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Cultural Diversity and Conflict in Multicultural Cities

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**Cultural Diversity and Conflict
in Multicultural Cities**

Alaknanda Patel
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KNOW – Knowledge, Technology, Human Capital

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Cultural Diversity and Conflict in Multicultural Cities

Summary

India has been known as the land of many cultures. Gujarat, an Indian state, has reflected this special aspect for over a millennium. In addition to the people of different religious faith like Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Christian and Zoroastrian, various caste groups within the Hindus and migrant workers ensured a diversity of culture and lifestyle. This is especially true in the city of Baroda. This paper studies the dynamics of their coexistence.

Gujarat, till about two years ago, was an economically vibrant state with Baroda as its pride. Employment opportunities attracted fresh migration to the city. Despite sporadic troubles among different religious groups there was at least a veneer of calm in Baroda. But early in 2002, violence of an unbelievable dimension broke out between Hindus and Muslims. This was not a conflict arising out of migration of outsiders but among people of the same soil and similar background, between Hindus and Muslims. With this background the critical factor in spreading the violence was economic. Encroachments on each other's economic turf were unavoidable which in turn became a new source of conflict.

There never is a set formula about the relationship between cultural diversity and conflict. Diverse cultures merge into the mainstream partly to avoid conflicts as in the case of tribals whereas in the case of the two major protagonists, Hindus and Muslims, conflict leads to greater attention to difference. In periods of extreme tension in this relationship, economic hardships, spatial pressures, competition for limited resources can lead to conflicts of catastrophic proportions.

Keywords: India, Migration, Cultural diversity, Coexistence dynamics, Conflict, Economic distress

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Cultural Diversity and Conflict in Multicultural Cities

The case of Baroda*

Alaknanda Patel

India has always been known as the land of many cultures. Whether through the rugged mountain passes of the North-West or the long coastline that surrounds a large part of the land, invaders, marauders, traders and travellers have penetrated into the heartland of the country since before the start of the Common Era. India was also a part of the Silk Route which through its multipronged arteries like the waterways of a delta, did far more than transport silk; it was a primary avenue for exchange of scholars, ideas and thought, religious and secular. The spread of Buddhism with the resultant translation of Sanskrit texts into Chinese or the Gandhara (Graeco-Buddhist) tradition of art, an early expression of a synthesis of artistic styles, Greek, Indian and Persian, are only a few of the contributions of this Route.¹

The coming of Islam and then the long rule of the Sultans and Mughal Emperors, of course, changed the contours of Indian society and its cultural profile. To this, the East India Company, its smaller counterparts from France and

Portugal, the subsequent British rule and coming of Christianity added a new dimension.

For Indians, the country, a harbinger of many cultures, a land of many faiths, of many peoples, was a matter of great pride. While there were pockets of fusion and syncretism, by and large, the individual groups kept their separate religious and cultural identity making Indian society a mosaic of different languages, religious beliefs and lifestyle.

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Gujarat, a large state on the Western side of the country, has reflected this special aspect for well over a millennium. The navigable waters along its Western Coast and the resultant maritime activities, gave it early contact with Africa and South-East Asia making its ports active channels for trade, exploration and migration.² In contemporary Gujarat, in addition to a large section of indigenous people there are people of different religious faiths like Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Christian and Zoroastrian with their individual socio-cultural patterns. Besides, neither Hindus nor Muslims represent one uniform culture; various caste groups within the Hindus and different sections of Muslims like Vohras, Memons, the orthodox, the Sufi-oriented or the subaltern show great diversity in their social practices, attire, food habits and attitude to one another. Caste, though rampant

among Hindus, is not just their monopoly; the Muslims in India have their own gradation – descendents of those who had originally migrated being higher than local converts. Even among local converts those who had converted from low castes continue to remain in the lower rungs of social classification. Added to this, the economic buoyancy of the last few decades attracted to the main urban centres, large-scale migration from other states as well as from economically depressed areas within Gujarat. This paper attempts to study the dynamics of coexistence and conflict among some of these groups.

Baroda³ is one of the larger cities of Gujarat with a population of about 1.8 million. For over two hundred years before the merger with the Indian Union in 1949 the city and the outlying rural areas were ruled by the princely family of Gaekwads. The accounts of European travellers or British Residents from late 18th century onwards describe Baroda as an extremely beautiful city with wooden gabled houses, tree-lined roads and large open gardens. It had the usual mix of autocratic, repressive and benevolent rulers till the visionary Sayajirao Gaekwad III took over the reins in 1876. His pride in the state, his concern for the people and commitment to Indian culture gave Baroda a new look and character.

Under his patronage, it became a leading cultural centre with some of India's best musicians and painters as residents. Similarly, the Baroda College that he started in 1881 attracted the best minds in social sciences. In fact, if one went

through a list of social scientists, social reformers, administrators, philosophers and nationalist leaders from late 19th century onwards, most would have had some connection with Baroda College. Hospitals, schools for boys and girls,⁴ public libraries, beautiful palaces, parks and buildings were a part of Baroda's skyline.

Economically too, the city did well. The government was a major employer while law, medicine, teaching attracted the bright. The railways, the textile mills, small industries, the banks employed many, as did the newly growing pharmaceutical companies like Alembic. Baroda could even boast of India's first ever glider factory! The cry for freedom, nationalism had already started and possibly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Gujarat had a desire to be a leader economically as well as politically. Baroda being outside formal British hold, starting new ventures towards this goal was easier.

From all accounts, at the time of merger with India, Baroda was a peaceful, rather laidback city of courtly grandeur and order, with a population of diverse cultural and religious practices, each community having its own space and giving spaces to the practices of others. With the Princely Court as the pivot, society knew its ordering and each one kept to her territory. To residents then it was an idyllic city of peace, harmony, beauty with intellectual and cultural interactions.

Today, it is transformed. Large oil refineries, fertilizer and petroleum complexes mark its boundaries. Industries, small and big, demands of residential housing, corporate offices, shopping and entertainment centres, have encroached on the surrounding farmland, orchards and gardens. Quaint old buildings have given way to soulless highrisers and the roads can hardly carry the yearly increase in traffic load. While old Baroda was planned to have wide four-lane roads, somewhat in straight geometric patterns, today's planning makes narrow roads and passages to give more land for building purposes. Underground parking spaces in buildings are often rented out to shops making driving and parking a bit of a nightmare. Little attention has been paid to civic amenities like road surface, drainage, garbage collection and care of stray animals. Pollution from chemical factories is less only because recession has closed many of them down. With the rise of the number of trucks, cars, three-wheelers and two-wheelers overall pollution is still high. In a society where poverty is endemic and there is little training in civic responsibilities, it is not uncommon to find people burning tyres or plastic to keep themselves warm on a cold wintry night. Use of loudspeakers with high decibel during religious and social functions is a declaration of one's social and economic status. Noise pollution and air pollution are a part of every Barodian's life.

If this city was known as an oasis of harmony and peace in the past, today it is labelled as one of most riot-prone cities where communal clashes can flare up

with the smallest of sparks. From 1969 onwards, there have been several severe outbursts of riots whether as a spillover from clashes in other cities or due to tension in the city itself. Despite earlier troubles, for the last one decade there was a veneer of calm in Baroda. Suddenly, late in February 2002, violence of an unbelievable dimension broke out between Hindus and Muslims; it attacked the basic diversity of the society and ripped apart the social and cultural fabric of Gujarat.

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On February 27, 2002 in a most reprehensible act of barbarism, 2 bogies of a train were set on fire not too far from Baroda, allegedly by a section of Muslims. 58 Hindus including a large number of women and children trapped in smoke and fire were burnt to death.⁵ Hindu leaders took the law into their own hands and vowed to teach the other community a severe lesson.

The dance of death, rape, looting and burning of Muslims started soon after, killing 2000 people (unofficial estimate, half of that, officially) including some from the Hindu community and rendering more than 100,000 people homeless⁶ in the State. It lasted for over two months, ostensibly with support from political parties and connivance of police.

Baroda city and the district was one of the worst affected areas. In one case alone 18⁷ people working in a bakery were torched to death. In all, in the city 56 people were killed burnt or stabbed, several hundred homes looted and gutted, 30 Muslim religious places destroyed or damaged and about 800 business establishments, large and small looted and destroyed. Refugees in various camps numbered over 7000, some of whom are still without a home after a year. The total economic loss till end of March, 2002 was estimated at Rs.100 crores⁸. In this, loss incurred by Hindus in business was almost 5 times as that of Muslims. Nor were Hindu lives spared. Some died in police firing, a few in the Muslim backlash and three in the bakery massacre just because they worked for a Muslim employer. Hindu militants had not thought of negative externality or ‘friendly fire’⁹.

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Why this extent of brutality and why now? It was not conflict arising out of recent migration of outsiders but among people of the same soil and similar background, between Hindus and Muslims of Gujarat, of Baroda; between people who had lived side by side, mainly in peace, for generations. Did cultural diversity play a role in this carnage and if so, in what way?

To make an attempt at any kind of answer, firstly one must remember that the religious, social and the cultural blend into one another in Indian society and

that in the last two decades religion has taken a very public posture. When one talks of culture and its diversity, it is very much what emanates from religious rituals and strictures. Religious differences like idolatry of many Gods versus the prayer to one Allah merge with cultural and lifestyle differences like food habits, e.g., eating of beef as opposed to worship of cows, attire and language, Gujarati as against Urdu. In cultural forms like music and art, the devotional music of the Hindu is different not only in content but style as well. While, in addition to the spiritual and the devotional, the Hindu garbs his deities in human form and depicts colourful tales of their daily life, in Islam, generally music is taboo, but even where allowed as in Sufi shrines, the content is far more severe, basically as praise of the Lord or his Messenger. Both create masterpieces of architecture but the animate forms in one pose a sharp contrast to the intricate designs of the other.

The second thing one has to keep in mind is that though conflict has generally been an urban phenomenon, the concept of city, town and village, is somewhat vague in this part of the world, with a thin line of demarcation among them. Because of a preponderance of princely states,¹⁰ there are a large number of cities. Every capital of a state had to be a city, so a kind of urban environment is common even when one goes away from the larger centres like Baroda. Besides, there has always been a great deal of interaction between cities and the so-called rural areas for medical, legal and social reasons. Social 'rituals' are extremely important in Gujarat and visits for births, marriages, deaths and even illness are a

major part of one's social commitments. It is somewhat like the city thinning out to a town, in turn thinning out to a village of brick and mortar houses and television antennas.

One could obviously ask why such conflicts did not take place in Baroda before independence; after all, different groups lived together even then. For one thing, the city was small with a population of 150,000 at the time of merger. Besides, in a feudal society of patronage and discipline culprits were easy to identify and punishment not difficult to mete out. And if in the old Baroda state there was no history of sectarian clashes it was mainly because each group had accepted its position in society. The Muslim musician often performed at Hindu temples if the Priest enjoyed classical music, but the same Muslim musician quietly accepted the fact that no Hindu ever drank water in his house. Christians found it difficult to rent a house in a predominantly Hindu area; this too he accepted as part of a disciplined or stratified society. When a Hindu of Bania caste did not allow a Hindu Patel to enter her kitchen, the Patel accepted it with an inner anger but nothing overt. Besides, in the earlier part of 20th century, much of the energy was spent on getting India free from British rule, the internal differences were put on the back burner to be sorted out in future.

21st century is an entirely different story. Over fifty years of freedom have given citizens a consciousness of rights; though not necessarily of responsibilities,

and a desire for identity. Exposure to a globalised world with greater expectations and ambition; education, mobility with a possibility of upward mobility, have led to a desire for more and now, without waiting. Manipulations by political parties aggravate this new impatience and confusion. In such a situation in a democracy, when the pie to be shared is not large enough, the construction of an 'other' and a resulting conflict is almost inevitable. The presence of different religious and cultural practices helps in the making of this 'other'.

Simultaneously, there were other social and political factors operating. Traditionally, upper caste Hindus like Brahmins had been sole proprietors of culture in Gujarat. They produced its arts and literature, pondered over philosophy and interpreted religious texts. The norm they set up for the society was casteist, hierarchical but accommodating of other beliefs, a norm that the rest had to follow. As awareness grew over time this cultural domination was challenged by the lower castes. Their alliance with the Muslims threatened the power of upper castes who then changed tactics and started a movement for Hindu supremacy. The new strategy was inclusive of all castes but not of other faiths like Islam or Christianity¹¹. The image of the 'outsider' came into sharper focus.

The main players in the arena of conflict in Baroda and around have been the Adivasis (the indigenous people), the Dalits (the untouchables), the caste Hindus and the Muslims, a large minority of about 12% of the total population.

The Adivasis have been a pawn in the seesaw game between Hindus and Christians for a long time. Christian missionaries converted them to better their state in life while Hindus tried to bring them under the Hindu fold claiming them as their own.

In any case, whether the Adivasis of Baroda region are a ‘different people’ in the anthropological sense or ‘very backward Hindus’ who were ‘under the impact of Sanskritic Hinduism through various channels [since] before the beginning of the British rule’¹² is subject to debate. Whatever may be the merit of either view, in the present context, tribals who migrate to Baroda city or those who live nearby show an allegiance to Hinduism, a desire to move up the scale of Hindu hierarchy. It is not uncommon to go to a tribal home to find Hindu idols in the front side of the house but indigenous deities still installed in the backyard. There is an obvious desire to be part of the mainstream society. Employment opportunities in their own habitat are low; constant logging and acid rain have destroyed much of their environment. Migration to cities is a necessity; one only has to drive through the main roads of Baroda in the morning to see the long line of tribals waiting to be employed as casual labour even for the day. According to one estimate, 60,000 tribals migrate to Baroda city every year between October and March. A large number also settles down in the city for education, jobs – high or low. Over time, their language, legends, dance, rituals, art, dress fade out and become showpiece items, as Hindu festivals and city celebrations take over to

become a major part of their life. The dominant culture erodes the practices of the little traditions.

The story of the Dalits is not very different. Despite the atrocities they faced for generations, recent tendencies in Baroda have been for many of them to align with majority Hindu politics and culture. Having been disillusioned by the broken promises of so-called secular politics, Dalits in Gujarat realised that their interest lay in joining hands with upper caste Hindus. Besides, the society around flourishing urban centres with fallouts reaching small towns and villages, had undergone major changes. Gone were the days when one could find identity and security in the niche of one's village or one's community. Education, exposure to large cities, media, specially electronic, cinema, new opportunities and a new freedom threw challenges difficult to handle. Discourses of Hindu religious leaders aimed specifically at groups like Dalits and Adivasis offered a new direction while organizations like RSS and VHP¹³ filled the vacuum by giving them a Hindu cushion, thereby broadening their own base of support. Hinduism is happy to allow individual cultural practices under the wide umbrella of a Hindu identity and in present day politics this 'Hindu identity' is crucial. The lure of being part of the upper echelon in caste hierarchy is strong and some Dalits who did well in the game of power and money even changed their names legally to upper caste titles. Here too a distinctive culture slowly got absorbed into the mainstream Hindu mould¹⁴.

The main protagonists then are the reinforced and restructured Hindus, the majority community and Muslims, the largest minority. This is an age-old enmity, a historical opposition. The Hindu psyche has never forgotten that Muslims ruled India for almost seven centuries, treating them as second class citizens in their own land; nor has it forgiven the conquerors for the destruction of 60,000 temples during these centuries with mosques built on 3000 of these temples sites¹⁵.

In some Islamic structures, it is quite obvious that sculptures of Hindu deities had been defaced to use as building blocks. The victory mosque near Delhi¹⁶ was built with stones from 27 Hindu and Jain temples with exquisite carvings, as was the Friday mosque in Ahmedabad, again from destroyed temples. Hindus have also not forgotten the destruction of the holy temple at Somnath in Gujarat not once but three times by Muslim invaders. Where religious fervour is strong, memories too are strong.

Muslims on the other hand cannot forget their past glory and grandeur as rulers, nor the superiority of praying to one formless God as against many idols in mainly human form. This often makes them arrogant and rather dismissive of the local population that cannot quite recall a glorious past. Even if this is not the outlook of the Muslim community as a whole, the impression given by the influential religious leaders and social elite is of this superiority. The fact that they

took to educational and other opportunities only after a lag and` remained behind Hindus in jobs, business and other independent professions acted as another ground for resentment. The leaders' insistence on keeping large masses in religious straightjacket also makes it difficult for a Muslim to adjust to contemporary society.

The partition of India in 1947 started a new chapter in Hindu-Muslim antagonism. It was a betrayal felt strongly in Gujarat for not only Md. Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, but many of the important financiers of the separatist movement were from this region. While Hindu anger grew, with the migration of the wealthy and the influential to Pakistan the local Muslim population felt bewildered and directionless.

Cities and villages here have always had pockets of 'separateness' based on religious, caste, linguistic, regional and other such grounds. Hindus and Muslims live in different areas as far as possible with little social contact. The stigma of 'pollution' and 'violence' that Muslims have faced for centuries keep the two communities apart even further. In the last three decades repeated riots have intensified this spatial segregation resulting in greater suspicion and fear.¹⁷ The creation of ghettolike living along communal lines is especially unfortunate because the few areas in Baroda and Ahmedabad where rioters could not reach

were the mixed ones, where residents had taken a decision not to allow outsiders to create havoc.

Tandalja is a rather large area of Baroda with many housing societies, some mixed with members of both communities and others separate but in close proximity. It was also the centre of the city's largest refugee camps, often referred to as mini-Pakistan. With all the provocation that came from outside, continued dialogue between leaders and residents, citizens' patrolling round the clock and strict vigilance against rumours prevented any kind of confrontation.

The story of Ram-Rahimnagar¹⁸ in Ahmedabad is even more moving. 20,000 Hindus and Muslims, majority of whom are victims of various riots, have lived here together for forty years. A dargah¹⁹ and a temple stand side by side in the same compound. They celebrate religious festivals of both communities with equal fervour and have never allowed communal fever to enter their little island of amity. This has been possible because members of the residents' committee do not allow rumours or outsiders to incite and disturb their peace. Mainly daily wage-earners, the residents also know that a day's curfew is a loss of a day's wage. But this is not the only motivation, continued exposure to each other's culture has made them respect and cherish their embedded differences and made them realise how variety can make life richer²⁰. But these are stray pockets. Unfortunately, the

general absence of interaction and understanding combined with the stress and squalor of urban living only help widen the faultline.

The Hindu then asserts his identity through religious and cultural symbols. Suddenly deities are resurrected and religious festivals take place in public with loudspeakers blaring away chants and devotional songs; pictures of Gods and Goddesses adorn walls of shops; men and women use religious symbols as part of their dress and make-up. Even television serials give prominence to Hindu rituals and so-called traditional Indian values. Culture, religion, politics, popularity ratings make for a heady mix.

The Muslim reiterates his Islamic identity in a similar fashion. Loudspeakers announce the call to prayer five times a day as daily 'namaaz' becomes vital to a Muslim's life. Fast for the holy month as well as religious education at 'madrasas' at least on Sundays become a part of a youngster's life almost by compulsion. One can identify Muslims more easily by their cap, long coat, and distinctive beard. Even the language changes. While Gujarati is still spoken at home, at work place or in public there is a tendency to speak a Urduised Hindi just as the Hindi spoken by the other community emphasises words with Sanskritic origin. In so far as language and etiquette are an expression of religious and cultural identity the two stand quite apart. The Muslims' different lifestyle is

then taken as a kind of connection with pan-Islamic culture which leads to a questioning of his loyalty; the tussle goes on. Diversity leads to divide.

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With this sharply etched ‘otherness’ as a backdrop a critical factor in the spread and continuation of violence in 2002 was economic. Gujarat till about two years ago was an economically vibrant state with Baroda as its pride. For at least four decades the city had been the hub of activities for fertilizer, petrochemical complexes, pharmaceutical and engineering industries and an oil refinery. Along with some of these large units in mainly public sector, small industrial units grew out of private initiatives. Employment opportunities attracted people from all over the country at senior and junior levels making this a highly cosmopolitan city. The economic boom led to a building boom and the city grew both vertically and laterally. As the city flourished on the economic front, the University of Baroda took the lead in the field of education. A centre of academic excellence, its various faculties attracted some of the best and the brightest of the country. There was progress in the air.

In the new millennium the story is different. Many of the public-sector undertakings either have changed hands or wait to be taken over while medium or even large private sector units face closure or lockout. Years of a protected

market made them parasitic and they could not withstand the competition coming from the open economy of the 1990's. Employment opportunities are now far less in the organised sector with Gujarat's job growth at a 15-year low in 2002; frustration among youth is not difficult to see.

The unwise move of turning some of the best farmland to fertilizer complexes not only affected agricultural production but also caused severe environmental damage. Loss of forest cover affected rainfall just as pollution from fumes and spills affected animals and yield. Three successive years of continuous drought in the late 1990's and the devastating earthquake of 2001 made life that much harder. Even the University lost much of its former glory. It is not a happy story.

On the other hand, the Muslim story is a little different. Education has now spread among Muslims, they too have been doing well in business. With an emerging middle class, their entry into mainstream society is no longer a far cry. The non-resident Indian, the big spender, includes people of all faith and castes; in some areas houses of Muslims compete with any rich Hindu's home. It can be an eyesore to one who thinks the land is his.

Traditionally, certain occupations like mattress making, carpentry, spectacle making, eye glasses manufacture, plumbing, tailoring, trade in lumber

and furniture, transport business and crafts like printing of textiles, gold embroidery, hand weaving of woollen wraps and killims, stringing of pearls and precious beads were the domain of Muslims. The marketing was done by Hindus. In the last two decades Muslims have become entrepreneurs themselves and thrown out the intrusion of the middleman. Besides, contemporary society does not build professions on sectarian basis; there are entrants from all communities to every profession and trade. A turf war is inevitable. It was no different in Baroda in 2002. While there had been brutal killings, the main focus was on destruction of business premises of competitors. Shops belonging to the minority community were targeted individually with no trace of any asset left inside. Whether a factory, a shop or a pushcart, nothing was safe. Destruction of homes made the economic loss that much greater, with the possibility of some, specially migrants, relocating themselves away from the city²¹. The turf war did not stop here, it led to a three-pronged attack on the territorial rights of money-lending, bootlegging and building.

Continued indebtedness has been one of the tragedies of the rural or even urban poor of India. Research on Indian economics has dwelt on it in great length just as poignant novels have been written on this theme. Over fifty years after independence, the situation has not changed much. Whether the poor of the city slums or the Adivasis of quaint villages, the story of the yoke of debts and the hold of moneylenders is about the same.

Money lending has been the preserve of Hindus of Bania caste in Gujarat. In villages, they had established a relationship with the local population so that the latter accepted the high rate of interest and the consequent misery as an essential part of life; for some unemployed Adivasi youth, the Bania even became a role model. Now Muslims have moved in to this sphere. Charging a rate of interest varying from 60% to 144%, not very different from the Baniya's rate, they started living in the townlike large villages and established a new relationship, apparently comfortable, with the locals.

Obviously, this was forbidden territory. With canards about Muslim designs on the women including abduction and sexual assault, their continued exploitation of local people, and various other rumours supposedly coming from tribal oracles, it did not take long to incite the Adivasis to attack Muslims and drive them out, in many cases forever. Even six months afterwards, the air in some of these areas was thick with suspicion, hatred, anger, fear and tension. It has been called 'a proxy war' fought on behalf of the Baniyas²² on two fronts: religion and business competition.

Gujarat is a dry state; bootlegging is profitable. Even way back in 1983²³, there were 123 liquor dens in Baroda city selling illicit liquor worth Rs.100,000 a day. The bribe paid periodically to police officers and political bosses came to about Rs.6,000,000 a year. Interest in the continuance of bootlegging operations,

obviously, came from more than one quarter. Today, it is a major curse of this society.

Three main groups operate in this underworld activity: the lower status Marathas²⁴, the Muslims and the Bhois, an economically, socially and educationally backward section of Hindus, generally engaged in fishing. While Marathas and Muslims have been strong rivals for many years, the Bhois are a rather new entrant but already aggressive and violent rivals of the Muslims. On occasions in earlier riots, what was seen as communal tension had turned out to be the underworld rivalry between Bhois and Muslims. In 2002 also this triangular fight for quick money and large money played no small role.

Land prices in Baroda are high. Bounded on one side by the river Mahi, the city has expanded over orchards and farmland almost as far as possible. Land in the inner city is coveted. The builders' lobby is not averse to getting access to areas, often occupied illegally by the poor, specially poor migrants. Riots that clear shanty-towns is a tempting proposition. In early May when one thought the madness had ceased, a whole row of shacks in the inner city belonging to poor Muslims was set on fire, allegedly by Bhois. In one act they had accomplished two goals, got rid of some of the bootlegging rivals and cleared the land for building.

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Culture, religion give only a partial explanation for some of the major conflicts, the motivation comes also from other factors. But putting religion in the forefront helps. In a land of want and poverty, when there is little education and ability to reason, where opportunities are few and frustration high, dependence on a God who dispenses life's pleasure and pain can be monumental. If that God is seen to be in danger because of diverse religio-cultural traits, it is not difficult to sway a mob to violence.

One distinguishing feature of society in India is that it is a conglomeration of various units, religious, social, cultural, regional, linguistic etc., the whole made up of distinctive parts. Even though years of living side by side results in some osmosis, it is not a melting pot blending towards monoculture. In periods of amity and respect people come together for public or private occasions, whether joyous or sad but enmity and confrontation are never very far. This too is a distinguishing feature. Unfortunately, Hindus and Muslims have not been able to carve out their respective spaces, individual or collective, so like day and night, tolerance and intolerance alternate to guide their lives.

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If there is one thing in India that is certain, it is that generally, no one story can explain everything. Society is now by and large multicultural everywhere and conflict is a part of contemporary milieu but there is no set formula about the

relationship between cultural diversity and conflict. Small variations of the dominant culture can carry on happily as a part of the general framework whereas diverse cultures often merge into the mainstream partly to avoid conflict but mainly to get the secure identity of the majority community. Historical enmity and suspicion arising out of political manoeuvres, religious difference and very different cultural pattern can lead to brutal confrontations as in the case of the two major protagonists of Indian society, Hindus and Muslims. It generally leads to greater attention to difference and their firmly delineated separate identity. Economic hardship, spatial pressures, turf war and competition for limited resources can then lead to conflicts of catastrophic proportions.

Maybe one should try to end on a happier note. There is one sphere where there is absolute communal harmony with a pan-Indian involvement; it is the game of cricket. No one ever takes any note of a player's religion, it is his performance on the field that gives excitement, hope and despondency. This is equally true of the average Indian's other passion – Bollywood films. One can only hope that as the new millennium progresses, this harmony in sport and entertainment will spread to other aspects of life in Baroda, in Gujarat and in India.

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Notes

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1. Subhakanta Behera : “India’s Encounter with the Silk Road”, p.5078, Economic and Political Weekly, Mumbai, December 21, 2002, pp.5077-5080.

2. Strange as it may seem, even now one can find settlements of Abyssinians in the heartland of Gujarat.

3. Now called Vadodara.

4. Beatrice Webb in her ‘Diary’ mentions the Gaekwad of Baroda who governed a progressive state, ‘enormously ahead of the rest of India’ in providing universal education. The Diary of Beatrice Webb, Volume Three, Ed. Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, Virago, 1984, p.172.

5. The long standing tussle has been over the site of a 16th century abandoned mosque at Ayodhya, claimed to be the birthplace of the mythological God-hero Rama. On December 6, 1992 the mosque was razed to the ground by Hindu fundamentalists. This has been the cause of major confrontations between the two communities for ten years now. On February 27, 2002, hundreds of devotees of

Lord Rama were returning from an ongoing religious ceremony at Ayodhya when the train was attacked and two bogies burnt.

6. The Economist gives much higher figures. “By the time of the election (December 12, 2002), 220,000 people displaced by the riots were still away from home.” The Economist, December 21st, 2002.

7. People’s Union of Civil Liberties, Vadodara: “Violence in Vadodara: A Report”, May, 2002.

8. Ibid. These figures are till March 2002. The riots had continued sporadically in pockets of the city till May but further figures are not available.

9. The all-Gujarat figures show a total loss of Rs.3,800 crores for Muslims during the riots as against Rs.24,000 crores for Hindus. In the 1,159 Muslim-owned hotels that were destroyed by violent mobs, 700 Muslims lost their jobs in a total job loss of 29,000. Apart from general fatigue this loss was one of the reasons the riots tapered off by middle of May and now, at least in Baroda there is general aversion to violence.

10. Over 300 in Gujarat alone.

11. Bhikhu Parekh : “Making Sense of Gujarat”, p.28.

Seminar 513, Delhi, May, 2002, pp.26-31.

12. A. M. Shah. : “The Tribals – So-Called – of Gujarat”, p.97,

Economic and Political Weekly, Mumbai, January 11-17, 2003. pp.95-97

13. Rashtriya Sewak Sangh and Vishwa Hindu Parishad are two Hindu organizations.

14. The section that kept the strong Dalit identity has produced some of the best contemporary literature in Gujarat.

15. Richard M. Eaton, Ed. : India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750"
Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003, p.83.

16. Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque near Qutb Minar, Delhi.

17. In one interview the informant described how her family had lived happily in a Muslim locality for over 100 years, but now in 2002, fear of attack, specially from outsiders had forced her to move.

18. The name itself is suggestive of communal harmony. Ram is a Hindu God and Rahim is an attribute of God in Islamic parlance.

19. Mausoleum of a holy man that is turned into a shrine.

20. One must also mention the 86 year old Hindu gentleman who lost his wife in the train carnage, lost his son in the subsequent riots but continues to live near his Muslim friends, calling last year's events an aberration. For more such moving stories, see 'Path of Harmony' by Charkha – Development Network, Ahmedabad, March, 2003.

21. While there has been general absence of violence since June, 2002, economic boycott of Muslim business continues, wherever possible.

22. Ganesh Devy : "Tribal Voice and Violence" p.41,
Seminar – 513, New Delhi, May 2002, pp.39-48

23. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find any later figures.

24. The Gaekwads were Marathas, who came from a neighbouring region. Their opposition to Muslims is historical, from the days their hero Shivaji rose against the oppressive Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in the 17th century. These Marathi-speaking people constitute a large section of Baroda's population. Generally well-educated, they are mainly in white collar jobs and professions like teaching, medicine, law etc. But many members of the lower status have turned to illicit liquor business.

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