

The Genocidal Pogrom in Gujarat: Anatomy of Indian Fascism

ARCH -VAHINI REPORT

Eye Witness Account of Looting and Burning in Kanwat [Gujarat]

I the undersigned Mr. Rajesh Mishra son of Shri Jagdambaprasad A. Mishra presently residing and working with Non Governmental Organization (NGO) ARCH Vahini at village Mangrol Taluka Rajpipla Dist. Narmada affirm on oath that:

1. I was present at my native village Kawant Ta. Kawant Dist. Vadodara of Gujarat state between March 10/03/02 and 18/03/02.
2. On 12/03/02 and on 13/03/02 in Kawant more than 250 houses and shop establishments of Muslims including Bohra community were looted and then set on fire by mobs of tribal of surrounding villages. Most of the Houses belonging to Muslims have been totally destroyed and their business is completely ruined. There were 185 Muslim and 52 Bohra households living and conducting their business in Kawant.
3. Even elders cannot recall when and from where the Muslims came and settled into this interior village Kawant. Some of them had their traditional businesses like cycle selling & repairing – automobile garages, fruit vending, grocery shops, poultry and goat farming etc. Some of the Muslims were also engaged in services in shops and business of other trading communities of the village. For the last few years some of them were diversifying into new enterprises like building construction, contractors, building material supplier, rural transport business with tempos and jeeps, second hand vehicles trading etc.
4. All the 185 Muslim households have lost all of their belongings. Their houses and business premises have been looted, burnt and destroyed. Out of 185 households, 38 had pucca RCC structures and the rest were Kachcha structures. They have lost their property approximately worth Rs 3.50 crores in their shops, garages, cabins and lorries and vehicles. They are homeless and have become paupers taking shelter in Vadodara and Chhotaudepur with relatives and Muslim Jamatkhana.
5. 52 Bohra community households were mainly well to do traders of Kawant. They were also settled in Kawant for more than 100 years and had developed business in varied sphere and on bigger scale. Besides their traditional business of wholesale grain trade and grocery shops, the bakery -printing press-soft drink manufacturing –rural transport business were some of the new areas where the enterprising Bohra had stepped in for the last 2-3 years. Even by very conservative estimate they have lost property worth Rs. 7 to 8 crores.
6. From 1st March onwards Muslims were receiving threats and threatening calls from various sources which had made them tense anxious. They were constantly requesting the local administration the Mamlatdar and police authority to provide protection. As the tension mounted, they also demanded deployment of Border Security Force (BSF) or Rapid Action Force (RAF) or State Reserve Police (SRP) in adequate numbers.
7. Their fears were not unfounded for the Sarpanch and other village leaders had cancelled the traditional weekly market Hat scheduled for 4/03/02 and on 11/03/02. Canceling of Hat was most unusual and extra ordinary decision because Hats are almost never cancelled. This indicated gravity of the situation and the danger loomed large over the law and order situation and the target was obviously the Muslim community.
8. The local MLA of Chhotaudepur confided into me personally that for that whole week he was pressurizing and persuading the district administration to employ BSF/RAF or SRP personal (minimum 40-50) in number at Kawant. He even informed the Home Secretary and the DIG of the State of the looming threat. But the administration did not respond to the requests.
9. On 10/03/02, in a nearby village Panwad, 12 KM from Kawant, the houses, shops and cabins of Muslim community were looted and set on fire by mobs from the surrounding villages. Prior to looting and setting fire to the houses and other establishments, the mobs had set on fire the tempo trucks that were parked inside the police station campus for safety and security. The incident took place on the very day on which the SRP and the BSF forces were withdrawn from Panwad.
10. As the report of incidents in Panwad reached Kawant, the Muslims desperately urged the local administration to provide them security or else they would be ruined and their life was in grave danger.

11. The Muslims in Kawant received this report and they panicked because they knew that it was their turn next for the stories were constantly pouring in from all the sides during the past ten days that the mobs would first do Panwad then it will be the turn of Kawant. I called the District Collector on the same day and informed him that prior to final attack on Panwad the tribal were constantly threatening that Panwad would be the first followed by Kawant. The local BJP leader, who was trying to keep peace in Kawant, had also sensed the great trouble. He was also constantly imploring the District Collector and the Police authority to provide adequate police BSF protect to Kawant to avoid great tragedy that could overtake Kawant.

12. In the next two days, I made several calls to the Collector and the DSP and pleaded with them to provide security to Muslims and Bohras of Kawant. I constantly argued with them to deploy BSF/RAF/SRP in Kawant.

13. All that district administration had done before this was to organize flag march of the security forces in Kawant. I argued out of desperation that it was not useful. Kawant is an interior village. The Hindu community of Kawant was not threatening the Muslims. In fact, the Hindus also wanted security forces because the fear was from the mobs from the surrounding villages. The administration claimed that they had limited army personnel. I was informed that there were 106 Jawans at their disposal for the area. If so, I argued that they should be divided in three parts and take positions in three sensitive localities, Chhotaudepur, Panwad and Kanwat. I even argued that since Chhotaudepur was a bigger town, may be Kanwat and Panwad may be assigned 20-24 Jawans along with thirty SRP. A flag march lasting for tent to thirty minutes without a constant presence of the Jawans would serve no purpose, I kept on arguing. My pleadings along with the pleadings of the other leaders fell on deaf ears.

14. On 11/03/02, I contacted the regional in charge of National Human Rights Commission Mr. Nambuthiri in Ahmedabad through Mr. Gagan Shethi of Jan Vikas, Ahmedabad and urged him to intervene and impress upon the administration to deploy enough force at Kawant to provide protection to Muslims and Bohra community. The Jan Vikas office informed that Mr. Nambuthiri had contacted DSP Vadodara and had discussed the matter with him. The office then informed me that I should contact the DSP Vadodara and discuss with him about deploying BSF/SRP forces in Kawant immediately that I had suggested to him. Following this I contacted the DSP office and discussed with him the above suggestion and also other suggestions about making preventive detentions and imposing curfew.

15. On the same day I also contact my senior colleague Dr. Anil Patel at our headquarters at Mangrol, Rajpipla. I requested him to contact Congress M.P. Mr. Madhusudan Mistry at New Delhi and ask him to intervene. Dr. Anil Patel contacted Mr. Mistry who in turn immediately contacted the State DIG and the Chief Secretary of the State and asked them to deploy effective force in Kawant.

16. I contacted the MLA of our region and he too took up the matter once again with the Chief Secretary and the DIG.

17. I then contacted a senior and reputed journalist of Gujarat Mr. Digant Oza over phone. He then approached Chief Secretary's office but since the Chief Secretary was not present in the office he left urgent message with his personal secretary to bring to attention of the CS about the Kawant situation and act immediately.

18. Rohit Prajapati and Trupti of Vadodara Kamdar Union based in Vadodara were also continuously interacting with the district administration since 10th March 2002 for deploying effective force at Kawant and were also representing that police was not handling the Kawant situation effectively.

19. Army unit did not arrived till the night of 11th March. Therefore, in the early morning of 12/02/03 at 3.30am, 135 household consisting 990 people of Muslim community were shifted under police protection. On the same day, Bohra Muslims families took shelter in the Kawant Police station in the after noon and later on in the late night these families too were shifted under police protection from Kawant to Dahod town of Gujarat. They left their houses and property exposed.

20. On the Morning of March 12th 2002, Mr. Rohit Prajapati informed me that an army platoon had left for Kawant and would reach Kawant anytime and that it would stay put up to March 16th 2002. The army unit did arrive on March 12th in the morning, staged flag march and left in about thirty minutes. While the army was conducting flag march, I was told by one of the traders that soon after the march was over the unit would leave. I panicked and called the District Collector and informed him about this. He seemed surprised and said, "this should not happen, I will call the DSP." It is a fact that the unit did leave. Later, I

also sent a fax message to the Collector and the DSP that the army had left and the people and property were left exposed.

21. The property of Muslims and Bohras was looted in the daylight of 12th and 13th of March. The police was merely a spectator. It was not that the mob was violent, it was unarmed and consisted of young children and women, but the fact was that the police had not taken any action to prevent the mob from looting and the administration had not deployed enough force. Even the simple measure like teargas or firing in the air were not resorted to by the police to prevent the mob from looting and setting fire to Muslim and Bohra's property.

22. On 13th March 2002, the looting and burning spree started from early morning and went on till late afternoon. Suddenly at about 3.15 PM Police imposed Curfew and within minutes it drove away the looting mobs. I was wondering why the police did not act in this manner the previous day and that day. Within an hour the mystery was solved and we came to know that the Collector and the DSP were visiting Kawant. I was asked to see the Collector. I went and told him that if the administration was willing to bring the situation under control and protect the Muslims and Bohras of Kawant, it could have easily done so.

23. The circumstances under which the Muslims and Bohras had to flee and their properties were looted and burnt, the panicked communities is not likely to return to Kanwat for a considerable time period and when they return it is imperative that a sizeable SRP force has to be stationed in Kanwat for a fairly long period. It is also imperative that the communities which lost all its properties should be appropriately compensated so that they can restart their lives.

ARCH - VAHINI

AT&PO. MANGROL

TA.& DIST. RAJPIPLA 393150 GUJARAT INDIA

Phone :02640 50140 ,50154