

Remembering candles that glowed in Gujarat

By Meher Marfatia

Mumbai: They were ordinary people who showed the most extraordinary courage—unsung heroes of the communal carnage that ripped the land of the Mahatma a year ago. For people like Kokilaben Dantani, Ramdas Pillai and Mumtaz Begum, giving scant thought to their community moorings and personal safety, helped save the lives of complete strangers.

A year after that fateful attack on Sabarmati Express coach S-6, attempts are being made to acknowledge the spirit that ran counter to the forces of mindless hate. Candle-lighting ceremonies were conducted in Mumbai to laud the selflessness of people like police officer M. Chudavat, who bravely protected every Muslim life in Modasa town, standing his ground against a howling crowd. Or Mumtaz of Juhapura, who sheltered a Buddhist monk from a stone-throwing mob. Or Kokilaben Dantani from Shahpur, who incurred the anger of her own family members when she stopped them from setting people ablaze and, instead, told some Muslim women to change from their tell-tale salwaar kameezes into the saris she provided. Or Kalu Sheikh, who smuggled a Hindu family into the sanctuary of the dried Sabarmati near Ahmedabad's troubled Khanpur locality. Or Sanjana and Sanjay Kedia, who carried dozens of Muslims to safety, returning repeatedly to a riot hub to rescue victims in their scooter sidecar.

Salat Nagar in Gomtipur witnessed a unique episode where an entire basti was spared thanks to quick intervention, which foiled the acid and fire-arms attack on 2,000 helpless men, women and children from atop the Khokhra overbridge. Living right below, they would have ended up as tragic victims but for the Jan Sangharsh Manch volunteers, who coordinated a daring plan that allowed every Muslim family to flee along the Mumbai-bound broad gauge rail track leading out from Kalupur station a kilometre away.

"Not one hut escaped the flames engulfing the settlement—but at least all the people were safe," reasons Mohan Bundela of Jan Sangharsh. "Hamne ho sake utna saamna kiya. We opposed them as best we could before we took cover. Today, 240 pucca homes are rebuilt."

According to one account in the series collated by the Concerned Citizen's Tribunal Report, although Kisanwadi in Vadodara saw about 120 Muslim homes looted by sword-and-sickle-brandishing Bajrang Dal workers, no life was lost thanks to the individual effort of builder Ramdas Pillai. He

ferried people with an auto-rickshaw driver and in Mohanbhai Savalia's tractor through the cold February night, at great risk to himself, until they reached the Quraish Jamaat Khana next morning. Mr Pillai's wife Laxmibai, his brother and friend Kanubhai readily opened their doors to 500 terrified Muslims.

Indeed, along with shocking newflashes from riot-hit areas have also emerged stories of spontaneous gestures which averted life-threatening situations. A mattress-store owner whose shop was savagely burnt found shelter with a neighbour who kept his belongings safe and offered him meals. An anonymous Muslim woman of Danilimda shielded three Hindu reporters, oblivious of the danger to herself, her husband and four young daughters. A sarpanch in Panchmahals district sheltered the entire Muslim population of the village in and around his house, promising the cowering group that no one would be handed to the shrieking mob.

To compensate, in however small measure, for government apathy, four donors stepped into the largest relief camp, Shah-e-Alam, with a lorry and Rs 2,000 per family to enable them to make a fresh start in their vegetable and fruit businesses. A doctor contributed pressure cookers to newly wed couples at Daria Khan Ghummat camp.

Having visited Gujarat both after its earthquake and the Godhra backlash, Mihir Desai, director of the India Centre for Human Rights and Law, observes that while rehabilitation was noticeable among the quake survivors, the communally scarred still seem too traumatised to return. "Homes destroyed by such human mobs appear more hideously ravaged and tough to build back than the physical shells left standing from Bhuj's huge natural disaster," he says. "Considering the frenzy whipped up among the vandals, it's amazing the death toll wasn't worse. That such mass fury left any survivors is attributable only to the help both communities extended each other." Says Saira Sheikh of Jan Sangharsh, "This destructive communal divide is so forced. You should just see the gusto with which young Muslim boys and girls dance the garba, celebrate Janmashtami shoulder-to-shoulder with Hindu Gujaratis." Adds a survivor, referring to the many unacknowledged helping hands, "We must remember, all people are not the same. Some are good, some bad, but you have to trust those who are nice."

(This column chronicles the brave initiatives and sunshine stories which light up the city)



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