swords, spears, scythes, sticks, daggers, bows, and arrows. They started screaming, “Kill them, Cut them up!” They raped my two sisters and me and behaved in an inhuman way with my uncle and aunt’s...
They tore our clothes and raped eight of us. Before my very eyes they killed my 3½-year-old daughter. The people who raped me are Shailesh Bhatt, Lala doctor, Lala Vakil and Govind Navi, all of whom I know very well. After raping me, they beat me up. Having been injured in the head, I fainted. They left, assuming I was dead. (…)

My aunt, my mother, and my three sisters all met with the same fate. I am 5–6 months pregnant. My husband and in-laws were away for Id. My husband came to meet me yesterday. All the other villagers, including Rabia’s family, had fled the day before, but we stayed behind because my aunt’s daughter was about to deliver. That delay has cost us everything. I have filed a complaint with the police but I don’t know whether I will get justice.


Place: Piplod Road, Randhikpur; Limkheda (Singvad) taluka

Witness: Ganibhai Majidbhai Ghanchi

Has filed an FIR dated Marh 10, 2002 with te police chief of Dahod)

FIR: We live in Randhikpur (Singvad) post and do business. In our village, there are 71 houses belonging to the Muslim community, besides which there are 14 grocery shops, paan and various other businesses. There is a mosque and a madrassa in the village.

When on February 27, the train incident occurred in Godhra, communal tension spread all over Gujarat and the property of the minority community was looted and burned. And the innocent people of the minority community were being killed. We ..., as also the people of our Muslim community, were at home on the night of
February 27. Around 2 a.m. on February 28, a mob of around 400–500 people, led by the names mentioned below, targeted us with cans of petrol, diesel.

They first looted and then burned four houses of our community. The mob returned around 8 a.m. the next morning, with lethal weapons and material to loot and then burn down more Muslim houses and shops. In addition, they also torched our mosque and our madrassa. Led by the accused we have named, the crowd returned on March 1, about 10 or 11 o’clock in the morning and looted and torched the remaining 10 houses. In addition, about 200 cows, goats, bullocks etc. were stolen.

We are lodging this complaint against them. These incidents were witnessed by the entire Muslim community in the village. We should lodge this complaint in Limkheda police station but because of the tense conditions prevailing, we were unable to lodge it in person. We have, therefore, faxed this complaint which please accept and take further action.


Place: Babaliya village, Panchmahal district

Witness: Jabbir Mohammed Abdul Razzak Shaikh

Has filed an FIR with the Khanpur Police station dated March 23 2002 sent by registered post. Copies sent to Chief Secretary Gujarat, Chief Justice, Gujarat High Court and NHRC; copy with CC)

FIR: Our family has been established at Babaliya for many years. We were running a grocery, a grain shop and a small flour-
We also handled small, transport business with jeep and tempo.

On Friday March 1, my father Abdul Rajakbhai, my mother Hajrabibi and my sister Jaybunnisa and I were sitting in the open space outside our shop that was closed because of Gujarat Bandh. Meanwhile, a crowd under the leadership of the below-mentioned arrived there, shouting and threatening: “Kill the Muslims,” “Cut them up,” “Rape their women,” “Rob their property,” “Burn their property,” “Burn them.”

I and my sister, Jaybunnisa, ran some distance and hid behind a tree on the nearby hill. Some in the crowd began to beat my father and mother while others broke the door of the house, shop and flour-mill and looted grain, grocery, TV set, gold ornaments and cash. Then they blasted the entire structure using some inflammable liquid. The accused then went away on the Naroda road dragging with them my father and mother. They also took away our Suzuki motor-bike.

Our lives were in danger so we hid ourselves for two to three days in the farms and the forest to save our lives. Due to pregnancy, my sister was in a bad state; somehow we managed to find her shelter in Bakor and I, carefully hiding myself, reached Lunavada with much difficulty. I am mentally disturbed and mentally broken.

I have complained and requested the police station Khanpur, mamlatdar Bakor, mamlatdar Lunavada, collector of Godhra and SP of Godhra to take legal action against the culprits I have named. But despite frequent complaints no action is taken against them though the crowd has killed my father and mother and destroyed their dead bodies.

**Place:** Noorani Masjid, Naroda Patiya  
**Witness:** Nasir Khan Rahim Khan Pathan, Principal, Sunflower School.  
*(Interviewed at Shah Alam Relief Camp)*

I teach English and Maths to students of Std. IX & X. In our school, Hindu and Muslim students share the same bench and study.

On Feb. 28, the day Gujarat *bandh* was declared, a large mob of 5–10,000, dressed in khaki half-pants or chaddis, saffron banians, and black hair-bands set upon us. They had spears, swords, acid bombs and petrol bombs. They used gas cylinders, too, for their work. First, around 10–10.30 a.m., the minaret of the Noorani Masjid was destroyed. Next, the family of Shabir Ahmed Khurshid Ahmed and Mehmood Ahmed Khurshid Ahmed was mercilessly burnt alive. The mobs were attacking Hussain Nagar and Jawarhar Nagar.

I was an eyewitness to the shameful rape of Khairunnisa, daughter of Mahrukh Bano. It was an animal-like mob of 11 who gang raped her. I was hiding in the toilet of my house at that time. After this, they burnt the entire family alive, one by one. The head of Khairunnisa’s mother was cut off. I saw them mixing some solvent in the petrol. The bodies found later were in a horrifying condition.

I saw with my own eyes, petrol being poured into the mouth of 6–year-old Imran. A lit matchstick was then thrown into his mouth and he just blasted apart.

Place: Dariakhan Ghumbat Relief Camp
Witness: Dawood Bhai Ghadiali, Camp volunteer

After the gruesome incident of Feb. 28, it was only on March 3 that we were contacted by the Civil Hospital RMO. He said he wanted to hand over the dead bodies so that we could “carry out the last rites as per Muslim custom.”

I went there under police protection and was totally horrified on seeing the condition of the dead bodies. The corpses were not even distinguishable as male or female. They were so badly mutilated that there was no way anyone could make out even the gender.

I had the unhappy task of organising the digging of huge pits and arranging a mass burial. I still cannot sleep because of the condition of the bodies that I saw. In many cases, the skull was just not there. The charred bodies were lying in a heap at the Civil Hospital. I can swear that I saw 3–400 bodies lying there. Unfortunately, we could bury only 192 of them over a period of 16 days. The volunteers who did this work had to steel their hearts, wear gloves, sprinkle dettol, use attar.


Set II: Afterlife
Place: Talimul Islam, Nandasan, Gandhinagar district

Witness: Syed Nasir, Manager, relief camp,

We stopped getting any relief from the government after May 27. Earlier we used to get wheat, sugar, rice and oil. For the government there is no camp, no refugees, now. But there are still 419 persons from 95 families in the camp. They are from the districts of Gandhi–nagar, Mehsana, Patan and Ahmedabad.

We had some grain that lasted up to June 13; after that it has been very difficult. Some Ahmedabad–based and Mumbai–based organisations have helped with grain. Today, feeding the persons is very difficult. These are not persons with any land. They used to work in fields. Their homes have been completely destroyed but they have received barely Rs 5,000–15,000 in compensation.

On February 28 itself, MLA Sureshbhai Patel was named and identified by many survivors as leading the mob in village Paliyar. One month ago, a two–day meeting was held in the village where it was decided that “Miyabhai gaam ma nahin joyiye” (“We do not want Muslims in the village”). The total population of the village is around 3,000. The Muslims who have fled just do not want to go back.


Witness: Mozaam Khan

Place: Pansar village, Kalol taluka, Gandhinagar district
Twenty-five persons belonging to four families from our village are now in the Nandasan camp. In Pansar village, there are about 450–500 Muslims. We have been holed up here for four months, because there is a boycott by the villagers who say they do not want a single Muslim in the village. The government is not helping at all either.

The sarpanch of our village, Gopalbhai Maganbhai Patel belongs to the BJP. The mamlatdar had directed him to get us back. He flatly refused. He said, “We do not want Muslims in our village.” On top of that, is the utterly uncaring government. I have received a cheque of Rs 500 to rebuild my house; my neighbour has received Rs 1,000. Many have not received a single paisa. Is this not a mockery of the people who have suffered?


Witness: Kasambhai Vohra

Place: Lunavada Relief Committee, Panchmahal district

On June 30 this camp was formally closed but we still have 460 inmates from Pandharvada and Anjanva. The camp ran from March 7 to June 30. Today, 12 widows’ from Anjanva will complete there iddat period. So in the next few days they will go back on a trial basis. Five families from Pandharwada went back on a trial basis after five meetings with the villagers. The common refrain was that you may return but remove the names of the accused from the FIRs and chargesheets.
Another issue is the illegal detention of innocents who were arrested. Eighty-four persons are also detained in Lunavada; a person who had just returned from Haj pilgrimage was illegally detained on March 15. Courts just do not want to entertain the bail applications.


**Witness:** Allah Rakha Shaikh, Lawyer

**Place:** Por village, Gandhinagar District

There are 75 Muslim families from Por whose homes were completely gutted using gas cylinders for arson on March 1. Even the masjid, dargah and kabrastan were destroyed. The instigators, 53 of who were arrested, had been named, with others, in the FIRs. They have been given bail on the condition that they don’t leave Gujarat. The Gandhinagar district court had rejected bail, but the High Court granted it after four months. We have also filed a case for adequate compensation in the HC.

Only the Thakores and Vaghars who looted and from whom some of our things were recovered have been arrested. Due to pressure from Patels we could not succeed in getting the bigwigs arrested. The zilla panchayat president Suman Patel and Raman Patel, both of whom also belong to the Bajrang Dal had led the attack. Then we decided not to push too hard since we do not want too much enmity as we have to come back and stay in the same village.

Since the incident, up to now, there have been at least 50 meetings with the police, the collector, village leaders and us, the affected persons. The Gandhinagar district minister and local MLA, Vadilal Patel, was
present at some of the meetings. Orally, we have been repeatedly told at the meetings that we should withdraw our cases against the accused. So far we have just said that once it becomes a police case, we cannot withdraw. Fortunately, the SP was transferred and the new SP arrested the accused and they were in jail for three days. This enraged the Patels. Now they are translating their anger and putting pressure through an economic boycott. We are 400 Muslims in a village of about 5,000 people. Muslim women have traditionally worked in the fields of the Patels and our youngsters have driven their trucks and other vehicles. Now they refuse to have any dealings with us. So there is no work and there is impending starvation.


Memory and Vulnerability

The stories in the previous section, we would argue, must be seen as a scream of pain, slowly hardening into memory. We have presented them as a collage to understand the collectivity of the pain the relief camps represented. Below we record reflections on these narratives, treating them as a single text, rather than as individualized stories.

In terms of survivor narratives, vulnerability becomes a site, a status, a form of being. There is fixity and tangibility in the beginning. Vulnerability comes with a history, a date, an event, even a recording in a newspaper report or headline. It conveys injured innocence, a cacophony of stories, demanding to be...
Violence involves a brutal invasion of property, dignity, identity, self. Between tales of murder and rape, a community is in shambles and all sense of security is gone. Intrusion, contamination, invasion, threat, violation—it is as if a community has lost its skin. There is a sense of rawness. In the initial phase vulnerability is seen as a historical event in a certain public or private space. This becomes the initial refrain once space, identity, integrity, and dignity lose meaning after being invaded. If there are memories of earlier riots, each new event seems an epoch unto itself.

Gujarat has always been marked by excessively long periods of rioting, which alter definitions of vulnerability. A marginal or minority community always fears harassment. Threat hangs in the air but becomes a backdrop in periods of normalcy; threat is domesticated into caution.

The ensemble of fears opens like a Pandora’s box in the first days of the riot. What increases the sense of violation is the involvement of neighbors. Violence from strangers allows distancing but violence by a neighbor has a different venom. Rape by neighbors increases the quality of threat. As a senior woman journalist told us, “rape is more than stigma. It both collectivizes and individualizes violence. It violates an individual woman. It violates the collectivity called woman.” Rape by a neighbor increases the visibility of stigma. The perpetrator hangs around in a perpetual presence. His boorishness is a reminder of the event and increases the victim’s helplessness.

As the events progressed, the language of suffering transformed from the cacophony of lamentation to silence. Silence magnifies vulnerability and each woman becomes iconic of her experience. As an activist observed, “Violence mixes the inarticulateness of rage with the eternity of
“Silence.” Silence creates the community of the underground, a body language of shrugs. If sometimes read as denial or fear, it actually signals a lack of hope.

Vulnerability needs a sense of Proustian time when the social scientist sits with a time table, tracing the social science sequence of the three R’s—rescue, relief, rehabilitation. At one level, the victim responds to everyday help. At another he realizes that justice is absent. Riots are not quite natural disasters despite the state’s attempt to force an equation. Vulnerability demands a multiplicity of lived times that the state and the majority community try to truncate.

Vulnerability is created twice: first through violence and next through denial or truncation. It becomes a denial of access to one’s right to narrative. In violence, storytelling is one entitlement that the survivor demands. The suppression of the story is the second circle of vulnerability. If violence as invasion is the first circle, then silence and repression comprise the second circle. Waiting forms the third circle of this Dantesque world. Waiting appears as a corpus of rituals by which the social signals a return to normalcy. Waiting creates a sociology of expectations marked by a timetable.

However, waiting does not only appear as an extended timetable, but also as an extended geography. One begins with the simple displacement from home. Life in a relief camp marks liminality. This liminality is doubly underlined because the camps are not the creation of a concerned state. In Gujarat, 2002, for the first time the state has refused to establish camps, fearing that it would be read as an acknowledgement and confession of guilt. Intelligence reports of the Gujarat state presented in affidavits before the Nanavati Commission of Enquiry indicate that in 13 districts for which reliable data is available...
70,000 people have not returned home. Waiting is waiting to return to work and finding that local things have taken over the place where you had your shop. Neighbors return with morsels of hospitality, denying their role in the violence. It is an invitation to normalcy, a signal to forgive and forget.

The rule of law often becomes a ritual of delay. More particularly, and despite the best of constitutional intentions, the forces of justice might themselves delay justice. Vulnerability becomes ironic here because it is the very promise by democracy and the rule of law to maintain justice. However, these very institutions defer the rule of law and contribute to more vulnerability, rather than creating a sense of hope. Justice as a farce intensifies vulnerability because the survivor feels helpless.

History will become positivist and frozen in print when it is majoritarian, when it is transformed from being plural and unofficial into being official and hegemonic, a simple narrative of conquest and defeat. Such history reduces memory to one strand of experience, denying validity to other interpretations. Such history leaves minority groups with only two options. First it legitimates exterminism by converting riots into zero-sum games: electoral majorities now want the elimination of the opponent. The second option is a notion of citizenship as defined by the majority. The ghettoized Muslim seeking his identity is now seen as a Malthusian threat or an object of emancipation. Either way, history legitimizes violence. This positivist, majoritarian history—which denies plural, personal and narrative histories—also demands erasure of memory. “Let’s forget and move on,” as argued by the new middle class audience on TV. Justice demands
memory, but it is precisely this memory and this right to storytelling that the vulnerable in Gujarat are asked to abandon. In fact, this explains the confusion around what has been called the Bandukwala argument. Bandukwala, a physicist and professor at Baroda University, was a civil rights activist who faced threats and harassment for his stands. He repeatedly fought for rights, justice, and memory, but he did so to little avail. One could argue that his act might be misunderstood as weakening the sense of struggle among survivors. But we feel it needs a sympathetic understanding. After a while, Bandukwala argued that he, as a practicing Muslim and a citizen, unilaterally forgave the perpetrators and wanted to move on. He explained that he did not want to carry the curdled memories of violence with him any longer. Memory becomes a double burden when justice becomes elusive. In this respect, vulnerability is critically related to memory and time. The structure of expectation is crucial, as is true of the politics of memory. It opens out a drama of choices. Does the victim forgive and move on? Does the majority apologize? Is some form of forgiveness possible? Today Bandukwala says that justice is a non-negotiable...

Vulnerability opens up the question of ethical repair, and this goes beyond the question of physical rehabilitation emphasizing a restoration of habitat and occupation. To convert a habitat into a neighborhood requires a nomos, a normative sense of understanding, of truth-telling. In this sense justice is an unfolding of normalcy in time. Waiting for justice, for recognition of what happened, is a waiting in time. Many activists attacked Bandukwala for ignoring the plea for justice, seeing his pronouncements as evasiveness or amnesia. But what Bandukwala argued was that vulnerability
searching for justice gets bogged down in stereotype. It needs to recover agency. Vulnerability caught in stereotypes loses its sense of innovation. Bandukwala wanted to tell his own story differently. Vulnerability, by reaching for an alternative narrative, finds a sense of agency. The actor forgives the perpetrator unilaterally and moves on recognizing that if justice is unavailable, forgiveness is the only creative option.

A minority always faces a ghetto-ization in space and time. If it is easy to grasp a ghetto as a spatial enclave, time creates its own ghettos. Is a minority to shut itself off or can it modernize with the rest of society while reworking the symbols of its identity? A minority reluctant to modernize might be seen as “backward,” “fundamentalist,” or recalcitrant. The minority as a vulnerable category is caught between two kinds of time, between the time of history and development. History, as majoritarian history, ghettoizes them and development portrays them as citizens reluctant to abandon their community.

What Modi as the state’s chief minister did was to create a new imaginary, arguing Gujarat had shifted its paradigms. His speeches imply to leave justice in the old paradigm for consumerism and mobility in the new one. Vulnerability is caught in the double bind of two narratives, both of which cannibalize a state of being. The tragic fact that over 75,000 people have been displaced in the thirteen districts for which reliable data are available loses out in such narratives. A riot not only distorts the story, but displaces or erases the storyteller. Vulnerability is that perpetual promise of non–being. Erasure stalks the victim as a collection of stories no longer available and injustice becomes a disappearing archive.

At one level, Chief Minister Modi’s regime explains the riots away as a loose kind of vigilantism, a knee jerk obeisance to a...
majoritarian view of history. He adds legitimacy by winning an election. But then he accentuates vulnerability by playing on the difference between normalcy and normalization. Normalcy is an authentic return to order. Normalization is an ersatz narrative which creates a façade of normalcy, a set of props which convinces visitors that life has returned to order and peace. But what does Pax Modicana consist of? Can it erase violence by enacting tourist dramas of ethnicity around kite flying festivals? Can it emphasize investment criteria as an indicator of normalcy? The victim is forced to forget and to repress the violence he suffered. He loses even the right to its memory. Vulnerability needs its narratives to survive, to complain, to record, to testify. Given the power of the dominant group, vulnerability often survives only as testimony, as witness. The power of the bureaucracy lays in suppressing and distorting these narratives.

In this case, the State government refused to take responsibility for the victims and denied any responsibility for the camps which were forcibly closed. The victims expected someone in Civil Society to speak on their behalf. But dissenting bureaucrats were silenced through ostracism and transfer. Civil rights activists and English newspapers were classified as outsiders, thus people not genuinely associated with Gujarat. What created this ersatz state of normalcy, as normalization, was the bureaucracy. Through file, diktat, transfer, it created a façade of normalization, a favorite tactic being statistics, especially the statistics of investment. This was immediately read as a sign of stability, a return to civility in Gujarat. In a democratic regime, one expects the opposition to object but the Congress in Gujarat was behaving like a sibling left out of the spoils.
In this instance, electoral democracy created a cynical sense of the vulnerability of minorities. Probably the best example of normalization pertains to the young Muslims arrested in Godhra immediately after the riots. Many of them were arrested for simple offences like violating curfew and they have been languishing in jail for the last five years. What journalists witnessed with surprise was the ease with which the Bharatiya Janata Party was campaigning in predominantly Muslim areas, where one noticed little Congress presence. The implications, as the survivors explained, were clear. The BJP asked for votes and in turn promised to reexamine the sentences and possibly abbreviate them. This electoral bazaar is the only promise of justice or of negotiating some sense of fairness, otherwise, as one of the Muslims explained, our children will languish in jail forever. Vulnerability stems from the long wait for justice and the cynical uses to which this search can be put.

As the regime stabilized, there was a change of tactics. It made a claim to efficiency and order through the manner it responded to threats. Now it was not its reading of history that vindicated it; it was the new narratives of the future that did so. Gujarat presented itself as the most competent regime in handling security and terrorism, while the Congress regime at the centre appeared weak-kneed and indecisive. In fact, the manner in which the Modi government responded to issues of security was impressive and sinister. Now Modi was seen as progressive, the only CM who made a presentation at the World Economic Forum, Davos. He was indeed the only one who spoke the language of security. Security needs firmness, strong handling, ruthlessness, and the very authoritarianism of the regime appeared as
positive quality in the emerging security discourses. In fact, there has been an appropriation of vulnerability discourses by the middle class. It is they who are potential victims, while victims in turn are portrayed as potential terrorists. Security as practice and rhetoric now overwhelms the discourse of vulnerability.

**Vulnerability and Storytelling**

The sociologist as ethnographer feels helpless. She suddenly realizes vulnerability is a word for a meta-narrative, a sequencing of stories now driven underground through silence. Silence embodies the resistance of vulnerability. The story incubates within, waiting for a future listener often lapsing in silence. Silence is the narrative of vulnerability retreating into its shell. It is the sociologist as activist who creates an opening by listening. She listens, she coaxes. Her word becomes a promissory note for justice. It is almost as if the first tendrils of hope reinstate the sense of vulnerability.

One of the best ways of understanding vulnerability is in the changing nature of narratives about it. One must posit a caveat here. In constructing the narratives of vulnerability, the survivor faces a counter-narrative. This is the narrative by the majority community, many of whom seek to brush aside these stories as exaggerations. Some admit there have been aberrations but emphasize the need for “normalcy.” The popular idiom is “we must move on.” Tales of vulnerability, they claim, damage the reputation of Gujarat as a “brand.” They argue that the violence was a minor punctuation mark. To convert it into a major full stop or an interjection was “unfair” and against progress and development.” Oddly,
progress and development are two terms used repeatedly as self-contained arguments for “moving on.” Many of them see the violence as an embarrassment, a stigma they have to carry. For them development becomes a term providing the cosmetics of erasure, even indifference. They treat the debates on the travails of the victims and survivors as a discussion that has gone on tediously. Development becomes an indirect statement for benign neglect.

As a decade goes by, the narratives of the survivor grow self-reflective. He narrates his story but also listens to that of others. Narratives become a necklace of stories. There are further changes. Initially, emic readings tend to be anecdotal and autobiographical. But then the social scientist enters, and in pursuit of limited generalizations for a middle range theory he adds etic narratives using concepts like resilience and vulnerability. But the politics of survival and the requirements of law call for a third style of narratives—the FIR (First Information Report) and the testimonies in two languages. This combination of three forms of narrative forges a community of survivors and a network of witnesses. Working together, survivors, social scientists, and legal activists demonstrate that narration and memory are ways of recovering citizenship, of re-entering the social and its norms through the institution of law. During this process, two concepts change. Justice becomes a passage rather than an immaculately hatched term. And there is a change in the tacit construction of vulnerability.

What was anecdotal, autobiographically discrete, and articulating grief, anger, pain now becomes a collection of statements filing complaints and accusations. As the individual survivor becomes community, the concept of vulnerability also grows to