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Hi everyone,

Brace yourselves for more stories from Ahmedabad--this time about last month's elections. You've probably read something about the recent victory of the right-wing Hindu nationalist BJP party in Gujarat. Gujaratis reelected Chief Minister Narendra Modi by a huge margin, even though most voters freely admit he played an active role in instigating the anti-Muslim rioting here last March, which left more than 1,000 dead. Though I had met riot victims with SEWA, only around election time did I hear a lot of people talk politics. Many people here, I learned, would rather India be a Hindu state than a secular, democratic one. But there is one group in particular whose stance on the riots has disillusioned me: The NGOs. Many groups, like SEWA, have done incredible work for the victims. But in many others, their leaders voted BJP, and have done nothing to support the relief effort. They spend their days supposedly trying to lift some of the burdens of poverty, but then exercise their franchise in favor of forces that have destroyed the lives of thousands of the slum dwellers here. It makes you wonder, frankly, whose side they're on.

I had my first personal experience of what a hostile city this is after about two weeks when some Muslim terrorists opened fire in a temple in a nearby city, killing more than 70 people. The next morning--after anxiously awaiting a blackout all night, because we'd been told the Municipal Authority would cut the electricity if there was an emergency--I was told I had the day off work. The government had called a strike. It seemed only natural to me that that the government would try to keep people safely in their homes in case there was any rioting. But I had got it wrong. The family I live with told me the strike was probably called for precisely the opposite reason--to create violence in the streets. If people sat at home all day seething about the Muslims who had killed their Hindu brethren at worship, eventually they would take to the streets in the kind of communal frenzy that plays nicely into the hands of the ruling BJP government. That day was the only time I've sat around an apartment waiting for a government to unleash chaos in streets where I happen to be living, and it was a disturbing sensation--for me and for everyone else I spoke to around that time, many of whom seemed to be reliving their riot experiences. The riots had clearly affected even the middle class in Ahmedabad, and I thought about that when I saw everyone go vote a few months later. Even if you could ignore the atrocities they'd committed in the slums, why would you vote for a party that threw your own life into that kind of disruption every few months?

One reason, I suppose, would be that you'd fallen prey to all the anti-Muslim propaganda. The gulf between the two communities here is enormous. There are very few middle class Muslims in Ahmedabad, and the ones that there are don't live in neighborhoods with middle class Hindus. For example, among the forty families living in my building, there's not one Muslim. During the riots, a woman I know gave shelter to a Muslim friend (the same Muslim friend who for years has only been traveling under a Hindu name on trains,) but had to instruct her children never to call out his name, in case someone in the building would alert the rioters that there was a Muslim living there. And this in one of the nicest buildings in the city. The people who chose to bring aid to the

riot victims were also divided along religious lines. One SEWA leader visited a riot-affected area recently and had a woman run sobbing into her arms: “you are the first Hindu to come to our neighborhood since the riots.” Even the people running the government’s relief program express surprise at seeing a Hindu. Another NGO leader was asked recently by a government official, “but what are you doing working on this project? You are not a minority.” “I am a minority,” he said. “I am a secularist.”

I asked a lot of people to explain why they voted BJP. Though some of their arguments must be legitimate, there are huge misconceptions about Muslim society. And I often sense that their explanations for the violence are really justifications. Here’s some of what’s being said: “Most Muslims want to be part of Pakistan, and I don’t understand why they don’t just go there.” “All Muslims root for Pakistan at cricket matches, and fly the Pakistani flag in their neighborhoods.” “Muslim men are always harassing our Hindu daughters, and we Hindus needed to do something to put a stop to this.” “Until Hindus decided to ‘fight back,’ it was always the Muslims who caused riots.” “With Congress in power the Muslims were always getting special attention. But this is a Hindu country and we’re not going to be ruled by a minority any more.” Some points were tailor-made for an American like me: “but Muslim culture is so bad--they are polygamists. How can a feminist like you sympathize with them?” “Look what Muslims did in your country on September eleventh. If we believe they are doing the same thing in our country, why aren’t we allowed to stop them also?”

I never heard anything that, to me, justified supporting a man who had come to power through instigating the deaths of a thousand people. Should murder on that scale actually be rewarded rather than punished? Wasn’t the communal harmony and secularism advocated by Gandhi and Nehru the better path for India than the the one of a religious state that Pakistan chose? Isn’t India far more likely to achieve prosperity through focusing on development, rather than creating societal havoc and causing people to destroy property? But even the NRIs--the Indians living in the West--don’t see it that way. They moved to America and Europe for exactly those benefits of a secular government that follows the rule of law, yet they bankroll the BJP. The NRIs can’t even use economic arguments to justify their support of Modi, because his party didn’t do much of anything for the state. And anyhow, development isn’t the priority. A friend and I followed a BJP candidate campaigning in the slums one day, and when I asked him what the primary concerns of his constituents were, he told us “terrorism.” I said I had spent a little time in the slums, and that his constituents probably had other concerns too--livelihood, housing and water access, for instance.

As for secularism, many people think it’s had its day. They are so fed up by Congress--the party representing secularism--that yes, they would rather vote BJP. Though Congress is guilty of corruption and nepotism, it’s clear that few are committed to even the ideal of secularism. This is particularly depressing in Ahmedabad, the town where Gandhi built his ashram and started his movement after returning from South Africa. I met a family in which the Brahmin grandfather had been so inspired by Gandhi’s ideals of equality that he took an Untouchable’s last name. Now, though, the family supports the local BJP party, and I don’t mention politics. All I can do is congratulate them on their wonderful family history when I see the old photos of Gandhian rallies around the house.

Since Hindus and Muslims have lived together peacefully for centuries, it's hard to say how much damage the BJP can do. But the party is using the schools to mould a whole generation to their thinking. And if they succeed, then these days may one day be viewed as the turning point, when the country abandoned its Gandhian roots--which anyhow only grandparents can remember now. The BJP is rewriting the history textbooks to suggest, among other things, that the Moghuls did everything in their power to destroy the Hindu religion--implying Muslims today are still as great a threat. One 25-year old friend hears her seven-year old cousin say things like, "oh, you know Muslims, always committing crimes." She says when she was that age, no such messages were transmitted to her. But now, the schools have gotten so bad in Gujarat that one mother I know has sent her 12-year old to boarding school, to get her away from classmates who taunt her for defending Muslims.

Often I try to discuss European Fascism. It would be hypocritical to expect a country three times the size of the US to immerse itself in European history, when American schools also ignore the rest of the world. But the parallels are so great and the ignorance too, that I keep coming back to it. One very bright seventeen year-old asked me if the Holocaust was when Hitler killed all of Europe's Muslims. The Gujarati tenth standard History textbook presents Hitler as an efficient ruler who united his people and made the trains run on time--exactly how the current Chief Minister presents himself. The inevitable result is a poll in the India Times last month, asking college students all over their country, "What kind of leader does India need today?" The Answer: 1) Gandhi; 2) Vajpayee; 3) Adolph Hitler. This is obviously deeply shocking to a Westerner. But, as the editorial page of that paper said later, this doesn't mean those college students are bloodthirsty wannabe-despots. It says more about their education. Though it's good their curriculum makes them so qualified for high-tech jobs, this is a republic, and the government should teach them about exercising their franchise responsibly.

I've harped on about politics because I was genuinely surprised at how many educated Indians view secularism as just another Western import, to be weighed and evaluated like our music, our consumer culture, or our standards for nudity in the cinema. Still, it's a shame I'm only able to describe the situation from the perspective of an outraged westerner, or at the most, of a small liberal Indian elite. And it may have been a waste of time too. Because it's important to be outraged about the same things as the people on whose behalf you want to cause some changes, and in this case, while the liberal activists are crying "justice," most of the victims are crying "work." And at least a few of the female victims I've met seem a lot more willing to move on than the liberal editorialists are.

SEWA has been put in charge of the rehabilitation of all the widows and children of the riots, and I attended the widows' first SEWA meeting a few months ago. The SEWA leader began by promising the women that in a matter of months, each woman would have her own trade. And though SEWA couldn't bring their husbands back, the women themselves could replace them as the family's sole breadwinners. She firmly believed that work would bring them a sense of purpose, and that self-sufficiency and security would be the keys to the healing process. She then invited the women to come to the mic and say whatever they wanted. The meeting had begun with a prayer, and many of the women were still sobbing quietly, so I expected a succession of horror stories at the

microphone. Instead, the women did exactly what the staff had predicted: they began articulating a future for themselves, and told us what they needed to get back on their feet. For one woman, it was money to start a telephone exchange, for another, it was a cart to sell vegetables, for a third, a buffalo so she could sell milk. Instead of watching things grind to a halt in front of broken down, paralyzed victims, I witnessed for the tenth time SEWA's methodical, case-by-case approach to empowering women by creating livelihood. They began with the fifty women in that room, and now, three months later, every riot widow has a livelihood goal that she will achieve in less than a year.

Most of Ahmedabad's secularists despaired after the election, saying the healing process can't begin until there is justice, but that the only hope for justice--a change in government--had just been dashed. Yes, there was anger in the Muslim communities at the result. But the overriding emotion was one of relief--that thank god there had been no more violence. The SEWA field workers I've spoken to have said it's mostly the child victims--the ones who watched their parents be murdered--who rage against whichever community harmed their family. Their parents--or at least the women SEWA works with--are proving themselves strong enough to move beyond blame.

I've seen no greater example of this than something I saw today. For our riot film, I was interviewing a woman who is just starting off in SEWA's livelihood program. Chamaben's husband died in the Godhra train. In this incident, Muslims attacked a train car carrying militant Hindus returning from a religious protest, and burnt every single person alive. Chamaben's stepfather must therefore himself have been an active supporter of the Hindu movement--as well as being as much of a patriarch as most other Indian stepfathers, since all of us women sat on the floor while he alone was on a chair. Despite this, though, he turned to his inaudible daughter-in-law hiding tearfully behind her veil, and told her that the family must move on. "I have no son anymore," he said. "You must cease to be my daughter-in-law and instead become my son. You must be the one to bring us food. You are our only hope."

Thanks for reading.  
Love,  
Jessie