

From: Ms Bina Srinivasan

GUJARAT: MISOGNY AT LARGE

Words alone can never hope to capture the hatred that has justified the specific use of violence against women, neither will tears reduce the horror of it. But we have to try. Hence this report: a small attempt to ensure that we remember these events, to pledge that it will not happen again. I present here a series of experiences based on my work with women who have been subject to or have witnessed violence since 27th Feb 2002.

It is true that in Gujarat women's bodies were turned into battlegrounds, and that all women have therefore been vulnerable. The forms of violence is known, have been diverse, ranging from verbal abuse to direct physical attack. In an atmosphere vitiated by fear and insecurity everybody is affected. However, some women have been more unfortunate than others by virtue of their religion. That is undeniable. That is also reprehensible for a country that claims constitutional protection for minority communities.

In working with women survivors in Gujarat I have also been faced with a dilemma. Should one place all these facts on record, or should one allow public memory to fade so that the women can get on with their lives, as they want very much to?

Challenges. Another way of saying difficulties. Multi-layered, multi-faceted difficulties that arise from a whole range of contexts: from the personal to the political. The personal, I realise today, has never been so stark, so raw. Having worked with victims of violence for so many years I bank on my training, perspectives and experience. Like many other women's rights activists, I know about the connivance of state, community and family in perpetuating violence against women, and in creating the conditions where this violence continues.

Yet, nothing ever prepared me for this. No other experience has been so embittering, so filled with anguish.

Nothing ever prepared me for what surfaced inside myself. Violence against women is quite routine, stands to reason that I would not have been exempt from it in some form or the other. Working with women survivors in Ahmedabad has sometimes rekindled feelings of frustration, helplessness and also a dark despair. It has also, however, strengthened a political belief: that women have to fight this battle together. And that we will win in the end. If not for ourselves then for younger women, for all those adolescent girls waiting to step into adulthood. In the struggle against violence there is pain, and there are tears. But there is also friendship in unexpected places, and strength in the shared knowledge of our vulnerabilities and our capacities.

The women's movement in India cut its teeth with the struggle against violence. Everybody remembers Mathura, Rameeza Bi and Guntaben. Truly, it seems we have come back to square one. And more. Because the communalised violence women have experienced recently in Gujarat is unprecedented in terms of the degree of state complicity, the unashamed valorisation of these acts of depravity, the horrific participation of women in the violence and the creation of

an implacable wall of hatred which provides the reason and then the justification for what has happened. It took us fifty years to document excesses against women during the Partition. I wonder how much longer it will take now.

Women are not victims of their gender alone. They also bear the brunt of a patriarchal system that operates at the level of the community too, even a besieged community. The very same community which stuck together in terrified solidarity for its survival has also sometimes turned its back to women who have been 'defiled' by the enemy. Women's rights activists have seen this prejudice in operation before and this should not come as a surprise. Yet, it does seem rather unfortunate that a community that has intimate knowledge of large scale violations does not hesitate to further marginalize its women. It is therefore a complex motif.

As part of Aman Samudaya, Ahmedabad it has been my responsibility to identify the survivors of violence, including sexual assault. Another aspect of my work has been to understand the entire gamut of residual emotions that such experiences tend to leave behind. Trauma counselling, it is called. Speaking for myself, I believe that the issues here are so complex that it defies any simple effecting of traditional trauma counselling. At least I have on several occasions been quite overwhelmed by the scale of the violence and the sheer depth of human misery it has created. I hope I will be able to make a fair representation of the realities that women survivors are grappling with today.

Before I end this rather lengthy preamble, I wish to say that I use this report as a means of breaking out of a kind of paralysis. Since 27th Feb I have been in the grip of a crisis as all writing had dried up as I faced the collapse of a society I had been born into, lived and worked in. Like the loss of someone you love. So words congealed in a morass of tears, anger. And in the suffocation of imprisoned expression I often thrashed about, confounding many of my colleagues and friends. Mahesh, Amar, Supriya, Antara, Bhavana, Sophia, Arundhati, Monika, Nandini, Sriram, Amit, Shambhavi, Nivedita, Aditya, Ranjana, Laxmi and Vani. I thank each one of them for trying to understand.

This writing has therefore been a much-needed catharsis. For which I am grateful to Aman Samudaya. I hope it will be as useful to others.

II

SJ

Naroda Patiya. The name itself creates images. A masjid with a peacock motif. Green, red, yellow. Colours meshing with soot.

SJ: her face superimposed on Noorani masjid. Also burnt.

A gaping black-toothed wall. A frail face, large black eyes flecked with tragedy. Violations, all.

SJ is an 18 year old girl. When I first met her she looked dully at me through those great

eyes. I was yet another one of those outsiders. A sigh of helplessness shuddered through me as I took in her presence. Her mother sat next to her, she talked about their losses. One daughter raped and burnt alive. Another sitting right next to her.

One son, about seven years old, also burnt. But alive, the skin on his left arm stretches taut and scarred.

So much for the physical signs. SJ carries deeper wounds.

She sat with hunched shoulders over a plate of rotis and curry. The sun blazed down on her bruised skin. Her mother was pleased to hear that I have family in Karnataka from where she herself had migrated many years back. SJ looked at me keenly: this piece of information is interesting she must have decided. Soon we were joined by SJ's maternal aunt who described for me one harrowing bit after another, the sequence of events in Naroda Patiya. I have heard this so often that my dreams are littered with the screams of women.

Then, said SJ's aunt, they raped women. They trapped them in a park, stripped them and raped them. We know because we were up on a terrace. That was not all. They chopped off limbs, mutilated their genitals and then killed them. SJ's sister was one of them, she said. Garbled testimonies. Nothing will stand in a court of law. Yet, it is part of collective memory today.

I suddenly noticed SJ. Her body almost in foetal position, seeking shelter from horror. Those perceptive eyes had clouded over with a dense, mute emotion. For one maddening moment I myself sought escape into a safe womb. SJ's pain does that to anybody, even a strong person. I am too weak not to be affected by that congested anguish.

I met her several times after that. Each successive meeting brought a thawing of her dignified reserve. Then one day she talked to me. I want to learn something, she said. Her eyes were bright with anticipation. What, I asked, what will you learn? Anything, she said, because I know I can do it. Disarming confidence. Ok, I told her, we will find something for you to learn. She held my hand, a range of expressions flitting across her face.

I still remember the grasp of those thin, long fingers. Some sweat, some hope.

I met her yet again at the Circuit House where the Women's Cell held its fourth sitting. The Cell was meant to go into cases where FIRs had to be changed, or to record women's statements on violence. Women's rights activists, lawyers and others were present along with women from camps. At one point in that long day some of us confronted the officials over their hamhandedness.

SJ was obviously impressed by that show of anger on our part. When I met her again at the camp she reached out and clasped my hand eagerly, her face animated. And so, in the glory of our collective bravado I had risen in her eyes. Pathetic as it was, I was grateful that we gave vent to our ire in the Circuit House. At least it granted me SJ's solidarity. At least she did not see me as yet another treacherous, bloodthirsty Hindu.

Contrast this vibrant visage with our next meeting. She looked straight through me. A couple of women sat next to her. I had never seen them before. SJ's seriousness, her refusal to even acknowledge my presence unnerved me. It rankled. I went to her, put my arm round her hunched shoulders and asked, why is this woman so grim today? SJ was unresponsive.

Her mother replied: my sister has come from desh. So we were talking about SJ's sister...the one who died. I cursed myself. Why, oh why did I not pick up the signals that SJ's scarred face was sending me? Fool. At this point, SJ crumpled into inconsolable sobs. My arms moved around her in reflex. Little sister, I whispered to myself, take care of that young heart of yours. SJ stared into space, grief-stricken. I wish I could take away that pain.

Soon all the women are crying. We have never seen such cruelty said SJ's mother. What they have done to our women, lamented SJ's aunt. Jawan ladki, she continued, who will marry her now?

I looked at SJ, her face pinched with grief. One slow tear rolled down.

You will learn anything, won't you? I asked in a semi-whisper. SJ did not respond.

She seemed to be going into shock. What horrors does this child bottle up inside her thin frame? I wish I could help. Yet, she suddenly smiled at me through her tears, as though at some shared secret. She let her fingers move through a shroud of pain. Her large eyes say: yes, I will learn anything.

I cling to hope. To a young child's belief in herself.

NJ

We had a very nice house. We had everything. A tv, a fridge. Everything. The girls in our house are very fond of watching tv, listening to Hindi film music. They can dance to any song. You ask them, they will show you. In our house we had everything we needed. They burnt it all down. They looted all they could. My nieces are very bright. I had potted plants. So many of them. I took care of all of them. They broke the pots. The plants are dead. I looked after them very carefully. See this photograph? Here this the sofa set we had. It was an expensive set. They could not lift it, so they ripped it apart. They tore the sofa to bits. Shreds, this nice blue cover, all torn to pieces. Slashed.

NJ has a very striking face. Nearly 35 years old, though she looks older. A white dupatta draped over her head, tucked behind her ears. You cannot miss NJ in a room full of people. You cannot ignore her even if you want to. As I want to when she talks incessantly about ripped sofa sets that they could not lift.

Was memory playing tricks here? I have no answers. From yet another garbled account I heard that they attacked her house and she stepped out to protect her bhabhi and nieces. There was no man at home, from what I gather.

I am a strong woman. I locked the front door and told my family, tum padho. Meaning read the Quran, say your prayers. I told the mob just leave us alone. They said, don't get in the way. I kept telling my family tum padho. The mob threw burning rags into the house, it caught fire. My family threw water, and tried to contain the fire. From one room to another they ran, I also went inside to save the house. I refused to let them into the house. Then they hit me on the head. Blood streamed down my face and I was dizzy. But I kept on. The phone was ringing. I could hear it, but could not take it. I was keeping the mob from my family. Then they hit me on the thighs. I fell on the floor. They threw a ring of kerosene around me. I was lying in a circle of flames. They hit me again, I lost consciousness. I do not know what they did with me.

I lost consciousness, she said apologetically. I do not remember anything after that, she said defensively.

NJ's story is known all over the camp. Everybody knows that she was sexually assaulted by more than one person. Only she does not want to speak about it. She flits from one topic to another, going back to the house, the sofa, the suffering of 'these people' (the camp residents). She says our neighbours did not do anything. They were good people.

NJ is a strong woman. She has a faraway expression in her eyes. All the time. She talks to you incessantly, but it is almost as if she is not there. She calls herself an Aman Pathik. It gives her an identity.

One day I called her to the office. Work with me, I said. She looked happy at the prospect. But, she said, I will not be able to come on my own. Somebody has to drop me to the office and back. Only till I get used to it, she said reassuringly, after that I will manage. I arranged for somebody to drop her at the office.

I waited all day. She did not turn up. In the evening I went to the camp. A group of Aman Pathiks surrounded me and told me that NJ is in trouble with the camp manager. Why? Because her brother had effected a compromise with one of the persons who had assaulted her. They had settled for Rs.1 lakh, or so said the grapevine. Now the camp manager was angry with NJ and her brothers because it put him in a false position.

NJ refused to see me that evening. I went back, a thousand questions in my mind. Was NJ part of this compromise? How does she feel about it? Angry, bitter? One lakh. How does one decide on the price of one's sexual integrity? And who has the money? NJ or her family? It was murky beyond measure.

The next visit to the camp. NJ came straight to me and said, are you looking for me? Then she began chatting about the rain, how difficult it is for 'these people' to live like this. She always refers to residents of the camp as though she herself is not one of them. I ask a group of women if they would like to come to the office for a meeting. They agreed.

The women from the camp arrive at the office. We sit in the dormitory. Even before we settled down the women burst out with their stories. Each one of them talked about burnt,

looted houses. About fear, anxiety. The camp may close down soon, where will we go then? The anxiety levels were very high in the office that morning.

They spoke about their dreams. Nightmares. Mindscapes of dread. The woman sitting right next to me was very quiet. I asked her, you want to talk about your dreams? She shook her head. They have finished all our dreams, she said. A chill ran down my spine. Sabse khatarnak hain sapano ka mar jana, flashed a warning.

Sound, they said any sound is enough to send us into a panic. We cannot sleep at night. They talked about various kinds of sounds.

We did a little relaxation exercise. They lay down, and closed their eyes with some difficulty. Vigilant. Hyper-vigilant to danger. I asked them to hold the hand of the woman next to each one. Which they did, amid much giggling. Now try to clap using one of your hands, and one of your partner's. They began to laugh and clap. Eyes happily closed this time.

Laughter invited a discussion about sound. Fearful sounds, happy sounds.

Laughter provoked a discussion about silence. Women's silence. Of how women should not laugh too loud or too much. How a woman's izzat depended on her silence. I watched NJ overtly. She looked confused. I felt a surge of triumph. At last that placid expression was ruffled. At last that saint-like detachment had lifted. The dreaminess in her eyes was now replaced with a 'right here' look. I was making a dent, I was getting somewhere with her.

We have to go soon, said one of the women. I led them out to lunch. On the way we crossed a patch of green. NJ touched one plant, and moved to another. This one is for show, and this is khajur, she said to the others. Soon the women were following her around wondering about her erudition. She stopped at an enormous tree and said, not everybody can understand plants. You need a special sensitivity to know plants.

A relationship with plants. It brings pleasure into those distant eyes.

In conversation with AM, SB, ZQ and several others.

SB: We had gone back to Naroda Patia, back to our homes for a panchnama. When we see our burnt out houses we are filled with great fear. Not a thing is left in those houses. I was chilled, frightened to the bone. All of yesterday I was very disturbed. The sight of my houses swims into my vision. All night I tossed and turned. At the house yesterday, I was a mass of nerves. I kept waiting for a mob to spring up from any direction, any corner.

ZQ: How can we go back? How can we go back when everything we had built up so painstakingly has been destroyed. It happened some years back, then again after Babri Masjid and now this. But it was never as bad as this. This time they have finished us. I wonder what more there is to live for? I just wish they had killed us. I wish I could just die.

MG: We know how we have built our houses. We work so hard stitching elastic on undergarments, we have gathered paisa after paisa and put these houses in shape. Now, it is all gone.

SB: I fled with nothing except the clothes I had. My daughter was to be married. I had gathered clothes, jewelry. Nothing is left. They have removed fans, tubelights, taken our tv.

ZQ: They had come a couple of months back. They asked us what do you have in your house? We told them. We thought they were election people so we gave them information. They told us you will have to because we are from the government. They took electricity bills and checked who lived where.

ZS: Even on the 28th Feb they had come. My son was at the paan shop that morning. They came around and asked, how many Muslims live here. My son said I don't know and ran home. Then a few hours later there was all this.

AM: This girl here, she cannot sleep at night. Even last night she got up screaming. I woke up and heard her say, they are coming to kill us. I shook her awake and told her nothing has happened, go back to sleep.

SB: We don't want to live in Gujarat anymore. We have seen too much destruction. We want to go back to Karnataka. We have not heard of such violence in Karnataka. Never. So we want to go back. Don't do anything for us, just do one small thing, get us some land in our desh and resettle us there. These people don't like us because we are from Karnataka. They think we are strange. Even when we speak they make fun of us. Our language is very polite, we cannot be rude. But they think we are being rude. Now after all this we don't want to continue here.

ZS: Himmat, you want us to have himmat? How can we have anything like that left. When I think of what has happened I feel that those who died were more fortunate. At least they don't have such a bleak future ahead. I don't have any more courage left.

AM: If there is a God up there he will see that there is justice. They should have punished those responsible for happened in Godhra. Why did they have to do this to all of us? Why wreak havoc on the innocent? What have children done to them? Or young girls? They raped women, they ripped open wombs. They did all this. We are mortally afraid for our young girls now. They had a plan and we did not know. Their plan and our ignorance finished us. We did not know anything about this plan. They had a plan and we were destroyed.

SM: Who are you? Why are you writing all this down? We don't want anything from you. How can you come here and write all this? I want to tell you that there will be justice. Sooner or later, there will be. You have not lost anybody, so it is easy for you to be sympathetic. We are not sitting here waiting for people like you to come in and take your notes. We are human beings. Aren't we human beings, tell me? If we are then why do this to us? They raped our girls. There are girls in this camp who were brought in such a bad condition, they could not walk, they could not urinate. Young girls. Is this our culture, is this our country. I am telling you, all you women better be warned. The same thing can happen to you also. So be warned.

RH

A ten year old child, her hair all cropped. She hops into the room. She is wearing a shiny red dress, several sizes too big for her. She glances at me shyly and makes as if to go out with her friend.

I am with a group of women from Naroda Patiya. They are talking to me in a tumult of voices. They suddenly turn on her. This girl here, they say, look at her. RM's pupils are dilated, all the childish energy with which she had darted into the room has seeped out. See, say the women, as if to taunt me.

They yank her dress up. Red satin slipping over a burnt body. Back and neck. Lacerations of skin, now healing. I close my eyes involuntarily. I know I will never forget the sight.

My heart is numb as I watch that rough edged skin growing now in shrivelled layers. Burns leave a sign on you. So this child will now carry marks forever. Her back and neck, her shorn head. Testimonies all. Look at her, say all the women. I pull one edge of the red dress. It comes tumbling down. Hiding from our sight the signs of a ravaged young body.

The women prod the child. Tell her, they say after the cloth draped the hurting skin. What happened with you, insist the women. They were determined not to let me forget the sight or the event. Let her be, I plead.

The child's face has shrunk to half its size, the pupils so large I think they will burst. I can see that RH is reliving horror and by now I am desperate to stop the women. The skin on her face lets off more gloom than I am prepared to handle. The women, eager to dispose off with their angst, to foist it on the child are pushing her to a point that would surely break her.

Tell her what you saw, what happened to you.

RM sits there unconvinced, intensely unhappy. Her back bared to a stranger. The humiliation rankles. It shows on her face. My stomach knots into a hard band of muscles.

What is your name, I ask her. R, she replies parrot-like. What a beautiful name, I say. I am frantic now to change the mood. Can you teach me a song, I ask. No response. Her face is still downcast. The women look at me, then at the child. They understand. Teach her a song, they say. A smile creases her face.

A smile. A stretch of muscles in a heavy, downcast face. Like the sun breaking through a thick forest of clouds. I know I will never forget that smile either.

RM rushes out, glad to be free.

The women tell me after she leaves: when they brought her to the camp she was fully burnt, her legs so swollen she could not walk for days.

I cry myself to sleep that night

AF

We walk through a large kabrastan. Past children with catapults trying to nab a few jamuns. Past bleating goats.

AF's house is one makeshift roof supported by some wood. The rest has all gone. Crumbled under the fury of mob violence. The house is on the edge of the kabrastan. It is also on the 'border'. She has lived here for the last 30 years.

My house is on the 'border', she explains. So the mob attacked it first. There is a chilling resignation in her voice. It was to happen someday, she tries to tell me.

30 years on the border. The tension must be backbreaking.

We look around the house. A large tin trunk, all burnt, the rust showing. Ironically, the trunk is locked. Two large locks.

They took everything, she says. I had collected dahej for my daughters, it was all there in that trunk. When the mob entered the area we fled. My husband is disabled, he cannot walk. So I first fled with my children, put them to safety in the camp. I rushed back to get my husband. By the time I got him they had already burnt the house.

Inside the house was her paternal aunt. Also disabled. And so unable to run. As she waited for AF to go and get her, the flames had already claimed her. She was burnt alive.

See, she says, this is the postmortem report. The PM report is very economical. Cause of death? Shock due to burns. I suppose that is how medical reports are written.

What did you do then? I ask. The first day it was too dangerous to go out, so I did not come looking for my aunt. I knew by then that she had gone. Others told me that the house was also gone. On the second day I asked a couple of people. I said please come with me, I will not be able to carry the body myself. A neighbour had walked in by then. She took up the story from there. Yes, we told AF that she could not be expected to carry a body on her own. Three women and two men went with her. When we came here we found the body surrounded by dogs. It was perched on the edge of the parapet. One little push and it would have fallen down into the kabrastan.

AF looked deeply worried through this account. She seemed happy to let somebody else do the telling.

III

There are many stories. So many of them. The widowed women of Chamanpura, others from Naroda Patiya, women who have been deserted since the rapes because they have conceived, a

woman who rotted in a garbage bin for ten days after suffering a paralytic attack, women injured in combing operations. The list is long. I will not go into each one of them. Truly, I do not find it in me to do it. The horror is almost unreal though I have met these women and I know that it is not all a figment of their imagination.

In conclusion, it is important to look at some of the key issues that have emerged. Firstly, the range of psycho-social impacts includes most of the symptoms of post-traumatic shock syndrome. Sleeplessness, recurrence of nightmares, reactions to sounds, fear of crowds and so on are very common experiences. Some of the more serious symptoms like withdrawal as evident in NJ need to be addressed immediately. In my work with the women I try to identify the trigger points and then try to steer the conversation around it. I do not necessarily address violence as such. There is a whole range of strategies that have to be employed to give the women space to ventilate.

Physical exercise is also important. I found that the women enjoy it immensely, it brings a release of pent up emotional energy. This however, is quite difficult in camp situations. Bringing them out of the camps into places where they can relax is also useful and can serve many purposes.

These are some very basic tools for trauma counselling. However, what presents a real challenge is feelings of guilt, self-blame and low self-esteem. At a superficial level it is possible to work through these emotions. These women are placed within the context of the community, they need the protection of the community. The experience of violence has shamed them, and shamed the community too. It is important to understand that short term trauma counselling can only work if there is a long term process of deconstructing these feelings of shame.

This is also an ideological struggle which would challenge the secondary status of women, question gendered power equations that sanctions the use of violence against women to control and monitor them.

The larger social and political context in Gujarat will also impinge on emotional rehabilitation. With this is tied up the issue of justice. Unless the survivors see a process of justice delivery, trauma will remain heightened. Camps are now under pressure to close down, and the women are to go back to the very places where they had experienced or witnessed such intense violence. This means that there will be some recurrence of trauma, there will be trigger points everywhere. Encountering some of the perpetrators of violence who live in the same locality will definitely have an impact.

Justice, is therefore the real challenge. The State will obviously have to be involved in this process. I think that it is important for the women to see that as a community we are doing something about this. SJ's reaction to our experience with the Women's Cell is a case in point. This is why it is imperative that we demand special courts, special commissions to go into these crimes. Together with this, setting up national or international panels independent of the State would also be useful in addressing trauma. Though these panels would have to be carefully thought through because the issues are very complex.

The women survivors are faced with a series of realities. Each one of them is tied up with the other and each one brings its own anxieties. Without a house it is difficult for them to feel secure. And without a means of livelihood, it is difficult to run a house. As physical security is a key issue and is not presently assured in their places of residence, they prefer to remain in camps. In camps the situation is far from ideal. There is no privacy and there is the danger of sexual molestation in camps too.

The camps are important as they are the only places that provide security. However, living in camps for extended periods is bound to exacerbate problems, not alleviate them. This is then linked to proper and quick rehabilitation. Without rehabilitation the women are not going to be able to get on with their lives. Currently their major anxiety is around safety, housing and livelihood. All these issues are interlinked and will have to be taken up simultaneously. Trauma counselling in this context also means that these issues have to be addressed.

Campaigns against violence, programmes that break the silence around sexual violence will also provide the necessary space for women to create solidarity amongst each other. Participation in programmes in Gujarat and elsewhere will help to break the isolation and the hopelessness. I firmly believe that these linkages have to be made, the survivors of violence have to become part of a broader movement against violence. This, again is an important aspect of trauma counselling as it moves beyond the personal into the political. Which in itself is an empowering experience.

Clearly, it is an uphill task. The work demands partnerships across a broad section of people and organisations. I do hope that this report will provoke a serious engagement with all the issues presented on the part of all those who have had long and useful experience of working with women in conflict situations.

Bina Srinivasan