

# Gendered violence in anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat

**Events:** On 28 February 2002, communal rioting broke out in the Indian province of Gujarat. The pretext for these riots was the horrific killing, the previous day, of 58 mainly militant Hindu volunteers who had been burnt alive on a train returning from Ayodhya. The communal riots in Gujarat continued until 3 March, after which there was a hiatus followed by a new round of violence from 15 March. Estimates of the numbers killed in the riots range from below 1,000 to over 2,000, with Muslim deaths outnumbering Hindu deaths by a ratio of 15:1. Over 500 mosques and *dargahs* (shrines) were destroyed and enormous numbers of Muslims in Gujarat were displaced: by mid-April, nearly 150,000 people were living in some 104 relief camps. There was, furthermore,



evidence of the complicity of the authorities in the Gujarat violence as well as of precision and planning, linked to the family of organizations associated with the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), which preaches a creed of 'India for the Hindus'. One of the most notable features of the anti-Muslim riots was the use of the sexual subjugation of women as an instrument of violence. At least 250 young girls and women were brutally gang-raped and burnt alive. Other atrocities included the stripping naked of groups of women who were then made to run for miles, the insertion of objects into women's bodies and the carving of religious symbols onto their bodies. What is more, women who were raped by Hindu zealots saw no action taken against their aggressors, as the police were generally unwilling to take their complaints seriously.

**Significance:** Hindu-Muslim violence has been a recurring feature of politics in India for three-quarters of a century or more. Although they are often portrayed as a manifestation of spontaneous hostility between the Hindus and Muslims, the deep involvement of the organizations of militant Hindu nationalism have given rise to 'institutionalized riot systems' (Brass 2003). However, why was gendered violence so prominent in the Gujarat riots of 2002, as, indeed, it has been in much of the communal rioting that has spasmodically gripped India?

The answer appears to be that a crisis of identity, linked to the desire to reassert or purify the Hindutva identity in the face of a perceived threat from Islam, has become entangled with a crisis of masculinity. Young males, organized on paramilitary lines, have conflated Hindu nationalism with masculinity and violence. This is evident not only in the emphasis within Hindu nationalist literature on the image of 'the man as warrior', but also in the fact that the political goals of Hindu nationalism are commonly expressed in sexual terms. Stress, for instance, is often placed on the 'threat' posed to Hindu identity by the generally higher fertility rates of Muslim communities. Hostility towards Muslims therefore tends to be expressed in the desire to dehumanize Muslim women, who are then viewed, and treated, primarily as sexual objects. Hindu nationalists thus rape and otherwise attack minority women to destroy not only their bodies, but also the integrity and identity of Muslim society, viewed as the 'enemy other' (Chenoy 2002). In that sense, the sexual violence against Muslim women that marked the 2002 Gujarat riots was very much a public act. Attacking Muslim women sexually served two purposes: it brutalized Muslim women and denigrated Muslim men for failing to protect their women. It was therefore an attempt to terrorize Muslims and drive them out of 'Hindu India' by violating their communal honour (Anand 2007).