Media and the Carnage in India

By Mairayee Chaudhuri

India celebrated fifty years of its parliament on 13 May 2002. India has for a long time prided itself in her democratic and secular politics. But the last two months of attacks against the Muslim minority in Gujarat, a western state of India, has left a badly damaged international image and a shocked civil society at home. This article offers a comment on the commendable role of the media in reporting the events in Gujarat; the role that the media can have in challenging commonsensical ideas of ethnic and communal conflicts; and the difficulties that the media face in being a mirror reflection of reality because existing social, economic and cultural powers (both international and national) also go into the making of the media.

Residents walk past their burnt and destroyed buildings in Ahmedabad, 1 March 2002

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Over the last decade, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and sister organisations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtra Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) have encouraged an anti-Muslim frenzy in support of a plan to build a Ram temple on the site where the mosque Babri Masjid once stood in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The government, committed to a secular nation, had succeeded in resisting any such plan to demolish the mosque and build a temple in its stead. In 1990, anti-riot police were ordered to stop more than one million marching Hindus armed with "consecrated" bricks from reaching the mosque site. This policy is said to be one of the reasons behind the collapse of the ruling coalition shortly.

But, the Babri Masjid was indeed successfully demolished—two years after, in December 1992, by a crowd of Hindu fundamentalists, and more than 1,000 people died in the rioting that swept through India following the mosque's destruction. Recently, BJP's sister organisations have become more aggressive in trying to build the temple on the disputed site. It is against this context that in March this year, a train carrying some of the supporters of the temple-building movement was burnt at a station in Gujarat. Fifty-eight died from that incident. Nobody was certain who was responsible (an inquiry is still going on) but a common suspicion that it was Muslims who burnt the train has set off wide-scale attacks on Muslims. As in all such conflicts, women have borne the harshest impact of the ensuing violence. The me-

dia has shown exemplary gender sensitivity in portraying this. Indeed a major sign of hope for Indian secularism and democracy in this dark hour has been the role of the Indian media in general.

Conflicts between the majority Hindu community and the minority Muslim community in India are not new. Much of India's colonial history has been marked by such tensions. Some will even argue that British colonialism has been instrumental, not only in aggravating these conflicts, but in constructing a world of communal politics in the region. India won freedom in 1947, but only at the cost of a partitioned country on the basis of religion. Pakistan was created as a homeland for Muslims; independent India opted for a path of secularism. The communal violence left millions dead and led to one of the largest instances of forced migration in history.

While the casualties of communal violence have been on all sides— Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, memory has been selective. As a woman born to Hindu Bengali family of origins that now reside in Bangladesh (what was Pakistan before 1971 and India before 1947), I have heard innumerable personal stories of murderous Muslim mobs killing fleeing Hindus. Many years later I heard a well-known Pakistani writer recount the rape and killing of Muslims during the Partition. These instances show that people's belief of which community is the victim, which is the victimizer, invariably depends on one's social identity.

Independent India has had its share of communal riots. As a child,

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I remember imagining riots to be incidents when two violent groups of men brandish weapons and attack each other. This was perceived as an unhappy development, but there was also an appreciation that both sides were at fault, and as such, the conflict was both fair and equal. Questions about the role of the state in general and of the police forces in particular were not matters of discussion. This narrative of mine is neither unique nor exceptional. Perceptions of societal conflicts are shaped by discourses within the community that acquire the power of "fact" even well researched documents cannot challenge.

I think part of the responsibility for this blurred and skewed perception rests on media. Indian media have tended to report communal riots with no mention of the communities concerned. A typical report would thus read, "Two men of one community were killed by members of another community." The idea is not to aggravate an already tense situation.

A variation is the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, considered Father of the Nation. After careful thought, the All-India Radio announced that Gandhi had been killed by a "Hindu fanatic," to quash dangerous inferences and possible violence. My own reading is that the "no-name" approach did not necessarily help. I am certain that each community believed itself to be the victim.

The role of the media in this renewed bout of communal violence in Gujarat, however, has been remarkable. Months after the train-burning incident, there are still almost daily reports of communal violence, and a steadily rising death toll. Nearly 1,000, mainly Muslims, have been killed since, when Hindu mobs went on the rampage to avenge the attack on a train carrying the Hindu activists back from the disputed holy site. Human rights groups put the number of casualties at 2,000; many more have been forced to remain in refugee camps in Gujarat, unable to go back to their homes.

Media has established unequivocally that the state government has been behind attacks on the minority, and that much of what has been considered communal violence is actually state-sponsored ethnic cleansing. Both electronic and print media institutions have sent their own teams to the camps where the displaced have taken refuge. One team was able to document the refusal of police officials to receive the First-Hand Information Reports (FIRs) of women who had been victims of rape in this latest round of violence. One can also discern from the letters to the editors

published by newspapers the sense of outrage and horror of ordinary citizens whose understanding of communal violence, as with this writer, has been blurred by personal but intense biases. This time, the media has indeed helped in presenting "what really happened."

But media is still a social institution that reflects the tensions and conflicts of society, and may even be said to be constitutive of these. A case in point is the differences in the representation of the recent outbreak of violence in Gujarat between the English-language media and the Indian-language media, particularly some local (Gujarati) media institutions. The Indian-language press supportive of a fundamentalist and revanchist Hindu identity speak disparagingly of the English-language counterparts as pseudo-secularists whose hearts bleed only when Muslim minorities are killed. Such contradictions within media bring to the fore two other important issues: (1) the angst of erstwhile colonial countries vis-à-vis modern institutions such as secularism, independent media, gender equality, to name a few; and (2) the internal hierarchies of a class-divided society where the English language represents both power and exclusiveness.

Another tension that also impacts media is the tendency for the majority community to appropriate the mantle of nationalism. Hindu fundamentalism cannot ever be a threat to questions of national security, but Muslim fundamentalism can. Compounding this problem is the present "unipolar" world order and

the American led fight against "global terrorism" because an isolationist approach to domestic concerns is no longer viable.

Under such push-pull tensions media institutions operate in, questions of sovereignty have inevitably surfaced. The government that has come under severe international criticism for its handling of the Gujarat crisis, triggering common sentiment that foreign powers ought not to intervene in matters of the country. Media has been quick to point out the difficulties of such a stance, but this in turn has earned the ire of many Hindus. The situation is potentially explosive and should be addressed squarely. A couple of years earlier, Bangladeshi poet Taslima Nasreen's writings about attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh were similarly deemed anti-national. A bounty has since been offered to anyone who can surrender Nasreen, who has been living in exile. The parallelism is obvious—a firm commitment to the values of secularism, democracy, and minority and gender rights is incumbent upon media.

As I have written elsewhere, sovereignty, however, is not an abstract concept; it refers to the sovereignty of the rights of peoples—ordinary men and women.* Especially in a regime of globalisation where India has been pursuing policies that would integrate its economy more deeply in the international capitalist system, and where a newspaper's advertising department has acquired more clout than its editorial section, this has meant over the last decade that media correspondingly distance itself from issues of

equity and justice. Interviews of the lifestyles of celebrities and other such features that promote a culture of consumption are given more space and airtime. This erodes the viable role that media plays in a society marked by hierarchical divisions. But the coverage of the communal riots in Gujarat has clearly broken from the trend of a media catering to the 'customer' rather than the 'citizen.' As in the instance of attacks on the Muslim minority in Gujarat that the state itself has encouraged, the idea of a sacrosanct sovereignty where the world at large ought not to comment on how a nation-state treats its citizens is indeed questionable. At the same time, however, media continues to play an important role in exposing the adverse impact of a western-driven globalisation on the marginalised sections of poorer countries. Media faces a challenging task of negotiating between those invoking "national sovereignty" in times of human rights violations and those who seek to project a globalised world free of imperialist ambitions. ❯

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Footnote:
* Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "Feminism' in Print Media," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 7, no. 2, pp. 263-287; and "Gender and Advertisements: The Rhetoric of Globalisation," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24, no.3/4, pp. 373-385.