

The Church as Part of Civil Society: *A Perspective From Gujarat Responses and Recommendations*

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Introduction

Gujarat has a long history of communal violence; and perhaps, it is the one State in the country in which this violence has been very consistent. The watershed however, was in 2002, when from February-end, a good part of the State was engulfed in bloody riots for several months which left the State completely paralyzed and polarized.

For a long period of time, brutality at its worse: murder, rape, arson and loot, unbridled mayhem seemed to be an accepted reality in a sizeable section of the State. The Muslims were at the receiving end. The horrors and injustices which many of them had to go through have been carefully documented in several reports and articles and even in films. One only needs to flip through the pages of any of these reports to realize that such barbaric actions should never have taken place in a so called "Civil Society". Anyone who has his / her heart and mind in the right place, would never want anyone at any other time to go through the pain and trauma of that carnage.

Today, five years down the road, the victim survivors of the Gujarat Carnage (hardly any one of them has been given just compensation or rehabilitation) still cry for justice. Their cries seem to fall on deaf ears.

This article attempts to provide a perspective of Civil Society's (and in particular the Church's) response to this very painful and

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forgettable chapter of Indian history, and in doing so, recommends some dimensions which could help in making our response more meaningful in future eventualities.

Civil Society

At the outset, it is important for us to try to understand “what” or “who” constitutes “Civil Society”. There are a myriad definitions of “Civil Society”. The London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society working definition is illustrative:

“Civil Society” refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women’s organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

So, if we go by this definition, then we are talking about a whole collective of groups and individuals who are concerned of what is happening in / or around a particular issue and are determined to do something about it. Classic examples atleast in the last century are the “Satyagraha” movement (exactly a hundred years ago) led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Civil Rights Movement of Martin Luther King in the United States. Closer to our times, are the spontaneous and massive outbreaks of protests that were witnessed the world over against the invasion of Iraq by the United States.

So naturally, one would have expected a ground-swell of protests from “Civil Society” against the Gujarat Carnage. Unfortunately, nothing of that happened. “Civil Society” in general, in Gujarat, remained a mute spectator to what was happening all around.

Thankfully, a handful of individuals and groups decided to “take a stand”. Though the numbers were in fact very negligible, the

persistency of this miniscule group from "Civil Society" has paid some dividends. Though justice is still elusive for most of the victims of the Gujarat Carnage, one thing is sure : that the memories of five years ago, will never be erased from the radar screen of history.

The Church and Civil Society

Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World", very emphatically states, "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men, of men who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all men. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history".

And in his message entitled "The Human Person, the Heart of Peace", on the occasion of the "World Day of Peace" (1 January 2007), Pope Benedict XVI literally re-echoes the message of Vatican II in today's idiom when he mandates, "Let every Christian be committed to tireless peace-making and strenuous defense of the dignity of the human person and his inalienable rights".

The St. Mary's Mahila Shikshan Kendra (a Nursing / Maternity Home and a Skills Training Centre for Women) is situated in the heart of the lower income group of Gomtipur. The dense area surrounding this institution has scores of tenements inhabited by Muslims on one side and an equally congested areas of Hindus (mainly Dalits) on the other. In small pockets in these areas live groups of Christians. Most of the breadwinners from these families, were once upon a time casual workers in the textile mills, that once dotted the Eastern side of Ahmedabad, known as the "Manchester of the East". Since the late seventies many of these mills went "sick", laying-off thousands of workers and in its wake, creating severe social and economic problems for these workers.

Gomtipur flares up like a tinderbox in any communal conflagration. In most times, the ones on the receiving end are the poor Muslims, many of them live a hand-to-mouth existence. It is significant therefore - that

when they are attacked, their houses are burnt and their meager possessions are looted - the place to which they most easily seek refuge is the St. Mary's Centre which is run by the Dominican Sisters. For years now, they have found in this place, a security and protection which they could not find anywhere else. The sisters too, do what is spontaneous and what is expected of them as disciples of Jesus....to keep their doors open for the poor and the needy and for those who seek protection when their lives are in danger.

This is just one instance where in the Church in Gujarat has shown that she can be truly the "light of the world", a hope for the many who are systematically marginalized and alienated from the mainstream of society.

That Church organizations are responding to the ills and injustices that take place in wider society in Gujarat today, is not something new. As early as 1995, in a well-researched document entitled *The Harmony Project : Peacebuilding Amid Poverty in India* by Joe Bock which has now become part of an important book called *Do no Harm* by Mary B. Anderson, the work of the Ahmedabad based St. Xavier's Social Service Society (SXSSS) is the focus. Whilst describing the work of SXSSS in the promotion of communal peace and harmony, Bock writes, "The most important aspect of the Society's programming involves encouraging the formation of local peace committees among slum dwellers. The Society's health, education, women's and environmental programmes all involve local committees. Within and around this formal structure, slum dwellers have established other informal committees for a variety of purposes.

Following the riots in 1992, the Society began to support and encourage the establishment of informal peace committees in affected areas. These committees provide a forum for the expression of tensions before they escalate and constitute a place from which to launch collective action to avert violence. They provide a direct link between the Society's development and relief programs and its preventive and preemptive peace activities.

These committees have had some success. On one occasion a group of Hindus approached a slum that had an active peace committee, intending to attack Muslim residents. The Hindus who lived in the area

met the attacker and said "you must kill us first." The attackers disbanded. The local peace committee organized this response.

In another location majority Hindus helped minority Muslims by bringing them food and water when the government imposed a curfew in anticipation of a riot. Personal relationships have been developed and nurtured through these harmony promotion efforts. When communal passions were running high in one area, Hindus sat on the steps of Muslims homes to prevent Hindu violence against the residents".

In the wake of the Gujarat Carnage, Church-groups were very active in every possible way to respond to the needs of the victims. Plenty of relief was mobilized and this was passed on to some of the Muslim agencies that were actually running the relief camps. Support was also given to those groups working for rehabilitation of the victims. Church groups were very visible in civil society networks, participating at various levels and at times, even providing the leadership.

Apart from relief and rehabilitation, there was wholehearted involvement in human-rights issues, legal and media advocacy, organizing of rallies and dharnas and voicing ones protest at what was happening. Most of this work continues in Gujarat even today.

Civil Society in Gujarat

One needs to look at the response of the Church as a civil society group, in the context of the total response from wider civil society.

The Gujarat Carnage was met with either a stoic silence and ignorance of what is happening and sometimes even a criminal response like "they deserved what has happened to them". Efforts to rope in some of the middle-class and even academics among them, were greeted by unbelievable quips like "don't you see what they have done to the WTC"; "they are all terrorists and deserve it"; "don't they all have four wives"; "are they not breeding children like rabbits"; "don't they cheer Pakistan when there is a cricket match against India"; "aren't they all fundamentalists"...the list of excuses, justifications and reasons for non-involvement are endless.

This was also very visible in a Peace-Rally that was taken out in the midst of the carnage. Hardly anybody joined in. Just a handful of the

usual faces or as the great Chief Minister of Gujarat would term them "pseudo-secularists and five-star social activists".

There is another dimension when several of the well-known NGO groups and even social workers preferred to hide behind the veil of anonymity. As citizens, they were definitely ashamed, aghast at what was happening. But as one belonging to the majority community fold, they did not dare posture for what is right, lest their defense may be interpreted as taking a stand for Muslims and against the Hindus. Some of the better names among them did not give the use of their premises for the meetings of collectives nor were they vocal about what was happening. Quite a few of them preferred to shoot from the shoulders of Church-based organizations because then they could always tell their own kith and kin that "it is not WE but THEY !". It was another matter however, that in their posturing to the West, their claim was that they were taking a stand totally and sometimes only for the victims.

However, in saying all this, one cannot ever deny or negate (as said earlier) the significant role played by several from civil society, human rights social activists, several from the legal fraternity, groups like the National Human Rights Commission, Citizens for Justice and Peace and others. If not for them, the reality of the Gujarat Carnage would have been buried into oblivion a long time ago.

All these extra-ordinary and heroic responses notwithstanding, what Gujarat has lacked tremendously is a charismatic leader (the likes of Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King) who can bring out people onto the streets in a non-violent manner for a cause. The protests against the Iraq war which was seen all over the world and in several major cities and towns in India, just did not take place in Gujarat.

On the other hand, when Aamir Khan makes a purely compassionate statement that the oustees of the Narmada Dam (who are poor adivasis) need to be given a just compensation package, apparently the whole of Gujarati society was angry and some of the thugs that belong to the Hindutva brigade did not even allow his blockbuster "Fanaa" to be screened in the theatres.

Even as this article is written, the highly moving and acclaimed film "Parzania" which highlights the tragic tale of a Parsi boy lost during

the Carnage is not allowed to be screened in Gujarat. This film was released on Republic Day, January 26th, all over the country. The reviews the film has got and the tremendous acting performance by the likes of Sarika and Naseeruddin Shah has literally moved thousands of people all over the world to tears. But then, screening this film in Gujarat is different matter. The guardians of the law feel that it is better the film is not shown, lest the truth be revealed in more stark ways.

A small group of fascists have decided to take law and order in their own hands and have threatened Multiplex owners of dire consequences, if the film is screened in Gujarat. This terrorizing would never have taken place had they not the blessings of the "Powers" that run the State.

The media has taken a stand –but there is hardly a whimper of protest from civil society at large – even when it is so amply evident that their Rights and Freedoms as citizens of this country are simply being trampled upon.

So when we look in perspective at the communal violence in Gujarat and the response of Civil Society in the State, one has to be honest enough to admit that not sufficient has been done. On the other hand, the Church here has played a fairly creditable role. But in the light of the Teachings of the Gospel and the mandate given to every disciple of Jesus.....the Church too has a long way to go.....

Some Recommendations

The Church can and should do much more to make of Civil Society a force to reckon with.....to be a "light of the world", the "salt of the earth", the "leaven in the dough."

In the context of what is happening, the Church can no longer sit on the side-lines and watch. It would be a betrayal of Christ and all that He lived and died for, if the Church does not involved herself wholeheartedly in the burning issues that plague India today, like fighting communal violence and injustice.

The following recommendations would hopefully help in giving to the Church, a more articulated response as part of civil society:

- 1. to be immersed in a living faith – justice theology**

As Christians, we are definitely called to pray. Our lives must be rooted and grounded in Christ and His mission. In today's world however, our spirituality and theology must be from a Faith-Justice perspective. The words of Jesus are clear: "not all who say Lord, Lord" The scene of the Last Judgment is even more pronounced. Very often, our spirituality is relegated to saying prayers and our sins get focused on the ones of "commission". We are afraid to speak and live a theology which is incarnational and focus on those serious sins of omission. Vatican II and the social teachings of the Church since then, have emphasized this dimension time and again. But somewhere down the line, we have failed to take ownership of these teachings and allow them to permeate every aspect of our lives.

2. To be aware of what's happening around us

How aware are we of what is happening around us? Do the problems of communalism, fundamentalism, cultural hegemony that has been unleashed by the fascist forces that we have spoken about earlier, actually touch us? Is our attitude one of: "It is not happening to me / us, so, why bother?" Due to globalization and the insensitive economic policies [like the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) that are being created] the gap between the rich and the poor grows wider day by day. Communal violence which hogged the front page of our daily newspapers and the headline on the TV screen, often numb us into apathy rather than creating that stimuli to generate us into positive action. A constant awareness of what is happening around us and the relationship between economics and politics must become part of our "daily bread".

3. To study and research

Deep awareness must definitely gear us to intellectual pursuits: study and research. The Church in India boasts of several centres of higher education, medical care and even social work. But how many centres do we have which are dedicated to social research and study on human rights, justice and peace? These centres/institutions can be counted on our fingers. The Church has the potential, the capacity and the reach to do much more serious reflection, study and research.

4. To be a communicating Church

The Church in India has a very inspiring document entitled "Called to Be a Communicating Church". A civil society movement necessitates

that we communicate the injustices around us in order to establish a more humane and just society. Besides, there is plenty of good happening (individuals/institutions who work for justice, peace and communal harmony). This good also needs to be highlighted. The internet and the electronic media do play a significant role in our lives today. A petition-online highlighting a grave injustice brings in hundreds of people on the same cause together. A problem in one corner of the earth is virtually owned by many more all over. It makes the burden not only lighter but ensures that the issues / concern is also addressed.

5. To form “ours” for mission :

At the centre of our Christian response is formation. We need to ask ourselves of the type of formation we are providing the young men and women who enter our seminaries and religious congregations. Is it an inter-disciplinary approach? What type of apostolates do they undertake? Is it merely teaching Catechism or are there more concrete involvements? In the wake of the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, the Vidya Jyoti Theologate was shut down so that all the Theologians (faculty and students) could respond to the victims. When the earthquake struck Gujarat, we had hundreds of those in formation who came out to help. However, we can definitely not say the same of the Gujarat carnage. It is in formation, that one inculcates attitudes and values. Are we above all, truly forming our laity...and for what? How do we understand mission? How do we understand salvation which is fundamentally a concern for human ecology?

6. To network and to be involved in advocacy

A civil society response necessitates the linking up and networking of likeminded people and groups. There are always many people concerned but very often, the solidarity dimension is lacking. When we provide ourselves with possibilities of creating these linkages, forging new alliances and even joining existing movements and groups, we are literally able to take the battle to the other side. Gujarat would have been lost long ago if the small but committed group of people had not faced the onslaught of the communal juggernaut. One is painfully aware that numbers are still lacking. Hopefully, when more people are encouraged to network and get involved in advocacy, crucial issues will be addressed and resolved. Above all, the ordinary citizen needs to be educated about his / her rights and freedoms.

7. To provide relevant education

The Church in India possesses a rich resource in our educational institutions and educational ventures. It is a wealth which I think is difficult to qualify. In a recent survey of academic excellence in India by "India Today", almost 50% of the very best colleges in the country are administered by Christians; but are we truly educators? Have our educational institutions helped us to form men and women for others. In a hard-hitting article entitled "Questions from the Killing Fields", Fr. Myron Pereira S.J. says "how is it that our schools and colleges which have trained so many middle-class Hindu and Muslim Gujaratis have left so little impact?" We have thousands of children with us for 10 – 12 years. We have another large percentage for another four years in our degree/professional colleges. Are we inculcating in them a value system or are we churning out "excellent" students who ultimately opt out of the country. Providing meaningful education would mean a paradigm shift from the exam-oriented approach to a knowledge-oriented one in which people are the centre and wherein service is emphasized.

8. To dialogue

On February 3rd, 2007, in an audience with the Foundation for Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Research and Dialogue (which was established in 1999) and of which he was a founding member, the Holy Father Benedict XVI, in no uncertain terms said "I repeat with insistence that research and inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue are not an option but a vital necessity for our time.....". He further added that "the people of today expect from us a message of concord and serenity, and the concrete manifestation of our common will to help them realize their legitimate aspiration to live in justice and peace". Dialogue presumes that we keep our doors open and get out of our Church compound mentality. "He who is not against us is with us...." Our philosophy should be:

SARVA DHARMA SAMBHAV
SARVA DHARMA MAMMABHAV
SARVA DHARMA SADBHAV

9. To work for a structural change

There needs to be a Christian approach in whatever we do and the Christian approach necessarily demands that we have to be

instruments of change, that we have to bring about structural changes. We need to bring Christ to every situation: "what belongs to God must be given to God but what belongs to Caesar must be given to Caesar too". Non-involvement is also a political response and that is perhaps more dangerous than responding in creative ways to what is happening. Above all, as Christians, we need to transcend "the charity and benefactor approach" we have towards others and ensure that we address the root causes of what is taking place in society. To be a Christian is a call to be a radical.

10. To make public, our stand

If we are serious of being "the light of the world", we have to make public our stand even if by doing so, we become vulnerable. Civil society movements have never been formed in the silent sanctity and safety of one's home. Only when we stand up and speak out in solidarity with others, then will we be actually doing credit to the teachings of Christ. "The culture of silence" has resulted in "the culture of death". Even in Gujarat, people have got away with murder because others have not protested against what was happening. Public demonstrations, dharnas and satyagrahas are manifestations of the vibrancy of civil society.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to position the response of civil society in Gujarat in the context of the Gujarat Carnage which took place in 2002. In a very special way, it has tried to look at the role of the Church as a civil society movement and what more should be done in order to make our response more effective and meaningful. The article is not intended to be judgmental but tries to articulate a response which is the crying need of the hour.

We often tend to take the easy way out and say to ourselves, "as long as it is not happening to me, why should I bother....." Falling into this attitude will perhaps put us in the firing line of being damned to perdition. Though clichéd, we need to be reminded of those very apt words by the German Pastor Martin Niemoller :

*"In Germany, the Nazis first came for the communists,
and I did not speak up because I was not a communist;
Then they came for the Jews,
and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew;
Then they came for the Trade Unions
and I did not speak up because I was not a Trade Unionist;
then they came for the Catholics,
and I was a Protestant so I did not speak up;
Then they came for me,
and by that time,
there was no one left, to speak for anyone. "*

We need to pray with Rabindranath Tagore, "Into that heaven of freedom my Father, let my country awake" but as Christians, we need to wake up first before it is too late.