

**TRIGGERED TOWN: SITUATING COMMUNAL VIOLENCE AND DISSONANCE IN  
THE WAKE OF THE GUJARAT EARTHQUAKE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates the intertwined narratives of the 2001 Gujarat, India earthquake and the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Ahmedabad. It examines the impact of these events on the city's urban population to explore the intersections of natural disasters, religion, caste violence, and rapid urbanization. Focusing on the rise of Ahmedabad's middle class, the study uses personal interviews with Hindu upper-castes and upper-middle-class earthquake victims to explore their evolving attitudes towards the environment, state politics, inter-community relationships and political amnesia. And more specifically, it seeks to delve into how this section of civil society who were impacted by both events, albeit differently, have interpreted and responded to them over the long term. It reveals how memories can be shaped and reconstructed with effective state-propagated distortions which in turn have led to widespread denial of social realities and contributed to then-chief minister Narendra Modi's electoral victories. Over two decades, the influence of the Sangh Parivar and political leader Narendra Modi has fostered economic pride and aspirations among these citizens, overshadowing the city's traumatic seismic history together with religious, class and caste divides. As increasing climate induced disasters loom over India together with authoritarian supremacist threats to India's secular democracy, this research aims to highlight the potential contemporary crises that inland urban metropolises such as Ahmedabad are likely to face given their tumultuous environmental and political histories.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## **IV. TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Photographs And Maps .....	v
Glossary .....	ix
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Section A: Seismological and Political Fault lines.....	4
Section B: Theoretical Framework, Positionality, Methodology.....	7
Section C: Literature Review.....	15
Part1: Bridging Environmental Forces and Social Dynamics in Disaster Contexts .....	16
Part 2: Literature on Ahmedabad and Gujarat .....	22
Chapter Two: Historical and Social Context .....	29
Humanitarian Aid, Community and Seva: The Rise of Hindutva Ideology .....	43
The Sangh Parivar (RSS, BJP, VHP and others) through Disaster Management .....	46
2002: The Making of a Pogrom .....	51
Patterns of Social Violence in Gujarat .....	55
Caste and Disaster .....	57
Chapter Three: Findings and Analysis .....	60
Chapter Four: Conclusion .....	100
Ahmedabad: Muslim Ghettos and a Politics of Exclusion .....	100
Disasters, Religion, Communal Violence, and the Future of Cities .....	106
Bibliography .....	110

## **PHOTOGRAPHS AND MAPS**

Images of the Gujarat 2001 earthquake and the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom

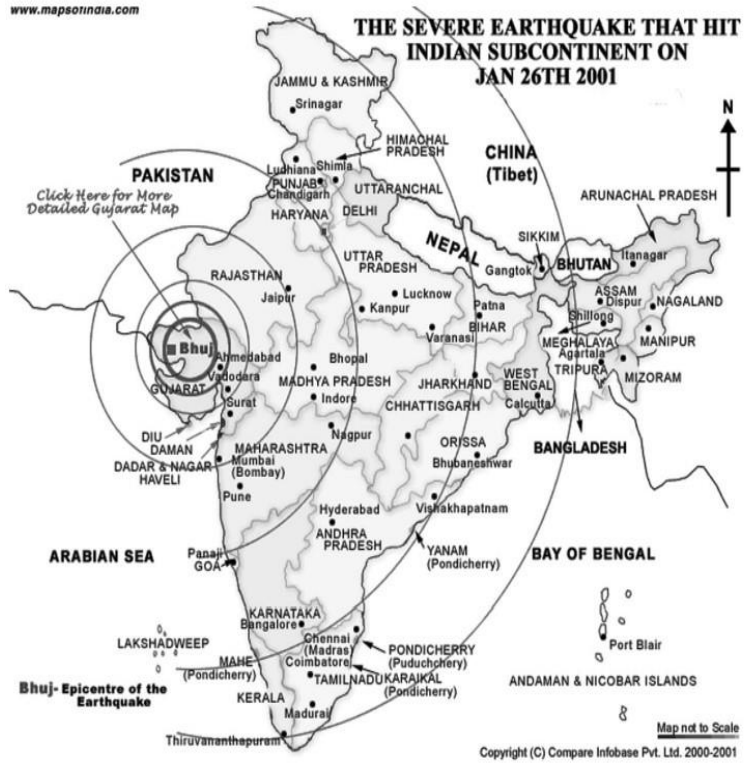


Fig 1. Map of India showing the state of Gujarat, and the areas affected by the 2001 earthquake  
Map source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com).

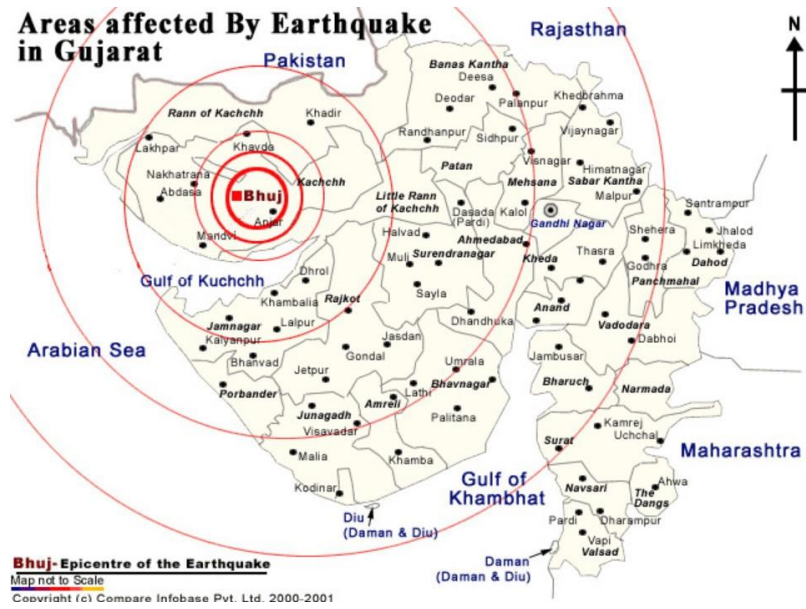


Fig 2. Map of Gujarat, Areas affected by the earthquake, showing the epicentre Bhuj, 2001.

Image courtesy: University of Memphis (CERI)

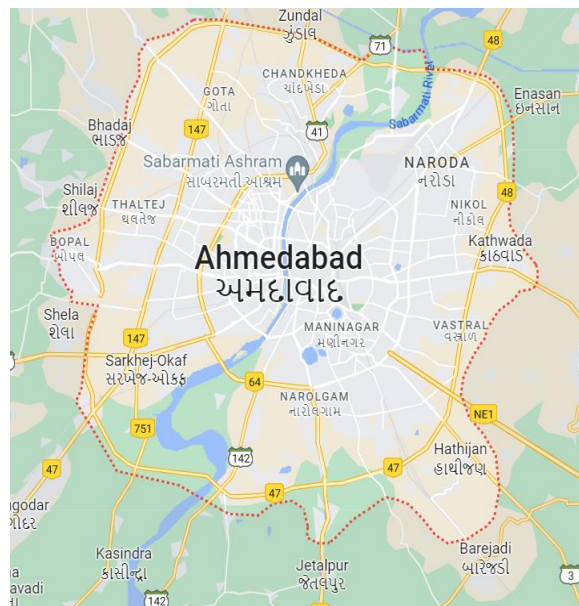
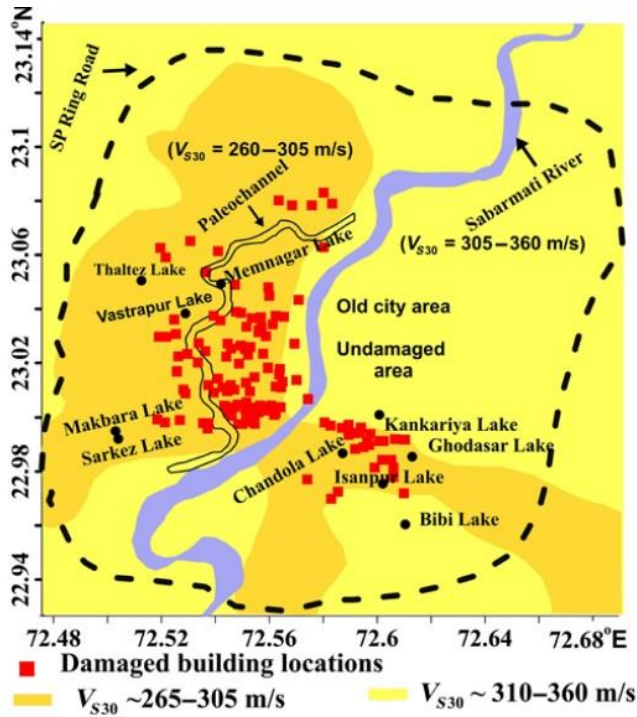


Fig 3. Map of Sabarmati River.



of Ahmedabad city with the Getty Images.

Fig. 4. Map showing collapsed buildings on the west side  
Image source: (Sairam et al., 2015)



Fig.5. Picture showing Ahmedabad under the 2001 earthquake rubble

Image source: Getty Images

Fig 6.  
train on fire,  
Image  
Press Journal,



Sabarmati express  
2002.

Source: The Free  
2022

Picture  
officers in



Fig7.  
showing police  
the riot hit areas of  
Ahmedabad, 2002  
Image

source: Amit Vitale/ Getty Images

## GLOSSARY

*Bandh* -- A general strike used as a form of protest by political parties or communities. In Hindi meaning “closed.”

*Bajrang Dal* -- A Militant Hindu organisation, youth wing of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). Established in 1984, the Bajrang Dal is named after the Hindu deity Hanuman, who is also known as Bajrang Bali.

Congress -- The Indian National Congress, commonly referred to as the Congress party, is one of the oldest and largest political parties in India. It was founded in 1885 and played a significant role in India's struggle for independence from British rule. The party's early leaders included prominent figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

BJP -- Bhartiya Janata Party. Indian People's Party, one of the two major political parties in India. A right-wing party. The BJP was founded in 1980, emerging from the Bhartiya Jana Sangh, which itself was founded in 1951 by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. The party's ideological roots lie in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist volunteer organisation.

RSS -- Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. A right-wing, Hindu nationalist charitable organisation, currently the world's largest voluntary non-governmental organisation. Has been accused of inciting and participating in communal violence.

Sangh Parivar -- The Sangh Parivar, translated as 'Family of Organizations,' is a collective term used to refer to a group of Hindu nationalist organisations in India. The term encompasses a network of affiliated groups, each with its own specific focus and agenda, but united by a shared ideology centred around Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism.

VHP -- The Vishva Hindu Parishad, translated as the 'World Hindu Council,' is a prominent Hindu nationalist organisation in India. It was founded in 1964 by Swami Chinmayananda, along with other leaders of the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other Hindu nationalist groups.

*Hindutva* -- A term used to describe a Hindu nationalist ideology that seeks to establish the cultural and political dominance of Hinduism in India. The term 'Hindutva' was popularised by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his 1923 pamphlet "Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?" In this pamphlet, Savarkar defined Hindutva as the essence of being Hindu, encompassing both cultural and political aspects.

*Karsevak* -- The term is derived from the Sanskrit words 'Kar' meaning 'to do' or 'work' and 'seva' meaning service, usually in a religious or selfless sense, often translated as 'voluntary labour'. The concept of seva is found in many religions, especially Sikhism.

*Dalit* -- The term Dalit refers to individuals who belong to the lowest caste in the traditional Hindu caste system in India. Historically known as 'untouchables,' they continue to experience intense social and economic exclusion.

*Ahimsa* -- A Sanskrit term that translates to 'nonviolence' or 'non-harming'. It is a fundamental principle in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist philosophies.

*Pol* -- The word Pol is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Pratoli' which means entrance to an enclosed area. This entrance or gate was known by the name of the community that inhabited the closed area.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On January 26, 2001, my sister and I were dressed in our school uniforms at Mount Carmel, a British era girls' convent school, in Ahmedabad on the western side of the Sabarmati River. January 26 is also the Republic Day of India, the day our Constitution came into force, and we stood on the school's basketball court alongside our teachers and classmates early that morning for the flag-hoisting ceremony. As we finished the last strains of India's national anthem *Jana Gana Mana* along a recorded tape of India's most well-known and famous singer Lata Mangeshkar, suddenly Mangeshkar's voice seemed to wobble on the speakers. Then it died out completely. Just when we looked at each other to giggle amongst ourselves, it started. It came in waves. Suddenly we weren't standing on a solid, concretized basketball court anymore. We seemed to be standing on liquid earth. The ground under our feet moved as if made of paper. Children ran screaming in all directions as the earth kept rolling like a giant ship. I ran towards the boundary wall of the school trying to hold onto a tree. As we watched in horror from below, our entire school building suddenly cracked and split horizontally. The entire second floor that housed a chemistry lab and several classrooms, simply shifted out. Windows burst open. Our physical training teacher started to blow his whistle as the shaking passed from under us. He was trying to guide panicked students to the one narrow gate in the front of the school. After minutes of tearful and flustered searching for her, I finally found my sister, both of us stunned beyond words by what we had just experienced. As children of twelve and fourteen we had just discovered that this earth we stood on did not owe it to us to remain still. A powerful earthquake measuring 7.7 on the Richter Scale had struck the Kutch region of Gujarat, affecting the entire state, particularly the urban centre of Ahmedabad, located approximately 400 kilometres away from the epicentre, Bhuj. What we did not know then was that less than twelve months later, on February 27, 2002, the city would experience another disaster and be engulfed in flames of the largest anti-Muslim pogrom in modern Indian history.

Using Gujarat as a case study, particularly the segregated urban centre of Ahmedabad, with its history pockmarked by natural disasters and communal conflicts, I focus on these two significant years, which altered the larger economic, social, and political terrain for India, eventually leading to the installation of Gujarat's chief minister, Narendra Modi, to the post of India's fourteenth prime minister. Natural disaster uproots physical features, and in many ways social relationships too. This study is a contemplation of a city's recent environmental journey, revealing how it sculpted the present reality in

which a segment of Ahmedabad's society has embraced a profound segregation—both spatial and cultural. The division, predominantly between Hindus and Muslims, has not only reshaped living spaces but also warped shared memories, deepening communal discord and breeding disdain for those who do not align with Narendra Modi's vision for growth and development or the call for a solely Hindu nation.

This thesis is an attempt to connect these two events, to unearth memory, retrace its path through a natural disaster that immediately preceded large-scale ethnic violence, and seek possible connections. This research aims to look at where and how memory falters and selective amnesia becomes a coping response to deep environmental trauma. Within this context, it delves into the ways in which the human mind remembers, forgets, and processes the realities of social and political disasters. It questions the narratives we construct—stories we tell ourselves to either accept, distort, or confront the truths of our present. By turning the gaze inward, it interrogates how our own privilege can enable oppression, often unconsciously, revealing the role each of us plays in sustaining systems of power. In these lapses and silences, the study seeks to uncover how a seemingly stable society can descend into large-scale violence, as witnessed in the horrific events of 2002.

Narendra Modi was a political figure common to both these human tragedies. He took over the state government reins as chief minister of Gujarat from the incumbent Keshubhai Patel, who came under severe criticism directly after the death and destruction of 2001 (Mahurkar, 2001). In 2024, 22 years later, India seems perilously on the verge of a democratic collapse under his prime ministership (Jasanoff, 2023). Consequently, the broad objective of this thesis is to delve into the profound impact of natural and human-made calamities on India's present socio-economic and political milieu. And more specifically, it seeks to delve into how the citizens of Ahmedabad, particularly members of upper-middle class Hindu society, who were impacted by both events, albeit differently, have interpreted and responded to them over the long term. Today, much of this same demographic is one of Modi's key voter bases in the city and country (Jaffrelot, 2024) and it feels pertinent to examine why.

This study centres around ten interviews with survivors who in 2001 resided in the areas most heavily impacted by the earthquake, mainly the parts of Ahmedabad west of the Sabarmati. Some of these participants resided in new and upscale apartment complexes like Mansi towers, Shikhar, Ayodhya, and Sangemarmar, which became written into the earthquake's history as the most tragic

multi-storey collapses (Mahurkar, 2016). Many of them have long familial histories with the city and state. Through these in-depth conversations, I got a deeper sense of the many disparate ways in which communities and individuals view themselves and their physical and political spatiality when faced with environmental trauma, but also when these wounds are exacerbated by human violence.

To guide readers through the structure of my thesis, I have divided the thesis into four main chapters, each addressing key themes and topics in depth.

This first introductory chapter is further divided into three main sections. Section A provides foundational information necessary to understand the geography, demographics of Gujarat and Ahmedabad, along with a brief account of the 2001 earthquake and the region's history of seismic activity. This section will also briefly highlight the Hindutva ideology, which originated in this region, together with a detailed comprehensive account of the 2002 violence, setting the stage for later discussions.

In Section B, I discuss the theoretical framework, the methods used to build the argument, connecting the 2001 earthquake and the 2002 violence, while reflecting on my own positionality as a researcher with personal ties to the land, its people, and its history.

Section C, will conclude with an extensive literature review, beginning with a global perspective on the relationship between natural disasters and social violence, before we get into literature specifically on Gujarat and Ahmedabad and their key scholarly contributions to understanding the events of 2001 and 2002.

## **SECTION A: SEISMOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FAULT LINES**

Gujarat sits on the westernmost edge of India, the only state to border both Pakistan and the Arabian sea. It lies within the "Himalayan Collision Zone," 300-400 kilometres from the tectonic plate boundary between the Indo-Australian plate and the Eurasian Plate, a highly active seismic fault line. The region has experienced nine major earthquakes in the past two hundred years: in 1819, 1845, 1847, 1848, 1864, 1903, 1938, 1956 and 2001 (USGS Earthquake Hazards Program, 2007).

According to the National Census (2011), Ahmedabad is Gujarat's largest city in size and economy and is the fifth-most-populated city in India with 7.2 million people. Approximately 83 percent of these identify as Hindus, while 13.8 percent belong to the Muslim community. Additionally, 2.5 percent of the population identify as Jains, and around 0.72 percent identify as Christians. In the 2002 Gujarat violence, most of the violence was committed against the Muslim population by the state's Hindus and some Jain community members (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

This frames Gujarat as a majoritarian Hindu state and helps to explain the roots of its communal past and present. Gujarat has also frequently been referred to as the 'Hindutva Laboratory' of India, where the foundations of Hindu extremism and advocacy for a solely Hindu nation were laid (Katakam, 2021). The Gujarat Pogrom that began on 27 February 2002 was one of India's deadliest incidents of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims, killing an estimated 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, with instances of mass murder, lootings, and arson. At least 20,000 Muslim homes were destroyed and 150,000 people were displaced (Aswani, 2022).

While the earthquake of 2001 and the anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002 have been studied separately by many scholars, not much work has been done in examining overlaps between the two. Here the question of memory and trauma psychology arises. The seismic event of 2001 was not the first in the region as has been demonstrated above, yet the shock and lack of preparedness within civil society indicates that an entire population had no idea that the massive urban centres they were rapidly developing sat on major tectonic fault lines. This study aims to look at that erasure and its impact on earthquake victims. The few existing accounts of the 1819 earthquake in the same desert region of northern Gujarat, which was the last major earthquake of the same intensity before 2001, were made under British colonial rule. For example, Lieutenant Raikes, a British officer stationed in the Kutch region kept diaries in which he wrote how more than a thousand people died and cattle, village homes and the local palace were decimated (Dasgupta and Mukhopadhyay, 2014).

Yet almost two hundred years later, Gujarat was not only caught off-guard but also sustained a much worse toll than it did in 1819. The rural district of Kutch was destroyed. In urban Ahmedabad, though it was farther from the epicentre, more than 81 multi-storeyed buildings came crashing down

(Mahurkar, 2016). Extensive damage took place in the more recently developed urban areas situated to the west of the Sabarmati River, which cuts the city into two. In 2001, this divide along the river was also felt on ethnic and communal lines, as most of the Hindu population lived on the west, newer side of the city, and Muslims and other minorities and marginalised groups mostly populated the eastern old city (Mahadevia, 2002; Dhattiwala, 2016). Research indicates that these western areas were built on sand and floodplains, as compared to the old city established in the sixteenth century by the Muslim sultanate, which was constructed on solid bedrock (Sairam et al., 2018). Again, the question arises, why such haphazard urban development and sprawl was allowed and did the ethnic tensions between religious groups have something to do with it?

In February 2002, barely twelve months after the Gujarat earthquake, when communal violence broke out, that violence followed an opposite geographical pattern in Ahmedabad as the earthquake. It started when in the Muslim-dominated town of Godhra, less than two hundred miles from Ahmedabad, a train carrying members of the Hindu extremist group, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was attacked just outside the station, resulting in the tragic death of 59 individuals (Ahmed, 2002; Chenoy et al., 2002). The train, carrying nearly 1,700 VHP activists, known as *karsevaks*, Hindus who volunteer their services for a religious cause, were returning to Ahmedabad after a symbolic and provocative pilgrimage in the extremely sensitive city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. A decade earlier, Ayodhya had witnessed the demolition of the sixteenth-century Babri Masjid during a demonstration that marked a turning point of mass mobilization by Hindu fundamentalist forces (Nandy et al., 1995).

According to the 2002 Human Rights Watch report, tensions escalated at Godhra Station as *karsevaks* clashed with Muslim bystanders over alleged mistreatment of a tea vendor and harassment of a girl. The Sabarmati Express was halted a short distance from the station, due to the emergency brake being activated, leading to a hostile mob surrounding it and pelting stones. The exact cause of the ignition of coach S-6 remains uncertain, but the fire rapidly spread, trapping fifty-nine passengers inside and resulting in 59 tragic fatalities.

The news of this incident went viral within hours of the tragedy. From local to national news channels, images of the burnt train cars and police officers opening fire flashed on television screens. A

headline in the Gujarat paper *Sandesh*, available at the railway stall, proclaimed “*Khoon ka badla khoon se*”—“Blood for blood,” aimed at the Muslims across the state (Laul, 2018).

In this emotionally charged atmosphere, Hindu extremist associations, notably the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and the Bajrang Dal which were both affiliated with the State’s administration, took to the streets. Over the ensuing five days, mobs of armed individuals seized control of Ahmedabad, launching attacks on Muslim residences and businesses. The perpetrators engaged in looting, arson, and brutal acts of rape, torture, and mass killings on the streets, displaying a ferocious propensity for revenge and violence. Within a short span, the violence extended beyond Ahmedabad to encompass villages and towns throughout the state. Mayhem continued in various areas of Gujarat for over three months, prompting a month-long curfew in Ahmedabad. The army, deployed after two days of uncontrolled violence, patrolled the city's streets for weeks (Brass, 2003; Mahadevia, 2002; Varadarajan, 2002; Shah, 2002). The violence began on 27 February 2002, killing an estimated 2,000 people, mostly Muslims. At least 20,000 Muslim homes were destroyed and 150,000 people were displaced, with property damage amounting to 38 billion rupees inflicted upon the victimized Muslim community (Aswani, 2002). According to Charlotte Thomas, who lived and worked in Ahmedabad as a researcher, the violent events of 2002 represent the most severe assault on Indian Muslims within their own country, both in terms of the number of victims and the methods of murder (Thomas, 2015:4). Following this tragic episode, Ahmedabad acquired the unfortunate distinction of being the city with the highest number of victims of ethnic violence in independent India (Varshney, 2002:7).

## **SECTION B: THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK, POSTIONALITY, METHODOLOGY**

The central theory for this thesis is built upon the foundational study of memory-making, drawn from French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs' (1950) *a mémoire collective*. His work provides insights into how societies remember and shape historical events. Here, the act of memory-making is not merely used to justify the findings of this research; rather, it situates itself within a larger genealogy of intellectual frameworks to add a nuanced layer for understanding deeply complex and intricate human behaviour and memory-making patterns. Halbwachs (1992) argues that all memory relies on group dynamics, including families, social classes, and religious communities. He suggests that an individual's social interactions within their group influence what and how they remember: "Our memories remain collective, and they are recalled to us by others, even when they pertain to events in which we alone

participated and objects that we alone have seen" (52). According to Halbwachs, groups collectively reconstruct their past experiences, meaning individuals, while having unique perspectives on these reconstructions, do not have independent memories of the past. He believes that a group's distinctive characteristics and shared experiences shape its collective memory, thereby creating a shared identity.

However, if I were to contextualize this framework from a geographical perspective, it is essential to recognize that memory-making involves an understanding of the past, present, and future through its relational intersections with space and geography. As geographers Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman, and Maoz Azaryah (2008) have observed in their study of urban toponymy, "memories that become visible (or remain hidden) in our surroundings do not arise randomly; they stem from people's decisions and actions regarding commemoration, influenced by specific socio-spatial contexts. Evidence suggests we are experiencing a resurgence of interest in both individual and collective memory, particularly in an era marked by widespread historical amnesia" (161). Through this lens of memory-making, I contextualize the events of 2001 and 2002 within this broader framework.

Both events represent grave humanitarian disasters. The citizens of this city for decades have understood their lives and their place as active members of a civil society through spatial difference in lived geographies. Twenty-two years later, this research and study seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarship on Ahmedabad by tracing and mapping out how this particular group of people and section of civil society have reconstructed their memories of these two tragedies. These reconstructions of memory have, in turn, influenced and shaped their understanding of their environment, their community, their beliefs, and, most importantly, their politics.

In this research I have focused on a narrow sliver of Ahmedabad's multilayered society, specifically its upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu citizens. According to Lobo and Shah (2015), the middle class in India has evolved alongside economic development following India's independence. Transitioning from a restricted state capitalism to a more liberal version, especially from the early 1990s, created new opportunities for social mobility and economic prosperity. With one-sixth of the world's population, India's middle class has constituted a huge portion of the global workforce and continues to serve as a substantial market for products. The introduction of the New Economic Policy of 1990 aimed to address a severe debt repayment crisis and stagnating economic growth. The policy embraced liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation, seeking to reduce government control,

encourage private sector participation, and open the economy to foreign investment and trade (Bhagwati, 1998). Gujarat stood among the initial states to enthusiastically embrace this transition, especially Ahmedabad. This led to a surge in the middle-class population within the city, expanding beyond the river boundaries, driven by aspirations for the affluence and prosperity facilitated by the industrial growth (Spodek, 2011).

In the present day, this demographic choice has even greater relevance, because Narendra Modi's strongest electoral backing comes from upper-caste elites and middle-class Hindus in urban centres like Ahmedabad. His administration in Gujarat from 2001 to 2014 facilitated rapid economic growth for these groups, through greater collaboration between the state and the corporate sector. This model prioritised profit generation by maintaining low wages, offering tax incentives for investment, and subsidising land allocation to industries, while neglecting social spending. The approach garnered support from the elite, including the emerging middle class and dominant upper caste Hindus (Chaudhry, 2023).

In the context of the 2001 earthquake and the subsequent 2002 violence too, this demographic plays a significant role. They are not only survivors of the earthquake hailing from privileged socio-economic backgrounds, but through the years have actively supported Narendra Modi's rule. It was also observed that during the 2002 violence Hindu middle-class families and upper caste women took an active part in the looting of clothing and jewellery stores owned by Muslims (Human Rights Watch Report, 2002). The report also observed that they not only indulged in pillaging but openly celebrated the destruction and the mounting death toll.

Political scientist Sabyasachi Basu Chaudhry argues that the middle-class values individualism by owning private properties and living in gated communities that isolate social interactions. They highly appreciate close connections between the government and influential figures in industry and finance. The government often seeks advice from these individuals and favours them by undervaluing state assets designated for privatisation. This practice, along with state subsidisation of capitalists, has become widely accepted by the middle class as the new standard and thereby created more space for the politics of the Hindu right wing that breeds in capitalist consumerism, communal disharmony and individualism (Chaudhry, 2023, para 6)

Keeping this in mind, the primary emphasis of the research was to isolate the voices of earthquake survivors from privileged upper-caste and middle-class Hindu backgrounds. It aimed to comprehend their perspectives on the tragedies, reflecting on their experiences after a span of twenty-odd years since both events. When delving into memory work, it is important to ask what aspects do we remember, what tends to slip from our recollection, and why? Apart from this, the project also involved integrating interdisciplinary resources and factual data drawn from fields like history, geography, urban planning, and disaster studies during 2001 and 2002.

Existing literature extensively covers the atrocities faced by marginalized communities such as lower caste Hindus, Muslims, and Christians during the earthquake and in the 2002 violence (Simpsons, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2002; The Concerned Citizens Tribunal, 2002). However, my focus is on the experiences of the upper middle-class Hindus, recognizing their significant political influence and the need for further study into their perspectives and roles during these events. This research revealed a scarcity of scholarly contributions aimed at comprehending the connection between India's middle class, environmentalism, and social violence, as well as exploring their ideas and opinions on development, modernity, society, religion, and culture (Shabnam, 2012).

The qualitative method used in this study is mainly aimed at memory collection and documentation through conducting comprehensive interviews that delve deeper than basic reportage has around both events. The focus is on memories, aiming to articulate the inherent fears, prejudices, trauma, and concerns carried by survivors when it comes to land, property, community status, and inter-religious animosity. The upper-caste and upper-middle-class, neoliberal Gujarati has specific aspirations for themselves and their families which in turn shape their choices of where to build or buy a home, who their neighbours should be, the schools their children should go to or the malls, theatres, and public spaces they view as markers of affluence. The objective of this study is that the personal interviews reveal these patterns which map onto the broader trends across the country. My interviews with this group also look at political affiliations and examine why the majority of the participants view the government's rehabilitation efforts during the earthquake positively and offer easy forgiveness for its role in the 2002 violence despite evidence that demonstrates the state's complicity and its coordinated assault on the city's Muslim population (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

Secondly, this research also relies on testimonies by relief workers who participated in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the city post 2001 and 2002. Their experience and first-hand observation of the devastation, the aftermath, and the state response (or lack thereof) becomes vital to stitch together a more complicated narrative than the ones several victims often tended to offer. In many cases these relief workers also functioned as interlocutors of victims and survivors who may have moved away or refused to revisit and recount these tragedies.

Ethnographic approaches emphasize the significance of positionality, or how the identity and location of the researcher influence their perspective of and interactions with the subjects of study, especially relationships with human participants (Naz, 2012). For Laurel Richardson the relationships between researcher and researched is informed by the researcher's own experiences. However, sociologist Geer Blanche (1964) explains that familiarity can become problematic for untrained observers when they visit field sites with which they are too familiar.

I have spent considerable time pondering my positionality with respect to this project. I belong to a Muslim family with deep roots in Gujarat, spanning three generations, and a direct impact of the 2002 violence on my family wherein we had to relocate and resettle in a different part of India, finding my unique stance was my central challenge. I drew significant insights from Marilyn Strathern's (1987) concept of "degrees of familiarity," which necessitates the exploration of different modes of reflexivity in research. Her concepts highlight the varying levels of closeness researchers have with their subjects. This affects the researcher's objectivity, power dynamics, and interpretation of data, as familiarity can both enhance nuanced understanding and introduce bias. Strathern emphasizes the importance of reflexivity, urging researchers to acknowledge how their positionality and relationship to the subject shape the research process. In reflecting on my own positionality, I have grappled deeply with the concept of "home," a notion central to both my personal experiences and my research. This internal struggle has compelled me to rethink how *degrees of familiarity* influence the fieldwork process, particularly for researchers like me who are unable to remain detached from the environments or subjects we study. Rather than seeing familiarity as purely advantageous or limiting, I have come to understand it as a complex dynamic that can either deepen the richness of insight or blur the boundaries of critical objectivity.

I have come to see the value in balancing that observational distance with the unique emotional intimacy I was fortunate to share with this region, its cultures, and people. I was twelve years old when the two tragic events uprooted the lives of many including my family. This project is rooted to my personal memory as much as it is in the memories of my participants, but the urge with this examination is to branch outwards, to reach for a higher understanding of the intricate human-environment connections that define this city I once called home. And so, instead of viewing as a scholarly burden to distance myself from the horrors and repercussions of the events of 2001 and 2002, I actually find my positionality as a survivor of both, and a member of the community that was further marginalised after 2002 to have a certain social political acuity, precisely because of my composite background as an Indian Muslim woman and someone who lived in the ghettoised part of the city and interacted on a daily basis with all of its contradictions.

Working through the questions of this study have proven to me that a reflective and reflexive proximity to a research area can in fact fuel one's commitment, bolster the need for moral integrity and drive one's curiosity. More importantly, how else does one reconcile their lived observations and memory of their world with other concurrent narratives of those that may have shared the same space and undergone the same tragedies but whose recollections seem to diverge starkly?

In addition to grappling with Strathern's concepts of familiarity, I have been particularly drawn to Katherine McKittrick's (2006) notion of "space" and "cartographies of struggle," especially her exploration of how marginalized populations face erasure and de-spatialization in dominant discourses. By this, McKittrick refers to how the histories, experiences, and deep connections these communities have to particular spaces are often overlooked, marginalized, or reshaped to deny them legitimacy and agency. This erasure strips these communities of their rightful place in the narratives of history and geography, while also robbing them of a sense of belonging and identity anchored in specific locations. McKittrick's insights resonate deeply with me, as an Indian Muslim woman, whose own sense of place and belonging has often lacked agency. Through my thesis, it became essential to confront these silences and underscore how religion, privilege, and power intricately shape both our research and the ways we interpret space and identity.

While these critical concepts and scholarly frameworks allowed me to reflect on and rethink my positionality, the challenge of applying this understanding to navigate the complexities of fieldwork proved to be much more difficult. Transitioning from theoretical insights to practical implementation was not as straightforward as anticipated. When the time came to recruit participants for my fieldwork, I feared getting almost no response to my requests. Trauma work, counselling, therapy--these terms are still underused across classes and religions in India, and especially with older participants for whom repression and denial work as simple survival tactics in their harsh daily realities. The incendiary nature of the subject, particularly the violence of 2002 has also created a general culture of silence, especially since 2014 when the Modi government was elected to power nationally. Critics have often faced public trolling, harassment, even litigation (Amnesty International, 2020). Interestingly, during my interviews, my proximity to the place and its people sometimes opened the doors to dialogue and trust. I did not preemptively offer information on my religious background. When participants would hear of my history or find connections to my family members, there were a variety of attitude changes observed. For some participants, the ambiguity of my identity had no impact on our conversations. But with a few, the tension was palpable, as upon inquiry into my background and religion, the disclosure became a barrier to building trust. This distrust inevitably affected the depth and quality of our discussions, with certain individuals holding back and becoming reserved. Two of the ten participants specifically asked for my religious background before agreeing to speak with me. Both eventually participated. One who was a businessman and survivor of the earthquake had the shortest conversation of all, lasting not more than twenty minutes, most of which were spent avoiding the events of 2002, questioning my readings, and stressing the murkiness of scholarly information and media sources, and arguing that much of what is known outside Gujarat is “propaganda”. The second participant was also an earthquake survivor, and slightly more forthcoming. This interview also hovered in the realm of broad generalizations about the positive values of the Hindu Gujarati community, and the ambiguous nature of big events, how the “full truth can never be known.”

In contrast, the participants who could not tell my religious background as a Muslim, seemed more at ease in speaking freely and frankly. I later reflected on my positionality not only as a researcher, but my very appearance as a Muslim scholar and how that may have influenced interactions with participants. I chose not to explicitly state my Muslim identity, and factors like my religiously-ambiguous caste surname, a lack of religiously marked clothing like a hijab or scarf, my fluency with

English which is often considered a marker of caste and wealth, my evident access to higher education— these may have certainly worked in my favor. These moments underscored the complexity of navigating identity in the research process, as well as the ways in which religion, power, and collective perception can shape the dynamics of fieldwork. However, these intimate conversations and interactions ended up, in many ways, revealing harder-to-grasp insights about why India finds itself in a precarious political position in 2024, with a wave of anti-minority sentiment and the rise of a dangerously violent Hindu right.

While navigating identity politics in fieldwork was one challenge, the other stemmed from the sensitive and precarious nature of the research topic itself. Since Modi became India's prime minister, a climate of fear and paranoia has enveloped the country. Numerous instances of attacks on journalists, activists, students, and others who criticize his administration have been reported, indicating a crackdown on dissent. Thus, the sensitive nature of the topic restricted recruitment options, necessitating reliance on trusted sources. Weeks were spent attempting to establish connections via emails and messages. While many were willing to discuss the 2001 earthquake, there was hesitancy or non-response regarding the events of 2002. Nonetheless, I succeeded in finding ten participants willing to engage in online Zoom interviews. All participants come from Hindu or Christian religious backgrounds. Primarily, they were aged between 45 and 70, included men and women, and came from diverse professional backgrounds such as medicine, education, science, business, and government services. Each of them has maintained a connection with the city for three or more decades and has witnessed Ahmedabad's transformation from a sleepy small town to a mega metropolis over the years and continue to live in Ahmedabad. The discussions flowed smoothly and became more comfortable as they learned about my ties to the city. Some of their children attended the same schools, spoke the same languages, dined at the same restaurants, observed the same festivals, and were part of the same Gujarati community as I was. In some instances, these shared backgrounds and experiences fostered a sense of trust. Despite having a time constraint and a prepared questionnaire, I realized early on that participants were eager to share beyond the script. As a result, I allowed the conversations to develop naturally, in a semi-structured way.

Apart from my qualitative analysis, these interviews were contextualized by extensive review of official documents, necessary to comprehensively address both events. In terms of the 2001 earthquake,

I reviewed secondary data available on the geophysical surveys of the earthquake, damage assessment reports on Kutch and Ahmedabad, aid and funding reports, and data on the infrastructural development of the city from the 1980's to the early 2000s. The 2011 census data provides insights into population distribution based on religion and caste. However, India has not conducted a recent census, especially a caste census, and those gaps were felt in reporting for this thesis. This also raises the crucial question of why a national caste census hasn't been conducted since 2011, especially since Narendra Modi took oath as India's Prime Minister in 2014.

In terms of the 2002 violence, I reviewed several documents published by state officials and non-governmental organisations that reported on the violence, including survivor testimonies published in reports from organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Genocide Watch, The Citizen Initiatives, The Citizens Tribunal that have conducted first-hand surveys of the affected areas and their residents, specifically in Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods of Ahmedabad.

The thesis, especially in its concluding chapter, draws on various maps and spatial reports of Ahmedabad, with a particular focus on areas like Juhapura, which have gradually transformed into Muslim ghettos. These references underscore the extent to which Muslim bodies have been spatially marginalized especially since 2002. Additionally, I incorporate media sources and academic literature that explore the broader marginalization of minority communities, not only in Gujarat but across India. The analysis pays close attention to troubling trends, including the suppression of democratic rights, the oppression of Muslims and Dalits, and the implications of these dynamics in an era of climate change induced natural disasters.

### **SECTION C: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review addresses two distinct yet extensively researched fields: natural disasters and political violence. Attempting to draw connections between these areas presents a unique challenge, making the process of navigating vast bodies of literature both complex and overwhelming. To bring clarity and maintain focus on the specific aims of this thesis, I concentrated on studies and global examples that directly relate to Gujarat's socio-economic and political context, seeking to uncover relevant intersections between these two fields within this framework. This section is further broken down into two parts: 1 and 2.

Part-1 explores the concepts of vulnerability while also examining how socio-economic and political factors in the study area influence the understanding of natural disasters and help in disaster response and mitigation efforts. It also draws on global examples to illustrate how globalization, forms of governance, religion, and trauma psychology intersect with the study of natural disasters. Each of these fields of inquiry are imperative and will become evident in the case of Gujarat as the thesis unfolds.

Part-2 focuses exclusively on the scholarship related to Gujarat, with a particular emphasis on Ahmedabad. This body of literature covers the city's socio-political history, spatial development, and the rise of Hindutva ideology, including the role of *seva* (social service) in rehabilitation efforts, caste discrimination, and its social implications. It also examines current research and literature available on the 2001 earthquake and the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom.

### **Part 1: Bridging Environmental Forces and Social Dynamics in Disaster Contexts**

While natural disasters like earthquakes, epidemics, and famine attract significant attention due to their devastating effects, many people around the world experience reduced life expectancies due to persistent political violence. These problems are often seen as normal in many areas, particularly in less developed countries, and are influenced by both natural and social factors (Blaikie et al., 1994). It is important to recognize how these natural and social aspects are interconnected, as separating them can hinder our understanding and prevention of disasters. By examining natural disasters in the context of society, we can better understand the relationships between risks, vulnerabilities, and coping mechanisms. This comprehensive approach helps create fair policies aimed at reducing disasters, mitigating hazards, and promoting environmental and social justice.

Most research and studies on natural disasters emphasize the “trigger” role of geo-tectonics, climate and biological factors arising in nature (Alexander, 1993; Tobin and Montz, 1997). Others focus on human response, physical trauma, psychological effects, economic and political consequences (Dynes et al., 1987; Lindell and Perry, 1992; Oliver-Smith, 1996; Platt et al., 2012). Research in disaster studies has also demonstrated that environmental vulnerabilities coincide with social vulnerabilities (Blaikie et al., 1994). During the 1970s and early 1980s, the perspective on disasters shifted to the

vulnerability approach, which involved rejecting the notion that external natural events were solely responsible for causing disasters and re-evaluating the belief that disasters were a normal occurrence. Emel and Peet (1989), Oliver-Smith (1986) and Hewitt (1983) review these reflections on normality by saying that what is considered "normal" in terms of disaster response and recovery often reflects societal acceptance of inequality, where the needs of the most vulnerable are overlooked. Over time, the understanding of vulnerability has also evolved with various interpretations, often focusing solely on individuals rather than encompassing buildings, economies, or hazardous regions of the Earth's surface.

Vulnerability, in simple terms, refers to the characteristics and circumstances of individuals or groups that affect their ability to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the effects of a natural hazard (Blaikie et al., 1994). Some scholars argue that certain groups are more prone to harm, loss, and hardship when exposed to various hazards. Factors such as socio-economic status, occupation, caste, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, immigration status, and the strength of social networks play a significant role in these differences. The concept of vulnerability encompasses a range of severity, but it is often used to describe those who are at greater risk, focusing on individuals at the more extreme end of the vulnerability spectrum (Baird et al., 1975; Davis, 1978). Other authors have also contributed and supported the discussions of vulnerability with the notion of 'capacity,' or the ability of a group or household to resist a hazard's harmful effects and to recover easily (Anderson and Woodrow, 1998; Eade, 1998; Wisner, 2003). Some of the earlier studies on vulnerability and its effects on society elaborate the role of policies, cultural factors in how societies prepare for and recover from disasters (Jeggle and Stephenson, 1994; Buckle et al., 2000). To understand how societies recover from a natural disaster and its aftermath, it is essential to recognize that vulnerability is inherently linked to the prevailing social processes and context (Blaikie et al., 1994; Oliver-Smith, 1996).

In addition to exploring what makes people and places vulnerable, there has also been a focus on understanding the factors that increase the likelihood of natural disasters occurring. German sociologist Ulrich Beck, in *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity?* (1992) and *Ecological Politics in the Age of Risk* (1995), addresses the main reasons behind environmental crises. He points to the excessive consumerism in wealthy societies as one major cause. He also talks about how society tries to deal with the effects of over-consumption. One way is through "ecological modernization," where experts try to fix environmental problems without dealing with the main issues. Another way is by ignoring or

denying environmental problems, which Beck calls “organised irresponsibility.” He argues that as societies become more advanced, they enter a stage called “risk society,” where wealth brings both benefits and dangers. The complexities of modern life, driven by technology, create new risks that are caused by modernization itself (Beck, 1992: 21). He also discusses “reflexive modernity,” where people in advanced societies constantly reflect on risks, including global ones, leading to international cooperation in risk management. While efforts like conserving biodiversity and reducing disasters are seen as forms of ecological modernization, they often fail to address root causes that perpetuate ongoing challenges.

While studying disasters, one must also include political and socio-economic factors in the given physical environment. Pelling and Dill (2006) argue that disasters triggered by environmental phenomena do not cause political change, but function as “catalysts that put into motion potentially provocative social processes at multiple social levels.” (2). They also suggest that when a state fails to effectively address a disaster, it can create a brief power vacuum, offering a crucial turning point in history. This creates a brief opportunity and risk for new socio-political actions at both local and national scales, which may involve efforts to strengthen or weaken existing power structures and alter power distribution within established sectors. Pelling and Dill (2006) see disasters as not just events but also as triggers for more political changes. They suggest that we should look at disasters within a larger social, cultural, and historical framework. This helps us understand what happens after a disaster, how it affects current political systems, and whether it supports or blocks new political ideas.

After placing considerable emphasis on the role of political and social power dynamics in addressing natural disasters, many scholars now place disasters within a broader context of human security. Instead of seeing them just as humanitarian crises, they view them as outcomes of imbalances in interconnected social and environmental systems at local, national, and international levels. This perspective leads to questions about fairness, justice, vulnerability, power dynamics, and which groups' security is affected or enhanced by environmental changes (O'Brien, 2005).

Pelling and Dill (2006) also argue that the way different sectors, such as financial and social services, respond to crises is influenced by their prior political relationships and the nature of the political system in place. This means that how well a country handles disasters is not just about the type

of government (e.g., democratic or authoritarian) but also about the existing political connections and commitments. The connection between political regime type and disaster risk is intricate. Research on Hurricane Katrina in 2005 has suggested that existing inequalities can be exacerbated by post-disaster governmental manipulation (Frymer et al., 2005). Similar studies on the 2005 Tsunami in Sri Lanka and eastern parts of India revealed the same (Christoplos, 2005).

Pelling and Dills (2006) identify several studies of disasters. The idea that political leaders may use disasters to regain or enhance their legitimacy is discussed in the context of historical examples like the 1966 hurricane in New Orleans, as noted by Abney and Hill (1966). Similarly, Chen (2004) provides detailed examples that illustrate how governments often perceive spontaneous collective actions led by non-governmental sectors as a challenge to their authority or control. These actions, which may arise during times of social unrest, disasters, or political instability, are frequently viewed by regimes as potential threats to the established order. In response, governments tend to resort to repressive measures, such as censorship, policing, or the suppression of civil liberties, to quell these movements and reassert control. The research highlights that these repressive actions are not solely about maintaining security but are also driven by political motives to stifle dissent and protect the regime's power from any perceived instability that grassroots mobilization might cause. His examples include the reactions of the military dictatorship in Guatemala after the 1976 earthquake and the Turkish government after the 1999 Marmara earthquake. In Guatemala, the state's neglect of rural Maya communities led local organizations to step in, prompting violent repression against emerging local leaders perceived as political threats. Similarly, in Turkey in 1999, when the government failed to provide timely assistance, civil society organizations that responded to the crisis were targeted to regain control, particularly those with Islamic affiliations.

Threats to social order also can propel people to support authoritarian attitudes to cope with these threats (Duckitt and Fisher, 2003). When individuals feel threatened, they may seek a sense of control by backing established authorities and anti-democratic leaders. This support for authoritarianism is a significant factor during times of crisis (Van Hiel and De Clercq, 2009). Some research suggests that individuals who do not typically have authoritarian tendencies may still develop such attitudes when feeling overwhelmed by external threats, such as natural disasters (Mirisola et al., 2014).

Few studies have investigated whether people in stable democracies change their political attitudes after natural disasters (Debbage et al., 2014). However, research suggests that in these democracies, citizens often hold their governments accountable for how well they prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters (Albrecht, 2017). As a result, there is usually a decline in political trust, government satisfaction, and support. In less established democracies, natural disasters can further weaken support for democratic values and practices, reflecting dissatisfaction with the political system (Carlin et al., 2014). While these studies have explored how people assign blame to political factors for disaster outcomes, they have not examined shifts in ideological perspectives. Therefore, the impact of natural disasters on opinions, beliefs, and perceptions about the social world remains largely unexplored.

It has been argued that exposure to earthquakes makes religion more appealing to people, because religion—similarly to right-wing authoritarianism—serves a palliative function. Findings based on the 2011 New Zealand earthquake revealed that most people turned towards religion at the time of a natural crisis (Sibley and Bulbulia, 2012).

The appeal of religion during a crisis has been observed to affect large populations. A notable example of how political violence impacts the human psychological state can be found in the study of religious responses to the September 11, 2001, attacks. The study found that many people reported relying heavily on prayer to cope with their stress (Trevino and Pargament, 2007). Researchers have noted that religious faith often becomes more appealing after reminders of tragic suffering, danger, randomness, and death (Atran, 2002; Kay et al., 2010; Gray and Wegner, 2010). Additionally, other studies suggest that experiences of suffering tend to intensify religious sentiments, which is explained by comfort-seeking (Trevino et al., 2019).

A different strand of research indicates that following natural disasters or instances of extreme political violence--religious belief can support and aid in post-traumatic recovery (Calhoun et al., 2000), enhance positive emotions (Vázquez et al., 2005), and foster social connections (Richman, 2012).

Apart from understanding the role of religion in post-traumatic recovery, research on conflict studies indicates that there has been a rise in ethno-religious conflicts in the context of globalization and industrialization (Melucci, 1988; Sandbrook and Romano, 2004). Factors such as the collapse of

traditional social structures between leaders and citizens, growing regional and social inequalities, heightened economic insecurity, challenges to local values, and declining state legitimacy create an environment that fosters extremist movements and political violence, particularly in the age of market liberalization (Sandbrook and Romano, 2004).

In its 2000 report *Global Trends, 2015*, The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) forecasts that

The second era of globalization would be no less tumultuous than the first. Its evolution will be rocky, marked by chronic financial volatility and a widening economic divide. Regions, countries, and groups feeling left behind will face deepening economic stagnation, political instability, and cultural alienation. They will foster political, ethnic, ideological, and religious extremism, along with the violence that often accompanies it. (18)

A good example for this is Egypt. Since the 1970s, Egypt has experienced increasing civil strife alongside neoliberal reforms. During this period, violent Islamic terrorist groups emerged, employing tactics like assassinations and attacks on religious and tourist targets. Scholars link this civil unrest to worsening economic conditions for the poor, amid growing affluence among the elite (Bill and Springborg, 1994).

## **PART 2: LITREATURE ON AHMEDABAD, GUJARAT**

As previously mentioned, while an extensive body of work and scholarship already exists on the intersections of the social, economic and political within disasters studies, I now move the focus on Gujarat and Ahmedabad. My goal with this thesis was to focus on the process of memory-making and how our recollections of trauma, violence, and community evolve over time. More importantly, the literature discussed here not only highlights the existing scholarship and established arguments that relate to the topics covered in this research project, but also represents the research I have relied on to

develop this thesis. It provided valuable insights into the gaps that needed to be addressed, guiding the direction of my work.

Political scientist Ashutosh Varshney (2003) examines communal conflicts in Indian cities and highlights the fact that 70% of Hindu-Muslim violence occurred in thirty cities, with eight cities responsible for nearly 50% of total deaths. These conflicts predominantly occurred in urban areas with significant Muslim populations. Reading Howard Spodek, who terms Ahmedabad, as the "shock city of the 20th century", sparked my curiosity and fascination for this research area. The term "shock city," was coined by the British historian Asa Briggs to describe rapidly growing urban centres that experienced significant social, economic, and cultural transformations during the 19th and early 20th centuries. These "shock" cities often served as focal points for the dramatic changes brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. Through Spodek's extensive research and writings, he gave us an understanding of Gujarat's multi-cultural history and the creation of Ahmedabad as a modern Indian city together with its concerning social-cultural transformation through the years (Spodek, 2011). Spodek's insightful exploration of Gujarat's history, culture, and politics is invaluable for understanding the region. Equally important is the work of Achyuth Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth (2005), whose book *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva, and Beyond* provides a crucial historical and social framework for this thesis. It provides a foundational understanding of the communal relationship between Hindus and Muslims from the pre-colonial period to the present day, focusing on the rise of Hindu nationalism and the specific impact of Narendra Modi on the state's social fabric. The book also explores the causes and consequences of violent communal riots that engulfed the city for decades, along with their political and social aftermath, offering insights into how these events have influenced public perceptions and political ideologies in Gujarat.

Current research indicates that the city is significantly divided along lines of religion, caste, class, and economics, with increasing ghettoization following the 2002 Pogrom (Mahadevia and Desai 2014; Chandhoke, 2009). To understand this spatial division of the city better, Bobbio Tommaso's *Urbanisation, Citizenship and Conflict in India* (2015) helps explore Ahmedabad's spatial development and segregated settlements, focusing on urban dynamics and interactions between authorities and residents. The book highlights how caste, religious conflicts, and political power have shaped the city's development and spatial order. It discusses how urbanization can result in unequal access to resources,

leading to social fragmentation. Tommaso examines issues of citizenship and identity; especially how marginalized and low-income communities navigate their rights amid urban development. Specific examples include the ghettoization of Muslim neighborhoods, the squalid industrial suburbs, and the impact of slum redevelopment projects, which have displaced marginalized communities and affected their access to essential services like healthcare, education, and transportation.

However, there is limited scholarship exploring the connections between the natural disaster of 2001 and the human-wrought violence of 2002. Many scholars have debated how we understand the spread of violence, focusing on why it occurs more intensely in some places than others. The Hindu-Muslim violence in 2002 was not evenly distributed. While broad explanations often attribute the timing of violence to factors like the political rise of religious or caste groups (Sidel, 2006; Hansen, 1999), economic liberalisation (Breman, 2002), or the spread of exclusivist ideologies (Jaffrelot, 2003), a growing body of work on Hindu-Muslim violence in India shifts focus to the locations where violence occurs (Dhattiwala, 2016). Paul Brass (2003) notes that after a communal incident in Ahmedabad, residents often change their behavior, avoiding certain areas and topics, and staying on high alert for potential unrest. This pattern is common in parts of India with ongoing communal conflict, creating a constant state of vigilance. Steven Wilkinson (2004) points out that communal violence is more likely in states with few effective political parties, where the ruling party does not depend on minority votes. In these states, politicians have fewer electoral incentives to direct the military and police to suppress disturbances. Varshney (2002) found that cities with strong and vibrant civic associations are less likely to experience violence compared to those with limited civic engagement. He suggests that cooperation between Hindus and Muslims in organizations can function as a barrier to communal violence.

Journalist Revati Laul's (2018) book *The Anatomy of Hate* shifts the focus from the usual examination of consequences and victims of mass violence in India, particularly the Gujarat 2002 riots, to the individuals within the mob itself. Through extensive research and interviews spanning a decade, Laul provides a groundbreaking account of the perpetrators of the 2002 violence, especially Hindu Dalits, shedding light on their personal motivations and vulnerabilities. What compels a human to lift a sword and take another's life? Is it rage or despair? By exploring the complexities of choice amidst collective anger, the narrative challenges conventional perceptions and encourages conversations that could lead to meaningful change.

Other ethnographic works such as anthropologist Parviz Ghassem-Fachandi's book (2012) *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim violence in India* delves into the role played by various media outlets such as newspapers, TV and movies in fuelling the communal violence. The book also explores how the principles of 'ahimsa' (nonviolence), and the associated practices of vegetarianism, were paradoxically implicated in justifying the very violence Hindu advocates were meant to disavow. He demonstrates how the Hindu community's language of sacrifice was manipulated to incite disgust towards Muslims, while also mobilizing the aspiring middle classes across caste and class divisions under the banner of Hindu nationalism.

Each of these works has been instrumental in deepening my understanding of Ahmedabad and in helping me determine where to position my research to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing scholarship. As outlined in my theoretical framework in the introduction chapter, my focus here is on the process of memory-making and how the events of 2001 and 2002 are embedded in the collective memory of Ahmedabad's citizens.

There is a significant body of literature addressing the act of remembering in the aftermath of natural disasters, situated within the broader context of memory studies influenced by the works of Pierre Nora (1998) and Paul Ricoeur (2004). Typically, this literature focuses on elements such as nostalgia, heritage, and memorial practices. While this literature emphasizes the acts of remembering, it largely overlooks the act of forgetting. Anthropologist Edward Simpson's research, which includes detailed ethnographic fieldwork in Gujarat during and after 2001, stands out as one of the few studies that explore this phenomenon of forgetting among the earthquake victims (Simpson, 2020; 2006). It also sheds light on the ruins, reconstruction and socio-political upheaval which helped incubate extreme religious fundamentalism and intensified neoliberalism in the wake of the 2001 earthquake.

The 2001 earthquake resulted in widespread damage and devastation west of the river Sabarmati, an area occupied by most of the Hindu population. They not only found themselves extremely vulnerable to environmental risks but also were economically, mentally, and emotionally affected. On the other hand, the 2002 violence was concentrated on the east of the city in Muslim dominated areas.

Literature on the Gujarat earthquake also includes damage assessment in west Ahmedabad, pre- and post-earthquake that documents the collapse of approximately 60-80 buildings (Saito, K. et al. 2004). A few disaster study experts during a two-week mission in the disaster area conducted an evaluation of the disaster relief provided to the affected population in Gujarat. Vulnerability due to climate, geography, culture, religion, gender, politics, and economy, as each affected the outcome, was also studied (Bremer, 2003). Official reports also suggest the damage caused by illegal and shoddy building constructions and the complicity of government officials evoked anger and frustration among earthquake victims and survivors (Spodek, 2001).

The literature mentioned above provided a thorough understanding of the geophysical disaster assessment conducted in the aftermath. However, the literature here will focus on how the earthquake created conditions that fostered communal discord. Much of the relief and recovery work in Gujarat after the earthquake was carried out by Hindu nationalist groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Bajrang Dal, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). The rise of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics is a multifaceted issue with various contributing factors. It has been argued that these nationalist organizations have worked hard to build their influence and win grassroots support through their "seva" or social service initiatives (Bhattacharjee, 2016). While many scholars have explored the roots and growth of the Hindu nationalist movement (Basu et al., 1993; Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996; Kanungo, 2003; Nandy et al., 1995; Zavos, 2001), there has been limited focus on the political effects of their welfare work, especially during disasters. Additional literature on Hindu-Muslim violence driven by the Sangh Parivar includes works by Nandy et al. (1995), Shashikumar (2001), Shah (2002), Engineer (2002), Noorani (2019), and Anderson and Damle (2018),

Previous studies have also confirmed increases in stress levels following disasters (Knez et al., 2018; Meng et al., 2018; Cox and Perry, 2011). The literature and field reality regarding disasters suggest that the anxiety provoked by nature following a natural disaster, coupled with the disorder stemming from post-disaster rehabilitation efforts, result in a loss of confidence and trust in both the social environment and those responsible for maintaining peace and stability. The slow but persistent development of mass unrest, particularly among minority communities in Gujarat, was characterized by a growing apprehension towards others and the socialization of mistrust, both of which created a climate ripe for communal tensions. Further, such an environment provides a perfect breeding ground for

conflicts over resource allocation and strong reactions to resource scarcity entailing aggression against other communities (Kumar, 2007).

Since the 2001 earthquake and the 2002 riots, Ahmedabad has become increasingly segregated, with Hindus moving west of the Sabarmati River and Muslims continuing to live on the eastern parts of the city (Chaudhury, 2007). This has led to further ghettoization of Muslims and Muslim dominated geographies. These areas have now turned into large slums, lacking proper lighting, sewage disposal, electricity, transportation facilities, and even clean water (Laliwala et al., 2021; Tejani, 2023). This change has taken place in the context of ongoing mass violence and increased polarization based on caste and religion. Unlike spontaneous riots, pogroms are characterized by deliberate planning and collective involvement, frequently tapping into local prejudices and stereotypes against groups such as Muslims in Gujarat. According to Ghassem-Fachandi (2012) the justification of violence during pogroms, followed by dismissing it as just politics, fosters a sense of moral impunity among those responsible, highlighting broader problems of communal tension and the deterioration of civic life in urban India.

Therefore, to explore this apparent complicity and dissonance among Ahmedabad's Hindu population during 2002, particularly within the Hindu upper-middle classes, the missing pieces to this scholarship became evident. My thesis aims to contribute to the existing scholarship on the 2001 earthquake and 2002 riots by highlighting Narendra Modi's political ascent, catalysed by the earthquake that transformed him from a local figure into India's prime minister. But, more importantly, it is crucial to examine how the recollection of memories from these two tragedies has influenced political opinions and bolstered Modi's support and voter base among Ahmedabad's Hindu upper-middle class and castes, over twenty-two years since these events. Here, I seek to enrich ongoing discussions on India's urban Hindu middle-class, exploring their psychological ties to authoritarianism and their environmental consciousness.

From here on, Chapter two of my thesis provides an in-depth examination of Gujarat's social and political history, essential for building the central argument of this work. This chapter delves into the social structures within Hindu society, particularly the roots of casteism, and how these dynamics fostered geographies of communal discord and social segregation. It also traces Ahmedabad's

transformation from a small textile mill town to a major urban conglomerate, setting the stage for the discussion of the 2001 earthquake. In this section, I cover the critical social, financial, and governmental policies related to 2001 disaster response and the functioning of the state in the wake of the earthquake slowly building on the ascent of Narendra Modi's political career. The chapter concludes by analyzing the 2002 violence and how pre-existing social inequalities were intensified by the earthquake's aftermath.

Chapter three forms the core of this thesis, focusing on interviews with my research participants. These interviews are organized into several analytical themes, which aim to dismantle myths, propaganda, and misinformation. More significantly, this chapter explores how memories are remembered, constructed, or forgotten, offering insights into the underlying causes of our present political, environmental, and social realities.

Chapter four, the final chapter concludes by addressing the current realities of Ahmedabad, Gujarat and India, overall, portraying a democracy hurtling towards fascism under Narendra Modi's rule over a decade. It emphasizes the worsening plight of minorities and the consequences of widespread political amnesia among citizens, alongside a refusal to acknowledge the political and environmental challenges ahead, which threaten to lead to widespread destruction and devastation.

## CHAPTER 2: HISTORY AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

In this chapter, I will discuss in detail the history of Ahmedabad, examining its social and political structures, as well as the spatial build-up of the city and the segregation based on class, caste and religion that intensified communal tensions. This chapter will provide an essential context for understanding how a small textile town evolved into an urban conglomerate, driving economic growth and the rise of the middle class, and how these developments contributed to the widespread devastation following the 2001 earthquake. The events of 2001 will be examined in depth, focusing on the rise of Hindutva, the ascent of Modi's political career, and the visible caste discrimination and religious intolerance during the rehabilitation efforts, which deepened existing social inequalities. This historical context will lay the groundwork for exploring the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom, when the city descended into large-scale violence less than a year after the earthquake.

Ahmedabad, a city built on the banks of the river Sabarmati, has been an important centre for trade and human settlement for over 700 years and has witnessed a diversity of people and rulers pass through its timeline. People arrived as nomadic shepherds, travellers, Sufi saints, merchants, refugees fleeing persecution, and conquerors. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the region broadly known as Gujarat today, expanding from the western Thar desert to the jungles of Madhya Pradesh in Central India to the coasts of Maharashtra in the south, became a province of the Delhi Sultanate. Ahmed Shah, the First of the Gujarat Sultanate, founded the city of Ahmedabad, giving it his name. In the rich cotton growing belt, the sultans encouraged merchants, weavers, and skilled craftsmen to settle in Ahmedabad so that the city could develop a flourishing weaving and textile industry. Following the East India Company's takeover in 1817, Ahmedabad experienced a significant expansion to its industrial base, leading to its rapid economic growth and influence as a textile manufacturing capital, well past India's independence (Chandhoke, 2009; Yagnik and Sheth, 2005).

Demographically, Ahmedabad in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a melting pot of Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity, with each of these faith groups claiming hundreds of years of lived legacies on the land. This syncretism permeated everything, influencing Gujarat's literature, architecture, languages, dance, and cuisine, thus bringing about significant contributions to emerging post-independence political and social ideologies that embraced diversity and became a symbol of

India's pluralism and secularism (Yagnik and Sheth, 2005). Gujarat also played an important role in India's political history as two individuals from Gujarat ascended to prominence in the 20th century: the first was the 'Father of the nation' Mahatma Gandhi, and the second, the founder of modern-day Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah.

Mahatma Gandhi's political rise also gave the religion Jainism significant prominence in Gujarat as Gandhi adopted some of the faith's central tenets into his political philosophy, most significantly 'Ahimsa' or non-violence. A mixed demographic thus slowly started to shift, especially upper-caste Hindus, towards abstaining from meat and alcohol consumption. These principles became widespread and were eventually adopted by other Hindu groups as well, which by the 1980s, became defining features of Gujarati culture. As Gujarat's Muslim, Christian and Dalit communities continued to differ from these mainstream dietary habits and faith practices, choices like animal slaughter, meat and alcohol intake began to be positioned in direct and disgusting opposition to these ideas of ahimsa and moral and spiritual purity (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012).

Before delving into how concepts of purity and impurity take shape within society, it is essential to first examine India's Hindu caste system. Originating in ancient Vedic texts, as a social organizing system based on profession, the caste system underwent transformations under various ruling elites during medieval, early modern, and modern times, particularly following the decline of the Mughal Empire and the establishment of British colonial rule (Bayly, 2001). The English term "caste" finds its origins in the Portuguese word "casta," which signifies race, lineage, breed, and initially meant pure or unmixed breed (Scott and Marshall, 2005). Rooted in socio-economic and historical practices, in Hinduism, a caste represents a rigid social group and hierarchy to which an individual is assigned at birth based on occupation, the hierarchy is composed of the Brahmins (priests, scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors, rulers), Vaishyas (farmers, traders, merchants), and Shudras (labourers). The Dalits, often referred to as the untouchables, were the "other" outside of the caste hierarchy and faced immense exclusion (Kanmony, 2010). Although the caste system found its origin in Hinduism as highlighted in the *Manusmriti*, which is considered as the authoritative text on Hindu law, it also permeated other religious communities, including Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Sikhs. Caste traditionally influenced various aspects of life, such as occupation, dietary practices, and matrimonial choices. In contemporary Indian society, social interactions between different caste groups still encounter

significant disapproval from certain conservative segments, especially upper-caste Hindus who adhere to traditional caste norms and values (Chakravorty, 2019).

For decades, the economy of Gujarat was dominated by affluent merchant castes of various religious groups—Hindus, Parsis, Jains, and Muslims—exerting significant power and influence over Gujarati society and political matters. The establishment of shipping ports along the Arabian Sea coast placed Gujarat at the crossroads of regional trade and commerce, enabling its businessmen to benefit significantly from maritime trade with east Africa and eventually Europe. Ahmedabad not only emerged as a significant hub for commerce but established itself as the epicentre of Gujarati culture and regional identity (Spodek, 2011).

By 1911, Ahmedabad had 52 textile mills, and it had begun to draw labourers from surrounding rural areas which escalated the process of rapid urbanisation of the city under British control (Yagnik and Sheth, 2005:12). When Gandhi returned from South Africa in 1914 and established his ashram on the banks of the river Sabarmati in Ahmedabad, initiating the *Swadeshi*, “Non-cooperation” and “Quit India” movements among others, Gujarat started to emerge as the epicentre of India's fight for independence. He convinced numerous industrialists and influential figures in Ahmedabad to lend their support to the movement, both financial and social (Spodek, 2011:7).

Most textile mill owners who offered this support belonged to dominant Hindu and Jain castes had amassed significant wealth and held a monopoly over the cotton trade and commerce. On the other hand, the labour force consisted of skilled and unskilled weavers and workers, predominantly from lower Hindu castes, including the Dalits, and Muslims who flocked here in search of work from other parts of the country (Chandhoke, 2009). This resulted in the establishment of the Textile Labour Association (TLA or Majdoor Mahajan Sangh) by labour activist Anasuya Sarabai in 1920 to represent the interests of textile workers in Ahmedabad and surrounding areas. Anasuya Sarabai, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist and believer of Jainism spent most of her lifetime working for the betterment of women rights among the textile mill workers. She was also an ardent follower of Gandhi. The TLA also mentored by Gandhi alongside Sarabhai played a significant role in advocating for workers' rights, fair wages, and improved working conditions in the textile industry (Spodek, 2011; Chandhoke, 2009).

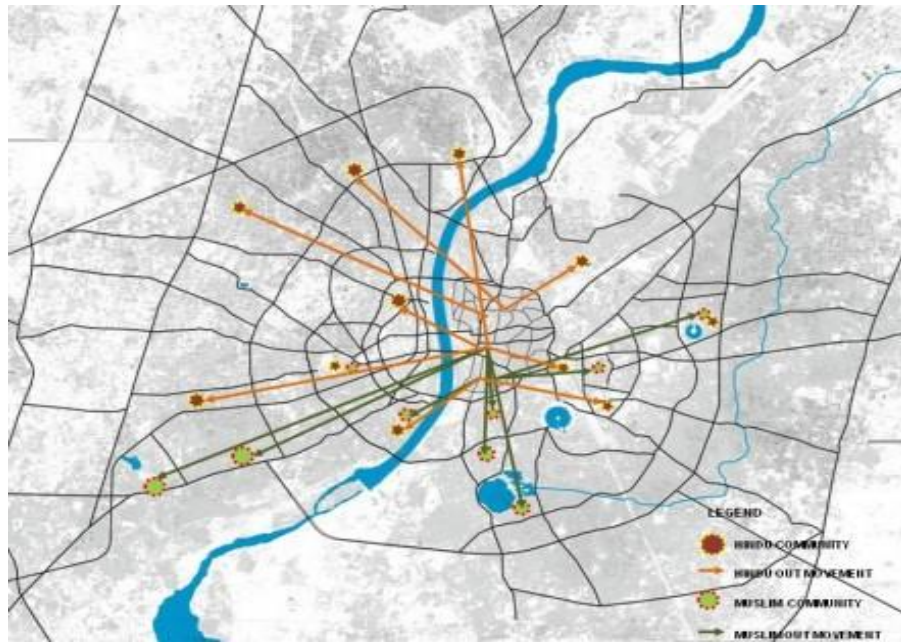
If the configuration of mill owners and workers reflected the unequal distribution of power among the three main communities (Hindus, Jains, and Muslims) during the British era, this inequality was also reflected spatially in the sprawl patterns of the city, as groups started to build homes and reside in specific pockets, based on income and access, patterns which persist to this day (Chandhoke, 2009). However, Darshini Mahadevia notes that the city, which was initially divided basis of caste and class, disparities in living standards, housing quality, and access slowly started to re-organize and divide itself by religion (Mahadevia, 2002).

After the Sultanate and British rule, Ahmedabad underwent yet another transformation, trying to shed its image as an ancient capital. While some old sultanate monuments, palaces and sites remained cloistered, mostly in the eastern old city area, new construction and infrastructure projects were greenlit, to throw open the limited, walled ancient layout of the city and consume the surrounding villages and settlements into a larger urban organism (Bobbio, 2015).

According to Yagnik and Sheth (2005), by the late 1960s, Ahmedabad had effectively evolved three distinct entities within the whole. The first was the historic walled city constructed by the Sultan, fortified by the Bhadra Fort, and occupied by upper-caste Hindus. Apart from this, lower-caste Hindus and Muslims lived in proximity, each community within its own neighbourhood or *pol*. The second Ahmedabad emerged in the early 20th century around the textile mills located on the eastern outskirts of the old city. These areas, known as industrial towns, were inhabited by Dalits and migrant Muslim textile workers. Finally, there was the third Ahmedabad, which expanded beyond the river Sabarmati after India gained independence. This was the “New Ahmedabad” which was inhabited mostly by middle and upper middle classes of Hindus, Jains, and some Christians and Parsis. The middle-class population of the city was a small but growing section dominated by educated upper caste professionals, government officials, and small traders. The revolutions in agriculture and dairy farming respectively had brought them wealth and tax exemptions that worked as an added advantage in the accumulation of capital. The establishment of the British-built railway line and the construction of new bridges such as Ellis Bridge and Nehru Bridge across the Sabarmati River facilitated this upper and middle-class migration west, opening “a new front of expansion of the urban territory, destined to prove decisive in the delineation of new geographies in the city during the twentieth century” (Ahmedabad Town Development Department, 1975:5)

During the 1980s, there was a gradual increase in the prevalence of power looms, chemical factories, diamond polishing units, and other burgeoning industries. Competition from other regions, outdated machinery, labour unrest, and mismanagement led to a decline in the city's textile mills. This created space for a new model of textile production—the rise of power looms and decentralized small-scale industries. As the large, centralized mills closed, many former mill workers and entrepreneurs shifted to establishing smaller power loom units. Power looms, which are automated weaving machines, allowed for more efficient production at lower costs, making it easier for smaller businesses to compete. Additionally, the emergence of new economic prospects within the city attracted migrant workers from neighbouring states like Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

This resulted in the decline and shutdown of a significant number of textile mills, with more than half of the workforce becoming unemployed. The collapse of the TLA in the late 1980's resulted in a disillusioned and resentful population of textile workers politically distancing themselves from the Congress party, which had enjoyed their full support in the initial decades after independence. Between 1980 and 1986, the city experienced a surge in caste and communal violence as laid-off workers were no longer sustained by the mills. Consequently, the once-integrated industrial neighbourhoods became fragmented and antagonistic. Dalits especially found no public support from the TLA (Spodek, 2011:211).



Map showing the outward migration of population within Ahmedabad

Map source: Vyas, Parul. (2019). “Urban Polarization: Case of Riot Affected Ahmedabad.

Bobbio (2015) highlights that the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation's approach to managing the city was deeply flawed, reflecting a bias against slum dwellers and the urban poor. These policies portrayed the poor as lacking in urban skills, morally unsuitable for city life, and as sources of pollution and health hazards. He traces these prejudices back to the early 1900s, noting how the arrival of migrant labourer from other towns shaped the city's social and physical landscape. Similar concerns about sanitation, poverty, and the supposed moral deficiencies of lower-caste migrants were evident as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. The Ahmedabad Municipality struggled with issues regarding the provision of basic services like water and sanitation to lower-caste communities. To appease local elites and business interests, the Municipal Commission often prioritized the complaints of higher-caste residents. There were even proposals to expel lower-caste and marginalized groups from the walled city, though these suggestions were supposedly dismissed by officials (Gillion, 1969; Bobbio, 2015:35).

By 1980s, the region surrounding Ahmedabad had shifted its focus from the traditional walled city to the expanding metropolitan area. According to a 1980 Ahmedabad Urban Authority Development report (AUDA), this shift called for comprehensive planning for the metropolitan region, emphasizing

balanced development of rural areas. This territorial growth led to changes in the social, cultural, and economic structure of the city (Adhvaryu, 2011:229).

By the early 1990s, the influx of migrant labourers led to the transformation of villages and ancient neighbourhoods east of the old city, like Saraspur, Gomtipur, Raipur, and Naroda, into suburban areas resembling modern urban centres. These areas began to combine functions such as warehousing, workshops for merchants, agricultural activities, and emerging industrial uses. Additionally, municipal authorities indirectly supported the development of settlements outside the city walls, viewing it as “a solution to alleviate overcrowding by relocating squatter settlements from within the walled city” (Gillion, 1969:144).

As Ahmedabad's walled city grew congested, affluent mill owners, landowners, and professionals sought larger plots and cleaner environments, leading to the development of upper-class and higher-caste suburbs. Initially, these areas emerged on the northeastern side between the old city and the cantonment, later expanding to the western side of the river. This urban reorganization marked a shift toward a modern environment, mainly benefiting the upper socio-economic classes. By the late 19th century, Ahmedabad exhibited distinct spatial divisions. The eastern and southeastern areas, centered around the textile industry, became densely populated with poor living conditions for workers. In contrast, the western side developed residential neighbourhoods with tertiary activities, cultural institutions, and educational facilities. These divisions led to disparities in access to services, infrastructure, and cultural integration, influencing the city's culture and politics. Despite some interactions between these areas, socio-economic inequalities persisted as Ahmedabad grew into an industrial and political centre (Majumdar, 1973: 237).

An additional significant catalyst for city-wide migration was the recurring outbreak of violence over the years. Hindu-Muslim tensions began intensifying as early as the 1960s. From 1961 to 1971, Gujarat's urban areas saw 685 instances of communal violence. Among these, the 1969 Gujarat riots stand out as one of the most severe outbreaks since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 (Gayer and Jaffrelot, 2012). Tensions ignited when local Hindu religious leaders, or sadhus, were attacked by Muslims following incidents where cattle herded by the sadhus had caused injuries to Muslims gathered to celebrate the local *Urs* festival, marking the death anniversary of a revered Sufi saint. In response,

Hindus launched attacks on Muslim mosques. The violence resulted in over 660 fatalities, 1,074 injuries, and left more than 48,000 people without homes or property. At the height of the riots, women were assaulted and brutalized, infants were killed, and trains carrying Muslims fleeing the unrest were intercepted, with passengers forcibly removed and murdered (Ghanshyam, 1970). In 1985, an anti-reservation uprising by upper caste students against Dalits led to wide scale rioting across the city, including targeting Muslims. In the aftermath of decades marked by intense episodes of rioting, the then-Congress government in power introduced The Disturbed Areas Act (1986) in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, primarily in response to recurring communal violence and tensions between Hindus and Muslims. This law was designed to prevent the forced sale or transfer of properties between communities, specifically aimed at curbing the practice of "distress sales" in areas affected by communal violence. After communal riots, members of a particular religious group (often Muslims) were pressured to sell their properties at lower prices due to fear of living in hostile neighbourhoods. This resulted in the segregation of communities and a shift in the demographic makeup of certain areas, further entrenching communal divisions. Muslims, Christians, and other minority groups areas prone to riots opted to move to neighbourhoods where more like them resided. Consequently, neighbourhoods became increasingly polarised, highlighting the city's segregation along religious and caste lines within its urban landscape (Spodek, 2011; Bobbio, 2011; Yagnik and Sheth, 2005; Mahadevia, 2002). A highly controversial Act till this date, as discussed by Tejani (2023), the act eventually served as a mechanism for advancing the Hindu right's agenda and promoting the "Hinduisation" of urban spaces. The effects of this act will be explored in more detail in the later chapters.

After the decline of its textile mills, Ahmedabad rejuvenated its industrial landscape by investing in new sectors such as chemicals, pharmaceuticals, denim, soap, and diamond polishing. As Gujarat's economy surged, the city's financial sector grew to accommodate this expansion. With India's increasing global influence, Ahmedabad re-emerged as a vibrant centre of growth. Major companies like Nirma, Procter & Gamble, Reliance, Cadila, and Adani set up factories, creating a wave of job opportunities throughout the state. This boom contributed to the rise of a white-collar middle class in the city, particularly in the western areas, where shopping malls, international brands, supermarkets, clubs, and restaurants thrived, reflecting the benefits of globalization (Spodek, 2011).

The development of multi-storey housing complexes offered a solution to the housing needs of the middle class, moving beyond the crowded confines of the walled city, especially in the western parts. These new residential models catered to smaller nuclear families, young professionals, and wealthier residents looking to escape the deteriorating infrastructure and density of the old city. Many families moved to neighbourhoods such as Navrangpura, Paldi, and Vastrapur (to the west of the Sabarmati River), where land was more available and gated communities were being developed (Bobbio, 2015).

Internal migration over the years resulted in a clear divide between industrial zones for the working class and residential areas for the middle class, affecting social interactions and spatial practices at the neighbourhood level. The Sabarmati River, while not a significant physical or social boundary, became a marker of social status, with the western side representing modernity through new infrastructure and higher living standards, contrasting with the older walled city. As a result, the walled city's role within the urban geography underwent significant changes (Bobbio, 2015:33).

By the late 1990s, approximately two-thirds of Ahmedabad's workforce was employed in the informal sector, with many individuals engaged in self-employment through small-scale trading and street vending (Jhabvala et al., 2003:51). In 1991, residents of slums made up 41% of the city's population and represented 77% of the workforce, primarily involved in casual labour and significantly contributing to the city's income. The closure of textile mills between the late 1970s and mid-1990s forced over 100,000 full-time workers into informal jobs. Despite their large numbers, these workers were not considered in the city's urban planning, with the old city and industrial areas being marginalized as lower-income parts of the urban landscape (SEWA, 1996).

Industrial townships such as Naroda, Vatwa, and Odhav on the outskirts witnessed a rise in low-income populations, who had limited access to basic amenities, including sewage disposal, water connections, education, and sanitation facilities. In this context, certain authors perceived the evolution of Ahmedabad as effectively comprising two distinct cities: one catering to the affluent and the other to the impoverished, demarcated by the east-west urban divide (Mahadevia, 2002).

As the economy grew in the 1990s and some individuals experienced prosperity, the environment suffered a decline. The expansion of petrochemical and mineral-based industries resulted in significant soil and water degradation. Groundwater resources depleted and the occurrence of recurrent droughts resulted in severe water scarcity across both urban and rural areas of Gujarat. Soil salinity increased, and the contamination of water with chemicals such as fluorides and nitrates from chemical factories further deteriorated water quality, rendering it unfit for consumption in many regions. Additionally, extensive deforestation was occurring simultaneously. The Gujarat Human Development Report of 2004 underscores these environmental challenges-

Factors such as Timber extraction by sawmills, paper and pulp mills, and extraction of raw materials from other industries as well as encroachment on forests by mines, and quarries and dams and other mega projects etc. have been largely responsible for the decline of forests in the state (Gujarat Human Development Report, 2004: 65).

The report also notes that water, land, and air pollution was among the highest in Gujarat at the turn of the 20th century. This environmental degradation also led to the migration of Adivasi and tribal communities from their villages to seek employment sources outside their residing villages into nearby towns and urban centres, especially Ahmedabad.

The state's economic growth led to unchecked construction in Ahmedabad's emerging middle- and upper-middle-class areas. The devastating floods of 2000 revealed the repercussions of this unplanned development, with new structures obstructing the city's drainage canal system, particularly in the west (Kaushik, 2000; Spodek, 2011). Illegally constructed shops and encroachment on parking spaces further exacerbated the situation. Newspaper reports exposed widespread violations of zoning laws, with many buildings found to be illegal under the Gujarat Town Planning Act. Builders disregarded regulations to construct commercial offices, often resorting to bribery to circumvent rules (Spodek, 2011).

The 2001 earthquake caused widespread destruction in the western area of the Sabarmati River. Following the disaster, a team of twenty-one professionals from various disciplines, including engineering, disaster management, and political science, conducted investigations sponsored by AUDA

and guided by the Centre of Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT) and drafted a report. The report revealed that many of the affected individuals in Ahmedabad belonged to the middle and upper-middle class, for whom these collapsed homes had been lifetime investments, and who lacked the financial means to cope with their losses. The team inspected several tragic building collapses, including Mansi Towers, Shikhar, Ayodhya, and Sangemarmar apartments. Notably, these collapses were attributed to the use of soft-storied designs, where buildings lacked concrete reinforcement at ground levels, relying instead on thin pillars and beams. Mansi Towers drew attention for its collapse, partly due to the added weight of a massive swimming pool built on its terrace (WSSI, 2001).

Different reports, media outlets, and government agencies published various death tolls following the 2001 earthquake. The Indian Defence Minister during 2001 George Fernandes had put the death toll at 100,000 while reportedly, the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Keshubhai Patel agreed to a figure between 20,000-25,000 (Times of India, 2001). However, a figure of approximately 20,000 deaths and 1,67,000 injured was established by the state (WSSI, 2001; CERl, 2001).

The disagreement over numbers of death highlights the significant disorder and confusion following the earthquake, to the point where official reports and statistics were inconsistent and unreliable, making it challenging to obtain accurate data. The Government of Gujarat estimated the disaster loss at almost \$4.5 billion (USD) as per its *Memorandum on the Earthquake Damage in Gujarat* report submitted to the Government of India on February 17, 2001. This figure is a good example to understand economic losses and the enormity of the damage caused by the quake (Lahiri et al., 2001).

The earthquake inflicted widespread devastation in Kutch and five major districts of Gujarat: Ahmedabad, Jamnagar, Patan, Surat, and Surendra Nagar, which altogether accounted for 99% of the fatalities. Towns and villages in these areas were reduced to rubble, severely impacting people's lives and livelihoods. Many affected individuals were forced to seek shelter in tents provided by the state government, with support from NGOs and governments within and outside India. Reports highlighted the emotional distress experienced by those who lost their homes and loved ones (Lahiri et al., 2001; WSSI, 2001).

The Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority (GSDMA) was established in February 2001 to oversee earthquake recovery efforts, marking a significant departure from past practices. Historically, disaster management in India has focused more on post-disaster relief rather than risk mitigation. The 2001 earthquake revealed a general lack of foresight and planning in terms of disaster risk management. Prior to the earthquake, Gujarat's disaster planning primarily addressed cyclones, droughts, and floods. The 2001 earthquake exposed firstly the lapse in memory—there was no public knowledge of the history of seismic activity in Gujarat. Secondly, the inadequacy of preparations were exacerbated by this memory gap, and the resulting significant loss of life, property, and economic disruption threw an entire state into shock. The establishment of GSDMA after the earthquake came in response to this crisis, reflecting an administrative shift towards proactive disaster management strategies (WSSI, 2001).

GSDMA was officially registered as a society, under the Societies Registration Act and its chairperson is the state's chief minister. The organization was given the responsibility to conduct the recovery program as effectively as possible. A four-tier institutional framework was set up- at the village, district, and state levels. A Central Implementation Review group at the state level led by the chief secretary facilitated coordination and monitoring between departments (OCHA, 2002).

The government of India and the state government of Gujarat implemented various financial exemptions following the 2001 earthquake, as detailed in a report by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperation. These measures included granting 100% tax exemptions for donations made to registered charitable institutions. Additionally, donations to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund and Chief Minister's Relief Fund of any state were eligible for 100% tax exemption. Relief materials provided for earthquake victims were exempted from customs/excise duty, and the Prime Minister announced \$80 million (USD) in financial aid during a visit to the affected areas on January 29, 2001 (UNDMT, 2001). Funding flowed freely and, on paper, seemed to be channelled towards those most in need.

In Ahmedabad, the district collector set up web resources for the submission of damage reports at a time when internet facilities were still limited in this part of the world, and most of the damage to individual households or businesses was received via landline telephones. The district collectors relayed the district-level data to the state government, and state officials subsequently communicated the overall state assessment to the Prime Minister's Office in Delhi. These figures served as the foundation for

appeals for financial aid for disaster relief and reconstruction presented to the Indian Parliament (WSSI, 2001).

According to the Gujarat earthquake recovery program risk assessment report, the GDSMA together with the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank put the total cost of rehabilitation and reconstruction at USD\$ 2.3 billion. Although this figure was rather arbitrary knowing this estimate was created and established in less than two weeks of the earthquake, the estimate was meant for the design of bank loans and policies (Simpson 2014:29; World Bank, 2001). The primary aim of the reconstruction effort was to restore and develop property and infrastructure, with a specific focus on differentiating between urban and rural areas. The goal was to fundamentally reshape both government and societal structures. Loan agreements involving private and public stakeholders facilitated the entry of private insurance companies into rural markets for the first time in the immediate aftermath of disaster. Later, a World Bank (2009) report observed that these insurance policies “improved the customer base of the insurance industries”. (14)

Development banks in India, like their counterparts globally, aim to promote economic growth and efficiency (World Bank report, 2009). They believe that higher economic growth leads to more job opportunities and reduces poverty. This approach, known as the “neoliberal paradigm,” involves reforming the public sector and integrating it into the market economy (Harvey, 2007). Gujarat was the first state in India to be “chosen” (a word used by the Asian Development Bank) for comprehensive economic and structural reforms (Asian Development Bank, 2008; Simpson, 2014). The earthquake also became an opportunity to speed up reforms and restructuring of state institutions: urban services, planning systems, local taxes were quickly reorganized to function in line with market principles (Simpson 2014:31).

Anthropologist Edward Simpson (2014) quotes famous political economist John Stuart Mill by saying “disasters are a moment of hyper-consumption which necessarily, given certain general conditions, acts as a powerful stimulus” (37). Before the 2001 earthquake, Kutch, a rural desert outpost, was seeing the beginnings of industrialization, especially around the port at Kandla. After the earthquake, state-sponsored tax breaks and incentives attracted heavy investment from national and foreign companies. By 2005, the once muddy roads were replaced with concrete, connecting Bhuj to

surrounding villages, and lined with factories. This development was not driven by local grassroots initiatives but by outsiders treating Kutch as an industrial estate. Manufacturers of various products set up operations, and mangroves were replaced with concrete. The Adani Group, a major Indian corporation, imported coal to fuel new power stations supplying electricity to Gujarat. While rapid industrialization may have felt beneficial to the state's economic prosperity in the short term to many citizens, the way it transformed the geographical landscape shocked those affected directly by the earthquake.

In Gujarat, state and private investments spurred growth. The generosity stemming from both guilt and fascination among witnesses contributed to the windfall. The disaster also garnered attention from a global media audience. Faster internet-based communication, referred to as “cyberspace” at that time, along with a sizable and affluent diaspora watching the disaster unfold in real-time, each played a role in encouraging an influx of foreign cash donations (Kodrick and Laituri, 2005).

This kind of “hyperbolic capitalism” as distinct from community-based care and mutual aid resulted in the creation of a new kind of citizen and society, as Simpson called it one whose vision for themselves was growing “highly individualistic” and “steeped in opportunism” (Simpson 2014:39).

### **Humanitarian Aid, Community and *Seva*: The Rise of Hindutva ideology**

Historically, local religious organisations have often taken the lead in delivering relief efforts, acting as first responders in a region like South Asia, where temples, mosques, gurdwaras and churches have long been centres of philanthropy and community assistance, especially in rural communities cut-off from access to the larger world, lacking highways, telecom, and other basic state-provided infrastructure. During British colonial rule, Christian missionary relief efforts marked a shift towards “modern principles of rationality” in social service, as noted by Barnett and Stein (2012). This transition involved adopting systematic and efficient approaches to aid delivery, departing from traditional charity. By introducing organisational structures and standardised methods, missionaries improved the effectiveness of relief work, contributing to the evolution of more sustainable social welfare systems in India.

Unlike the ancient traditional practices, where charity in the Hindu faith was primarily seen as highly personal, often encapsulated by the concept of *dana punya* (charity leading to one's own spiritual

merit and upliftment), Hindu reformers, inspired by Christian missionaries, started to establish parallel institutions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries formalizing social service to provide humanitarian aid during famines, plagues, and epidemics, but also establish schools, orphanages, and hospitals during other times for social upliftment. Thus, the deep-rooted tradition of *dana punya* within Hinduism (Watt, 2005) underwent a metamorphosis into a more modern form of service, now defined as *seva* (social service). Moreover, *seva* and compassion towards others became enshrined at the core of Gandhi's philosophy as a branch of nationalistic thinking, one which could foster unity and cultivate empathy. However, these ideals and systems of community service were put to the test in the 2001 earthquake to surprising results.

A psychological study conducted right after the earthquake in Ahmedabad examined the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder, revealing widespread symptoms such as anxiety, nightmares, insomnia, and depression among residents. The report highlighted the lack of mental health resources, warning that inadequate intervention could worsen the psychological fallout. Traumatized individuals often avoid confronting their memories and fears, resorting to physical means to cope, which in turn leads to physiological and neuro-chemical changes in the brain (Pestonjee and Satish, 2001). In a society which was rapidly inching towards “hyperbolic capitalism” and growing “highly individualistic,” natural disaster seems to have exacerbated these feelings of alienation, based on the findings of this study. During 2001, under the leadership of Keshubhai Patel, local citizens of Gujarat were highly antagonistic towards the state governments efforts in recovery and rehabilitation which further prompted local religious organisations and civil society to intervene. The deployment of humanitarian aid as a justification for political intervention is, as Fassin and Pandolfi (2010) have pointed out, a common strategy of states during times of disaster. There seemed to be a general air of discontent with the handling of the crisis by the political establishment, and a need arose for belonging and community care. This vacuum for collective response was quickly filled by one group.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a socio-religious organization that understood disaster psychology in 2001, is closely associated with right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). During the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, which led to widespread sectarian violence, the RSS capitalized on the situation to mobilize Hindus. The organization assigned members to protect Hindu homes in Gujarat and to manufacture homemade grenades in preparation for potential Muslim attacks.

By 1948, the RSS shifted its focus to social service, a move that helped establish its reputation as a community saviour in the eyes of many Gujaratis (Bhattacharjee, 2016). This image would come in particularly handy in the wake of the 1948 assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by one of its former members, Nathuram Godse (Noorani, 2019). By diversifying its activities to provide targeted *seva* to certain groups, such as women, tribals, and Hindu lower-castes over the next 40 years in Gujarat, the RSS consolidated these diverse groups under an overarching Hindu identity, and indoctrinated thousands of young Gujaratis through a unique system of community education through shakhas or local RSS-run schools. One of the millions of Gujarati youth, indoctrinated and educated in the organization's core Hindutva ideology was Narendra Modi, who in 2001 was BJP's electoral strategist and party worker.

Narendra Modi, born in post-independence Gujarat, had attended the RSS shakha or school, since he was eight years old. Ambala Koshti, an RSS worker, who brought Modi into the party recalls in a 2019 interview with ANI after Modi won his second term as India's prime minister, how he had discovered him working at the state transport office canteen, when he had no place to live. "I used to meet him after the shakha gathering at the canteen every day and arranged for a place for him at the RSS office," known as Hedgewar Bhavan in Ahmedabad (Vohra, 2018).

In 2001, as the total scope of disaster and devastation became known, an angry Gujarat voter base demanded the resignation of then chief minister, Keshubhai Patel, an old-school BJP incumbent. Narendra Modi, never having faced an election, was chosen by the RSS and the state party officials to replace Patel as chief minister of Gujarat in October, eight months after the earthquake. He became the first RSS *pracharak* or *swayamsevak* (volunteer to the cause) to hold such a post in India (Mukhopadhyay, 2013).

The RSS' ideological antagonism towards the modern state of Pakistan, with whom Gujarat and specifically Kutch share a long geographical border became a focal point for societal reconstruction. This narrative further marginalised Gujarat's Muslims in pockets where devastation had taken place due to the earthquake, intensifying existing and dormant socio-economic and religious tensions (Simpson, 2014). Images of Modi visiting relief camps and personally delivering much-needed aid to Hindu victims in rural and semi-urban centres flooded local news media. Gandhi's ideology of charity and

community self-reliance was quickly and impactfully being replaced by a modern vision of care: the RSS pracharak with rolled-up sleeves, ready to uplift a beleaguered people.



Picture of Narendra Modi in Kutch with BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha relief workers

Picture Source: Navbharat Times, 2001

### **The Sangh Parivar (RSS, BJP, VHP and others) through disaster management**

In severely affected, more rural areas like Kutch, untrained individuals led initial efforts due to limited preparedness. Volunteer organisations of the Sangh Parivar—the umbrella name referring to the family of organizations like the RSS (the social and ideological arm), BJP (the political arm), VHP (the militarised arm), and their other Hindutva-espousing offshoots-- quickly mobilised to join these efforts to locate survivors, showcasing their motivation and organisation. (WSSI, 2001)

The *seva*, social service, oriented activities of Sangh affiliates serve distinct political purposes, besides uniting and mobilising various castes, and classes under a broader Hindu identity. While critics of the Sangh Parivar have accurately characterised, the movement using terms like “revivalist” (Anderson and Damle, 1987), “fundamentalist” (Marty and Appleby, 1994), “communal,” and even “fascist” (Goyal, 1979), it is imperative to look beyond these labels to truly comprehend the broader functioning of the Sangh as a civil society network.

During the critical hours following the earthquake when the official machinery was effectively paralyzed, Sangh Parivar grassroots organizations played a crucial role by kicking into quick response (Bhattacharjee, 2016). They spearheaded search and rescue operations in the first forty-eight hours and eventually collaborated with the Indian Army in aid delivery. By January 30, 2001, approximately eight thousand Sangh Parivar workers were deployed in Kutch district alone. Despite the prompt deployment of the Army and the State Rapid Action, the Sangh Parivar played a pivotal role in the recovery of bodies and the cremation of the deceased (WSSI, 2001). Further, according to the booklet “*Punya Nirman Chunauti*” by Sewa Bharati (n.d.) reports that on January 26, 2001, RSS Swayamsevak’s across Gujarat were preparing for the Rashtra Jagran Abhiyan (national awareness initiative) and Bharat Mata Pooja (worship of Mother India) as part of Republic Day celebrations. Immediately after the tremors ceased on the morning of India’s Republic Day, this army of volunteers, already on the ground for the festivities, was diverted into rescue operations. Over 20,000 swayamsevaks from various parts of Gujarat, many of whom had lost family and friends themselves, actively engaged in rescue, medical assistance, and cremation tasks. swayamsevaks ran community kitchens and erected tents. A few days after the disaster an RSS control room was set up at Hedgewar Bhavan (the Sewa Bharati head office in Ahmedabad) and nodal officers were appointed to coordinate relief activities. The relief operations persisted for approximately three months, during which Sewa Bharati operated as the overarching organisation for the RSS. In Bhachau, Kutch, the area most severely affected by the earthquake, a hospital named after Hedgewar (the founder of RSS) was established less than two months later, on March 1, 2001, equipped with sixty beds and four operation theatres. A notable narrative in the testimonies of various swayamsevaks highlights the government's enthusiastic collaboration. According to Sewa Bharati, the district collector requested their assistance for the cremation of deceased individuals a day after the calamity. Sewa Bharati fostered especially close ties with other Hindu organisations during this period, including the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Mata Amrit Anandamayi Foundation, and the Ramakrishna Mission (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

During that period, more than three hundred international and local NGOs were actively involved in overseeing relief operations in Gujarat including Ahmedabad. Organizations like USAID (United States Agency for International Development), the United Nations Children’s Fund, the United Nations Office for Humanitarian Efforts, and other global governmental units helped. Financial and material aid flowed in. Yet what became the larger story was large number of donations from the Indian,

and particularly Gujarati, diaspora living in the United States and the United Kingdom. Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminayan Santha (BAPS)—an international religious charitable order with right-wing Hindutva leanings and funded by mostly rich Hindu diaspora-- adopted twelve villages in Kutch for reconstruction (Simpson, 2014). Funds were raised through the diasporic communities living in Ohio, New York, and Michigan. From Queens, and Edison, New Jersey, along with various cities in Europe and Africa, followers of the Swami Narayan, a primarily Gujarati Hindu sect, reached out to their affiliated temples in Gujarat. Their purpose was to send financial aid and obtain information about family members who were reported missing (Sengupta, 2001). With the help and support of US President Bill Clinton and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a group of philanthropists created the American India Foundation (AIF) to channel diaspora donations to relief efforts in India. AIF soon began aggregating funds from the Indian diaspora to provide relief from natural disasters beyond the Gujarat earthquake. Over time, the organisation shed its disaster-response focus and pursued various issue-based initiatives that channelled large-scale investments from Indian Americans to NGOs in India. By June 2015, AIF, which does not operate with an endowment, had raised and distributed about \$100 million to 248 Indian NGOs (Menezes et al., 2015).

Most of these contributors directed their financial support through Hindu entities such as Sewa Bharati, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and Swaminarayan Sanstha (Bhattacharjee, 2016). Asghar Ali Engineer (2002) discusses how the aid provided by Indian expatriates can be seen as a way for them to confront their own feelings of disconnection by adopting a more pronounced Hindu identity. This involves generous contributions to Hindutva organisations and offering volunteers to their international branches. Additionally, it is important to consider that many Indians perceived the incumbent Keshubhai Patel government as corrupt and inefficient, motivating them to donate to private entities.

Additional critical perspectives have asserted that the RSS offered relief selectively, favouring the Hindu population over all other minority groups within these cities and villages. Kuldeep Nayar (2001), in an article for *Gulf News*, claimed that Sangh activists engaged in discriminatory relief efforts by setting up relief camps exclusively in Hindu-dominated areas, while deliberately neglecting lower-caste Hindus and Muslims in certain regions. Nayar further contended that in Kutch, RSS and VHP activists allegedly took control of relief supplies, with the government seemingly complicit in these instances of bias and prejudiced distribution. According to a senior Muslim Congress party leader based

in Bhuj, the relief efforts were entirely dominated by the RSS-VHP members, focusing exclusively on Hindu-majority areas (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

This observation was supported by a 2001 Milli Gazette news report, which stated:

The RSS and VHP are effectively operating as an alternative government. They have established a robust organisational structure with a rapid response network. Their representatives are stationed at the airport to manage government relief brought in by numerous Indian Air Force missions. Notably, they are closely collaborating with revenue officials from the district administration and officials dispatched from Gandhinagar and Ahmedabad. It is evident that the BJP's government... has integrated the Sangh Parivar and extensively engaged its members in the relief operations. Additionally, the RSS/VHP cadres have taken control of the government relief camps (3).

The news report continues to highlight that the Swaminarayan temples in most parts of Gujarat housed the largest community kitchens, providing food to anyone waiting in the queue. However, those benefiting, including many Muslims, were instructed by RSS and VHP members to chant religious slogans such as *“Jai Swami Narayan” Long live Narayan* or *“Jai Shri Ram” Long live Ram*. Similarly, at Jubilee Ground in Bhuj, where relief materials were being accumulated daily and continuous food preparation was taking place, VHP members led slogan-shouting sessions, urging everyone to join in when they exclaimed *“Jai Shri Ram”* (Shashikumar and Varghese, 2001; Bhattacharjee, 2016).

Two additional reports have made allegations that relief funds raised by the Sangh Parivar from the Indian community abroad were misappropriated for advancing the Hindutva cause. The Foreign Exchange, a publication by Sabrang Communications (2002), an organisation established in 1993 by independent activists and journalists, probes the connections between the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF), a charity based in Maryland, and the Sangh Parivar in India. The report claims that funds raised for Bhuj earthquake relief were distributed along communal lines, benefiting those aligned with Hindutva. A similar report by Awaaz: South Asia Watch (ASAW), a London-based group, alleges that Sewa International UK and the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) fraudulently raised £2.3 million for Sewa Bharati's reconstruction efforts, redirecting the funds to advance the RSS's political goals. While

these reports faced criticism for perceived bias against the Hindu Right and lack of substantial evidence, they correctly highlighted that the extensive relief operation provided opportunities for the Sangh Parivar to further its political agenda and reshape public opinion in their favour.

The RSS used its robust system of regular community engagement to recruit new members. These activities, including physical training and nationalist teachings, were geared towards fortifying the idea of a Hindu nation through their shakhas, especially for unemployed and economically challenged youth, who were now also un-homed and lacking community networks, and a hope for the future. These gatherings served as platforms for discussions on national security and the role of minorities in shaping society. Dedicated members were initiated into a grooming process for local leadership roles through participation in RSS camps (Bhattacharjee, 2016). The tireless relief efforts of RSS workers during 2001 had eclipsed the less effective state machinery, and earned the organisation widespread appreciation, and with Modi, a true RSS scion at the helm of the state government, if anything the state administration was able to bask in the reflected glory of its grassroots mother organization. This not only allowed the Sangh Parivar to build and reinforce connections with recipients, civil society groups, donors, Indian diaspora communities, and the media but also served as a strategic chance for the Sangh to represent itself as a humanitarian force, recruit new members, and downplay its contentious history as an instigator of social discord and violence.

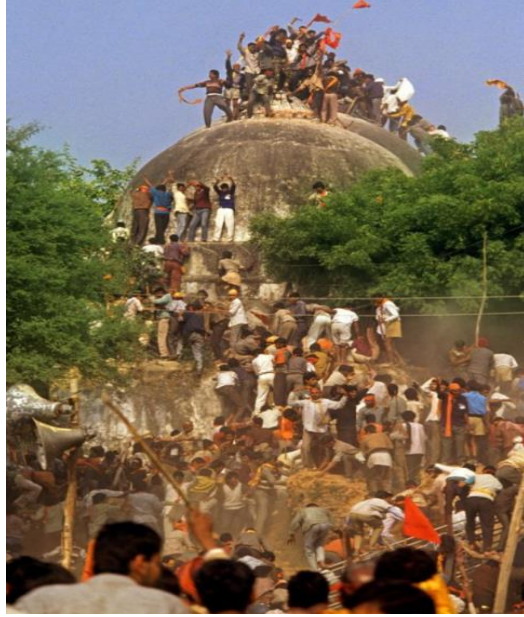
A new Gujarat was taking shape in the reconstruction through the hands of the Sangh Parivar, as Naomi Klein explains in the *Shock Doctrine* (2007), “believers of the shock doctrine are convinced that only a rupture—a flood, a war, an earthquake—can generate a kind of vast, clean canvas they crave. It is in these malleable moments, when we are psychologically unmoored, and physically uprooted, that these artists of the real, plunge in their hands and begin the work of remaking the world” (20). The earthquake swept through, shattering land and people alike, leaving devastation in its wake. Yet, amidst the ruins, Gujarat's essence of pluralism and secularism was also in upheaval, giving rise to a new city, one that was forged upon harsh pillars of communal hatred.

### **2002: The making of a pogrom**

The Keshubhai Patel-led BJP government felt the public's ire, facing an electoral setback in state and village-level elections in September 2001, and by October, the party leadership forced him to resign,

making way for a lesser-known BJP general secretary and RSS worker, Narendra Modi (Reuters, 2013). After four quiet months of this political transition, in February 2002, Gujarat erupted in a disaster of a whole other nature: the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in which more than two thousand people were killed, mostly Muslims, and another 140,000 people internally displaced and made refugees in their own land (Yagnik and Sheth 2005:282). To understand this tragedy, first we must outline the role of the karsevak and the history of the Babri Mosque demolition which took place exactly a decade before this event.

The Babri Mosque in the city of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in honour of Babar, India's first Mughal ruler. Starting sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the British Raj, a considerable number of Hindus started to believe that the mosque was erected on the alleged birthplace of Lord Ram, a central deity in Hinduism (Sharma, 2003). While a majority of India's population was coalescing around the calls for freedom from colonial rule, a small minority was rising in agitation for a Hindu supremacist future. The founders of this movement in the 1930s, impressed by the rise of fascist movements in Europe, established the Hindu Mahasabha, a pre-cursor of the RSS and Sangh Parivar (Casolari, 2000). Fast forward to post-independent India in the 1980s, after Indira Gandhi's disastrous Emergency period, and with rising tensions in the debate over caste-based reservation, the Congress party's grip over the country's nationalistic self-image waned especially amongst upper-caste Hindus (Pathak, 2024). The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a young militant wing of the erstwhile Hindu Mahasabha rose in this time, along with other Sangh Parivar groups, to revitalise a demand for the construction of a Ram temple at the site where the mosque stood, with the BJP serving as its political representation (Udayakumar, 1997). In September 1990, BJP leader L. K. Advani commenced a *Rath Yatra*, a religious political pilgrimage traversing a significant part of northern India enroute to Ayodhya. The yatra (pilgrimage) aimed to garner public support, raise funds, and recruit volunteers for the proposed temple while also attempting to consolidate Hindu electoral votes by fuelling anti-Muslim sentiments. These volunteers traveling to Ayodhya in a bid to restore "Hindu glory" were also called karsevaks. By the end of the year and the yatra, the BJP had significantly increased its representation in the union parliament and secured a majority in the Uttar Pradesh assembly (Guha, 2007).



Picture depicting the demolition of the Babri Mosque by Hindu mobs, Ayodhya, 1992

Image source: Getty Images

On December 6, 1992, around 70,000 *karsevaks* and five hundred sadhus and sants (religious priests and godmen) gathered at the Mosque site, and using axes, hammers, and grappling hooks demolished the entire structure, constructed from mud and chalk, within a few hours (Engineer, 1992).

On 8 December 1992, Derek Brown, a journalist working at *The Guardian* described how riots erupted across the length and breadth of “a huge and angry country.” Even Mumbai, the western metropolis considered the most modern of Indian cities, was caught up in the violence, leaving more than two hundred people dead, mainly Muslims. Social scientist S.P. Udaykumar (1997) succinctly describes the concept of the *karsevak* and the principles they embody. Drawing on the work of Mishra (1980), who explored the historization of religious myths, Udaykumar explains that for many *karsevaks*—often young men involved in the mob violence—Ram transcended being a mere deity and became a symbol of a communal interpretation of a glorious "national history." Influenced by the rhetoric of a "heroic heritage" from the past and a "pathetic situation" in the present, these Hindu youth were motivated to reject "impotence" and "weakness." They identified a clear enemy—the Mughals, and by extension, contemporary Indian Muslims. The mosque served as a visible target for destruction, offering them an opportunity to assert their "strength and glory" and reclaim "pride and hegemony." The

preamble of the RSS constitution articulates the organization's aims to "make them (Hindus) realize the greatness of their past and "bring about an all-round regeneration of the Hindu Samaj" (Mishra, 1980). The deliberate manipulation of history, myths, and oral narratives played a crucial role in reshaping a community's historical consciousness and present identity.

Myths, along with religious sentiments and political rhetoric, can create narratives that alter a community's collective understanding of historical facts. Mishra (1980) and Iqbal Ansari (1989) both examine how these politically motivated narratives can reshape public perceptions of history. In the case of the Babri Mosque demolition, such narratives became deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of Indians, particularly those with Hindutva sympathies. Over time, strong spiritual and moral justifications normalized the violence of December 1992, reimagining the karsevaks from aggressive participants in the demolition to humble, voluntary religious workers. This transformation was largely driven by the "Mughal invader- Hindu victim" narrative promoted by the Sangh. In 2002, the two carriages of the Sabarmati Express train that suffered a fire were transporting approximately a thousand karsevaks back from the Babri demolition site to their towns and villages in Gujarat. This annual "pilgrimage" was public knowledge and had become routine for most onlookers. It has also been claimed that many of these karsevaks, only a year ago, had also volunteered in large numbers to aid in earthquake relief. On the night after the train fire, once the chief minister Narendra Modi and other state officials had toured the site of the tragedy, a large convoy, filled with mourners and VHP/Bajrang Dal members brought the charred remains of deceased karsevaks to a government hospital in Ahmedabad (Sinha and Suppes, 2015). The VHP called for a state-wide *bandh* (strike). Both these choices were highly criticised and considered to have fuelled anti-Muslim sentiments. The next morning, mass-scale violence and massacres broke out across Ahmedabad, and other major cities, as well as burning through rural areas.

Hindu extremist groups attempted to rationalise the event as an action-reaction phenomenon, that the violence was simply a spontaneous surge of anger and indignation triggered by the killing of the karsevaks in such a gruesome manner. Nevertheless, compelling evidence of premeditation revealed a more intricate and nuanced reality, indicating that the Sangh machinery took advantage of the organic public anger of the majority Hindu community as a strategic opportunity to perpetrate violence against Muslim minorities. Armed and trained mobs traversing the city were equipped with lists of Muslim-

owned houses and shops, prepared to commit atrocities that contradict the notion of a “spontaneous reaction” (Bobbio, 2015:179). In one instance, an ex-Member of Parliament, Ehsan Jafri, was hacked to death in a gated community, an event which came to be known as the Gulbarg Society massacre (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012). Upper-caste BJP ministers were found to be instigating violent mobs of mostly lower-caste men to slaughter people in a poor, working-class Muslim neighbourhood called Naroda Patiya (Genocide Watch Report, 2023). In the former case, affidavits of survivors, eyewitness testimonies, and various published reports convey the impression that the prolonged siege of the colony was meticulously thought out and premeditated (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012:98). The Concerned Citizen’s Tribunal reported: “The extent of the macabre delight that perpetrators took in the crimes committed was evident in what some residents saw on the evening of 28 February 2002. When some witnesses returned to the area later that evening, they saw neighbourhood goons ‘playing cricket’ with the skulls of the dead” (CCT: vol. 1, 31; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012:104). In contrast to Gulbarg Society, Naroda Patiya was a highly impoverished residential area. Naroda Patiya located on the fringes of the Ahmedabad municipality housed more than two thousand daily wage-earning Muslims. On 28th February 2002, more than five thousand individuals, under the leadership of the Bhartiya Janata Party and the Bajrang Dal perpetrated extreme and gruesome violence, which claimed the lives of over hundred and twenty-five people within a few hours (Dasgupta, 2004).

According to Human Rights Watch (2002) women and girls were subjected to rape before being killed. Many of these assaults occurred in public, with the victims subsequently being killed and their bodies set on fire. Many women who sought refuge in the relief camp, experienced various forms of sexual violence, including rape, gang rape, mass rape, stripping, insertion of objects into their bodies, and molestation. The report emphasised the lack of efforts to protect women, the absence of deployed police officers, and the ongoing complicity of the state and police, as women survivors were denied the right to file First Information Reports (FIR) (Citizen’s Initiative report, 2002). The report also pointed out the absence of an institutional mechanism in Gujarat through which women could seek justice. As human rights columnist and sociologist Kalapana Kannabiran notes that the “rapes were part of a well-organised, deliberate and pre-planned strategy, which places the violence into the categories of a political pogrom and genocide” (Kannabiran, 2012:414).

### **Patterns of social violence in Gujarat**

For over three decades after independence, Gujarat was depicted as a place where traders, especially the influential Mahajan community of Ahmedabad, and hardworking Patel farming community thrived. However, this portrayal overlooked the presence and contributions of Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, various pastoral communities, and artisan groups (Chacko, 2015). To understand the root causes of social violence in the city, a thorough understanding of the geography of caste within its many neighbourhoods and suburbs is necessary.

Throughout Gujarat's modern history, Brahminism, characterized by the dominance of the highest priest caste, has not played a significant cultural or political role. Instead, Jainism and Islam have been more influential, distinguishing Gujarat from regions like Maharashtra or Southern India. In Gujarat, and particularly in Ahmedabad, the predominant urban culture has been mercantile, represented by the Jain and Vaishnava Hindu communities (Yagnik and Sheth, 2005). In the 1980s, Hindu Dalits made up seven percent of the population, with a notable presence in Ahmedabad. After independence, many Dalit sub-castes, such as the Vankars, who are skilled weavers, found employment in the city's textile mills. Despite the constitutionally mandated affirmative action program known as the "reservation quota," Dalits have often been unable to benefit significantly from these initiatives. Caste discrimination has also prevented them from living in predominantly Hindu areas, resulting in many Dalits residing near Muslim communities, in the old city or in industrial suburbs on the outskirts (Yagnik and Bhatt, 1984).

Beginning in the 1960s and intensifying in the late 1980s, Ahmedabad experienced many waves of severe caste violence targeting Dalits when upper-caste students and citizens protested the Congress party's social upliftment programs for Dalits and other lower caste, marginalised groups (Yagnik and Bhatt, 1984). The Congress found itself compelled to seek a fresh electoral strategy, the outcome of which was KHAM - the coalition of Kshatriyas, Dalits, Indigenous tribes, and Muslims. The coalition effectively secured political power without the support from the upper castes. But this perceived threat prompted numerous individuals from the upper castes to adopt an extreme stance, rendering them more open to the radicalization of Hindusim (Balagopal, 2002; Yagnik and Sheth, 2005; Kannupillai, 2006). Between 1985 and 1990, Gujarat saw a surge in "saffronisation," a coded term for the influence of the Hindutva movement. The anti-reservation protests finally brought an end to the KHAM coalition which saw the end of the Congress rule and the beginning of the BJP rule. The Sangh Parivar successfully

replaced the ideas of *Savarna* (upper castes) with Hindutva as the unifying force for Hindus. The previous divide between upper castes and Dalits and tribals evolved instead into a Hindu-Muslim polarisation. Yatras (political and religious marches) and the symbolism of Lord Ram and the Babri Mosque helped bring various groups under a single umbrella (Yagnik and Seth, 2005: 260). In a broader perspective as B. Natrajan argues, “the Hindutva project is dependent on the construction of two main social identities– an external Muslim other, and an internal Dalit other” (Natrajan, 2021:4). Fanning the flames of hatred, the proponents of Hindutva politics managed to incorporate a significant section of the so-called lower castes into their fold. This inclusion of Dalits under the broader category of *Savarnas* marked the initiation of a political shift from an era dominated by the Congress to the ascent of the Bhartiya Janata Party in the state politics in Gujarat (Chaudhury, 2007). Religious sects like Swaminarayan played a significant role in cultivating the societal base of Hindutva. Despite being overseen by the middle class and 'upper caste' elite, these sects ostensibly reached out to Dalits, Adivasis, fisher-folk, and various other marginalised groups across Gujarat throughout the 80s and 90s with a reformist Hindu agenda. The involvement of the Gujarati diaspora through these sects emerged. Starting in 1990s, the diaspora became the economic backbone of Hindutva politics (Chacko, 2015). Yet as the next segment will reveal, there exist tensions between this party-level political strategy for a unified Hindu right, and the ground-level reality of daily co-existence and community, especially when faced with disaster and crisis.

### **Caste and Disaster**

Six weeks after the 2001 earthquake, representatives from Human Rights Watch (2001) visited several towns in Kutch, the district most severely affected by the disaster. In all the areas they inspected, there was a clear separation between Dalits and Muslims from the upper-caste Hindus. Survivors were recorded as saying: “We are surviving the way we lived; that's why we are in separate camps” (6). Despite the government's claims of equal allocation of compensation and relief supplies, Dalit and Muslim populations evidently did not have comparable access to shelter, electricity, running water, and other provisions being made available to other communities. This disparity was evident in several cities near Bhuj, including Anjar and Bhachau where the government provided significantly superior shelter and basic amenities to upper-caste communities (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Researchers found that individuals with political connections in the administration pragmatically leveraged these ties, while

those lacking such connections often had to depend, with varying degrees of success, on the benevolence of locals and small charity groups (Mehta, 2001).

Similarly in 2002, during the anti-Muslim pogrom, many of those arrested and booked under charges of participating in mob violence and perpetrating gory attacks on Muslims were Dalits who often lived in closest proximity to their victims. When Rajdeep Sardesai, a renowned journalist and reporter in India interviewed a young Dalit boy from the Naroda Patiya area inquiring about the reasons for being involved in the killings and rioting, he replied “The local Bajrang Dal promised us we will be allowed to stay in the land vacated by Muslims who have fled” (Sardesai, 2016, para 2).

This photograph below by journalist Sebastian D’Souza published 2002 of Ashok, a street cobbler from the Dalit community, during the pogrom in Ahmedabad became an enduring visual symbol of a violent majority’s assertion over a Muslim minority. The fire in the background, as well as the triumphant posture of the man wielding an iron rod in the foreground gained global recognition for its depiction of the siege laid to one group of civilians by another. Ashok lived in the old city neighbourhoods of Shahpur, where working class Muslims and Dalits co-existed. After the violence abated, Ashok spent 14 days in prison. Harsh Mander, a human rights activist, who was engaged in fighting legal cases for many Muslim victims, writes, “we realised that most of those we succeeded in engaging in these legal battles were foot soldiers of the carnage, not its leaders” (Mander, 2016, para 8). Mander fought on for several years claiming the police had deliberately “undertaken shoddy investigation to protect perpetrators” (para 11). Fourteen years later, for this *Scroll* report, Mander tracked him down to a small shop, still in the old city, where Ashok continues to work as a cobbler in a temporary, illegal structure, unable to escape the burden of his caste or his family’s poverty. He criticised the general struggles for necessities, stating that despite Modi's governance, the common

person continues to struggle for food, clothing, and shelter, just as he did while sleeping on the footpath in 2001 and continues to do so today (Mander, 2016).

Picture of Ashok  
Ahmedabad

Image source: The



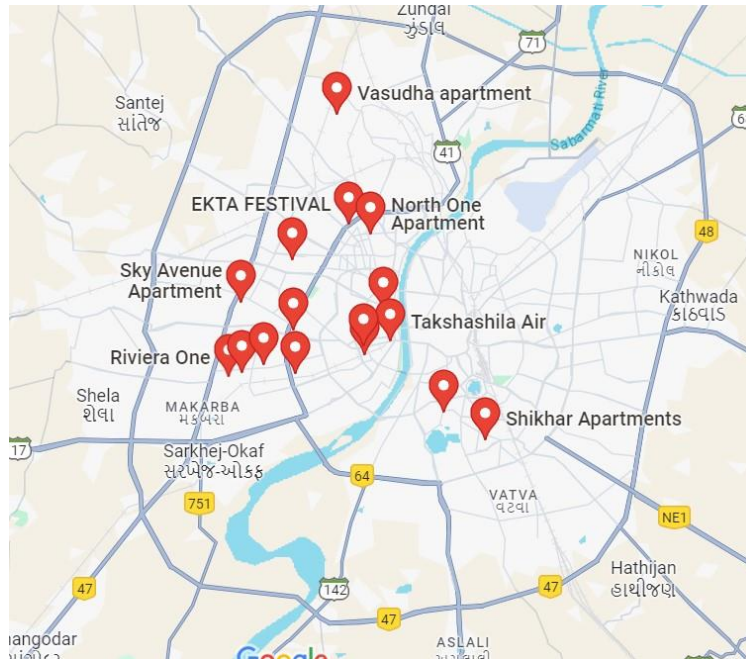
during the 2002 violence in

Scroll, 2002

Stories of Dalit and Muslim animosity during the 2002 violence abound, but what becomes important to ask is how these conditions were created of marginalising both groups, in tight living spaces, where incidents like the train tragedy resulted in such violent and immediate conflagrations. This perspective urges us to consider those who have been left out of the narrative: upper-caste Hindu Gujaratis, whose role and complicity in the horrific violence have been largely ignored or even worse -- forgotten. They have gradually distanced themselves from the old city, moved away from their Muslim neighbours, and thus escaped any responsibility or acknowledgment of the horrific gruesome violence and underlying communal tensions.

### CHAPTER 3 – FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter centers on the core of this thesis: personal interviews with upper-caste, upper-middle-class Gujarati Hindu victims of the earthquake. The findings from these interviews, two decades after both the 2001 earthquake and the 2002 pogrom, document how this specific group of citizens responded to the twin traumas that the city experienced. I probe how they define community, who they view as a part of it, their aspirations for themselves and for their natural and built environments and what they perceive as markers of progress. In addition, my analysis of these conversations provides a close look at an example of how memory works, its lapses and reconstructions.



Map of Ahmedabad showing location of collapsed apartment buildings

Source: Google Maps

These earthquake survivors were Hindu residents of the various multi-storeyed housing projects situated in the new city, all of which collapsed in the tragedy. In addition to eight survivors, I spoke with two relief workers and social activists whose perspectives differed greatly, perhaps because of not having directly faced the trauma, but rather having travelled across broader socio-economic and geographical realities, as they worked in both urban and rural environments during the earthquake and

witnessed both the Hindu and Muslim experiences across various classes and castes during the 2002 pogrom. All participants continue to live in Ahmedabad.

The interviews are categorized into analytical themes that help deconstruct memories, focusing on trauma responses, city and state reactions, memory lapses, fragmented social relationships, and active dissonance. These themes are essential in shaping how people remember or forget, feel, analyse, and perceive natural disasters and violence, offering insights into our current realities of ethnic tensions and complete denial of environmental distraught. To safeguard their privacy, original names have been changed for all interviewees.

### **Trauma response**

Each of the earthquake survivors shared specific sensorial memories of the day. These feel important to capture as they offer a peek into the traumatized mind. Further probing also suggested a lack of public history knowledge about earthquakes, biases and tensions with Pakistan, and the immediate familial and community response of a bereaved people.



Picture of collapsed wing of Sangemarmar building, 2001

Image source: WSSI report, 2001

Atul was a resident of one of the collapsed buildings, a four-storied apartment building complex, one of whose wings collapsed killing eleven people during the earthquake. In January 2001, Atul had just graduated from college and was in his early twenties. He had just gotten married a few weeks before the earthquake struck. Theirs was a multigenerational home, his parents lived with the newly married couple. All four survived the crash.

Atul vividly recounts the initial collapse, describing the trauma and fears that filled his mind in those moments of horror in great detail. This demonstrates how the human mind can recall even the smallest details during times of distress. It also underscores how the experience of the ground shaking may have shocked them and possibly awakened an awareness of their city's history of seismic activity.

It was a public holiday. We were just waking up and everything started shaking. I knew immediately it was an earthquake even though it was the first time we were experiencing it. I pulled my wife, and we huddled into the corner. The moment we huddled, it all came crashing down, a landslide, we fell from the second floor all the way to the parking ground floor. Everything was pitch black after that...because we had fallen along with the rubble from the second floor and our legs were all knee deep into rubble. And, you know, we had lost sensation in our legs.... The second concern was there were a lot of gas cylinders. People were cooking in the morning. And they were all on and then guess we could hear gas cylinders going off you know, there was a fire in the building which I came to know later... a lot of mixed thoughts, and then the worst part is you could hear all the ones trapped inside, you could hear all their screams, you know, echoing inside the building.

In January 2001, Kumodini and Srikanth, now in their sixties, lived with their two children in a multistorey apartment complex opposite Mansi towers in the Vastrapur area. Kumodini worked with the World Bank and as a town planner in Ahmedabad. Srikanth was a nuclear physicist.

26th January, I heard the shattering of the windows. For a second, I thought it was a bomb blast. Mansi was opposite. We saw the building falling. We saw the AC units hanging in the air.

The reference to the bomb blast is noteworthy because January 26th is India's Republic Day, and many citizens, especially in Ahmedabad, initially mistook the tremors and building collapses for a military attack by Pakistani military forces. Gujarat's proximity to Pakistan and its long history of violence has perpetuated this anxiety, fostering anti-Pakistan and Islamophobic sentiments among its citizens (Simpsons, 2013:72). But more importantly the reason for highlighting their occupations and preferred areas of residence in what is now termed as the 'developed' part of the city shows that, despite education and jobs that require a certain level of critical-thinking, deep-seated prejudices can still foster anxiety and distrust during a natural calamity.

250 kilometres away, in Vadodara, another major city of Gujarat, Parul and Parth were receiving alarming news about their family who lived in Shikhar Apartments in Ahmedabad. Now in their late seventies, the couple recall the tragic day when they lost three family members in the collapse of that building: Parth's brother, the brother's twelve-year-old daughter, and fourteen-year-old son. At that time, Parth was an employee in Gujarat Chemicals and Fertilisers, a government-run public entity, and Parul was a teacher and housewife. She did most of the talking.

Here again, an emotion of shock and disbelief of seismic activity is visible.

In the morning, I was awake and standing and wondering what is happening to me? Is my blood pressure high? The earth beneath my feet began to shake. Everybody around said earthquake *aaya!* Earthquake! And everyone ran outside. See even now while talking to you I get a chill down my spine.

As the quake subsided, Parth's father who also lived in Ahmedabad called them. He had heard a rumour that Shikhar collapsed. Parul continued:

That's it, after that all phones stopped working... We couldn't contact anybody. Somehow, we reached Ahmedabad, entered the (Parth's father's) house and saw 3 dead bodies: brother-in-law, his son, and his daughter. Till today I am unable to forget or accept what really happened.

Miraculously, Parth's brother's wife survived.

They were running down the stairs and the slab fell on the others and not her. Nobody really survived from that building wing that fell. All the cars that were parked under the building also got crushed...

Parul and Parth, even twenty years later, are haunted by the loss.

I was very close to all of them. Especially Bunty (nephew)... Till today I can't forget Bunty's face. The night of the funeral we didn't go to the site. Only next day when we went to the site, we found people crying, and debris everywhere. Dead bodies all over. Nine floors collapsed. The staircase collapsed which led the collapse of the building. People tend to forget and to start a new life, Ahmedabad might have forgotten but people who have lived those experiences, haven't forgotten. For us this has been hard to accept.

It is fascinating to see this insistence on remembering deep and tragic personal loss in such visceral detail. Almost every survivor I spoke with showcased signs of deep sensorial memory of that moment. While this is a common occurrence, particularly when trauma is profound, it's important to highlight that humans have the capacity to remember, no matter how hard the memories. However, in the later stages of the interviews, when discussing the events of 2002, just twelve months after, noticeable memory gaps begin to emerge.

Mohan, a resident of another collapsed apartment complex, was a prosperous business owner in Ahmedabad, in January 2001. His apartment was on the second floor, the load-bearing lower storey. During the earthquake, a section of his apartment collapsed as all the floors above them came crashing

down. Mohan, along with his parents, endured several hours trapped beneath the rubble before they slowly dug themselves out.



Picture of rescue workers looking through rubble at Mansi Tower, Ahmedabad, 2001.

Picture courtesy: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images

Mohan's connection to the city spans seven generations, and he hails from an upper-caste Hindu business community. His family owned an ancestral home in the historic part of the old walled city built by the Sultanate. Although the house still stands and is marked as a heritage property, Mohan's family shifted to the west of the city in the 90's, acquiring multiple newly constructed, luxury condominiums. Mohan said very little about the old city home but reminisced at length about the brand-new luxury apartment which the earthquake decimated.

I had a beautiful car, and I was very proud of it. Of course, my apartment was very lavish and one of the best in the city. My mom was shouting and waking me up. It's an earthquake! So, I quickly got myself to the exit door and I went to the stairs with my mom. We were on the stairs and half the building collapsed and half remained. From the 1<sup>st</sup> floor we reached the ground floor. My neighbour was under the rubble. We got stuck. But we were stuck in the way we could move out, luckily, we jumped out and escaped. All the cars were crushed, together with people.

This quote from Mohan also emphasizes how his trauma response was more concerned with the damage to his valuable material possessions, placing less focus on the physical trauma he experienced after the earthquake. That being said, regardless of the trauma experienced, each participant's ability to recall even the smallest details—whether physical (related to the body), mental (pertaining to thoughts or emotions), or material (objects or surroundings)—and how they chose to remember that day was quite intriguing. And while this recollection of memories was clear and evident in the case of 2001, as discussions later turn to 2002, noticeable gaps in memory start to surface.

### **City and state governance response**

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, parts of the city looked like a collapsed house of cards. All across the western banks of the city close to 60-80 apartment buildings, all recently constructed were rendered immediately uninhabitable death traps which had crushed their own residents. These buildings were built on deeply sedimented soils on the banks of the river Sabarmati as compared to harder bedrock found on the east side of Ahmedabad--the old city (Humar., et al, 2001). In the first 24 to 72 hours the city and state were caught in a state of clear unpreparedness.

As the days passed, and a clearer picture emerged of the scale of human and infrastructural devastation, national and international aid started to pour in. I asked the survivors about those following weeks and months, and how, if at all, this aid benefitted them.

Purvi and Silesh lived in Naranpura, a recently expanding neighbourhood in west Ahmedabad, predominantly occupied by the industrious Jain community to which the couple belong. Naranpura has many small Jain temples as well as being a well-equipped locality with hospitals, schools, public transport and retail stores. The couple have called Ahmedabad home for 56 years. They now live in a tenement house and have two grown children who worked and studied abroad. Silesh, a medical anaesthetist, and Purvi, a microbiologist employed at a well-known pharmaceutical company, spoke about the state's response with praise.

We lived in housing board apartments. Gujarat housing board had lots of apartments in the area. Not one fell during the earthquake. Mostly all private

construction. For 10 years after the earthquake, it was a tax-free zone. So, people started setting up businesses and plants. Good 20-30 percent profits. So real estate, pharma, tech, everybody worked, business increased, and recovery was possible. The buildings that had fallen, the government helped in the reconstruction. Yes, the government gave aid. Hospital surgeries were free. Nobody had to give a cent. Medical was 100% free. Housing boards gave aid.

The success of the state's reconstruction efforts relied heavily on economic growth and recovery, which was spurred by the Indian government's creation of new tax-free zones. This initiative sparked a surge in private investment, with an estimated USD 10 billion already invested in the region and an additional USD 7 billion anticipated. Many private business owners benefited from these tax exemptions (Buchanan & Solanki, 2011).

Parul and Parth stressed how most of the government aid and compensation received directly went to the deceased brother's wife:

The money, house, everything of my brother's, money from the bank he was employed in, went to Jagruti (the wife). The entire amount she received in cash or building a house, everything went to Jagruti.

Parul clearly remembers the finer details of all the aid.

She received money even from the bank my brother-in-law was working in. Even the school (the kids went to) gave money to her. One lakh rupees for both kids, individually. Money quickly we got. We are satisfied. But we lost our people. We had a big family and now it's become very small.

Atul remembers how quickly local non-profits and community initiatives sprang into action:

Well, it's the government that took the initiative. Plus, there were other, like you said, NGOs that also stepped in. In terms of, you know, monetary assistance....

You have to rebuild, you have to reconstruct, and that's where the government came in with their grants, whatever they had sanctioned. For every individual who was affected by the earthquake. Obviously, they did a lot in Kutch for rehabilitation. Here they came out with monetary assistance... It may not be as much as you would expect, but there was aid.

Kumodini, the survivor who worked with the World Bank also had similar positive memories of governmental response.

The government response very good! We were very happy. Within the work you could see people clearing the debris, experts from Rourkee (IIT engineers) came and gave the building grading and for inspection. They repaired buildings, and engineers were sent.... People were given aid but I'm not sure how much compensation was given. Especially BPL [below poverty line].

Mohan spoke emotionally about having to deal with the monetary loss:

We had gone through so much trauma. But we were fortunate to be alive and deal with the situation. People can build a home only once or twice in a lifetime. My father was in great shock. I was young and I could withstand the shock. It's very complicated when you must deal with emotions and then deal with funds. That house had taken my father's lifetime savings. It's not easy.

His family are still fighting a case against the builders of their apartment complex. They never got compensated by the real estate company.

We all pooled money and built it together. All the residents gave their own money to build it. Builder didn't do anything. Every family member came back to the building except one family... The govt had announced a few grants, we had applied for one of the grants, upto 50 % we got and the

rest we didn't. Nothing significant. They gave us Rs. 50,000 to survivors.  
How will that erect a building?

While Mohan is right, and some of the financial assistance survivors received was not near enough to rebuild expensive multi-storeyed units, most families were able to either move into other homes owned by extended family members for a few years or/and were offered help by members of their own communities, or/and had the financial safety nets that offered some financial respite. These conversations provide insights into people's capacity for economic recovery and the role of state governments in this process.

As we will see later, this same capacity was not present, neither was the community or state support available to victims of the religious pogrom the very next year (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

As our discussion progressed, I aimed to understand how individuals like Mohan, who had incurred such devastating loss, and had rebuilt his home by dipping into his own financial resources rather than receiving adequate government aid, perceived the state's response. His response seemed to be quite forgiving.

It was complicated. My reaction as an individual could be different, but overall and holistically the earthquake had devastated an entire state. They had bigger problems to deal with. I would not discredit the efforts of the government. They did the best what they can. It's not perfect. There is scope for improvement. But where is a perfect world? I would still give kudos to everybody. People helped in ways like giving food, giving jobs, giving houses etc. all people helped.

Atul also seemed keen to distribute praise amongst all levels of social and state support:

Yeah, we reconstructed the building, and we moved back in 2005. So that all the funds for this building came by individual, the families that lived in that building. It was a bit of everything. Some came from Government grants. Some of us are individual contributions and some came in the way of subsidies like you get

subsidised cement and you know building materials like concrete. Steel was subsidised. Which came tax free which was again very, very helpful at that point of time, so you know all these things put together, even you know, the grants from family, you know, Lions Club, etc.

We moved on to discussing how the city had recovered in their perspective. Twenty-two years later, what were some of the positive outcomes stemming from the earthquake, and did they contribute, in their opinion, to an improved urban life? Atul seemed to think they now have a robust disaster warning system:

We also have a dedicated disaster management authority for every state in India. So, I think it's a good step forward. In alerting citizens and keeping for, you know, against any disaster because even after the earthquake we had we've had so many cyclones and hurricanes and floods, and so I think it's a good initiative for an early disaster warning. Not 100%, and you know, nobody's equipped to handle a disaster. But awareness is high. The awareness is high and I'm sure, but God forbid it doesn't occur...very recently we had a cyclone back in June. And because of the early warnings. Everybody was much, much better prepared. Everybody stayed indoors.

He seemed to suggest the city had embraced modernity and technology at a much greater rate, which could safeguard them from future natural disaster inflicted devastation.

And I think it's also to do with technology. The way people adopt technology, the way the government agencies use technology is the key driver to these things.

Because if you think about early in 2001, we did not have this technology. And now, after 20 years, it is a learning and technology is available at, you know, like you know how deep we are into technology now. So yeah. Government is to thank for.

Other survivors seemed to praise Ahmedabad and, by extension Gujarat's technological progress. Kumodini made comparisons with Bengaluru, long perceived to be the IT-capital of the country.

Gujarat's infrastructure has really developed. The transport system is even better than Bangalore. 100 times better. Somehow things are better in Ahmedabad. It has become such a great city. Green spaces. Beautiful layout.

She also added how efficient she thought Chief Minister Narendra Modi had been in comparison to his predecessor. All participants referred to the term "Gujarat model" when discussing the city's rapid growth and development. I will elaborate on the significance of this term in detail below.

Gujarat model I would say, I worked under Modi when he was chief minister. He was a no-nonsense person. Work gets done under him. Keshu Bhai Patel was very corrupt. We had direct dealing with Modi. He would give us 15 minutes to explain the problem. He would make everybody work for 18 hours. Nobody had an option. We worked and we saw the results. Most of Gujarat progress happened because of him... People were very happy under him. The Chief Minister's office was highly active during that time. Even in rural areas.

While the immediate gushing praise for the city's growth and its direct credit to Modi was a common pattern amongst all eight participants, what was underlying was also a sense of pride in what locals consider the "Gujarati spirit". Atul, for instance elaborated on the culture of entrepreneurship and the state's overall business-friendliness.

I think the city has a lot of potential. And Gujarat being very business friendly and even socially, people are friendly, they are very welcoming for people who migrate. And the way the economics and the dynamics are working here. I mean

I think it could be one of the major cities and best to live in. We are looking at another mega city of India. Very soon. And I think it's all about the forward-looking nature of the people over here. And the way they look at opportunity, giving back to the community.

It was interesting to consider what people like Atul consider aspects of community. There was hardly any mention of social upliftment. Rather, the focus seemed to be on the visibility of costly infrastructure, and a general air of progress.

Trying to move forward in every aspect. Socially, you know, economically and financially. You know, so yeah, I think I see a lot of potential and promise in the city. I mean infrastructure wise as well it is going the way things are developing. And plus, we have a lot of support from the government, the central government, which is a very good thing. And I think the main thing is the adaptability. People are very adaptable and flexible...

The use of terms like “flexible,” “adaptable,” and “forward thinking” was interesting and reflected values that these participants, all survivors of a major life-upending disaster seemed to uphold as markers of growth and progress. The absence of values like healing, solidarity, or sustainability was marked in these conversations.

### **Aspirations and markers of progress**

Since most participants focused so heavily on economic progress in the state, and many even mentioned “Gujarat model,” I chose to dig deeper. The term “Gujarat model” was coined to highlight Gujarat's economic prosperity as an example for the rest of India to follow and was mobilized to showcase Modi's administrative prowess during the 2014 national election campaign. When I used the term ‘development,’ nearly all participants interpreted it solely in terms of infrastructure and technology. There was no mention of social justice, employment and education opportunities for all, environmental conservation, democratic freedom, or social inclusiveness for people of all religions and classes.

Parul: The city has developed a lot. This is a good thing by the government...The roads have become so good. Technology and infrastructure has become so good. We didn't even have cell phones. Now look at us. Modi has done a great job. Gujarat is the safest. 10 or 11 o' clock ladies got to eat Paani Puri. On Navratri we also roam around the city. Look at Delhi, a girl can't go outside beyond sunset...

Srikanth: Have you heard of Dhulera? Dhulera is near Ahmedabad 60 kms, they are developing a smart city, and it is going to be like Dubai. Construction has already started.

Kumodini: I would say, corruption is not eradicated but is much less. Even today Gujarat is less corrupt than other states. I was working in a government set up, I know the realities and we know how things work.

This focus on comparing Ahmedabad to big cities like New Delhi or Bangalore, or Dubai, shows a clear fascination to compete in a bigger globalised economy. Terms like "smart city" and "mega city" denote the participants' urban aspirations and a desire for technological and infrastructural growth, primarily to distinguish themselves from rural life and perceived backwardness. Dubai, which is geographically quite close and accessible for the upper-class Indian traveller, known for its tourism, impressive urban infrastructure, tax haven economy, and opportunities to indulge in luxury hyper-consumerism, is admired by many Indians. However, what is often overlooked is that Dubai is an Islamic state with a monarchy and lacks basic democratic freedoms or equal rights for citizens. The irony of a broader Islamophobic sentiment towards the Muslim neighbouring nation of Pakistan, which many perceive as less developed than India, but a favourable exception made for Dubai's modernity and progress are also an interesting contradiction. It was also noticeable how markers like women's safety, cellular connectivity, and reduced corruption show up in the list but as secondary priorities to economic growth. Similar to Dubai's race to have the tallest, biggest, hugest, largest of architectural and infrastructural feats, Ahmedabad's citizens, too, seemed to prioritize visible symbols. The central question remains: can Ahmedabad, located on an active faultline, sustain Dubai's ultra-luxurious real estate model?

Purvi: The tallest building in Ahmedabad is coming up, they say 30 floors. People from adjacent cities are all coming to Ahmedabad but also after Covid, lots of migrations are happening. Especially in the last 5 years, this city has boomed. Everybody seems to have forgotten the earthquake. Any scheme, any real estate opportunity, people are going for it. Modiji, became chief minister, then prime minister. Since he has come, Gujarat has improved a lot in the last 10 years. Flyovers were built, traffic solutions, lots we have benefited. Rapid transit service, we got lots of funding from various institutes. Ahmedabad has grown so

much. From walled city, then bridges were constructed by the British. Crossing the river was a sin according to Hindus. Then British came and made bridges and all the construction began on the other side of the river.

This statement, "crossing the river was a sin according to Hindus," raises the question of why people chose to move west and settle across the river. While these claims of rapid modernization and economic opportunity certainly explain one part of it, something in the intensity of this aspiration to steadily urbanise felt particularly important to probe.

Throughout this series of interviews, I kept coming back to their understanding of community. Who did they perceive as their community, and how did they define it? Who were the individuals who stepped forward to offer help and rescue? What criteria helped them feel this community involvement that several of them claimed?

Purvi and Silesh: Medically...doctors, hospitals, Indian Medical Association, Mehsana Association, pharma companies... Gujarat Doctors Association. All of them helped. Then food...people had lost homes...In Kutch, villages had got wiped out. Buildings has fallen everywhere. But we saw dharmic sansthas's (religious institutions) especially *Pramukh Swami ki sanstha* woh log!! (those people from Pramukh Swami, a Hindu godman's organization) Bahut dharmik sansthayein (lots of religious organizations) .... First Kutch was the priority...the government was handling it...but we arranged with local pharma companies also. Then people started cooking...in camps and people were doing whatever they could.

Silesh: BAPS did a lot. They worked very hard. They constructed homes, they cooked food, not just random food. Good, delicious food packets. -Achar, daal, chawal (pickle, lentils, rice).

Kumodini: I was in WDTC (Women's Development Corporation) which is under the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare. We got immediate orders to leave for Kutch. All the men went to Anjar and Bacchau. We didn't know the impact of the earthquake. We only found out 3-4 days later when we started watching the news

and realized the disaster. Amit Shah (India's current Home Minister, who was then a BJP party worker) only came. He was our local MLA (member of legislative assembly). We saw lots of RSS people coming and helping. They were pulling out the dead bodies and doing the cremation. Lots came in cars to help. We saw many tents. Akshardham people and RSS was giving blankets, food, shelter to people. They even offered it to us. Lots of hostels were converted into shelters.

The blurred lines when defining community to include religious non-profits, government entities, and ruling party workers under the same umbrella was fascinating. Kumodini also seemed to suggest that trafficking was occurring closer to the border, where she was working at the time of the earthquake.

At that time people were also selling girls and boys. Pakistan was close... Pakistan was taking young boys and girls from Kutch. I am getting goosebumps. People were ruthless. Not just about Hindu and Muslim. We couldn't keep a count. People were just going missing.

There is no evidence to substantiate this claim, and yet this memory shared by a survivor offers some insight into the deep cracks in trust and favour with their neighbouring country. It also shows a primed audience for the narrative that was being built at the time of a "united community" that had shown up for its citizens in need. That this was a "Hindu community" is not ever openly spelled out by any participant, but the common pattern of whom they named, listed, and perceived as having helped the most, and who they saw as antagonising, even if peripherally, becomes quite telling. Also, what is important to note is most of this aid work was done in Kutch, not in Ahmedabad, where Atul and others mention being stuck under rubble for 36 hours and only neighbours rushing to dig them out of the rubble. Yet the praise for relief work in Kutch and pockets of rescue work by entities like BAPS transposes over all the state response, to paint a picture of overall positivity.

Most, if not all, participants mentioned BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha), a Hindu charitable organisation, and it is worth understanding the stature the organisations enjoy in the city. BAPS holds a prominent position in Gujarat, and its most renowned

temple built in 1992 is situated in Gandhinagar, the capital city of Gujarat, right next door to the seat of state power. The organisation played a leading role in the relief endeavours in Gujarat. Engaging in public-private partnerships, BAPS actively participated in diverse reconstruction projects, frequently relying on funds from overseas. BAPS jumped into action in the weeks following the earthquake to adopt villages, construct houses, roads, hospitals, camps, and organised extensive kitchens to provide food and water (Simpson 2014:98).



BAPS relief workers attending to injured patients during 2001

Image source: BAPS website



BAPS workers near collapsed building sites, Ahmedabad, 2001

Image sources: BAPS website

To understand the role BAPS played in 2001, I spoke with two NGO workers and social activists from Ahmedabad-Alisha and Paul, both of whom are Christians. As with the residents I interviewed, I specifically avoided speaking with Muslims, and speaking with Christians introduced a fresh perspective to the study. Their observations differed starkly from the survivors.

Alisha, social researcher and rehabilitation worker based in Ahmedabad, collaborated with a well-known local NGO (non-governmental organisation). Alisha, who had earlier lived in the United States with her husband moved to Ahmedabad in the late 1990's. The New Economic policies introduced in India brought better employment opportunities for them. It's important to note that Alisha was also witness to the mayhem of the earthquake firsthand as a resident of Ahmedabad.

So, Mansi apartment had collapsed. We never expected that in Ahmedabad there will be so much damage. Then we also realised that in Azad society and in Vastrapur many buildings had collapsed. Now if you look at that the problem was, not that it was not severe in Ahmedabad, but the problem was the quality of construction was poor... You know, there was damage to the structures which were made in between like in the 80's and 90's. Much of the attention moved away from Ahmedabad and went to Bhachau and Bhuj because it was the epicentre.... this Akshardham and BAPS foundation had put up a big camp there and they were giving food to everybody.

Alisha and her team in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) were sent to Kutch immediately.

We didn't have any expertise on natural disasters. But it was a unanimous decision to help the poor and marginalised during that event... In the first round IIM and we did a damage assessment. All these things like damage assessment and all these tools weren't properly developed. Lots of marginalised people, salt-pan workers, Adivasi's, Dalits, migrant workers had lost their jobs in the factories and home. You see the Anjar, Bacchau, Bhuj development authorities were set up during that time. These authorities were given power to plan for the city. But we



saw many people were left and missing from the plan... the new plan was made by the government with ADB (Asian Development Bank) support, but in the final plan there was so much exclusion... in any disaster when

rehabilitation happens especially in a place where everything is wiped out, powerful people take over, and marginalised voices are not heard.

Then Alisha provided some powerful testimony to the discriminatory practices she observed on the ground in far-out rural communities in Kutch.

We didn't have a kitchen at that time, so we went, me and my director all sat in the line (at the BAPS community kitchen), and we were kind of about to eat the food. Firstly, it was not great food, I still remember. And then they told everybody, please say the *Gayatri Mantra* (Hindu prayer). Okay, and me and of course my director is, I'm a Christian and I wouldn't know the *Gayatri Mantra* and now other people wouldn't know it. So, then we decided at that time that tomorrow onwards we are not coming here. And what I'm saying is within the group, there are caste groups, community groups which got special relief from special groups. So Akshardham foundation will get from that route. Then your Brahma Kumaris would have some special route, Jains came for Jains only. Muslims came for Muslims, like that.

BAPS relief workers distributing food, Ahmedabad, 2001,

Image source: BAPS website

This sheds significant light on how fractured the idea of community was even during the early period of natural disaster relief. The participant highlighted two crucial points: first, almost zero historical awareness of Gujarat's seismic risk, and inadequate preparedness for earthquake response. Second that the communities both urban and rural, which deeply lacked inclusion had continued with their patterns of inequality even during times of crisis.

A local resident of Bhuj and social worker speaks about BAPS role-

They used the disaster, and the money raised to further their religious ideologies. Not necessarily through direct conversations, as they would have attracted censure, but by promoting their organisational identities as 'do-gooders'. Often, they changed the names of villages and put large sign boards proclaiming the name of the village after their religious saints, most of whom the villagers have barely heard of (Virmani, 2010: 149-50).

I also spoke with Paul, another social activist and rehabilitation worker during both the 2001 and 2002 events. His work stressed the central role of a human rights-based approach during events of both natural disaster and social violence. Paul has lived with his family in Ahmedabad for many decades and has seen its transformation through the years. In Kutch, where he also rushed right after the earthquake, he mentions the government and its allied organizations gatekeeping relief work.

The government coordination on started a little bit later. I think the government was getting its act together... we did see an outdoor cordon off area for volunteers

who did not allow others to enter. Especially civil society organisations to go into the rescue work that is happening there. Maybe the government wanted to take the credit alone or you know build a positive image.

Paul also speaks to the clear discrimination between majority Hindu and affiliated sects and minorities and marginalised groups like Christians, Muslims, Dalits, and Adivasis.

Particularly against Hindu and Christian Dalits and Muslims. We actually found that happening in every village. Community-based relief like people from outside would send truckloads and truckloads of relief supplies, food and clothes and all kinds of things, tents and water, everything would be diverted. First would be diverted by the dominant communities in every village towards their own settlements. They would choose all that they want and then they would put, I mean, they would kind of reject those things which they did not want and that's what those were the only supplies that the Dalits and Muslims had access to. This we saw with our own eyes and then we, we had never seen such thing, you know. We found that people did not receive even water to the extent that they (members of the majority community) did because the water was a big issue. All those water supply systems were all damaged pipelines and tanks and everything... Food was an issue. Clothes were an issue. Women were in a very difficult state. The lack of sanitary napkins became an issue. So everywhere we found that these communities were, you know, deliberately kind of discriminated against and excluded..

Alisha: There was a lot of religious division that existed in the way relief was distributed. And then, then that's when you realise that the Dalits don't have foreign money coming in. The Adivasi or the Muslim may not be having money coming in. So, it was up to organisations like ours to start thinking of them.

By “foreign money” Alisha is referring to the millions of dollars that private and non-profit entities with huge diaspora donor networks were funnelling into the state.

The stark contrast between survivor narratives and perceptions of a ruling, urban, upper-middle-class and caste in Ahmedabad and that of relief workers who witnessed all stakeholders in disaster management first-hand was revealing. The conflation between community and political party, between religious foundation money and government aid, these and other confusions show a tendency to easily adopt propaganda. This serves as a strong example of how natural disasters can intensify and reinforce existing inequalities, prejudices, and biases. In a setting where civil society is both weak and manipulated, instances of grotesque violence become inevitable.

I proceeded to speak to all participants about the events of 2002, to study any differences in their perception of this other tragedy that struck the city and state.

### **Lapses in memory: a political amnesia**

While the recurring patterns in how survivors remembered their own bodily experiences of the earthquake were visceral, emotional, showed persistent grief and acknowledgement of pain as a community, city and state, the recollection around the rioting, looting and carnage of 2002 is marked by an observational distance and need to rationalise.

Kumodini: It was bad. We had friends from both sides. We had a picture from the Muslims, and we had a picture from the Hindus. Both sides were to blame. This is a typical mob mentality... Normally, western Ahmedabad was very peaceful. We didn't have curfew or tear gas shells. But that's also happened. Our own road, the Premchand Nagar road was under curfew. 3 partners (she mentions a business in the neighbourhood which was attacked), one of them was Muslim fellow. People came with lists in their hands. '*Kisko burn karna hai?* (Who do we have to burn?) They came with full preparation. It was sad.

Here the shock was less about the actual intention and intensity of the mob's violence and more the fact of geography, that they had chosen to enact this violence in the western side of the city. When asked how the police responded there was a similar off-handed answer. "No, they said don't worry. The mob just went off. They just probably wanted to scare us..."

Silesh: we had a curfew pass. Section 144 was imposed. I could go to work, but aunty (referring to his wife) couldn't go. The curfew was there for 2-3 days.

After further probing and presenting evidence of the violence witnessed in the Muslim-dominated eastern parts of the old city, the discourse began to shift.

Silesh: Violence *toh tha!* (violence was there). *Hamara* area (in our area), Muslim people live separately, we live separately. Only for business we have to go to each other's areas. Like my son, the auto-man (autorickshaw driver) who used to take the children to school was Muslim. So, we stopped that. Even he stopped coming to us. Like, community, any violence in these areas if any crossing happens, violence will break out. Lots of stabbing, then burning started. Burning Muslim people. And they would cut Hindus.

Each of the earthquake survivors seemed insistent to speak into the record that violence occurred equally on both sides of the city, and across the religious divide, even though data and in injured witness testimony suggests otherwise (Human Rights Watch report, 2002; Genocide Watch report, 2002: Citizen's Initiative Report, 2002). It was alarming to study the stark difference in how inclusionary the recollections of 2001 seemed, where community was perceived as neighbours and civil society rushing to help each other, and yet in 2002, based on religious differences, choices were made immediately to sever those civil connections, rationalising them as natural responses to fear for one's safety. The idea of only "going to one another's area for business" also hints at the deeper, darker truth of near-complete religious segregation which had played out first geographically leading up to the events of 2001 and 2002, but now, seems to plague these respondents in their very perception of urban spatiality.

### **Misrepresenting Data**

When studying historical events like natural disasters and pogroms, even though evidence may be subject to manipulation, the testimonies of survivors—both documented and lived—remain a source for uncovering the truth. However, individual memory operates differently, often giving preference to myths, propaganda, religious biases, personal prejudices, and political opinions.

I asked Kumodini who worked with the World Bank during the earthquake rehabilitation if the same orders of assistance from the government was given in 2002 to help Musim victims. She replied-

We had orders only to help people who needed houses during the earthquake. Our work was in rural areas. We were given orders...but...erm...it wasn't the same as 2002. It was all *seva* (choose to voluntarily help/engage in charity). Here even the government was scared to give orders. Orders were given only to the police.

So, the perception seems that the violence was so intense (which was contradictory to previously mentioning of sporadic events) that even the government was afraid to intervene, and that one explanation for a lack of community support was that only the police were meant to help the victims of the rioting, not civil society.

According to the HRW report (2002), a reporter for the *Hindu* observed that, "the saffronised police also found a common cause with the criminals to punish the minorities." The same reporter wrote that, "insiders in the Bhartiya Janata Party admit that the police were under instructions from the Narendra Modi administration not to act firmly". (21)

Secondly, in attempting to determine the duration of the violence that resulted in thousands of Muslims becoming internally displaced and refugees in their own city, all the earthquake survivors asserted that the violence lasted only for 2-3 days. They emphasized that once the national army and the state's rapid action force were deployed, the situation immediately calmed down.

Documented evidence suggests otherwise. The Human Rights Watch report (2002) clearly states that even though the national army arrived soon after the burning began, the state government refused to deploy the soldiers to effected areas of violence.

On March 24, for example, thirty-year-old Mumtaz Bano was stripped in public and stabbed to death by a mob in the Vejalpur area of Ahmedabad after being dragged off her husband's scooter. On April 6, at least five people were killed in Ahmedabad. Two were stabbed to death and three were killed by police gunfire as police reportedly fired to disperse clashing groups of Hindus and Muslims. On

April 17, three people were stabbed to death and fifteen were injured in Hindu-Muslim clashes in Ahmedabad. (25)

As stated in the above-mentioned quote, the violence went on well into the months of April and May 2002.

### **Dissonance and collapse of civil society in 2002**

As the interviews delved deeper into the participants' recollections of 2002, persistent contradictions in narratives emerged. I sought to understand who the participants believed were responsible for the violent events and what they considered to be the acceptable truth. Not surprisingly, an active rhetoric of discordance emerged in most conversations.

Atul, mostly blamed it on media biases and propaganda:

You're in one part where these things don't touch you. But the way it is projected at the whole world will feel as if the entire city is on fire. But that was not the case. And that's the truth. I mean, you look at the Ukraine war and you feel the entire Ukraine is on fire, it may not be the case. But the way it is projected, I mean, there are people living, you know, people living normal lives, maybe in the western parts of Ukraine or in the capital Kiev.... Yeah, well, I think media always hypes things. I mean, they give people I mean, they give food to people what people want to read.

Similarly, Mohan felt there had been some misrepresentation in the media and felt compelled to minimise the extent of mass violence to instances of personal grudges.

I don't know what articles you are reading, or people are reading and base their assumptions on all this. I was so fortunate to have friends from all backgrounds...but overall, the real community, the real people were never connected to it. People who react might have some own objectives. I have friends from different religions etc. I don't understand how people articulate it, and people use things out of context. Like even in this conversation, you can say and

turn it the way you want to. So, I would say Gujarat has always been open to people, diverse, peaceful people and I can keep going on about how good, safe and open it is. \*laughing\*. But any true individual who has spent considerable time in Ahmedabad will say the same. All people who have grudges and problems have personal objectives. People from outside will have a different opinion because they haven't lived in the city. \*laughing\*

As I listened to Mohan's and Atul's perspective on blaming the media for sensationalizing the violence of 2002, this idea of "the real people" and "real community" once again emphasised to me how one particular demographic of Ahmedabad had very clearly marked some fellow-Ahmedabadis as their people, and others as "outsiders". Likewise, Silesh, who has deep ties with the city spanning generations, categorised this violence as local, sporadic instances, not unfamiliar to him. He had witnessed several such events in his lifetime. He spoke to the selectivity of memory in the case of social violence which I found fascinating.

Normal people become used to and *forget-fata fat!* (quickly). Only if a house has seen a death, nobody remembers. Unless your shop is burnt, scooter is burnt, property is damaged, there is loss. Otherwise, everybody forgets.

This begs the question of why these participants show such major gaps in shared social experience and if the upper caste, affluent Hindu Gujarati community of the city does not want to or cannot remember the scale of devastation in 2002, who does? And what this selective amnesia bode for the future of a city where both natural disaster and social violence have a clear and dangerous history of recurring.

Alisha and Paul filled in the gaps from their firsthand observations as relief workers in 2002. Paul remembered similar dissonance and denial amongst citizens living in the west during the 2002 violence as many of my participants had exhibited.

Life was going on as normal. They had their weddings; they had their normal life going on while the east was burning.

He also expressed his disappointment with the state apparatus in assisting Muslim victims.

We reached out to relief camps, especially those organised by the Islamic *jamaat* (community). We found there were no government intervention, no protection from the government and people somehow managed to reach these camps and later the stories came in of women who were actually raped. The number of people, families where hundreds were killed... We were able to meet people and start documents by reviving the Citizens Initiative team, but we didn't have many volunteers as everyone was frightened.

Alisha drew a similar picture of fear and intimidation, even as she described targeted demolitions of Muslim homes and businesses, arson and looting from Muslim owned shops, restaurants and individual homes, the fact that “nobody was spared.”

They were not allowing us to go and do anything in those areas where camps were set up. And the government would not allow any, none of this. The camps I think were run by the local community and few by the government, I think at some point some NGOs also. I think the Muslim community also came together and, in Shah Alam and elsewhere. But we couldn't even enter those camps even to see. So, UNICEF was ready to give these toilet blocks to keep in the camp and then we wanted to go and give it to them, but they said no we will not give any protection to you, do it at your own risk. Some of us went and we did some, no police help whatsoever. It's a complete reversal of what happened in 2001.

She specifically spoke to the incendiary nature of the moment, how the atmosphere around relief and rehabilitation work was rife with risk for anyone who wanted to speak for or support the Muslim

survivors, most of whom were huddled in refugee and survivor camps in the east of the city (Nathan, 2002).

He [Modi] had a clear message that nobody would be supporting these people. And those who support the Muslims and the riot victims. Yeah, they will, you know, '*hum log dekhenge*' (we will see to them). So, I can tell you, the fear which was built into people at that time during 2002 continues. I can tell you several organizations, who would not have tolerated human rights violations, they just gave up on even talking about the Dalit rights, tribal rights, Muslims etc. Minority rights is nothing... The clear message was given that NGOs who stayed with the government, you will be okay and useful and those who are going to fight against this violation and all that for the case, we're going to find these cases. You are not going to be okay.

As previously mentioned, the extensive efforts by individuals, civil society, the state, and international stakeholders to provide economic and physical assistance to 2001's earthquake victims starkly contrast with the response during 2002. When asked about the challenges of raising money for rehabilitation, Alisha offered a hard reality check.

Nobody, nobody helped (she laughed here, helplessly gesturing) I can count on my fingers a couple of people who did. No, no, international funds came. So, some of these like as I said, UNICEF, local people wanting to give some drinking water, and I think local Islamic relief organisations etc. other than those nobody came forward.

There are several hypotheses one can draw for the clearly opposing nature of memories and recollections between the participants who lived in western Ahmedabad and the relief workers who showed up in the camps on the east and industrial/impooverished outskirts of the west to provide aid and assistance. First, as a result of long-term segregation a community that was visibly and physically kept away from them, simply did not seem to exist. Second, that the fear and intimidation by the Sangh Parivar's capture of state politics may have over the past two decades driven entire sub-groups of the

city to live in denial. And the third, more worrying one, that people were aware of the scale of the massacre but were choosing to look away. All three could be true. For instance, Silesh and Purvi seemed to think that by living on the west, they could still continue to have economical and transactional relationships with the Muslims and poorer Dalit populations in the east, but no other social exchange was necessary or possible.

You see the division now, in Muslim areas and Hindus areas, you see, now if I have any car repair, I go to Arif bhai (a Muslim car mechanic) then. If he needs any money and work, they come to us. We drink chai together. But we will not live together. All Muslim labourers work in Hindu areas. Only eating and living is separate. We work together. But marriages won't happen. Now even their food. But they will not marry each other... (he laughs here) there is no acceptance for each other. Like Hindus will say – any caste but not a Muslim! Some fear is there. I don't know.

It is interesting that the word “caste” here is used interchangeably with religion. One explanation for this is that within the caste hierarchy Dalits and Muslims are often viewed as the very bottom due to their “impurity” stemming from their work with animal carcasses and flesh (Prabhu, 2016). This could also explain the literal geographical separation and social segregation which both the earthquake and riots upended in different ways. A *Times of India* (2002) article by Harit Mehta chronicles how upper- and middle-class Hindu Gujarati families had to move from higher-storey apartment complexes in the new city due to fears of collapse or after their buildings were badly damaged, into areas which at the time were considered “fast developing”. Yet only six months later, some of these like Vejalpur turned to tinder boxes because they were considered “border” neighbourhoods, i.e. majority-Muslim and majority-Hindu neighbourhoods in close proximity, often separated by a literal wall or fence.

It is also important to note that areas in Ahmedabad experiencing some of the worst violence were also electoral seats dominated by the Congress party at the time, but also specifically targeting Muslim dominated areas on the east side. The 2002 violence yielded significant political benefits for Modi by unifying the Hindu vote across the city and state. This further blurred the lines between the Sangh Parivar and the state (Yagnik and Sheth, 2005; Jaffrelot, 2021). Furthermore, the establishment of

Hindutva hegemony among Hindu citizens across classes was deeply felt during the 2002 violence with Hindu middle and upper middle classes of women participating in the looting and arson (HRW, 2002). Paul explained this as a strange mix of fear and bias.

It was hatred. You started to believe that Muslims were aligned with the enemy country (Pakistan). And in fact, since the 1980's, hatred was built up in the minds of people through various means. The segregation was completed by the Babri Masjid in 1992. All even elite Muslims, like in Azad society or such places where professors and doctors and engineers lived, such people were driven out of the locality by 1992 and 1993. So, the segregation was complete, in housing and even in schools. Segregation was very important to accomplish what they wanted to. As long as Hindus and Muslims were staying together, working common spaces where in the same political party with so then it was difficult to kind of make them believe in the false narratives.

After the 2001 earthquake, through these detailed interviews a certain sense of victimhood and simultaneous growing admiration for the Sangh Parivar's relief efforts on the ground can be established. Paul explains how this two-fold community perception could evolve into tacit permissibility for social violence.

Before 2002 was perpetrated and the earthquake was one of the factors.... It was important in a kind of legitimacy which they did not have. I mean, you will find people saying, yeah, what a lot of good work people were doing, particularly in disasters. So that kind of a narrative was built up through different disasters and 2001 was one of the best examples of that.

To analyse Paul's observations, it's crucial to understand the significance of the geography of the violence, how it was concentrated only in the Muslim dominated areas on the east side of the city (refer to the map above). To examine the "political logic on ethnic violence in 2002," sociologists Raheel Dhattiwala and Michael Bigg (2012), use political scientist Steven Wilkinson's (2004) argument on understanding violence in the context of electoral gains. By 2001, the BJP's influence in the state had



Map source: Vyas, Parul. (2019). "Urban Polarization: Case of Riot Affected Ahmedabad

Paul puts the 2001 earthquake disaster into perspective.

Human beings are capable of tremendous violence, regardless of religion. But when the state government sponsors and becomes biased towards any religion, then the whole game changes. A general bias against Muslims was always there but not to the extent where it became systematic. The RSS already had a strategy of intervening in natural disasters with a communal bias. And by the time in 2001, it was building up the foundation, you could see right from 1985 onwards... So, you see all this was an alarm bell which was ringing, and Gujarat I think came to a breaking point.

It is this political amnesia which when paired with the geological tensions of the land, feel particularly worrying. How participants who were able to remember deep natural disaster trauma, and justify social urban segregation, were not able to remember a time when the city and state were not as hegemonic either in their support for the BJP or their fear/hatred for the other. It is as if these twin tragedies have congealed a communal memory into stringent recollections, much of which seems to directly replicate state propaganda.

On the other hand, as the city grew post 2002, Muslim and impoverished lower caste Hindu Dalit populations have only been pushed closer into contested and congested neighbourhoods in the crumbling old city or outskirts. Alice explained how after 2002, Muslims were specifically targeted socio-economically. She observed tactics such as targeting their businesses and jobs, restricting admission of Muslim students in private schools, turning away Muslim patients from medical facilities, and housing societies avoiding Muslim residents. According to her, these measures were employed by the state to suppress the entire community. and she drew parallels with the treatment of Dalits, suggesting that Muslims were becoming the new most marginalized group. She also perceived this as a strategy by the Sangh Parivar to perpetuate socio-economic turmoil among Dalits and Muslims thereby hindering their unity and opposition to the BJP, particularly in electoral contexts.

**Ahmedabad in 2024: perspectives of social relationships, development and democracy** Twenty-two years have passed since both the natural and social catastrophes of 2001 and 2002, making it essential to understand how the electorally powerful and economically dominant section of society which my participants all hailed from perceive their current quality of life, politics, and society. When I asked specifically about the level of trust they perceived between “their community” and “the other” after 2002, it yielded some interesting results.

Atul invoked the capacity for healing over time. He believed that, on an individual level, trauma did not persist unless one faced economic losses or worse, lost a family member; but that such trauma eventually faded from collective memory. So, in a manner, he was justifying forgetfulness around both events seeming to focus on individually experienced loss as the only way to register an event in memory. What became immediately apparent though was that he understood the earthquake as a global phenomenon, one that covered the entire geography of the city, and the social violence as a selective one, which, because it never touched his lived geography was easier to forget.

He also argued that comparing the crises of a natural disaster and a man-made pogrom in terms of civil society engagement is not appropriate. He noted that while natural disasters stem from uncontrollable external forces, prompting “community” to naturally want to volunteer help, pogroms were communally instigated by media and politics, and so people like him preferred to “stay out of it.”

While this could be explained as the second hypothesis of a deep and natural fear of getting involved or feeling intimidated by the nexus of state and media, the final case to be considered is that of simply the immense popularity of Modi’s strongman image and the subsequent benefits this community sees themselves as being beneficiaries of, that many have volunteered to simply look away from the plight of their fellow citizens.

Here it is important to investigate the reasons behind Modi’s popularity. Modi’s administration in Gujarat from 2001 to 2014 facilitated rapid economic growth through a model rooted in collaboration between the state and the private corporate sector. This model prioritised profit generation by maintaining low wages, offering tax incentives for investment, and subsidising land allocation to

industries, while neglecting social spending. The approach garnered support from the elite, including the emerging middle class and dominant upper castes (Chaudhry, 2023).

Similarly, Jaffrelot (2014, para 3) believes that Modi managed to garner support from India's middle-class populations because the upper layer of this class whom he appealed to, already lives in new towns where education, health, security, water, electricity etc are privatised. He further dwells on the political landscape of the Hindu middle-class which is increasingly coloured with ethno-religious undertones. In his opinion this evolution stems from the necessity to offset growing materialism with a faux spirituality, which has become more prevalent following years of rapid economic growth. However, it also underscores the impact of prolonged Hindutva politics and apprehensions regarding Islam's impact and influence in the region. In Jaffrelot words the middle class in India prefers a 'CEO-style' leader because it values managerial decision making over democracy with equal representation.

Towards the end of our interviews, I tried to gauge from each participant how they felt the city of Ahmedabad had modernised and transformed from the ruins of the 2001 earthquake. Atul seemed most eager to provide this part of the testimony.

I think the city has a lot of potential. And Gujarat being very business friendly and even socially people are friendly... We are looking at another mega city of India. I mean infrastructure wise as well it is going the way things are developing... People are very adaptable and flexible over here. They are always open to new things. I mean obviously there are a lot of people who would try to portray negative things. Ahmedabad has a very forward-thinking plan, which is good in the long run that at least they think ahead. Even the whole Sabarmati project (he refers to the riverfront beautification project the Modi government undertook immediately after 2002 demolishing and removing thousands of Muslim and Dalit slums along the riverbed. [Refer Desai, 2014]. It has been done well. There is criticism for that as well. And they'll always be mourners. There is a nice riverfront, the gardens, you know, there's a place for people to hang out, morning walk, and cycling. They've sold some patches of land for building, you know, residential apartments etc which have generated income. We also have this

new international financial trade center, which is coming next to Gandhinagar, a special economic zone sort of thing... something like a mini-Dubai. It's Narendra Modi's dream project and it is now getting, you know a lot of traction, a lot of multinational banks. Have you gone to the new stadium? Its huge, it's called the Narendra Modi stadium.



Picture of the newly Sabarmati riverfront

developed promenade,

Ahmedabad, 2016

Image source: Veena Nair/Getty Images

I asked Atul to elaborate on this sense of adaptability, and flexible thinking, if it had also helped Ahmedabad become more inclusive, after the violence of 2002 so painfully tore the city apart.

Well, I think it's a state of mind. It's more subjective. And it's how you look at it. I mean, I don't see anybody complaining. Everybody's got

employment. Everybody's making a good livelihood. And, you know, they, everybody is rising on the, on the living index.

Atul's response also exemplifies how state-driven propaganda can deeply embed itself in people's psyche. Since 2002, particularly after Modi's involvement in the violence came under scrutiny, the state apparatus has worked tirelessly to restore the tarnished images of both the state and Modi. Over the past 15 years, the biennial "Vibrant Gujarat Summit" has become one of India's premier business events, attracting global leaders and policymakers. Since its inception in 2003, the summit has grown significantly in participation and international investment. It has successfully positioned the state as a prime investment destination and enhanced Modi's reputation as a pro-economic growth leader which is loosely marketed as "development." This was a major contributing factor to his 2014 election as prime minister of India. In 2019 during the summit, then chief minister of Gujarat, Vijay Rupani said, "Remember those days in 2001 when earthquake struck, and 2002 when Godhra riots happened? An entire group of people had tried to defame Gujarat. But due to Vibrant Summit, Gujarat managed to stand (back on its feet)" (Nair, 2019).

However, the ground reality differs from the political marketing. Structural infrastructure errors till date remain unrectified across the real estate sector in Ahmedabad (The Times of India, 2019). While some families had the economic means like Atul, Mohan, and others, to rehabilitate and financially contribute towards rebuilding their housing structures, many builders and architects facing serious legal charges were acquitted, highlighting the deep corruption within Ahmedabad's real estate sector (Khan, 2023).

Nevertheless, almost all the earthquake survivors, even those who faced financial losses in rebuilding their homes, spoke with a sense of pride and awe about Ahmedabad and its "infrastructure". They highlighted the construction of flyovers, high-rise buildings, public transit systems, and efficient roadways, and emphasized how safe Ahmedabad is for women, especially compared to other urban cities like Delhi and Mumbai. Nobody seemed to mention where most of this infrastructural investment was, which communities it served, and who had been drawn out of its reach.

Paul, who has dedicated most of his career to advocating for minority and human rights, holds a different perspective. He believes that the new capitalist economic model introduced in the 1990s was inherently flawed. According to Paul, Modi did not introduce anything new but rather exacerbated the situation by attracting foreign investors and funding, and encouraging corporate ties that created oligarchs like Tata, Adani, and Ambani. He argues that no tangible development occurred in terms of minority rights. Instead, effective propaganda and a robust communications and public relations network helped Modi gain popularity based on distorted facts.

After analysing the diverse perspectives and detailed recollections of my participants, it is important to return to the theoretical framework of collective memory. These interviews have unveiled a consistent pattern that requires further reflection and critical examination. When participants recounted their experiences of the earthquake, their memories were vivid and emotional, yet they consistently emphasized the positive support provided by local Hindu religious groups such as BAPs and many others—even if they did not personally receive that help. Furthermore, most participants viewed Modi's involvement in rehabilitation efforts positively, despite some still facing ongoing legal battles for compensation. Why is this the case?

According to Halbwachs, memory is not merely an individual phenomenon but is shaped by the social groups to which people belong—whether family, religion, or nation. These memories align with the collective interests and identities of the group, forging a shared sense of history and belonging. He states that memory is not a static recollection of facts; it is an active reconstruction of the past, continuously reshaped to meet the evolving social and political needs of the present. In this light, the participants' recollections of the earthquake are not merely personal but deeply embedded in the collective memory of their Hindu community, reinforcing social narratives that legitimize certain figures and actions.

The same can be said for the events of 2002. The widespread denial of the atrocities committed against Muslims, often dismissed as media-driven propaganda or individual bias, reflects a broader collective commitment among Gujarati Hindus to support Narendra Modi's political agenda. This collective memory, shaped by the need to sustain Modi's leadership, serves not only to deny violence and oppression but also to align with a narrative that has ultimately benefited the majority community.

It felt clear with this series of interviews that this particular class of citizens of Ahmedabad, were undergoing selective political amnesia and readily consumed the distortion of facts presented to them by a highly articulate and effective state machinery. Moreover, a brazen denial of the gruesome realities was increasingly permeating most discourses around daily life. Twenty odd years later, members of this demographic had simply learned to navigate the physical and socio-political geographies of their city with blinders on for its religious and class divide. The earthquake had scarred their sense of safety and stability. But the Sangh Parivar, and twenty years of Modi's ascension to even greater power, had filled this population with visible economic pride, rocketing material global aspirations, and blanket denial of social complexities.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

The group that has been missing from this conversation so far are Ahmedabad's Muslims, despite that being my own community. Since 2002, activists, journalists, social workers, and international human rights organizations have consistently visited the Muslim-majority areas affected by violence in Ahmedabad. They have painstakingly documented, written and recorded the detailed testimonies of Muslim survivors. Human rights lawyers and journalists like Harsh Mander and Teesta Setalvad, among many others, continue to seek justice for the Muslim victims of the 2002 violence, persistently pursuing legal avenues in the judicial courts. And yet, the memories of 2001 and 2002 seem to have faded in the minds of the ruling classes of Ahmedabad and now India as a country.

I particularly did not focus on the Muslims or the gruesome violence they have had to endure because despite the extensive evidence of harm, dispossession and feeling of disfranchisement, through the decades, but especially after 2002, their testimony remains undervalued in the absence of the perspective of the dominant ruling class. When sociologist and ethnographers study the squalid and inhuman conditions in which many of Ahmedabad's poorest of Muslim communities and survivors of the pogrom continue to live, often the focal point of criticism becomes the state and no other parts of civil society which were supposed to share this lived environment and the fruits of its progress with them and consequently are exempted from critique.

### **Ahmedabad: Muslim ghettos and a politics of exclusion**

As Paul, one of the participants in this study rightly pointed, the east-to-west migration and segregation in Ahmedabad happened through the 1980's and 1990's some of it individual-driven, some manufactured through local politics. But the events of 2002 solidified and cemented this spatial order. Since 2002, Gujarat and specifically Ahmedabad has not experienced any mass, widespread rioting anywhere near the scale of the 2002 pogrom (Desai, 2008). Here, it is important to interject the earlier mentioning of the 1986 Disturbed Areas Act (DAA).

Given Ahmedabad's histories of caste and religious based violence, the DAA was introduced by the then Congress government in 1986 to curb spatial segregation based on religion by preventing the distress sale of properties in violence prone or "disturbed areas". The law forbids any property transactions

in parts of the city labelled as "disturbed" unless they receive approval from the District Collector. The Collector must conduct a formal investigation to confirm that the sale is voluntary, and that the seller is receiving a fair price (Government of Gujarat, 1986). During Narendra Modi's tenure as Gujarat's chief minister in 2009, the Act underwent several changes. These amendments made violations of the Act subject to immediate legal action, significantly expanding the District Collector's authority to overturn unauthorized transactions. Additionally, criminal penalties were introduced, including up to six months of imprisonment and substantial fines (Tejani, 2023).

The current enactment of the law allows the state to enforce boundaries between "Hindu areas" and "Muslim areas," solidifying their separation and hindering the development of mixed neighbourhoods by limiting property transfers. Most Muslim dominated areas in the walled city were labelled as "disturbed," meaning these were possible areas of ethnic and religious tension and violence. Over the years of sporadic tensions, feelings of alienation and mistrust drove non-Hindus out of these Muslim dominated areas.

The largest settlement to arise from this was a neighbourhood called Juhapura-Ahmedabad's largest Muslim ghetto (Tejani, 2023). Today, Juhapura houses more than 750,000 Muslims. In the public perception of Ahmedabadis like my participants, Juhapura has been further demonised with labels like "mini-Pakistan." The British-era two-nation theory now delineates Ahmedabad's landscape. A physical barrier erected to separate Juhapura from its Hindu neighbour, Vejalpur, is still colloquially referred to as the "Wagah border," after the real border in the Punjab region of India that separates India and Pakistan (Laliwala et al., 2021). This act only exacerbated a city's already stark patterns of spatial segregation and ghettoization based on religion.

The 2002 anti-Muslim violence led to the formal ghettoization of Juhapura. Relief colonies established by Islamic organizations housed riot victims, while Muslim elites from Ahmedabad and nearby towns moved into Juhapura, adding economic diversity. This migration transformed Juhapura into a community that transcended class distinctions. After 2002, elite Muslims found it nearly impossible to live in the western parts of the city, except for Juhapura and a few other restricted areas (Laliwala et al., 2021).



Picture of a Muslim resident walking past open sewage flowing in Juhapura

Image source: Sam Panthaky/ Getty Images

Till date, Juhapura continues to suffer from severe neglect by city authorities, with basic amenities such as streetlights, roads, drainage systems, clean drinking water, schools, and hospitals sorely lacking (Jaffrelot and Thomas, 2012: 71). According to Tejani (2023), here the DAA has been employed to officially restrict the mingling of Hindu and Muslim populations, thereby redefining the law to uphold “peace” through religious segregation. She describes the phenomenon of spatial segregation as an urban planning tactic intended to “normalize” and “rationalize” the characteristics of an ideal society. She further emphasises saying that in this context, the presence of Muslims is seen as a "disturbance" that poses a threat to Hindus, leading to a perceived need for protection. Consequently, "saffron geographies of exclusion" have been established, representing the dominance of Hindutva ideology over the city and simultaneously creating Muslim ghettos. These evolving spatial arrangements illustrate a tangible manifestation of a Hindu-majority state, where Muslims are systematically "purged," "cleansed," and relegated to designated, peripheral areas of segregation.

In 2014, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the BJP achieved a majority of seats nationally, leading to his appointment as Prime Minister of India. This election marked a significant and “critical” shift in India’s political trajectory and voting patterns (Palshikar et al., 2014). Post-poll surveys revealed that promoting Narendra Modi as a strong prime ministerial candidate early in the campaign significantly contributed to the BJP's success in northern and central India. A campaign mostly focusing on the mishaps of the earlier British and Mughal rule, and the need for a solely Hindu nation. Extensive corporate backing,

which enabled the BJP to spend heavily on their campaign, along with positive media coverage from outlets owned by these supporters also played a role in boosting Modi's personal popularity (Bhushan, 2014). The BJP also expanded its influence into rural cities over the years, moving beyond its traditional support base among urban upper castes and middle-class voters. However, its electoral performance remains strongest in India's urban cities. Narendra Modi has actively courted what he terms as India's "neo-middle classes," largely residing in swiftly urbanizing regions. Additionally, he has acknowledged the aspirations of rural voters by advocating for a "rurban" vision, aiming to bring urban-style amenities to rural areas (Tillin, 2015).

This development narrative is shaped not solely by state-driven propaganda but also by a well-organized network of social media, public relations, and media outlets. Private and financial global institutions have also fueled this narrative. Following the 2001 earthquake, major financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (2011) and the World Bank (2016) have consistently issued reports commending the state government's efforts in disaster preparedness. Their reports often used phrases like "rising from the ashes," and "rebuilding from the rubble" to further reinforce Modi's image as a strong leader committed to development. A BBC news report in 2011 quotes Navin Prasad of Sewa International, the RSS's international volunteer charity wing, stating that the reconstruction efforts had significantly advanced development, claiming, "we have brought people out of the Middle Ages and into the modern world" (Para 13)

In 2014, the official website of the Government of Gujarat asserted that, Modi's government and tenure as chief minister (2001-2014) led to "13 years of peace, prosperity, and progress" (Government of Gujarat, n.d., 2020). This assertion effectively minimized the significance of the 2002 events in both the government's understanding and collective memory, even as the data suggests a downward slide. In Gujarat, Muslims were not the only community facing severe socio-economic challenges, other minority groups such as Dalits, Christians, and Adivasi communities have also experienced marginalization and discrimination. Corporations often seize land, displacing landless labourers, with Adivasis being particularly targeted (Davis, 2011; Rasheed, 2018). Both rural and urban areas of Gujarat have been severely affected by low wages, exploitation, and an increasing number of contract workers (NSSO, 2011). The prevalence of low wages and poverty has led to severe malnourishment among children (Bhavdam, 2013). Approximately 3.6 million Dalits reside in the state, with 80% working as agricultural

labourers, yet only half of the population owns any land, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and poverty (Davis, 2011).

These social indicators, for a state with a population of sixty million people, paint an entirely different picture from the narrative of "peace, prosperity and progress." Compounding this uneven economic and infrastructural progress is the stark reality of deepening divisions based on caste, class, and religion. Globalization and neoliberalism have brought about significant employment opportunities in India; however, upon closer examination, the gap between the rich and poor has only widened (Thakurta, 2017). Gujarat, through successful efforts to attract both domestic and foreign investments, particularly following the 2001 earthquake, has emerged as one of the most industrialized states in the country (Ibrahim, 2007). Despite these developments, minorities, particularly Muslims and Dalits, continue to lag in terms of socio-economic status compared to other groups (Shah et al., 2007). The benefits of neoliberal policies have primarily favoured the ruling classes, as evidenced by the staunch support even within my participants for privatization, for cities which appear modern and on par with global centres like Dubai, and markers of local wealth which are accessible only to this select group.

On a national scale, these inequities have extended out from Gujarat, onto an even more diverse and complex socio-political reality, with Narendra Modi's election as Prime Minister. In its periodic review from November 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) highlights several key concerns regarding India's protection of minority communities, instances of caste-based violence, the preservation of democratic freedoms, efforts to cease torture in custody, and the safeguarding of human rights defenders (Amnesty International, 2022). The government's crackdown on independent and democratic institutions has intensified, with the use of stringent counterterrorism and national security laws to target and intimidate human rights activists, journalists, students, government critics, and peaceful protesters. Instances of attacks, discrimination, and incitement against religious minorities are on the rise. Moreover, traditionally marginalized Dalit and Indigenous communities continue to face injustices and lack equitable protection (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In December 2019, the government enacted a citizenship law that discriminates against Muslims, marking the first-time religion has been used as a basis for citizenship (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Additionally, in August 2019, the government revoked the constitutional autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state, and persists in limiting free expression, peaceful assembly, and other fundamental rights in the region (Human Rights Watch,

2019). Furthermore, since October 2018, Indian authorities have repatriated at least 13 Rohingya Muslim refugees to Myanmar despite the known risks to their lives and safety (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Many Indian states have enacted laws against cow slaughter to prosecute Muslim cattle traders, as the cow is considered sacred to Hindus. While simultaneously, BJP-affiliated groups target Muslims and Dalits based on rumours of involvement in the killing or trading of cows for beef (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Apart from this, at least ten Indian states have laws prohibiting forced religious conversion, but these laws are often misused to target Christians (Petersen, 2021). Additionally, states utilize these laws to harass and arrest Muslim men engaged in relationships with Hindu women (Pandey, 2020). Throughout 2022, authorities in several BJP-ruled states unlawfully demolished Muslim homes and properties, often without legal authorization or due process, sometimes resorting to summary or collective punishment, holding them accountable for violence during communal clashes (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The Human Rights Watch report (2020) also raised concerns regarding the utilization of the counterterrorism law, the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), against activists, journalists, and members of religious minority communities. Over time, human rights organizations and numerous United Nation human rights experts have expressed reservations about the application of this law. Widely criticized for not aligning with international human rights norms, it is often used to detain activists and individuals exercising their fundamental rights of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and challenging government policies.

However, despite these facts and evidence, a significant portion of India's Hindu population, particularly its urban and semi urban upper-castes and upper-middle classes, continue to endorse and actively constitute a significant part of Modi's electorate. Since 2014, Narendra Modi's government has achieved three consecutive electoral victories, allowing him to continue serving as India's prime minister (The Hindu, 2024).

The fervent international support for Hindutva extends beyond India's borders and enjoys widespread backing from diaspora Hindus, too. The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), considered the international arm of the RSS, operates extensively in countries such as the US, UK, and Australia, overseeing over a thousand schools or shakhas globally and maintaining strong ties with Sewa International. A report by Awaaz – South Asia Watch Limited (2004) revealed that despite Sewa

International's claims of being non-sectarian and non-religious, it collaborated with HSS to redirect funds to extremist Hindu right-wing groups in India. These funds, initially intended for humanitarian purposes such as aiding victims of the Odisha cyclone of 1999 or the Gujarat earthquake of 2001, were diverted to support extremist factions within India. The HSS operates by perpetuating a narrative of Hindu victim analogous to the domestic narrative of 'Hindu khatre mein hai' (Hindus are in danger), utilizing social media and misinformation to ostracize and marginalize Muslims while leveraging global Islamophobia to further its agenda (Bhattacharya, 2022).

### **Disasters, religion, communal violence, and the future of cities**

Cities in India are considered levellers. They provide conducive environments for marginalized populations in terms of social mobility, overcoming social disadvantages and prejudices (Desai and Dubey, 2012). However, accelerated urbanization in major Indian cities has not managed to dismantle deep rooted social and ethnic divides (Vithayatil and Singh, 2012). Socio-religious disadvantaged populations such as Dalits, Muslims and Indigenous people, are often concentrated in specific urban settlements particularly in slums and impoverished neighbourhoods as illustrated in Ahmedabad's example. This concentration leads to overcrowding and segregation, resulting in limited access to essential municipal services such as water, sanitation, education, healthcare, and food assistance, especially for communities on the outskirts of cities (Lanjouw and Murugai, 2009). Moreover, this level of segregation and demonisation in the perception of the upper classes and castes has resulted in the extreme dehumanization of entire marginalised populations.

And so, this raises a question: How should we envision the present and future of a planet increasingly affected by natural and socio-political disasters? As climate-induced anxieties and risks to India's most vulnerable populations escalate, it is concerning that the state, which ought to prioritize disaster mitigation efforts, is instead contributing to the deterioration of the nation's social fabric at the local community level.

In one report published by the Ross Centre for Sustainable Cities of the World Resources Institute, director of research Anjali Mahendra, emphasized that the countries experiencing rapid urbanization, particularly in South Asia, will witness a significant influx of climate migrants. She noted that these migrants, upon reaching cities, "will only be pushed further into poverty" (McDonell and Kapur, 2020). India is the seventh most profoundly impacted country globally to be hit by climate-induced natural

disasters (Global Climate Risk Index, 2021). Additionally, in India, the 2011 Census revealed a concerning trend: sixty-four percent of rural migrants from lower-income backgrounds moved to larger urban cities in search of livelihoods. This shift was driven by climate-induced disasters impacting agricultural lands, further accelerating inter-state migrations within the country (Census, 2011; Yadav, 2019).

While the majority of the focus of the climate justice movements is on communities at the forefront of immediate impacts like sea level rise, hurricanes, coastal erosion, melting polar caps and increased flooding (and rightly so) there are other geographies of urbanized and semi-urbanised inland settlements, like the city of Ahmedabad, where the threat is less urgent, but the existing social conflicts are more complex and could yield even more dramatic and violent outcomes. Here, climate change will only be a catalyst to speed up existing segregation projects. In inland cities like Ahmedabad, these rifts within the physical, emotional, and mental geographies of its inhabitants have been an ongoing process where every upheaval, whether an earthquake, or a pogrom has reshaped a citizen's lived environment.

What is even more concerning is the lack of acceptance and acknowledgement of this stark reality. Ahmedabad, for instance, is situated on an active fault line, yet its seismic history is largely ignored in infrastructural development policies. Moreover, the growing material and economic aspirations among Ahmedabad's ruling class and India's middle-class, coupled with state-fueled propaganda that systematically diverts the population's focus towards religion, hate, and divisive politics, paints a grim future. Discussions on environmental and social justice cannot advance without a clear understanding of the fundamental concept of justice. The distinction between oppressor and oppressed, and the worrying reality of who gets to live versus who dies, in any natural or politically instigated disaster, must be central to any inquiry, as we delve deeper into examining the complex relationships between humans and their environment. This is especially crucial in a context where our collective memory of historical tragedies is distorted, and our definitions and ideas of justice and community are deeply fractured.

In contemporary India, the growing right-wing Hindutva attitudes among the middle and upper-middle classes risk creating a narrow perspective, potentially blinding us to a deeply conservative and problematic history (Kashwan, 2014). Here, the middle-class must not be used simply as a parameter to measure economic prosperity of a country, rather the focus must be on the ways in which they interact

with the state, market, and civil society, and their ongoing role in representing or failing to represent the socio-economic and political interests of various other marginalised communities (Jodhka and Prakash, 2016). The focus must shift towards individual actions that foster broad coalitions at the grassroots level, aiming to construct a new societal and political framework that rejects bigotry, communal hatred and fosters compassion and care towards better human-environmental relationships. Attention should also be directed towards self-introspection, considering how our individual consumerist desires are prioritized over addressing human suffering and significant environmental degradation. More importantly, to take a stand against a dangerous rhetoric and use of language which we have normalised as dinner table conversations, which is only fuelling Islamophobia and breeding even more hatred, and in turn could lead to unimaginable violence in the future.

The Sangh Parivar used a natural disaster and pitted the most vulnerable communities against each other in a fight for basic survival resources, but also simultaneously succeeded in uniting a whole other class of voters who bought into the idea of a monolithic “Hindu community” around the values of *seva*. The earthquake further created a ripe environment to reshape rural communities in highly segregated new ways, and to replace the older semi-urban landscape of cities like Ahmedabad with modernized, technologically advanced infrastructure that met all the superficial criteria for a developed metropolis. As for the reshaping of memory, that seems to be the most pliant of all geographies. And if memory is as malleable as we believe, it further emphasizes the necessity of continually revisiting our documented and recorded histories with the land and its people. Navigating the aftermath of a natural disaster turned out to be more manageable and politically palatable for those who saw themselves as included in the state machinery or could profit from its selective economic and social rehabilitation. But for Ahmedabad’s Muslims and Dalits these wounds caused by hurt and betrayal by who they considered their own are far beyond repair. As Harsh Mander (2002), social activist and lawyer who has spent a lifetime fighting for Gujarat’s riot victims rightly notes “There are also some wounds – these are lacerations of the soul – that do not heal even as years, decades, or even a lifetime passes. These soul-wounds are inflicted by crimes motivated by hatred, where you are stricken and dispossessed for who you are rather than what you have done.” (Para 11)

Natural disasters can indeed have far-reaching political implications beyond their immediate local impact. The Gujarat earthquake of 2001 and the city of Ahmedabad, serves as a significant

example. It catalysed significant economic growth, spurred modern advancements, and prompted infrastructure development. However, it also exacerbated authoritarian tendencies and religious violence within the region. These political earthquakes in Gujarat have been felt for generations, long before 2002. As Rohit Kumar, a social relief worker and educator who worked in Kutch and witnessed widescale discrimination during the 2001 earthquake said, “The massacre that shook Gujarat, India, and the world the following year (2002) was horrifying beyond measure, but ultimately not surprising. Gujarat was a conflagration waiting to happen. It just needed someone to light the match.” (Kumar, 2016, para 16). By fostering spatial divisions and segregations, Indian urban environments will continue to serve as fertile grounds for communal violence and discord. The attainment of peace will remain elusive unless inclusion and social justice across all class, caste and religions are prioritized in development efforts. While we continue to romanticize the idea of resilience and applaud the resilience of oppressed communities, these precarious and sensitive social fault lines are waiting to erupt. The Gujarat earthquake of 2001 reshaped a city, a state and eventually a country’s socio-cultural fabric one can’t help but wonder what these moving layers of religious and sectarian discord will yield in the future, especially when the foundation they lie on, isn’t a permanent one by any means.

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