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**23**

Was there discrimination in the  
distribution of resources after the  
earthquake in Gujarat?  
Imagination, epistemology, and the  
state in western India

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**Women selling the Indian national flag on Republic Day/3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Gujarat Earthquake in 2004.**

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Editor: Professor Jude Howell

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## **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

In this paper, I analyse and reason with the patterns of discrimination evident in the reconstruction initiatives following the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat. I do so in order to explain what discrimination there was, and how and why such discrimination was related to broader patterns of social polarisation. After the earthquake, the political state of Gujarat made the headlines following widespread violence in 2002. This led to a flurry of publications in which anger and indignation led to the over-statement of the links between the government, social life in the state, and the politics of religious (Hindu-Muslim) communalism. This paper is an attempt to chip away to the impression thus created of a land consumed only by the violent compulsions of Hindu nationalism. I do so not through polemic, but ethnography, as a way of suggesting it is simply wrong to conflate state complicity in the anti-Muslim violence of 2002 with all other routine operations performed by government. Given Gujarat's reputation for Hindu nationalism, my analysis unsurprisingly confirms the scholarship of others by showing how some powerful Hindu-oriented non-governmental organisations have drawn power and resources away from the state to parade before the people as if they govern. However, more importantly, the ethnography of the mixed-fortunes of Muslims in the rubble also illustrates some of the limits to the power of the Hindu nationalists: the data shows that the Hindu nationalists have not hijacked the state in its entirety and their influence is clearly curtailed and imperfect. By clothing the Hindu nationalist in unassailably powerful terms, the academic critic, I argue, has paradoxically almost become culpable in the success of the nationalist, by conferring on their rhetoric the status of reality, and on them power.

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## Introduction

From the many months of fieldwork I have conducted on the social aftermath of the Gujarat Earthquake of 2001, three conversations about the place and character of the government in the reconstruction efforts remain vividly in my mind. The first took place in 2003, with a man who was trying to fathom how he could get compensation from the state for his house that had been badly damaged in the earthquake.<sup>2</sup> He was aware certain forms were to be completed and certificates and other documents had to be produced in order to initiate the procedure. He had gone several times to queue for the right to enquire about his application at the new offices of the Bhuj District Development Authority (BHADA), the state agency charged with the administration of the reconstruction of the badly-damaged town. Each time he reached the front of the queue, he received short shift from the officer on duty, who variously told him to come back another day or that his application needed further paperwork from other offices of the state. Each trip to these offices involved him having to take time off from his own place of work, and a journey of several kilometres. He was at his wit's end, unable to start work on a new house, and frustrated that no one was apparently willing to help him. He feared he was being discriminated against by the state, not, however, on the grounds of his religion or caste, he is Brahmin, but on the basis he had refused, loudly, to pay an unofficial discretionary sum when asked in the same office some months before. As a conclusion to his lengthy story of woe, he dramatically said: 'after the earthquake, the state has grown, it has arms everywhere but there is no one to talk to, it has become a monster without face'. Eventually, instead of losing his own face by admitting defeat and paying the bribe, he did the next best thing and paid a broker to complete the application for him, whose fee, of course, included the additional discretionary payments to officials.

The second conversation into which the state was drawn also took place in 2003 and was part of a remarkable sociological exegesis relating the incidence of death and destruction wrought by the earthquake to patterns of religious faith and practice. In this case, the man was a Sunni Muslim who lived in the southern part of Kachchh, and, although his family had not been affected in the disaster, he had been closely involved in both relief and rehabilitation programmes in Bhuj through both mosque and caste associations. According to him, the policies and actions of the state did not discriminate between Hindus and Muslims or Muslims of one kind and another. The lives of the dead were

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout I have used no names rather than real or distracting pseudonyms.

equal in their value; there was not one rate for Hindus and another for Muslims. A Muslim arm severed by falling masonry was worth the same as a Hindu arm and so forth. The same was true for the distribution of other subsistence and compensatory payments as well for the allocation of new land for housing. While the policies of the state attempted to level out social and religious differences, through the earthquake god revealed that Sunni Muslims were the favoured people. God did this by killing proportionally fewer Sunnis than Shias, reformist Sunnis and Hindus. For this man, the egalitarian levelling mechanisms put into action by the state after the earthquake were simply convenient methods of disguising the pattern of just social hierarchy god had revealed in the disaster, in that way, and in that way alone, was the state acting against the interests of Muslims.

The third conversation occurred a year later in an almost-plush air-conditioned office in the government secretariat in the state capital, Gandhinagar. I had gone to interview a senior bureaucrat who had been transferred to the position of Collector of Kachchh (chief administrator of the district, elsewhere in India known as the District Magistrate) a few days after the earthquake to oversee relief efforts. Subsequently, he had moved to higher things and was then one of the principal advisors to the office of the Chief Minister of Gujarat. I had never met him in Bhuj, but had heard curious things about him. According to many people I had spoken to in the town, in the weeks after the earthquake he wandered around the compound of the Collectorate offering a reassuring touch or hug to the beleaguered who came his way. This was the state, quite literally, reaching out to touch and stroke the suffering. He confirmed these touching stories to be true, without any acknowledgement that this was unusual behaviour for a senior bureaucrat. He had his own philosophical and humanitarian logic for this practice that need not detain us here. What he said in addition however, has detained my thoughts, and clearly inspired his own administrative career: 'when god fails you, what is left? The state'. The failing of god was, of course, the earthquake.

The study of everyday experiences and life of the state is now conventional academic terrain, accurately charted for South Asia more generally by political scientists such as Sudipta Kaviraj (1984) and geographers such as Stuart Corbridge (2005). Indeed, the literature is considerable, and well beyond my means to engage with it here. In much of the recent anthropological literature however, there is an air of conspiracy as if the state was, *de facto*, a force for the suppression of human exuberance. On the other hand,

there also appears to be an interest in the way states violating constitutional norms, which is taken as evidence revealing to hidden agendas of conspirators. Seldom, is there remark about states acting over and above their constitutional commitments as they appear to do in the aftermath of natural disasters such as earthquakes. Despite the many attempts to erode the idea that the state is an homogenous entity that performs in routinised ways, it still appears to me that the default position in the literature is that states know what they are doing, or at least as if they consciously and deliberately work in the interests of capital, or a majority population of some description. Such arrangements are obviously possibilities; but it is clear that states may not always know what they are doing and that they may work tangentially (deliberately or otherwise) to the secret and vested interests they are held to represent.

In the broader conversations of which my three opening extracts were part, not one of the men distinguished between administration and political governance, as political scientists often do. Perhaps they assumed I knew all about the complicated relationships between bureaucrat and politician, or, perhaps, it did not appear to them to be a particularly important distinction. Alternatively, however, I suspect they were thinking of something else altogether when talking about the state, something more magical and intangible. The state variously appears as a corrupt and corrupting tide, a just mechanism for counting and distribution on the one hand and a font for ideology on the other, and a reassuring and cathartic presence in the lives of the needy. Together, the example offered by the three men dispatch the idea that there is any single or systematic way in which Gujaratis either anticipate or experience the state. This observation is the starting point for what follows, not the point of what follows.

For my friends and informants, the conditions and appearance of the state vary. The state may be imminent, anonymous, alienating, and may readily appear in the hug of a bureaucrat, as well as in cash or in the disconsolate pout of an avaricious *babu*. As we shall see later, the state may also appear in the form of religious organisations, bulldozers and town plans. Although the three characterisations of the state differ, together they represent something more general: the state is called upon as an explanatory and imaginative device that exists quite independently of the armed forces, bureaucracy, and government. The three examples also have a counter-intuitive optimism about them (which I would not like to think is unrepresentative), enough to



warrant a re-examination of some of the conventional wisdom about the condition of the state in Gujarat.

Violence in Ahmedabad, with which the violence of 2002 is often somewhat inaccurately conflated, has a long history. Spodek (1989) for example shows how organised violence in the 1980s emerged from political conspiracies, police involvement, and changing economic opportunities. In contrast, Shani recounts how the same violence had roots in changing patterns of class, caste and status in the city (2005; also see Engineer 1985a, 1985b). In the case of the 2002 violence, very similar arguments have been drawn upon to explain what happened on the ground (see Engineer 2003; Prakash 2003; Shani 2005; Varshney 2002; Varadarajan 2002). Stepping back somewhat from the specifics of the violence and into the broader context, there is a significant body of work showing the broader consequences of shifting patterns of government in Gujarat (see Breman 2004; Simpson 2006; Sud 2006; Yagnik and Sheth 2002). Likewise, in a provocative article on the politics of culpability, Nandini Sundar argues that in Gujarat 'by transforming ordinary Muslims into potential terrorists, the RSS both dehumanises them and makes them culpable for their own victimhood' (2004: 155). She attempts to critically place the perpetrators and supporters of violence within broad and powerful transnational discourses, not as a way of condoning violence but as a way of creating the possibility of alternative conversations. Sundar's broader aim therefore is to unmask the state's use of culpability as a way of disguising both its own failings and aims and to open new spaces for discussion. What remains of this paper is influenced by the sociology to which I have referred, as well as by Sundar's call for an engagement with violence, or, more accurately in this instance, ideas about violence and culpability.

Largely drowning out the sociology however has been a broader and much more influential populist literature in which Hindu nationalism and the government in particular has been called to account. This paper is animated by some of the assumptions on which this new body of popular academic writing critical of Hindu nationalism generally and of the Gujarat state in particular is based. In my view, some writing critical of the state-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Hindutva nexus in Gujarat (as authors of such work see it), as with similar writing on the Shiv Sena in neighbouring Maharashtra, has unwittingly added both grist and mountains of prime wheat to the nationalist's well-oiled mill. I do not of course mean such critics have adopted the ideas and chants of Hindu nationalism; rather, the large number of books and articles that have appeared since the religious

violence of 2002 has done little more than to confirm the impression that Gujarat is in the grips of endemic communal hatred, in which the state and an undifferentiated and unified Hindu mass has systematically organised – through both violent and non-violent means – the creation of a beleaguered and vulnerable Muslim minority.

Those critical of statecraft in Gujarat have contributed to enlivening the categories of hatred both inside and outside the state. Their criticism, rather than undermining the rule of the BJP, has, in fact, added directly to the reputation of the Chief Minister among his followers, who are, lest the uncomfortable fact be forgotten, the clear majority of thirty-or-so million voters in Gujarat. Furthermore, the critics have essentially contributed to elaborating the myth at the heart of popular representations of the state, conducting their own arguments almost exclusively in the terms of the nationalists, rather than attempting to open alternative critical spaces.

Perhaps the central myth of popular Hindu nationalism in Gujarat is that Muslims are uninterested in participating in the democratic processes of modern India. Now, in an attempt to deny the validity of the myth, the critic will rightly point out that this idea is animated by bad history and populist xenophobia. Here, the critic is appealing to a sense of universal moral truth, where the truth of liberal history is greater than selective nationalistic revisionism. Most probably, the critic is right so far. Then, the critic will point out that this myth translates into direct discrimination by the state against Muslims. Here, however, the critic seems to exchange an appeal to universal truth for their own selective reading of the evidence. No one would deny, in the most general sense, Hindus and Muslims fair differently in the terms of economy, mainstream educational statistics, and political representation in Gujarat. What I am contesting, however, is the assumption that this differentiation has arisen simply because the state distributes its largesse on the basis of religious categories, any more fundamentally than it does on the basis of gender, caste or class. On a day-to-day basis, the evidence of such systematic discrimination is hardly overwhelming. The critic, however, will compensate for this epistemological deficiency by pointing to the state's involvement in the public and vindictive violence against Muslims in 2002, a topic to which I return at the end. The scale of this outrage was such that the critic presents it as if it should simply drown out the fact that evidence of systematic discrimination against Muslims, over and above other marginal groups, is harder to come by. While this strategy is morally persuasive, it is poor methodological

reasoning, and relies, almost it seems deliberately, on a confusion of the terms 'government', 'politics', 'bureaucracy' as well as the 'rhetoric' and 'practices of the state'.

It seems to me, the rhetoric of Hindutva used by a politician desperately campaigning for a stake in (or for a second or third chance at) office is quite different to the routine functioning of a professional administration. However mundane this observation may seem, I wish to spell out in concrete terms what I mean because the point seems crucial. The rhetoric of the campaigning or proselytising politician is a quite literally a series of words, a speech, designed to enchant the electorate, and often put together by skilled professional writers. The composite elements of such speeches have long and colourful histories and can draw on a vast array of readymade and understood idioms. These may include, religious mythology, history, and, most popularly, the demonic characters of others. This 'other' may be rival political parties, countries, causes or religious groups. Whether the rhetoric of the political speech translates into workable political practices is a matter for debate, but, such rhetoric clearly does not lend itself easily to a multi-layered administrative service whose personnel and procedures typically predate the coming of the successful politician. The various strands of the administration are mostly staffed by those in long-term careers who are involved in a complex world of targets, audits, departmental rivalry, and systems of promotion and transfer. The epistemological mistake perhaps made by many critics of the state in Gujarat is to conflate the functioning of the civil administration with the heated words of politicians. How, for example, and without wishing to make light of bad, does a replica of Ram's chariot passing through rural Gujarat translate into workable policies on pensions, pollution control, or restrictions on the labour of children? I am, of course, well aware that elected politicians exert influence over non-elected civil servants at all levels, and sometimes vice versa, but my bone is with the critic's assumption that words and the social life of administrative procedure can simply be confused. Yet, despite my caution, it is clear that the resources of the state do not flow to Hindu and Muslim populations in the same way and to the same effect, although data on this is hard to come by. In my view then, if the administration is not to blame in a straightforward sense, then who or what is?

The ethnography does not provide a single answer to this question. Sometimes, there are officers within the administration who prejudice the interests of Muslims through their behaviour, but, more often than not, patterns of discrimination emerge as a secondary or even tertiary consequence of policy, as policy interacts in unpredictable, and, sometimes,

quite counter-intuitive ways with the savage world of social hierarchy, class and other interest groups of various kinds. It is such processes that I wish to animate in the main body of the paper by answering the question: was there discrimination in the distribution of resources after the earthquake in Gujarat?

Before I get into the nooks and crannies of this ethnography, however, I wish to briefly address what I consider to be the greatest contribution of the critics to the Hindu nationalist cause.

In many ways, Muslims in Gujarat have become quite literally a 'minority interest group', and, as such, are often excluded from the activities of the majority, this is particularly apparent in areas such as housing and employment. In part, this has become about because some vocal politicians have said that Muslims are a threat to the security, peace and prosperity of Gujarat. Given this impression of danger, Hindus shun interactions with Muslims and occasionally threaten violence. Muslims sensibly avoid situations of potential conflict and group together for safety, appear secretive and isolationist and thus *appear* to be uninterested in participating in the democratic process. The politician therefore appears to be offering protection for the Hindu majority against the Muslim minority, a minority partially, but not exclusively, of his own making and description. In this way, through its very actions, the political machinery around the state appears to enliven its own central legitimising and foundational myth which is that Muslims are uninterested in the modern Indian democracy.

The politician who contributes to the creation of a feared and marginalized Muslim minority probably has some reason for doing so. He may, for example, want to create a constituency of Hindu voters who are unified in their animosity and fear in order to gain or retain office for himself. He may, indeed, believe what he is saying to be true. He may also find it expedient to stress and re-stress the 'Muslim problem' because it is popular and has a common history readily reproduced in speeches. Alternatively, he may find the 'Muslim problem' a useful way of disguising other issues. Here, I also feel the critic who focuses on the state-BJP-Hindutva nexus also contributes to the disguise of other issues. The over-bearing and disproportional focus on Hindu nationalism and the role of anti-Muslim politics in Gujarat has simply had the effect of side-lining very important sociological and political issues such inter-Hindu-caste politics, discussions on the legalisation of alcohol, urban-rural tensions, poverty, environmental degradation, and the social implications of rapid industrialisation. Discrimination against Muslims reveals but

one social cleavage in Gujarat, there are many others which are mostly being ignored. Arguably, the liberal and critical focus on the plight of Muslims in Gujarat (as it currently exists) is damaging primarily to Muslims themselves. The focus on Muslims animates the categories of hatred at the expense of other issues which could effectively unpick the stitches that hold an uneasy coalition of Hindu voters in the spell of the BJP.

## **Was there discrimination in the distribution of resources after the earthquake in Gujarat?**

Over the seven years since the earthquake of 2001, I have conducted around 18 months of ethnographic research in Kachchh District, mainly on the social consequences of the disaster. I had conducted research in the region in the late 1990s and knew some families affected by the earthquake. I do not think I could have conducted this research had it not have been for the fact that in many cases I had also known and missed the people for whom Kachchhis were also grieving. Whenever I have presented the findings of this research in public I have *always* been asked (no matter what my topic or title of my talk) some variant of the question: was there discrimination in the distribution of resources after the earthquake?

As the years have passed, and the ethnography has settled in my thoughts, I have found it increasingly difficult to give a satisfactory answer to this question. Those who typically ask this question do so because they are activists, have political concerns about recent events in Gujarat, or because they have a broader interest in religious or caste communalism in crisis situations. I have generally found, however, that those people who ask this question largely do so assuming that they know what the answer is, whether or not they have any experience in Gujarat. They know *a priori* that Muslims were discriminated against and, to a lesser extent, that there were certain patterns of favouritism in the distribution of aid along the caste lines. How exactly people can be so confident (most of whom who only know about the event through having read about it) that there was such widespread discrimination remains something of a mystery to me. There was of course media coverage at the time suggesting discrimination, but there were also many tales of compassion and generosity to counter this. I suspect however the primary reason for the confidence of the questioners is that their question simply repeats the established set of ideas I have already discussed which provide a ready framework for understanding politics in Gujarat: in Gujarat, Muslims are discriminated against, as are Harijans to a lesser degree. In a sense, one question and one line of reasoning seem to fit all as far as the watchers of the state are concerned. They could have asked other questions which, in my view, would have allowed very different stories of discrimination to be told, if discrimination is where critical focus must rest.

## **The earthquake**

The earthquake struck in the morning on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2001. It severely damaged three major towns and hundreds of villages in eastern Kachchh. The dust settled, corpses were removed, precious things were rescued or stolen from the rubble, and temporary shelters and food supply chains were established. In the coming weeks, as the emergency response teams left for home, people faced the task of rebuilding their houses, livelihoods and relationships in a ruined landscape. There was no epidemic or any sustained lack of food or water, the humanitarian crisis, such as it was, lay in the lack of shelter and in the widespread sense of loss and grief for the 13,000 or so who lost their lives. The state was criticised for being slow to respond, but government offices in Bhuj were damaged, and officials could no more escape death and disruption than anyone else. The Collector initially ran his office from his car. Power and communications were restored rapidly. The army and large-scale private enterprise provided machinery, personnel and co-ordination for much of the relief work. The state gave emergency cash payments to all, friends of mine, feeling the payment unnecessary, donated this money to needy charities working elsewhere in India. From the outset, there was a surfeit of assistance of all kinds.

There was a scramble to give and receive aid, which was inevitably connected to party politics (see Simpson and Corbridge 2006) and nostalgia for what was lost (see Simpson 2005); likewise, Islamic organisations also took the opportunity to consolidate their influence. In the countryside, villages were rapidly rebuilt through 'public-private partnerships'. The state largely borrowed its share from international development banks. An astonishing range of organisations were let loose in the countryside, ranging from toothpaste manufacturers and radio stations to established aid givers and religious outfits. In the process, a variety of new political and religious ideologies were inscribed on the landscape of rural Kachchh (see Simpson 2004). At the time, these efforts seemed pernicious, particularly when driven by the political and religious aims of the private organisation and their auditors rather than by the requirements of the villagers. Such interventions were frequently associated with various types of proselytisation (the keenest proselytisers were Hindu sects intent on luring other Hindus to their fold). In some cases, religious organisations built temples in the new village and installed managers to ensure that the beneficiaries attended that temple regularly. In other cases, informal village-wide associations were made with political parties in exchange for new

houses (a bloc vote for Congress in exchange for a new village). With a few years hindsight however, these interventions seem quite innocent in scale and ambition when held up against broader shifts that have taken place. Now, in early 2008, the village managers have largely deserted their posts, finding the task of policing the errant quite impossible, and a great many political unions have dissolved on the tide of subsequent happenings.

In Bhuj, the administrative centre of Kachchh from where most of my data is drawn, people considered themselves to be living through a 'second earthquake' for two to three years after the disaster as the state seemed to impose the weight of its understandable hesitancy on the beleaguered. The scale of the task was enormous, as were the range of opportunities to improve housing, urban design, and infrastructure. This would all prove to take time, thought, and research, as plans had to be drawn up, consultation exercises managed, and contracts and tenders issued. Initially, the state produced poorly thought-out policies which caused extreme confusion and directly contributed to the corruption of resources. These policies were of course not without precedent, as they drew on experience from the Latur earthquake in Maharashtra and the cyclone that ravaged Kachchh in the late 1990s; however, policies that under normal circumstances would take years to produce were put together hastily. The notable ones related to the public-private reconstruction scheme for rural areas, to which I have already referred; to the establishment of Area Development Authorities in the principle towns of Kachchh, which required a re-configuration the local administration; to building design and regulatory codes for earthquake resistant housing; and to the taxation privileges of new industry locating in the region. All these policies required subsequent modification, and new layers of bureaucracy, as new offices and personnel began to appear in Bhuj.

For many ordinary people, surviving the policies and actions of the state became a full-time job for some years after the earthquake. Many busied themselves with the details of the various compensation packages. Initially, compensation schemes were available for the death of relatives, the loss of body parts, and damage to property. Later, compensation also became available for property destroyed to make way for the new town plans. There were also enterprise grants, through which the state improbably financed the mushrooming of private beauty parlours. Others studied new building codes and the operation of the new government offices, such as BHADA, established to oversee the reconstruction of Bhuj. Private brokers emerged between the people and the



new unfamiliar regulations of the state, local newspapers devoted pages to explaining these new regulations to their readers. For others, there was time for little more than staying one step ahead of the bulldozers, as the rubble was cleared. The complexities and bureaucracy of urban reconstruction, the sheer size of the task, and clear divisions in popular opinion undoubtedly contributed to delays in policy design and implementation. There were some, for example, who thought Bhuj should be built anew elsewhere; others favoured rebuilding it the way it had been. For a long time, however, caught between these two alternatives, there appeared to be no plan and people became angry and protested. Then it was decided to rebuild Bhuj where it had been, allowing room for future expansion.

Then, as the months became years, concern shifted to building permanent shelters, the implications of having lost documents relating to property and finance and the continuing lack of co-ordination. Later, it was planning considerations, policies and payments for rubble clearance, relative levels of compensation and baffling questions about the rights of tenants and apartment owners that preoccupied many. There were surveys and resurveys, and an utterly mystifying system of damage classification was introduced. Later still, there were gnawing questions about the location and design of permanent housing and the scale and scope of new infrastructure. Meanwhile, as these important debates raged, large numbers of people found good reason why their homes, which had survived the earthquake, should not be destroyed to make way for new roads or to conform to new safety regulations. It appeared to many people as if the state was taking away property to make way for these new roads without compensation. This caused widespread anxiety and resulted in a number of suicides. To an extent, the tragedy of these suicides stood as a metaphor for the popular perceptions of maladministration and alienation at the time. It was widely sensed that profiteering contractors, mostly from distant northern India, descended on the town at night with noisy and satanic machinery and gangs of feral labourers to demolish what remained of the civil old town. The local citizenry, feeling alienated, engaged in letter writing campaigns, hunger strikes, and protest marches against the state. These protests, interestingly, always centred around the offices of the Collector, rather than around particular government departments, or the homes and offices of politicians. Some called for an independent Kachchh or for direct rule from Delhi, free from the shackles of step-motherly Gujarat. The protesters felt that the state was imposing new regimes upon their town that were quite alien to the way things had been organised before the earthquake.

While many worried about money and shelter, for others there was a plentiful supply of 'disaster boom' cash. Those who had regularised property but had previously scraped by on low wages were suddenly cash rich because of the compensation schemes. The money was intended for new housing but agencies selling motorbikes and television sets prospered. Many, encouraged by the emergent class of brokers, made false claims for compensation and for enterprise grants. Corruption was an open secret in which it often seemed as if the whole town was complicit; very few could point accusatory fingers at others from the security of innocence. In 2004, audits revealed some of the false claims and many beneficiaries, having already disposed of the cash, faced the worry of further debt or imprisonment as well as the problems associated with a lack of funds for the construction of a permanent shelter. There are others, also worth a mention, whose lives and properties were unscathed by the earthquake, who have, as the years pass, grown tired of the topic and the lack of attention the state pays to their mundane needs.

In popular thinking about the disaster and the aftermath there is a conflation of the 'obvious' and widely-reported instances of religious and caste discrimination in the immediate aftermath of the disaster and patterns of community polarisation in the longer term, and reports of community polarisation that followed in the wake of the violence of 2002. Contrary to this line of thought however, I wish to suggest that on the ground there was no 'obvious' pattern of wholesale discrimination in the initial phases along the lines of the generic Hindu, Muslim and Harijan or Dalit categories as has often been suggested, and, what incidents there were, generally appear to have been more of chance than design. Some campaign groups have suggested the tripartite division of the populous on religious and caste lines continued into the rehabilitation phase. Having suggested this pattern was not systematically present in the relief phase, I now want to suggest it was not simply present later phases of reconstruction either. What may superficially resemble continuations of the non-existent initial pattern are in fact nothing of the sort and are to be explained more accurately by looking at the unforeseen consequences of the actions of the state on a diverse population organised by history in particular ways. My argument here is that there was a riot of discrimination in all directions after the earthquake, but there is little evidence to suggest this was systematic and planned by the state. More importantly however, I would like to suggest there have greater biases within the process of reconstruction which have largely gone without mention, but reflect some of the many tensions within Gujarat, the focus on the plight of Muslims helps to disguise.

## **Discrimination in the distribution of relief?**

The first reports from Gujarat suggested the disaster had eroded religious and class differences as people worked together in response to crisis. Everyone who followed news coverage of the disaster will recall such headlines were soon replaced by stories of social polarisation. Media reports suggested widespread discrimination in the distribution of relief materials such that Dalits and Muslims were denied resources, with headlines such as 'Discriminating against the distressed in a democracy'.<sup>3</sup> It is tempting to ask however, why anyone should have expected the allocation of relief to be equitable given that the primary distributive mechanism in India, the state, is often legally discriminatory and popularly known to be imperfect. Furthermore, private organisations inevitably continued to operate through their own pre-existent networks of patronage and knowledge, however exclusive and self-interested they may have been.

The response of institutions is however perhaps the less important half of the story because villagers also had pre-existent rivalries and squabbled in the rubble accordingly. Some areas were more accessible to the relief teams and received more aid, a trend compounded by the lack of maps. Some villages were better at putting signs on highways to direct aid convoys than their neighbours; some turned this into a competitive art form and lured journalists and activists with their tales of neglect. The damaged concrete houses of wealthier villages were more suggestive of devastation to relief convoys travelling in strange lands than the piles of rubble that the houses of the poor had become in the earthquake, relief landed at the broken doors of the wealthy. Despite the losses of the disaster, the villagers were unable to forget their own history. They clearly recalled friendships and religious and caste ties when it came to distributing relief materials. Those with political contacts in the administration, political parties or elsewhere sensibly exploited these connections; those without had to rely, often with mixed success, on the goodwill of others. Some were apparently too 'proud' to accept aid (see Mehta 2001: 2933) but there were many others who simply did not require random aid of uncertain or questionable provenance, when the members of their village religious and caste committees in Bombay and overseas were providing appropriate supplies; this was as true for wealthier Muslims and Harijans as it was Hindus.

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<sup>3</sup> As one example among many see Kuldip Nayar writing in the *Financial Express*, 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2001.

Taken as a whole, the reports of discrimination are haphazard and evidence is seldom drawn from eye-witness accounts (see Jigyasu 2001). Of course there was widespread discrimination but nothing suggests it was wholesale or systematic. Even aid givers were treated selectively, politicians created a fuss about receiving papal aid, and turned a critical gaze on all Christian organisations working in the region; some Christians subsequently had rocks thrown at them. Likewise, the disparate Muslim groups of Kachchh pooled their resources to place advertisements in local newspapers warning people not to accept aid from Ahmediya missionaries (a sect originating in Pakistan in the early twentieth century) because they were heretics. Society continued to operate as it had done before the earthquake, only it had not occurred to anyone to write the telling headline 'Discriminating against the distressed in a democracy day before earthquake'.

## **Contemporary politics and reconstruction**

Many of the media complaints about discrimination were written as needling political objection to the activities of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the distribution of relief. The RSS was at the forefront of relief efforts in Kachchh, often operating before the state, providing relief and appropriate death rituals for Hindu corpses. The RSS is a vast organisation, running thousands of schools and camps to instil suitable moral values and produce leaders for a nascent Hindu India; it was through these networks that they were able to readily mobilise resources and personnel. Indeed, the RSS made significant inroads to Kachchh following its efforts and through pre-existent links with media, civic and political organisations. The entry of the RSS is where the debate gets more complicated, and the tempers of 'secular' social workers dissolve. The RSS came to Kachchh to fly their flag, and to spread the ideals of their organisation, as, it should be pointed out, did just about every other religious and political outfit in western India. In the case of the RSS however, the organisation clearly had the explicit support of the ruling BJP and other organisations within the so-called Sangh parivar (the 'family of Hindu nationalist organisations') notably the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and sections of the highly influential Swaminarayan sect.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, the RSS became a simple extension of the state in the early days after the earthquake. Together, however, these organisations blur the boundaries between the state and people through their activities and personnel. Their successes have not simply been well planned but have emerged at the confluence of a number of related processes, in which cause and effect are difficult to separate. These processes are: the rise of support for a Hindu form of nationalism at a popular level, the implementation of neo-liberal economic reforms, and the deregulation of state functions. The coincidence of these factors in the post-earthquake landscape gave the Sangh parivar plenty of opportunity to manoeuvre as the state drew up the new policies and created new administrative structures to address the crisis.

In the post-earthquake landscape, the influential space between people and state has been colonised by nationalist organisations which have grown strong from the spoils of top-down devolution. Simultaneously, they have siphoned power from the grassroots

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<sup>4</sup> The VHP campaigns for the revival of the signs of Hindu might and amity. Academic writing conventionally stops short of calling these organisations 'civil society' (see Varshney 2002 for example) because of their association with 'un-civility'. However, it would seem analytically impossible to separate such organisations from others such as women's groups, professional unions and cultural organisations which are conventionally thought of as 'civil society'.

which, at least in the terms of popular perception, are increasingly unable to find representation in the fading political structures of yore. Together, these processes have enabled the transformation, and thus to some extent the popular 're-imagination', of the state as an 'Hindu' entity personified primarily by elite and non-elected intermediaries. Legislative and empirical shifts in patterns of governance have created sets of relationships whereby political elites can mobilise anti-Muslim or anti-Christian sentiments for their own purposes, whilst simultaneously disavowing any connection and thus appearing merely supine in patterns of discrimination. It is in this realm of nationalist civil society where ideas and practices of discrimination reverberate and echo, and Muslims tend to be side-lined. This is not to say of course that the state is universally good and nationalist civil society is corrupt with self-interest.

Since the earthquake, there have been thousands of ceremonies to inaugurate development projects. At the most high-profile of such functions, the guest of honour is normally surrounded by a swarm of local politicians whose identities are suffused with those of the social and welfare groups in which they also hold office. To the right of the politicians will sit a consort of administrative officers, often looking slightly starched and uncomfortable in such a spotlight. On the opposite side of the stage, there are often saffron-clad saints, most commonly from the Swaminarayan order. This hierarchical order has been impressed on the population in Kachchh through repeated public displays, to the point that this order represents the state for many people. While there may well be a mismatch between popular perceptions and the actual distribution of power between the politician, the administrator and the saint, such confusion is easily forgiven as the triumvirate often arrive in the same vehicles and busy themselves whispering important confidences to one another before ceremonial procedures start. If anything, this would suggest that rather than the state stepping in to compensate for the failings of god, god has been drafted in as an aid to the state, to mediate between it and its Hindu people.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Space precludes lengthy discussion of the issue, but one of the most remarkable developments to have occurred parallel to the rise of the BJP in Gujarat has been the growth of the Swaminarayan sect and that of Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) in particular. The sect has developed extremely close links with the state, their saints often presiding over government functions. They have constructed a spectacularly large temple adjacent to state buildings in the capital Gandhinagar, which due to the various animated and electronic displays within has become a very popular place for worship and tourism. The sect has also recently constructed the world's largest Hindu temple in Delhi, perhaps in anticipation of the Chief Minister of Gujarat's bid to take over the national leadership of the BJP.

Much of the Sangh parivar's success seems to have been serendipitous, cemented through elective affinities between their interests and social organisations such as Rotary and Lions clubs, trade and industrial associations, temple and pilgrimage committees, caste organisations, history societies, educational trusts, local newspapers and organisations that offer access to charismatic religious leaders such as Murari Bapu, Sitaram Bapu, as well as the saints of the various Swaminarayan orders. It is at this level that most people experience the state, despite the fact that none of these organisations are 'governmental' in any conventional sense of the term. I do not simply mean these organisations form a powerful lobby, but that they are instrumental in extracting resources from the state, have a strong influence on policy, and can be seen like a state to be building villages and so forth.

Given the uneven character and spread of the state in Gujarat, it is to such organisations people turn to for assistance in securing pensions, housing allowances, compensation and injury payments, and building permissions from the local administration. Cushioned by such organisations, brokers may extract compensation from the state on behalf of harried individuals, or influence the decision to award a particular organisation with a public-private partnership for the reconstruction of earthquake affected villages. However, such brokers do not simply facilitate the downwards flow of resources from the state to people; they also unevenly influence the upward flows. They may also influence who is compelled to pay municipal rents and at what level, whose sales tax records are scrutinised, whose commercial encroachments onto highways are overlooked, who is granted building permission for structures on public water bodies and to whom state land is released for sale in areas proximate to or within the boundaries of future industrial developments. In Kachchh, such intermediary roles tend to be controlled by the dominant castes who support the BJP and who have strong affinities with the RSS and VHP. These castes (in the broad sense of the term) are Brahmins, Jains, mercantile Hindus and, in somewhat different ways, Patels in rural and semi-rural areas. These groups dominate commerce, industry, educational institutions, local media and the interests of the landed classes. They have also benefited most from the expanding neo-liberal economy. The membership and networks of many of these organisations coincide, so that a merchant may be a member of his caste association, professional guild and the Rotary Club and enjoy the influence of his comrades in each. These networks also inevitably overlap with those the local municipality, the committee memberships of the local offices of political parties, commerce and temple committees and devotional constitutions. And, while the

galactic polity of these organisations holds the city walls, they also create dependents in the countryside, reliant on their largesse for representation and resources.

In contrast, the closed civil society networks of Muslims, while offering similar nests of nepotistic comfort within the community, simply cannot bridge the gap between their people and the state, and are necessarily excluded from the galactic polity of the saffron clad.

This image of a state hijacked by political Hinduism is certainly very strong in both popular imagination in Kachchh and in academic writing, but it too is an image with definite empirical limits. Popular rhetoric establishes an intimate link between the state and political Hinduism, as if the state worked solely for Hindus and had abandoned Muslims or, worked to defend Hindu interests from Muslim predations – depending on whether Muslim or Hindu is talking. There is however nothing in the statutes or practices of the state to suggest the mostly Hindu bureaucrats should not reallocate houses to rural Muslims or provide compensation payments to urban Muslims whose property has been destroyed. The conspiracy does not run that far into the administration, and I have only very infrequently heard Muslims, no matter how outspoken the individual or private the circumstance, suggest that it might.

I am not suggesting that Muslims were entirely happy with their lot because when they thought it worthwhile they protested quite vehemently, for example, at the destruction of Muslim religious buildings and graveyards as Bhuj was rebuilt. The requisition of a portion of land surrounding the *eid garh* to make way for a wider road caused particular consternation, a few hundred Muslims took to the streets to protest and the police came out armed with sticks and sent them home again. The question of whether BHADA and the other planning agencies vindictively took the opportunity to destroy a disproportionate number of Muslim religious buildings in Bhuj as part of the new urban plan is an extremely vexed one, but in many ways it is no different to the other questions of post-earthquake discrimination I discuss in the following pages. I have taken a keen interest in this matter over the last seven years. It is undeniably true that a greater number of sites of significance to Muslims fell before the bulldozers to make way for new roads than equivalent Hindu structures. Somewhat to my surprise, senior Muslim leaders repeatedly told me there was no evidence of deliberate discrimination against their architecture, it was simply that the old town, where most of the reconfiguration of urban space took



place, was where most Muslims lived, where most of their monuments were, and around which their graveyards had expanded over the centuries. The destruction, they said, was necessary for the improvement of their welfare and quality of their lives. It was clearly not the first time in the history of Bhuj that the graveyards had been bulldozed to make way for new roads. Other Muslims, whose tongues were less disciplined than those of their community leaders, saw the destruction of the tombs as a profound insult to the Muslims of Bhuj and to the history of the town. The former President of the Muslim Graveyard Committee said it was an attempt to write Muslims out of the history of the town. He took the opportunity however of pointing out that because the graveyards were so intimately related to the fabric of the old town, Bhuj must have originally been a Muslim settlement. This really annoyed the Hindu nationalist historians who were busy writing their own fitting history for post-earthquake Bhuj (see Simpson 2007 for more on this); the Muslim historian had to lay low for a while. Just to further confuse the picture, there were also concerted and effective campaigns, mostly conducted by upper-caste Hindus interested in the preservation of the town's heritage, to save a number of architectural gems associated with Muslims – in which Muslim leaders had apparently no interest.

The ebb and flow of interest and opinion evident here must caution against the alluring conclusion that the state took the opportunity of erasing Muslim heritage. Furthermore, the Muslim's mausoleums were not the only things to fall before the bulldozers. A statue of Gandhi was toppled and left to lie unceremoniously amid the rubble. Some of the finest nineteenth century mercantile houses and temples were first plundered for their architectural detail and later demolished. One side a popular library was deliberately bulldozed while still full of books and its custodian almost still at his desk. But, most telling of all, is the way the administration responded to the critical protests of the various mercantile associations over the widening of the main bazaars in old Bhuj. This mercantile community is the archetypal and traditional support base of the BJP, the heart of the conspiracy of interests I discussed previously. If there was going to be straightforward evidence of collusion between the state and its support base it ought to be found here. Through their professional associations, and the host of other lesser charitable and cultural associations over which they preside, the merchants lobbied for the main bazaars to be preserved as they were, exempt from new planning regulations. Their campaign, not surprisingly, was endorsed by most local politicians and councillors, who were also part of the same network of caste and nationalist civil society organisations as the merchants.

The Collector of the time went to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate that no-one was exempt from the new regulations, no matter how influential. In order to prove this, he had to target the property of influential people, those such as wealthy merchants with political clout. He was also irritated at the merchant's attempts to bypass his authority and to secure exemption from the planning regulations from figures higher up in the state. There were also rumours that the merchant's campaigned for him to be transferred. The 'cutting' of the bazaar was the most astonishing acts of post-earthquake destruction to take place in the town. The road was around one meter too narrow to meet the minimum requirements in the new planning codes. Instead of forgetting about the complicated matter, the administration lopped around 50cm (on average) off the front of each shop. This not only caused tremendous disruption, anger and expense, it probably left the bazaar more dangerous than before the earthquake as structural beams and columns in the frontages were also removed. Then, perhaps for the government to win back the support of the jaded merchants, the 'new' disfigured bazaar was inaugurated by the Chief Minister.

This shows the bureaucracy and networks of political civil society can work against one another and towards different goals, and that the nepotistic networks between society and state are fallible. It also shows that bureaucrats are not simply the lackeys of the saffron agenda, and that an appeal to universal justice (for whatever reason) was evident in the rubble as new plans were implemented. Arguably, however, for the Collector, 'justice' for his own political critics became an obsessive crusade, and, at times, he seemed more interested in demolishing the old buildings of the well-connected that violated building codes than he was in building new ones for the many thousands of ordinary people who were still in temporary shelters.

## **Reconstruction in rural areas**

My Muslim friends are generally not of the opinion the state is pitched against them – they know patterns of discrimination occur because they are largely excluded from the most efficacious and profitable networks of nationalist civil society. There is little to suggest a deliberate diversion of funds away from Muslims by the state after the earthquake; yet, the residential patterns of Muslims, Hindus and Harijans throughout Kachchh, in both rural and urban areas, have altered quite dramatically. Throughout the district, boundaries between the communities have become more clearly defined. There seem to be two developments worthy of particular attention in rural areas. First, the process through which particular religious and nationalistic ideologies have been inscribed on to the rural landscape, introducing certain new social biases and hierarchies to rural areas. Second, how some groups of people took the opportunity to move quite large distances within Kachchh after the earthquake. I will address some of the trends in rural areas first, before attending to the questions of polarisation and discrimination in the urban areas.

The need to imagine a future for stricken towns, villages and people, as well as the types of philanthropy spawned by the earthquake, illustrate practical aspects of new forms of political power and influence in Gujarat. As part of the rehabilitation of rural areas the state announced a 'village adoption scheme' for it to work alongside private interest groups. In short, the organisations with clear links to the BJP Government received permission to adopt the most prestigious sites around the epicentre and along the main highway into Kachchh. They were also initially the most successful at securing land, utilities, and other kinds of infrastructure for the settlements they have reconstructed. Reflected in the post-earthquake redesign of some of these rural villages the 'Hindutva agenda' now finds expression in new settlement names, segregated housing and, importantly, in the growth of support for particular kinds of Hinduism.

In a sense, various understandings of Hindutva have offered a straightforward (from the perspective of its proponents) paradigm for some planners, social workers and charitable institutions working in the region. Using the ideals given by this political vision it became possible to build villages with particular kinds of schools and social services, just as it became possible to determine who would populate the settlement and how different kinds of people would be distributed throughout its carefully designed streets. In some cases,

Muslims, Dalits and others were clearly and deliberately excluded from these projects, having to rely on other organisations for support. In many other cases however, these groups were given markedly inferior houses far from the centre of the new village, as new forms of caste and hegemony were inscribed through the new patterns of housing.

Hundreds of villages were reconstructed through public private partnerships; many of the highest profile villages were rebuilt by the organisations of Hindu nationalism. When the ideological components of these villages (the choice of street and neighbourhood names, the distribution and selection of the population, and the deities and intellectual ideas around which the village is constructed) are compared it is quite evident that even among the organisations with close links to the BJP that 'Hindutva' is a simplifying and homogenising term that collapses a series of similar but different and competing philosophies. The right-wing village builders have generally constructed settlements from the similar building blocks: an image of the nation, an ideal relationship between different castes, temple worship of various kinds, ritualised social practices, veneration of a deity or an ideologue and so on. However, without wishing to push the analogy too far, if each village can, to some degree, be seen as an idealised microcosm of the nation its builders hold as ideal, then it is quite clear that life in one village or nation is quite incompatible with life in the neighbouring one. The comparison of such villages strongly suggests that Hindutva is in fact a series of similar but different philosophies.

To illustrate some of the subtleties in the way villages have begun to reflect formal ideologies that were for the most part alien to rural pre-earthquake Kachchh, I turn to the case of Dudai in central-eastern Kachchh. Severely damaged in the earthquake, a new site, Indraprastha, was developed by Sahib Singh Verma, a well-known BJP man (who died in 2007) and former Union Minister. A cultural and charitable organisation, Rashtriya Swabhimani (RS, self-esteem or pride in the nation) set out to build a model village, intended as a unique social vision for the future, equipped with schools, college, technical education centre, community centre, handicraft park, agricultural training and conference centres, 'old-age home', and orphanage. Today, the village immediately reflects the generosity of the donors and ambitious plans for a new kind of settlement in which the comforts and mores of urban life are brought to the countryside.

Verma's own portrait hangs on the walls of the organisation's offices at the entrance to the village. He is flanked by the portraits of other national heroes (but not Nehru) painted in the

blood of the movement's devotees. In the same compound is a 'Special Study Centre', a library of nationalist and Vedic literature mostly written in Hindi and English. The new name given to the village, Indraprastha, is taken from the Mahabharata, the magnificent capital of the Pandavas; the name means 'city of the god Indra' and was the ancient name for Delhi. The village is adjacent to one of the two main highways into Kachchh and its presence is marked by huge signboards, more fitting for a major city than for a small village. Behind the leafy gardens of the 'Special Study Centre' are temples dedicated to Ram and Krishna and, as a local concession, to Lord Swaminarayan and Omakareswar Mahadev. The development of this village, as with many others, is led by its social infrastructure and the housing stock in comparison is low quality. The main residential areas in Indraprastha are further away from the highway and more modest in their design. The ten sections of the village, formed by a grid of roads, carry the names of national heroes, both historic and mythological. More farcical however, is the fact that streets and squares carry the names of places in Delhi, the capital's Chandani Chowk, Sudar Bazar and so on.

The residential colonies nearer the road were intended for the high castes, Jains and Patels those in the middle for low caste Hindus and Harijans and the two furthest to the north for Muslims. Unlike in some other new villages, Muslims and Harijans have been allowed to settle in Indraprastha, but their houses are out of sight, furthest from the improbably huge bazaar that runs along the western flank of the village. Moving from the entrance to the wilderness to the north one passes the education complexes, the temples, housing arranged on the basis of caste, and eventually the Muslim areas. A reflection of the ideology underlying the plan, the layout gives a hierarchically ordered value and priority to each area. The Muslims, although promised a mosque, have been left to their own devices to construct one on a plot on the distant northern fringe, a refraction of the idea that they are a problematic adjunct to national and local planning paradigms.

It is important to remember that state did not do plan or construct this village, it was the work of Rashtriya Swabhimani, aided with cash and tacit approval from the state.

The admission of Hindus and Muslims into the village, the uniformity in shape and quality of the housing, and the fact that it was constructed by the intellectualist and Sanskrit RS have meant that the two dominant communities of old Dudai have not settled in new Indraprastha. As in much of fertile rural Kachchh, Jains and Patels are the principle land holders, a position of economic and political dominance amplified by their strong

entrepreneurial presence in Bombay and overseas. Although there are numerous sub-groups within each community, broadly endogamous marriage practices and identification with particular exclusive religious traditions ('Jainism' for Jains and the various Hindu sects of Swaminarayan and Laxminarayan for Patels) contribute to the strength of the identity of each community. Both (mostly) spurned the support of the RS, opting to stay in the old Dudai and to rebuild their own houses around temples. This reflects a more widespread tendency in urban and rural Kachchh to form exclusive residential colonies, complete with private roads, schools, religious institutions, and healthcare provision.

Scattered around Indraprastha are a number of slogans in Hindi: 'True love alone generates the sentiment of sacrifice'; 'everything is possible with self-confidence, true labour, and strong will'; and most confident of all, but strangely in English, 'Purity is power'. The 'purity' of this last slogan is to be found in devotion (to Hinduism), in scholarship (of the appropriate traditions) and in discipline. The elite nationalism of the metropolis on display here is knowledge led, Sanskrit based, and premised on the idea of the traditional and harmonious Indian village. The benefactors designed the village as they would like to see India: selectively diverse and hierarchical, with the social engineering dividing hierarchically ordered castes through space clustered around the ritual complexes of Ram and Krishna; Muslims live on the margins. Arguably, here, as in other rural areas, the differences in the quality of the housing stock of the rich and poor have decreased, but within settlements patterns of geographical separation are more evident as the design of villages has been used to consolidate particular caste, religious or nationalist identities.

The second conspicuous trend in rural Kachchh after the earthquake was the large numbers of people who took the opportunity to resettle far away from their original lands. The northern parts of Kachchh, towards the Rann and the international border, are known as Banni and Pachim. These areas were, prior to the earthquake, inhabited predominantly by Harijans and Muslims. Following the earthquake, there has been a significant migration of Harijans from the region. Hundreds of families left these sparsely populated areas to resettle on or near major roads at a distance of around 10km from Bhuj. A number of reasons have been provided for this intriguing shift of people. First, it is said, Muslims in these regions have been harassing the Harijan population for years and they sensibly took the opportunity to escape persecution. Second, because of the proximity of these areas to the border with Pakistan, Harijans live their lives in fear of

terrorism and other kinds of subversive activity. Third, the religious traditions of Harijans compel them to abandon land affected by disaster and death. Fourth, the northern regions are poor, the land infertile, and the transport facilities are woefully inadequate so the Harijans left their lands to settle near the city to be close to the market for their handicraft products.

While all four explanations probably contain truth, none of them explain why the Harijans were *able* to abandon their ancestral lands and temples, why they were able to acquire relatively desirable land close to highways, why Muslims did not move closer to the town, or why there has been so much support for their new settlements from the state and allied organisations. I do not wish to suggest a planned conspiracy, but there is a strong elective affinity between the interests of the Sangh parivar and this relocation. It appears that at some indeterminable level a decision has been taken to initiate Harijan migration towards the urban centre, but not for them to come so close that they infringe on the town and offend the high-caste BJP stalwarts who dominate there. This is an obvious compromise that allows the state to appear as if it is taking Harijan interests seriously without being so generous to them that they cause offence to others. The invisible 'party line' is thus attempting to garner the support of the Harijans, bringing them closer to Hindu fold and the urban settlement, and away from, what were by most accounts, congenial relations with Muslims in their ancestral villages.

At the same time, there were clearly other ventures afoot in these northern regions. The summit of the Kala Dungar (the black or protective hills) affords an impressive view over the Rann towards Pakistan. For the last few years, the certain newspapers had speculated that the surrounding villages were centres for illegal activity, smuggling and shelters for terrorists crossing into India from Pakistan. In April 2001, the then national leader of the RSS came to inaugurate a number of post-earthquake developments along with the BJP's Member of the (Gujarat) Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the constituency. They pair stopped in a number of villages to make speeches urging Hindu unity and vigilance against 'foreign powers'. Sometime later, the MLA told me, quite simply, their mission had been to instil a sense of nationalism among the villagers. Following their visit, a Border People's Welfare Society was formed by local branches of the RSS. They organised the construction of a public road to the summit of the Kala Dungar, demolished a Jain temple with the complicity of the MLA's family who were closely associated with the deity and built a much larger temple in its place. They then started to 'Hinduise' the

public face of the god and attempted to develop for it a reputation for divine protection over a dangerous border. Since 2001, they have given momentum to an annual pilgrimage to the temple from Bhuj by bussing in hundreds of 'pilgrims' to enliven the area with strong nationalist sentiments and to celebrate the ritual protection of the highly symbolic border from Muslim predations from within and without.

While the jamboree of the annual pilgrimage might disturb the peace of the Muslims remaining in the area, the depopulation of the region has had the effect of further impoverishing and marginalizing the remaining Muslims as the reduced numbers in the northern areas mean fewer bus services and other resources distributed according to population size.



## **Reconstruction in urban areas**

I have argued that there is little evidence of systematic and wholesale discrimination by the state against Muslims in rural areas, a fact most of my Muslim friends would agree with, at least in the case of post-earthquake relief. The effective appearance of discrimination is primarily a secondary consequence of policy as it comes into contact with the compulsions of the broader social world, as in the case of public-private partnerships or, even less directly, in the case of the migration of Harijans from northern to central Kachchh. To give a final example of this, I now return the focus to Bhuj. An astute and regular visitor to the town will notice that residential patterns have changed dramatically since before the earthquake, vast new suburbs stretch for some miles to the south of the town, and that these are mostly populated by Hindus. In the old town, the same visitor will notice a lower density of population than before in many areas, but will probably also observe, especially in the northern areas, a high concentration of Muslim residences. The visitor might be quite reasonably tempted to conclude that such polarisation has come about because the state favours Hindus and built fancy new suburbs for them while leaving Muslims to suffer in the congested heart of the old city.

Our visitor's account would not be entirely wrong, but neither would it be entirely correct. Because, just as the Hindu-dominated colonies, which are also partly organised around class, caste, and sect, had started to emerge before the earthquake, Muslims too had started to build their own modest suburbs to the north of the city, along co-operative, sect and caste-based lines. After the earthquake, this process intensified as many reasonably well-to-do families saw the destruction as their opportunity to move from the old town and to build a new house in the northern Muslim suburbs, often borrowing from commercial banks in lieu of compensation from the state for the land on which their old houses stood. There were also longer-term plans for new mosques and schools which would have reduced their dependency on the older religious buildings in the heart of the old city to which they continued to be drawn.

After the violence of 2002, however, Muslim felt vulnerable in the suburbs, their houses less secure and difficult to defend. Many simply abandoned the new houses, leaving some only partially constructed. Today, these structures are storerooms or daytime workshops, many are empty. For now, the suburbs are deserted, and people prefer the relative safety and congestion of their old haunts, areas where new houses have clearly

been designed with security in mind. Thus, what appears on the surface as a simple case of discrimination through planning mechanisms turns out to be part of a rational, if unfortunate, choice made by Muslims in a hostile environment.

## **The problem with the critique of politics in Gujarat**

In December of 2007, the BJP romped back to power for the third time in succession. Under this party's rule, the state has had a very high media profile following cyclones and earthquakes, rapid economic and industrial growth, and the inauguration of sections of the controversial Narmada Dam irrigation project. However, the spotlight fell most intensely upon the state following widespread violence and civil disruption during 2002, a little more than a year after the earthquake. This violence was mostly, but not exclusively, against Muslims. There had been an attack on a train, supposedly planned and instigated by Muslims, in which more than fifty Hindus died. The more general violence is now commonly understood to have been in retaliation for this attack. It is however worth pointing out that there is evidence suggesting the ensuing violence was premeditated, and the attack on the train, whoever was responsible, was perhaps either the catalyst or a sign for the violence to commence. Curfews were imposed and military placed on the streets, but not before around 2,000 lives had been lost.

In the aftermath, a number of commissions investigated the atrocities and, finding the truth hard to establish, concluded the state was between supine and complicit in the bloodshed: the police stood by and watched, sometimes siding with Hindu gangs, and the odd politician was seen on the streets of Ahmedabad leading a mob, but, most seriously of all, the state did not intervene immediately, it either hesitated or waited (depending on who is telling the story) as the violence took hold.<sup>6</sup> Most mainstream liberal commentators expressed outrage at the fact the actions of the state were not in accordance with the Constitution and that the state displayed a weak commitment to values of substantive justice, ultimately expressed as governmental lawlessness. This, the critics saw as a brutal enactment of the state's anti-Muslim stance, and perhaps they were right.

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<sup>6</sup> See: 2002. *Rights and wrongs. Ordeal by fire in the killing fields of Gujarat. Editors Guild of India fact-finding mission report*. Editors Guild of India: New Delhi; 2002. *'Maaro! Kaapo! Baalo!' State, society, and communalism in Gujarat*. Vols I & II People's Union for Democratic Rights: Delhi; 2002. *Crime against humanity. Volume 1. An inquiry into the carnage in Gujarat. List of incidents and evidence; Volume 2. An inquiry into the carnage in Gujarat. Findings and recommendations; Volume 3. Annexures*. Concerned Citizens Tribunal, Citizens for Justice and Peace: Mumbai; 2002. *"We have no orders to save you". State participation and complicity in communal violence in Gujarat*. Human Rights Watch, 14.3. 2003. *Threatened existence: A feminist analysis of the genocide in Gujarat*, Report by the International Initiative for Justice; 2004. *In bad faith? British charity and Hindu extremism*. AWAAZ, South Asia Watch Limited: London, especially pp. 17–32. *Seminar* published a special edition entitled 'Society under Siege' No. 513, May 2002.

The stories of reconstruction I have drawn from post-earthquake Gujarat do not simply recount how and why patterns of social polarisation came about, I think they can also be used to explain something else. They can explain how some powerful Hindu-oriented civil society organisations have drawn power and resources away from the state to parade before the people as if they govern. The stories of the mixed fortunes of Muslims in the rubble also illustrate some of the limits to nationalist's power: they have not hijacked the state in its entirety and their influence is curtailed and imperfect. The ethnography strongly suggests that it is incorrect to conflate state complicity in anti-Muslim violence with all other routine operations performed by government. This false conflation is partly why the academic critiques of the nationalist government in Gujarat are ineffective; the following example illustrates why.

An acquaintance from Delhi is a respected journalist for national English-language newspapers. Over a few days before the results of the 2007 state-level elections in Gujarat were declared on 24<sup>th</sup> of December, he wrote a piece to be published on the 25<sup>th</sup> which served as an obituary for the Chief Minister's political career, and as a general explanation of the decline of the right in western India. The BJP however won the election easily, and the journalist had to abandon his copy. In contrast, in Kachchh, on the first of the two election nights, a friend who works for a regional Gujarati daily returned home full of bravado and drunk on expensive whiskey. As he reeled around the room, he merrily predicted what the results would be throughout Gujarat when they were announced a week later. He was mostly right. How can the first left-wing journalist have got it so wrong and the second right-winger so right?

Assuming that we can exclude imbecility and extraordinary psychic powers, we seem to be left simply with their interpretation of the facts that they had at their disposal. The first saw the jingoism and carnival of the BJP's election campaign as desperate and childish; the latter saw these things as populist and invigorating. The first saw the resignation of former leaders and other heavyweights in the BJP just before the election as a sign of the party's weakness and fragmentation; the latter saw it as a sign of the strength of the leader, his internal rivals realising that their only chance of power was to support to the Congress party. At a more fundamental level however, the Delhi-based journalist saw the religious violence of 2002 as tarnishing the image of Gujarat. Such was the outrage against these events in the state that the overt politics of communalism had now had their

day. In his view, the humiliation of the country was compounded by the fact that the Chief Minister himself had been linked to the violence. Subsequently, the Chief Minister was refused diplomatic entry to the UK, and entry to the USA in any guise – and therefore could not do his job properly, or secure respect within the international community.

In contrast, my friend in Kachchh is circumspect about the events of 2002. The ‘atrocities’ (his word and one I have heard other Hindus supportive of the BJP use) were carried out in the name of a political cause to which he is devoted. He is on less certain ground however when it comes to the intimate details of the violence, and is probably glad all this took place far away in eastern Gujarat. I am pretty certain that he, again like many other middle class Hindus I know, considers the violence to have restored a proper hierarchy of religious classes in the state: simply, Hindus lord over Muslims. For him, this state of affairs is right and proper for it redresses the loss of Hindu might to Muslim incursions in the past, and reflects his ideas about social hierarchy in the terms of racial and cultural purity and pollution. In his eyes, the Chief Minister has become a hero, not simply for being strong against ‘troublemakers’ (read: Muslims, rival political parties, dissenters within the BJP, and the ‘secularists’) in the state but because he has stuck by his opinions and actions in the face of international pressure. The Chief Minister has not apologised for the actions or inactions of his state that contributed to the violence of 2002 in exchange for a visa or access to the alluring world of international politics.<sup>7</sup>

The differences in opinion between the two journalists are not simply born of a tension between the traditions of metropolitan secularism on the one hand and provincial political Hinduism on the other. Their conclusions are determined by what they can see, and how they imagine the stakes to be apportioned. The former sees voters related to politicians and policy through informed choice; the latter sees voters primarily wed to politicians through the strength and efficaciousness of nationalist civil society networks, of the kind I have described in this paper; for the Kachchhi journalist, if you can gauge the integrity of the network, you can more-or-less predict the result (according to him, this is generally true for politics and not particular to the success of the BJP). It is the failing of the metropolitan/academic critics to understand these things that prevents them from being able to predict election results in Gujarat and, ultimately, what, in my view, renders the crude leftist critique of politics in Gujarat impotent.

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<sup>7</sup> This might have interesting consequences in the future if the Chief Minister’s plans for national leadership of the BJP amount to anything.

If the focus on the idioms of nationalist rhetoric does little more than contribute to making that rhetoric reality, then it also disguises other issues. In relation to post-earthquake reconstruction, there have been glaring biases which have passed without critical comment but which reflect the less tangible agendas of the state, and biases within the BJP. The state has concentrated effort and resources in urban areas, reflecting a general bias in its overall development strategy.<sup>8</sup> This can also be seen in different ways in the radically disproportionate concentration of effort, administrative competence and cash in Bhuj when compared to the smaller towns of Bhachau and Anjar which were, in both absolute and proportionate terms, worse affected in the earthquake, and where signs of the neglect are clear to even the casual visitor. Second, the state focused on infrastructure development in reconstruction, rather than on social equality or on the redistributive opportunities afforded by the disaster. This too reflects the nature of the development priorities of the state. In urban areas, this focus clearly favours the interests and life-style of the middle and upper classes, while alienating the poor (of any religious community).

Finally, shortly after the earthquake the state announced significant tax concessions to industry locating in Kachchh, attracting a huge influx of migrant industry from more expensive parts of the country in search of cheap land and lucrative tax rebates. Here the state has acted as broker for capital, and the commercial interests of India's giant corporations. The silent industrialisation of Kachchh and the acquisition of land by capitalist enterprise has been by far and away the greatest change to occur in the region in the name of post-earthquake reconstruction. If complex systems of production need dirty areas for processing and production and clean areas for the consumption of the goods they produce, Kachchh is moving rapidly from being a marginal clean area to an important dirty one on the national stage. The relatively free access the Government has granted to minerals and land has enabled large industrial enterprises to remove wealth from Kachchh. The costs of this shift seem to be carried primarily by the state, the environment and, perhaps in the long run, by the local population.

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<sup>8</sup> See Shah (1998 and 2002) for the ways in which this reflects struggles between factions of the support base of the BJP.

## **Conclusion**

The ethnography shows the state in many guises as it comes into being through its interaction with those affected by the earthquake. The material presented here has mostly been left to speak for itself, and often, the only clear message it conveys is uncertainty and ambiguity. I have attempted to ensure that the examples contradict and conflict with one another in ways that are representative and proportional to what I have witnessed over the last seven years. I now wish to explain why I wrote this paper, and why it should not in any way be read as an apology for politics in Gujarat, but as an attempt to think about old problems in new ways. In order to do so, I briefly revisit the following question: did state agencies deliberately demolish Muslim structures in Bhuj to erase the history of Muslims in the town? The same structures, incidentally, which had, according to one of the men with whose story I started this paper, been left standing by god to show that Sunnis were the favoured people. In the main body of the paper, I left this question open, now I wish to close it.

The answer is that after seven years of thinking about this I do not know whether this destruction was vindictive or not, or whether it was simply an innocent consequence of planning a new town. The evidence, images, and stories that envelop this issue are riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies and tug in many directions. There is no single explanation, but several co-existing possibilities. However, I think my own strong uncertainty is extremely revealing for it conflicts most intriguingly with the standard narrative in Bhuj, which is that Muslim buildings were deliberately destroyed by the administration. I have suggested that Muslims themselves are not unified in the belief that these buildings were deliberately targeted. The Collector who took apparent pleasure in the destruction of the buildings of the wealthy would also be mystified at the suggestion that Muslim structures were deliberately demolished. If I think of my friends and informants in the town on a case by case basis I am not aware of anyone who would claim they had been deliberately targeted by the administration. So why, we might ask, is this narrative so prevalent in the face of uncertain evidence? It appears to me, to be primarily a political myth of nationalist civil society, which suggests a control the state that they do not in fact have. The repetition of this narrative, like so many other narratives of nationalism, only serves the interests of nationalistic civil society and their politicians, for it confers on their rhetoric the status of reality, and on them power. This paper is a first attempt at opening discussion about such possibilities.

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