

**Muslims of Ahmedabad:
Social Changes Post-1993 and
Post-2002 Riots**

Raheel Dhattiwala

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Foundation for Universal Responsibility

Of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, New Delhi, India, 2006.

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Published by

WISCOMP

Foundation for Universal Responsibility

Of His Holiness The Dalai Lama

Core 4A, UGF, India Habitat Centre

Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110 003, India

**This initiative was made possible
by a grant from the Ford Foundation.**

The views expressed here are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of WISCOMP or the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of HH The Dalai Lama, nor are they endorsed by them.

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I dedicate this work to my parents.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to WISCOMP without whom this monograph would not have happened. And to Sheba George without whom WISCOMP would not have happened.

Dr Deepti Priya Mehrotra, I admire you for your insight into the issue and thank you for your consistent support as my guide; Dr JS Bandukwala for your patience and grit; Dr S Chatterjee for staying up all night to review my work; dwellers of Ram Rahim Nagar for helping salvage the little optimism left in me about Ahmedabad and all my friends from NGOs and educational institutions in Ahmedabad and Vadodara for sharing their experiences with me.

A special thanks to my dear friend Rizwaan Ali.

Raheel Dhattiwala

Preface

The Scholar of Peace Fellowships awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defense and foreign policy practitioners, NGO workers and others. The series WISCOMP Discussion Papers, in conjunction with WISCOMP Perspectives, brings the work of some of these scholars to a wider readership.

The tenth in the series, *Muslims of Ahmedabad: Social Changes post-1993 and post-2002 Riots* is the outcome of a media project awarded to Raheel Dhattiwala, journalist with *Times of India*, Ahmedabad. The project explores social changes experienced by Muslims of the city, within a climate of growing communal conflict.

Raheel Dhattiwala's is a voice at once detached and deeply engaged. As a long-time resident of the city, she knows its communalised atmosphere, from the inside. As a journalist, she accesses the views and experiences of people from different strata, religions and sites in Ahmedabad. While her primary intention in the present project is to explore initiatives taken by Muslim residents of the city, at the same time, she explores the views and actions of Hindu and Jain residents. Through a survey, interviews, and study of secondary sources, Raheel examines the theme of ghettoisation – separation of Hindus and Muslims in terms of geographically demarcated living spaces. Work, business, employment and educational sites have got demarcated on a similar pattern. She also develops insights into the role of education vis-à-vis Muslims of Ahmedabad. Her findings indicate an increasingly proactive stance towards modern education – which she analyses as a positive development, leading to greater opportunities in terms of joining 'the mainstream'.

Raheel's is an important contribution to the growing body of work on communal conflict, and its impact upon ordinary citizens. Her observations lead to a nuanced understanding of people's responses to the multiple crises posed by communalism. Conflict can escalate in different directions – from everyday acts of exclusion and communal divide, to events of explosive, searing violence. Ordinary people's

positive interventions can stem the tide of communal conflict, by bringing about a better appreciation of the common concerns of people on both sides of the divide. The present monograph is a small, earnest step in this direction.

The WISCOMP Research Team

Introduction: An Overview

Young. Muslim. Woman. Living in Ahmedabad. Disowned by “Us” for being atypical. Disowned by “Them” because of not being one of Them. It can’t get worse than this, can it?

I have spent all my life (28 years) in Ahmedabad, either being witness to or a victim of communal riots that seem to break out at the drop of a hat in a city where community ghettos have long become acceptable infrastructure.

The first major communal riot hit Ahmedabad in 1969. That’s almost a decade before I was born. Yet, for the ruination that it wreaked, and the precedent it set (Ahmedabad saw another three major riots in 1985, 1993, 2002 apart from scores of minor ones), one can’t help but do a flashback to ’69 – a year that set the genesis of communal decadence in Ahmedabad.

I also remember how we – a family of four – survived on tranquilising pills on the nights of December 6 and 7, 1992 and how we – an apartment of 100 – waited with bated breath and a few packets of red chilli powder on the terrace waiting for the mob to arrive... it was defeatism at its best.

Indeed, it’s difficult being a Muslim in Ahmedabad. But, it’s more difficult being a liberal Muslim. If not anywhere, then at least in Ahmedabad.

The travails of being a liberal Muslim...: One can fathom it only if one is. For people (women in particular) like me, who always felt disowned by the community for being “different”, one question dogged my mind: is the liberal Muslim an endangered species in Ahmedabad? Maybe India too?. It pained me to see a Muslim youth wasting productive years of his life in becoming a Quran-e-hafiz and taking pride in calling the rest “kafirs” (while media hype has prevented this word being used openly, essentially it does exist in the innermost thoughts of many an average Muslim). The pain was as severe as the one I felt upon seeing a Hindu creating chasms of communal discord when he could be welcoming his ‘minor’ brethren. Instead, they could both be doing something constructive for their nation, for humanity.

I always asked myself: Why can't the Muslim who turns the world upside down with his passion to fight 'infidels' like Salman Rushdie, not do the same when it comes to condemning Beslan, Godhra (no, it wasn't condemned enough), 9/11, 7/7 (a survey conducted in the UK concluded that 3/4th of British Muslims sympathised with the terrorists) and, of late, 30/10 (New Delhi)? Even as I write this, I recall the happenings of the day. It's just a few days after 30/10 – blasts ripped people-packed areas of New Delhi killing over 50 people. I was told by my editor today do a story on whether Muslims in Ahmedabad would scale down Ramzan Id celebrations (Id falls two days later, Nov 4). The story had to be shelved. Reason? None of my Muslim brethren felt the need to tone down festivities. Said one relatively liberal Muslim to me, "Had the community felt remorse at such happenings ever, it would have been pretty advanced in thought and deeds in this day and age."

Hmmm...not that the Hindus toned down their Diwali festivities either (ironically, Diwali almost coincided with Id, just a day apart), but being a Muslim I choose to introspect first.

True, condemnation is beginning to build up. But it's not enough. A very high-profile human rights activist known for her active role post Godhra riots admitted during a casual tête-à-tête, "Well, Muslims are laidback. They don't realize how much that backfires on them." Apparently, it's more than being laidback. While interacting with two top Muslim businessmen of the city, who have faced huge losses in Ahmedabad riots, I was slightly taken aback when both very diplomatically told me: "We have never faced any problem. Muslims are unnecessarily making an issue out of a non-issue." Such denial is probably what happens when the ethos of a society is ruled by money...

Going back to my research, the topic I chose was a consequence of the questions that frequently arise – not only in my mind but in that of several Hindus too: When Islam is known for the respect it gives to women, why do men have to bring in a bizarre practice like triple talaq? How can a community that fails to uphold its own face (a smiling Zaheera Sheikh on TV, doing a volte face), expect to garner respect, even sympathy, by other communities?

The words of former MP, Ahsan Jafri, who was brutally slain in the 2002 carnage, and whom I interviewed in October 2001, clearly ring in my ears: 'It's indeed shameful that while Muslims form the second

largest populace in the world, their contribution to the world – financial, social or scientific is very little. About time we started applying our minds to bring out the practical aspect of Islam and use it for the betterment of Muslims and the rest of the world.’

Jafri’s murder and the consequent delay in imparting justice, is condemnable beyond words. But it is also worrisome is that despite being an elected Lok Sabha MP, Jafri was disliked by several Muslims because of his ‘reformist’ ideas – gender equality, cutting down on rituals, encouraging mainstream education more than religious education etc. Remember, Jafri won the election on a Congress ticket, knowing very well that his irreligious, Communist ideology will find negligible takers within his community.

Of course, that never sidelined the major question: Why cannot the Hindu accept a Muslim as he/she is? Muslims are not obstructing the progress of Hindus. If there’s one person that the Muslim is probably proving to be an impediment to, it is only the Muslim. Take the Dawoodi Bohras and Khojas (sub-sects of Muslims, with an origin in Gujarat), for instance. They prefer not to be called “Muslims”. Agreed, they follow the priesthood (Syedna Burhannuddin is the head priest of the Dawoodi Bohras; Aga Khan for the Khojas), but also the Prophet Mohammed and Allah. A Dawoodi Bohra woman, working as a research associate at Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, admitted, “Dawoodi Bohras have taken their hands off Sunni Bohras, and vice-versa. There is little unity among Muslims.”

There can’t be a better example than Vadodara-based J S Bandukwala, a physicist by profession, a social activist by passion and a Dawoodi Bohra Muslim by birth. “I am not a reformist, only a Muslim,” he says. Bandukwala ‘outlawed’ himself from the Dawoodi Bohra Jamaat (community), after he refused to bow down in front of the Syedna. “Islam forbids ‘sajda’ in front of anyone other than Allah – not even in front of the Prophet himself. As a true believer of Islam, I could not have possibly done that,” he says.

Incidentally, he faced the wrath of the Hindutva brigade in the 2002 carnage. His house was destroyed; he had to move to the faculty quarters of the M S University, where he presently teaches. Interestingly, after he moved in, the blocks adjoining his have remained uninhabited.

Nevertheless, even the most pessimistic among us would know one basic truth of life: Despite the odds, there is always a way. If there is a will. “To become Muslims,” as Bandukwala puts it, “We don’t need reforms; even following the Quran as it is, will do us a world of good.”

...Hence the project: I sought answers to the unending array of questions that dogged my mind. I wanted to at least raise, if not solve, problems in a different way: through lateral questioning. Hardly anyone has linked the area of reforms within Muslim community to communal hatred, but being a Muslim myself I know how complicatedly both are interdependent. For example, in the riots of 2002, the 20% Muslim-run schools located in western Ahmedabad were left untouched, while everything else Muslim (shops, stalls, larris, homes etc.) was burnt. Interestingly, over 80% of students in these schools are Hindus. Had there been more schools managed by Muslims in Hindu-dominated western Ahmedabad, equations and perceptions may have been different.

I proposed to adopt a completely unbiased approach (even towards, as they say, the “sympathized with” Muslims). I hoped that the findings might awaken a sleeping population of “laidback” moderate faces in the Muslim community, and give them the will to find a way out. And one never knows when the majority lends its hand along the journey and realise what it was missing so far...

How the ghettoisation virus permeated Ahmedabad : Ghettoisation – the shifting of communities from areas inhabited by the dominant community – is almost total in Ahmedabad.

The seeds of ghettoisation in Ahmedabad had sprouted during the riots of 1969, the year which marked the RSS and Jan Sangh’s Hindutva experiment in Gujarat. But it was only after 1990 that the process of ghettoisation took hold of entire Ahmedabad, including the walled city (old Ahmedabad), the industrial mill areas (mainly comprising Dalits who lost employment following the closure of textile mills in Ahmedabad in the 80s) and the middle-class and elite localities.

Apart from the experiments of Hindutva that the Sangh Parivar regularly tried out in Gujarat, the rapid economic progress in the state (termed as “lumpen capitalism” by noted labour researcher Jan Breman, which can now be termed as “capitalism without a human face”) and impractical laws made by the government, led to increasing ghettoisation.

Like political scientist Achyut Yagnik has said, “Gujarat has had no Left movement, no Dalit movement, no tribal movement and no trade union movement. In the absence of such movements Hindutva filled the void with the RSS successfully making political use of religion.”

Communist parties have never been strong in Gujarat. As mentioned before, Ahsan Jafri, a self-proclaimed Communist had to fight the Lok Sabha elections on a Congress ticket simply because he knew it was impossible to get elected in Gujarat on a Left ideology. Again, the trade union in Gujarat has been under total control of the Congress. Unlike Maharashtra there has been no tradition of asserting a Dalit identity in Gujarat and unlike Jharkhand, no tribal movements have ever taken place here.

Until 2002, ghettoisation in Ahmedabad was only residential; thereafter it also became commercial with the total wipeout of Muslim commercial establishments in the western (Hindu-dominated) side of the city.

In terms of residences, while the posh western Ahmedabad is totally Hindu dominated except for a few pockets of Muslims (which too have become unsafe for the community since 2002), eastern Ahmedabad is home to a majority of the Muslim population – over 80%.

The effect of ghettoisation has seeped into every cross-section of Muslim society, to such an extent that top officials of the state government found it advisable to resign rather than continue their work. One such high-level officer known for his honesty, who resigned from the Health department (whose minister then was the rabid Hindu leader, Ashok Bhatt, now the Law minister of Gujarat), said, “Scrutiny of my papers and raids at my house were commonplace. I had to be extra careful to not give the government a chance to recover anything against me.”

Similarly, a top official in the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, remembers the time when the BJP was in power before the year 2000, in the AMC: “I was in charge of the city transport service (Ahmedabad Municipal Transport Service) at the time. I remember how applications of Muslim drivers were cancelled before they could be called for interviews.” Another official in AMC, holding an important post in the education department, took voluntary retirement after the 2002 riots. Asked why, he refuses to comment today.

With BJP taking over reins in 2002 at the state level, the number of

Muslim recruits in the government fizzled out. Of course, it also became difficult to get reliable statistics.

Why ghettoisation could not be curbed

In 1991, the government brought out a law to prevent panic selling of property during riots, called The Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Prevention for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act (1991), popularly known as the Disturbed Areas Act. Under the Act, residents were not permitted to sell their property without the permission of the district collector after an area has been notified a ‘disturbed area’.

But people discovered ways of circumventing it, such as by giving the power of attorney, which saved time and the expenses of transfer fees. Besides, there is no ban on giving out a house on long-term lease. If there is physical transfer of house or property without outright sale, the district administration cannot take legal action.

To top it, the Supreme Court’s judgement in April 2005 which permits housing societies to restrict membership on lines of community and caste, consolidated the already existing ghettoisation in the city. (Ahmedabad already has societies that have started segregated on the basis of caste and community, such as Shilalekh Hindu Society or Navrangpura Muslim Society).

While the whys and the wherefores of ghettoisation in the city has been dealt with and written about endlessly, what was important to know was the wish of the people. Had they ever been asked – even for the sake of taking a fantasy trip – whether they would have preferred to have a cosmopolitan neighbourhood?

Exploring **the will to live together** became an important aspect of my study. Apart from a survey that took into account the mindset and aspirations of the Ahmedabad Muslim (which had a sample size of 50 and which shall henceforth be called Wiscomp survey*), around 20 Hindus (90% upper-caste and vegetarian) and 5 Jains (100% vegetarian) were separately quizzed only on this aspect. The results were startling:

1. 62% of the Muslim respondents said they would choose to live in mixed community localities, had there been no fear of communal violence in Ahmedabad.

2. Presently, 78% Muslim respondents live in Muslim ghettos or pockets (Juhapura, Millatnager, Chandola, Navrangpura, Paldi) or in eastern Ahmedabad which used to have a sizeable Hindu population three decades ago (Kalupur, Dariapur, Shahpur, Jamalpur etc). Of them, 32% were not happy with their current residence. Reasons cited varied from lack of poor civic amenities to wanting to live in a mixed community locality. Half of them actually stated, “I wish to move to mixed community areas or be allowed to live wherever I want”.
3. 33.3% Muslims felt that their food habits do make their Hindu friends/visitors uncomfortable.
4. 60% Hindus and 1 Jain (ie 20%) expressed the wish to live in a mixed community. All the Hindu and Jain respondents live on the western side of the city.
5. All the Hindu and Jains said they have “several” Muslim friends.

City-based sociologists attributed this latent desire of living together to the cultural environment of Ahmedabad – the ‘pols’ (pronounced ‘pole’) – which existed until the beginning of the 80s.

The Pol culture of old Ahmedabad: *Pols* are a unique architectural characteristic of Ahmedabad city. *The Ahmedabad Chronicle* (Vastu-Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design) describes these as residential precincts amid winding lanes which are flanked by densely packed, four storeyed row houses.

The architecture of pols, therefore, induced (voluntarily or involuntarily) different communities to live in the same vicinity. So you had the Hindu-inhabited Dhana Suthar ni pol sharing its walls with the Muslim-inhabited Khiskola pol and Bakar Ali ni pol.

These close-set, multi-community housing systems were meant to encourage interaction between communities. But over time they became soft spots for communal chaos because of their proximity. Gradually, the more affluent Hindus started moving out of these ‘mixed localities’.

However, many of those who left the ‘pols’ continue to miss the culture. “These are people now in their 50s and 60s. They had spent the best

times of their lives – their youth – in *pols*. It is not easy to forget that,” says professor of Sociology at the Gujarat University, Prof Gaurang Jani.

Today, *pols* have either become completely ‘single-community’ or have single-community domination.

Exceptions

Despite complete ghettoisation, three areas in Ahmedabad – the slums of Ram Rahim Nagar along with the slums of Khanpur Darwaza and the middle-class residential apartments of Khanpur – have remained relatively untouched by the virus of communal polarisation that has infected the rest of Ahmedabad.

Hindus being next door neighbours to Muslims may be an alien notion to most Ahmedabadis, but not to the residents of these localities. And more than the communal amity, what strikes you most about these localities is their economic status. The much written about Ram Rahim Nagar Jhopdawasi Mandal is a 23,000-strong slum dwelling of impoverished Hindus and Muslims. The slums withstood four consecutive riots, including 1993 and 2002. Remarkably, the largely Dalit population of the slums also withstood the Dalit vs Muslim wave that was initiated in the mid-80s. Pyar Ali Kapadia, former president of the Mandal points out, “The Dalits here could have easily got lured by monetary rewards, as did many others. But somehow they knew we all had to stick together.” In fact, the chances of bad blood were more between the Dalits and the 8% upper-caste Hindus in the dwelling. Nalini Trivedi, a lecturer of sociology at a city-based college, who conducted a study on the residents in the late 80s, felt that the sense of superiority among the upper-castes did create antagonism at certain times.” Upper-caste Hindus were better employed. Compared to the Dalits who were mostly safai-kamgaars in the municipal corporation, upper-caste Hindus worked as compounders in dispensaries etc. During instances of performing pujas and kathas, if there happened to be interruption by a lower caste member, there were chances of bad blood,” she said. That, in a way, did become reason enough for unity between the Dalits.

The irony of an economically backward group of people shunning communalism became another interesting aspect of the study. Sociologists term the peculiarity of the slum dwellings as a case of

strong economic inter-dependency. Meanwhile, the level of education (rather the lack of it) in the slum dwellers of Ram Rahim Nagar, made it all the more striking

Today, the 70-year-old slums comprise around 15,000 residents, all Muslim except 35. Says Salimbhai, a house painter, “The poor understand each other, therefore live in harmony.”

Despite several contradictions, education as a means to achieve reform was an essential component of the present research. Noted city-based Supreme Court advocate, Hamid Qureshi, quipped, “There are plenty of examples of educated fundamentalists. Despite that, it can be said for sure that education does help broaden perspectives.”

Education

Until the 1993 riots, only 32% of the existing Muslim-run educational institutions in the city had been established. The rest – 68% – were set up in the decade 1993-2003.

I remember talking to a city-based social worker, Afzal Memon who runs the Gujarat Sarvajanic Welfare Trust, an NGO which, as Memon admitted, took interest in education of Muslims only after the riots of 2002. He said, “Muslims have never considered schooling ‘useful’. They would rather spend Rs 100 on a madrasa than a mainstream school.” Memon has started a school after the riots and has set up five centres across the city to provide guidance to Muslim youth on UPSC exams.

At the beginning of the project, I had ambitious plans – to arrive at conclusions after analysis of statistics (government and NGO), interviews of the common as well as illustrious Muslims and analysis of survey results of a self-prepared questionnaire. The last two were not difficult, but the first was. It could be my prejudiced imagination which made me believe that it was the topic of my project that caused government officials in the education department of the Modi government to develop cold feet. Or maybe it’s simply inefficiency, which is synonymous with the government anyway. For, it wasn’t before I did six rounds of the District Education Officer’s (DEO) office and made at least 15 phone calls to the government department that I could get my hands on something substantial.

Nevertheless, the findings within this area of work were rather revealing. I carried out a detailed survey¹, (a story on which was published in *Times of India*, Ahmedabad, Sep 8 2005 – see ‘ Muslims Shift from Madrassa to Mainstream’). I shall succinctly list the most significant findings:

I would say that the communal riots of 1993 and 2002 proved to be an eye-opener for the over 5 lakh Muslims of Ahmedabad. They realised that apart from Allah, mainstream education can help get them out of the communal rut.

1. In a survey of 50 Muslims of Ahmedabad (which shall henceforth be referred to as Wiscomp survey*), surprisingly, 60.9% Muslims cited the lack of mainstream education as the most common reason for the economically weak condition of Ahmedabad Muslims. Only 17.07% cited discrimination on account of religion, as the reason. Reminds me of IAS officer in the Gujarat government, Munir Vohra’s remark, “We are not discriminated against because we are Muslims, but because we are weak.”
2. Of the 59 Muslim-run government recognized private educational institutions in the city, 68% were established between 1992 and 2005.
3. 54% of the respondents felt that religion is a private matter, and should not be taught in schools and colleges. Incidentally, Muslims who have plans to begin universities in the city, however, intend to teach Islamic education along with mainstream education.
4. 74% of respondents felt that mainstream education will get them better jobs while religious education is essential for self-development. This indicates the confusion that prevails in the mind of Muslims undergoing transition. As a social worker told me, “Muslims have not been able to understand the essence of education. They fail to realise that mainstream education also helps in self development, and not only in getting jobs.”

¹* The Wiscomp survey was conducted among Muslims of Ahmedabad. The sample size was 50; males 27, females 23. Age groups included Below 18 (8%), 19-25 (18%), 26-40 (26%), 41-60 (44%), Above 60 (4%). Sunnis in Gujarat (and Ahmedabad) account for the majority in comparison to Shias. This was reflected in the cross-section of the sample, which comprised 80% Sunnis, 20% Shias. 58% were married, 40% unmarried, 2% others (widow/widower/divorced/separated).

In terms of occupation, the sample includes businessmen, professionals, teachers, students, housewives, religious teachers, government servants, private servants, self-employed and in-service skilled workmen (mechanics, drivers etc) and unemployed youth.

5. 10% of respondents have never had Hindu friends because they all studied in schools that only had Muslim students. An unfortunate case considering that most Muslim-run schools in the city are based in the Muslim dominated eastern ghettos.

I remember meeting a group of Muslim and Hindu slum dwellers in the Khanpur locality of Ahmedabad. The seeds of education were not only sown here but had reaped results too. I felt this upon meeting Khwaja Shaikh, a class 9 passout, working as a driver in a private company. Khwaja had 4 sons and 2 daughters. Interestingly, one of the sons is an MBA, the other a pharmacy student, the third a mechanical engineer and the fourth studies in an English-medium school. Of the two daughters, one studies in the city's prestigious St Xavier's school, the other in a leading English medium school. Khwaja told me, "I can't imagine any of them struggling the way I did." True, they all are well-versed in the Quran but can give you tips in entrepreneurial skills or pharmaceutical patents equally eloquently.

Similarly, I met a young lady, Ruby Khan whose sons take regular tuitions in religious text from a maulana, apart from attending a mainstream school. "I insist that maulana saab give translations of the Quranic verses to my sons," she says. (Otherwise the teaching is only in Arabic.)

The findings in education among Muslims flagged one important point: The Ahmedabad Muslim is undergoing a transition – from a self-abnegating, discriminated entity to one that can fight odds by entering the mainstream. The spurt in Muslim-run educational institutions is a sign of the latter. But the fact that most of these institutions are poorly managed and bereft of quality, indicates that much needs to be done. A teacher at the city's largest chain of Muslim-managed schools, F D High School at Jamalpur (Muslim-dominated area in the Walled City) admitted, "I sent my daughter to a school in western Ahmedabad. The quality of teaching is better there." Asgharbhaj Sheikh, a tailor, living in the Chartoda Kabrastan slum area, had a very pertinent point to make when he casually stated, "The only source of 'education' in our area is television," quickly adding, "If not all, at least our women need to be educated." Looks like the seeds are sown – an NGO activist told me – and the evolutionary process has begun.

Introspection:

Irshad Manji, Canadian Muslim reformist: ‘The peer pressure to stay on message – the message being that we’re not all terrorists – seduces us into avoiding the most crucial of jihads: introspection’.

I realized that several of those responsible for this evolutionary process were individuals who picked up the gauntlet thrown by communal forces (including a communal state, a criminal police force and an indifferent society), and decided to take charge of their lives themselves.

Such was 29-year-old Raisuddin Saiyed, a manager at a leading five-star hotel in Ahmedabad. He nonchalantly said, “I knew that as a Muslim, I had to work much more on my survival skills than a non-Muslim.”

Saiyed’s “survival skills” followed in rapid succession: firstly, he switched over to English medium education from Gujarati medium at the college level, started learning computers on the job without dropping out from college (he later went on to get a master’s degree in Commerce) and is currently pursuing an MBA and a diploma in Finance Management.

“The riots of 1993 were the turning point in my life. I was 17 then, and that was the time when the reality of being a Muslim hit me. I knew I had to educate myself enough to stand up on my own feet,” he says. Incidentally, Saiyed never belonged to an affluent family. His father was an out of work mill-worker (affected by the closure of textile mills in the city in the 1980s). “My father could only pay for my school. For college fees, I took up the job of an accountant for Rs 800 a month,” he said.

Charity to hospitals and education which was an alien concept to the Ahmedabad Muslim, who preferred giving donations to madrasas and mosques, suddenly made an appearance. The Iqraa hospital established after 2002 got donations up to Rs 25 lakh from Muslims. While donations for the health and education sectors have mostly come in from non-Gujarati Muslims (the Allana Foundation, Mumbai, for instance), there is a visible change. The Dawoodi Bohra Jamaat’s Raj Hospital (which was revamped with the latest medical equipment in 2002) and Jamali School (established 2003), were both set up largely on donations received from Dawoodi Bohra Muslims based in Ahmedabad.

But the most significant change was evidently the movement to reform traditional religious education. Here's a typical example of the Ahmedabad-madrassa education. Sixteen-year-old Mohammed Altaf is a student of a city-based madrassa for the last four years. He dropped out of school "because madrassa and school hours clashed". When asked the meaning of the traditional greeting of the Muslims, "Assalam-alaykum", Altaf coyly whispers, "It means, may God protect you." The incredulity on the youngster's face is evident upon being told that Assalam-alaykum means 'May peace be on you'. Incidentally, Altaf's teacher Sajid Sheikh shared the same incredulity.

"The day Muslims begin to understand the Quran, they will need less maulanas. The good news is that a segment of enlightened Muslims are taking this crucial aspect of reform, ahead," says Vadodara-based activist J S Bandukwala.

And it was Vadodara that initiated reform in religious education, with the English-medium Farooq-e-Azam madrassa being the turning point. Teachers at the madrassa, which aims to cater to students from English-medium schools, are asked to focus on the interpretation of the Quran and the Hadees. Girls have to go through additional books on the role of women in Muslim society.

Summing up: Some conclusions, derived from this study, can be listed as under:

1. Crises have triggered vision: Unfortunately, until the communal riots occurred, education never figured in the list of most important things for the Ahmedabad Muslim. Whether it's the 68% schools which got established post 1993, the introspection that several Muslims went in for, or the philanthropic streak that Muslims expressed – all happened after the riots.
2. Mainstreaming in terms of education, living and work does dilute prejudices on either side. Says Ruby Khan, a housewife who moved from the Muslim-dominated locality of Jamalpur to the Navrangpura Muslim pocket (located in a Hindu-dominated area), the change she felt was distinct. "None of the neighbourhood children in Jamalpur went to school. My son Alsaaz, consequently, hated school too and his results were affected. Again, he had a lot of misconceptions about the Hindu community simply because he didn't have Hindu friends in the locality! Now, the environment is different; he loves school and he no longer faces the contradictions he did earlier," she said.

But with the polarization that Ahmedabad faces today, children like Alsaz abound. 82% Muslims live in ghettos or the Walled City where education is low, despite 92% Muslim-run schools located in these areas. The reason: Poor quality of education in Muslim-run schools and no inter-communal interaction as Hindu children mostly live in western Ahmedabad and therefore, go to schools there.

Secondly, a lot of Muslims including social workers feel that Urdu-medium schools restrict exposure of Muslims to the mainstream. This notion turned out to be false. It's not as much the language as the level of education that restricts job opportunities. 8% of respondents had studied throughout in Urdu medium. One is unemployed, whereas the rest are daily wagers today. Not because of the medium of instruction but because they all dropped out after class 10. Again, not all who studied in English or Gujarati are faring well in the job market. An international diploma holder (age 27) is unemployed today simply because he only studied till class 10 then opted for the diploma – all in English medium.

The problem, therefore, lies in the fact that a majority of Urdu medium students drop out before secondary school because of the lack of Urdu-medium secondary and higher secondary schools in the city. Moving to a new medium of instruction at the age of 12 (Gujarati, Hindi or English) is tougher than dropping out for most students. Not surprisingly, they choose the easier path.

3. Education is the key to change: That was absolutely clear – Muslims themselves have realized the importance of mainstream schooling. Along with madrasas, which also rose in tune with the insecurity of a singled-out Muslim, schools too came up with equal gusto. The most revealing of all findings was when majority (60.9%) of Muslims, in the Wiscomp survey, said that the economically poor condition of Ahmedabad Muslims was because of the lack of education and not because of a communal bias against them. Only 17.07% cited discrimination on account of religion, as the reason.
4. What's needed: Apart from more education, some basic changes in religious practices can make a big difference. The movement of translating the Quran from Arabic to Urdu or the regional language is a welcome and essential requirement. What is most worrisome for the community today is the hold of the clergy over every aspect of the Muslim's life – matrimony and personal laws to dress code to

what books you should or shouldn't read. If the community needs to progress, it has to realize that the clergy's place is in the mosque and not their personal lives. And that can happen once Muslims understand what the Quran truly says – that Jihad-ul-Akbar (Greater Jihad, or Introspection) is bigger than Jihad-ul-Asghar (Smaller Jihad, or Fight Against Persecution), that the triple talaq finds no reference in the Quran, that the Quran nowhere says that the burkha should cover the woman's face, etc. Like Rashid Shaikh, a city-based educationist lucidly put it, "Muslims should read the translation of the Quran. Once they do that, they will need less maulanas."

To sum up, a few lines from Irshad Manji's book 'The Trouble with Islam Today':

'I call myself a "Muslim Refusenik". That doesn't mean I refuse to be a Muslim; it means that I refuse to join an army of automatons in the name of God. In that spirit, I'm asking Muslims in the West a very basic question: Will we remain spiritually infantile, caving to cultural pressures to clam up and conform, or will we mature into full-fledged citizens, defending the very pluralism that allows us to be in this part of the world in the first place?'

Whether it's the West or it's a city far, far away called Ahmedabad, the trouble with Islam is the same. So is the solution.

Muslims Shift from Madrassa to Mainstream Riots Trigger Mainstream Education among Muslims

The riots post Babri demolition in 1993 and post Godhra in 2002 seem to have ignited a mass movement of mainstream education within the Muslims of Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Of the total Muslim-run educational institutions in the city, 68% came up in the last decade. While there is a question mark on the quality of these institutions, the consciousness itself is a silver lining.

Canadian ‘Refusenik’ Irshad Manji might have spurred an ‘ijtihad’ (‘independent thinking’) in the west. But thousands of miles away, in the city of Ahmedabad, ‘ijtihad’ is creeping in involuntarily. At least the beginning of it.

For a community that has long suffered general exclusion and communal riots, the odds of non-affordability of quality education, prejudice at educational institutions and burden of earning the day’s bread, have always outweighed the essentiality of getting educated. That’s until now.

A vision triggered off by the crisis of the communal riots of 1993 and 2002, seems to have generated within the Muslim psyche of Ahmedabad in the form of a will to enter the mainstream, especially in education (“Mainstream education” here implies education in government-recognized private or government-funded educational institutions).

“Over 90% of Muslims in Ahmedabad are uneducated or semi-literate. Education will open employment prospects for them,” says Afzal Memon, managing trustee of Gujarat Sarvajanic Welfare Trust, an organization that entered the field of education after the riots of 2002 and set up one primary and one secondary school in Ahmedabad.

So it happened that in Ahmedabad city, of the 59 Muslim-run government recognized private educational institutions, 68% were established between 1992 and 2005 (that is, between the communal riots post Babri masjid demolition and those post Godhra). The rest 32% can be said to have come up in a span of over 100 years (considering

that the oldest Muslim-run school in the city Anjuman-e-Islam dates back to 1885). While the number of mosques and madrasas also came up with equal gusto, if not more (though no statistics are available, religious teachers and Muslim social workers endorsed this statement) during this period, mainstream education trudged alongside.

There is, however, one key factor missing in most of these ‘nouveau education centres’: Quality. So, is this recent awakening really helping the community to progress? While the odds are certainly more than the effects, attempts of the community – which comprises 12% of Ahmedabad’s total population (42 lakhs, 2001 census) – to get itself ‘mainstreamed’, are worth a look.

Why Muslims need mainstream education

The lack of mainstream education was cited to be the most common reason for the economically weak condition of Ahmedabad Muslims by 60.9% Muslims, in a random survey of 50 Ahmedabad Muslims, conducted by this writer (henceforth, it shall be referred to as “WISCOMP survey”. Please refer endnotes for a brief on the WISCOMP survey).

This is proved by Javed Ameer’s (of ActionAid) recent report on education in Gujarat: Of the 16% Muslim population of Gujarat just before the 2002 carnage, 2.1% were educated till Higher Secondary (12 yrs of schooling) and only 0.6% till graduation level (or above). A major reason, he states, is limited access to quality education for Muslims, most of whom live in ghettos.

For example, in Ahmedabad, there are 86 government-funded Urdu medium primary schools (till class VII) as opposed to just 1 secondary and no higher secondary school. Because of unavailability of alternative education, a lot of Muslims opt for madrasas.

Another reason is the limited number of job opportunities because of lack of mainstream education. The WISCOMP survey brought out interesting facts:

- 71.4% males dropped out after class 10 or before completing graduation. 50% of them are unemployed, while 50% have an annual income between Rs 3,000 and Rs 50,000.
- 6% males (between 35 to 50 years) dropped out before completing class 10. Of them, 66.6% are daily wagers today.

- 80% males (between 19-40 years) opted for vocational diplomas after class 12. These include unemployed youth and those with incomes between Rs 3,000 and Rs 50,000 a year. (None in the above 3 questions was affected economically during riots)
- 60.9% respondents feel that the average Ahmedabad Muslim is not economically well-off because of the lack of mainstream education. Only 17.07% cite discrimination on account of religion, as the reason.

Does Urdu-medium study restrict employment opportunities?

It is believed that Urdu medium education (even if in government recognized schools) restricts job opportunities in a highly competitive “business English” market. The truth is slightly different. It’s not as much the language as the level of education that restricts job opportunities, as the WISCOMP survey showed.

8% of respondents had studied throughout in Urdu medium. One is unemployed, whereas the rest are daily wagers today. Not because of the medium of instruction but because they all dropped out after class 10. Again, not all who studied in English or Gujarati are faring well in the job market. An international diploma holder (age 27) is unemployed today simply because he only studied till class 10 then opted for the diploma – all in English medium.

The problem, therefore, lies in the fact that a majority of Urdu medium students drop out before secondary school. That’s because there is only 1 govt-funded Urdu medium secondary school and 2 private Urdu-medium secondary schools in the city as opposed to 86 Urdu-medium government-funded primary schools. “Urdu-medium students have to approach Gujarati medium secondary schools for classes 8 to 10. As a result, they find it difficult to cope with secondary-level studies. Most, therefore, drop out,” says Rashid Shaikh, principal of the Gujarati-medium Oriental High School in Mirzapur.

Those who do get admission to the limited secondary and higher secondary Urdu schools do not face problems in acquiring jobs because they learn English or Gujarati as a second subject in class 8. Shamshira Ansari, an MA (she studied throughout in Urdu medium) also topped the HSC board in 1989. She works at the Bombay Mercantile Bank in the city. “I came across plenty of offers including teaching, but took up this one by choice,” she says.

When crises trigger vision...

The importance of mainstream education was realised by Muslims after the 1992-93 communal riots. The carnage of 2002 gave the movement a further boost. Here's how:

Post 1992-93: Ahmedabad-based Sanchetana, the 25-year-old NGO run by noted activist Dr Hanif Lakdawala began Institute For Initiatives In Education (IFIE) in 1994, with the prime objective of creating a meeting ground for Muslims of Gujarat to discuss agenda in education, employment, Muslim reform and inter-community harmony.

IFIE first targeted class 10 dropouts by introducing coaching classes for Rs 20. What began with a group of 45 in 1994 in Ahmedabad, has now spread to cities like Rajkot, Jamnagar, Chotila and Vijapur. "The classes are attended by a significant Hindu population which generates interaction between the two communities," says IFIE team member Anwar Tirmizi.

Falah-e-Darain Educational Society, the city's largest chain of educational institutions established 14 institutions from 1973 to 1992. From 1993 to 2001, 6 new institutions were set up in Ahmedabad city (including 3 English medium schools, a commerce college in Gujarati for girls, 2 vocational training centres) and 4 residential schools in Dehgam (Ahmedabad district). That is a 166% increase in a span of 10 years.

For the first time, English medium was introduced by F D Society that earlier had Gujarati and Urdu mediums of instruction.

In Juhapura, arguably India's biggest ghetto with a population of 2 lakhs, 19 out of the current 22 schools were established after 1992.

Rais Munshi, the 32-year-old principal of Sultan Ahmed Institute, a vocational training institute run by the Sunni Muslim Wakf Committee, revamped the 1954-established Sultan Ahmed Technical Institute which used to conduct tailoring and electric installation courses then. He introduced government recognized computer courses in 1998, English language training in 1999 and fashion design in 2000, at fees starting from Rs 125 onwards.

"Unemployment among Muslims increased immensely after the riots in 1992-93. We felt a growing need to provide them with quality vocational courses, on contemporary disciplines," he says.

Moreover, once bitten twice shy Muslims slowly began rejecting non government-recognized teaching institutes (Islamic or otherwise) which mushroomed after 1985. Says Akhtar Diwan, lecturer in Urdu at the F D Arts College for Girls, “Since these were not government recognized, children could not get admission to secondary classes in government recognized schools. That set a lot of Muslims parents thinking, and gradually takers for the movement reduced.”

This view is endorsed by Sajid Shaikh, a 29-year-old DTP operator cum religious teacher (‘alim’) at Faizan-e-Madina madrasa/Islamic school in the Raikhad area. “Apart from religious training, we also teach basic maths. But people know it does not hold market value as it’s not government recognized. We are therefore thinking of setting up a government-recognized university, where both mainstream as well as religious training will be given.”

Explaining the sudden enlightenment among the community, Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee spokesperson J V Momin, says, “It was a survival instinct; Muslims veered more towards self-employment, at the same time began understanding the need for mainstream education.”

Post 2002: F D Education Society opened 2 new English-medium schools. Among the 15 private Muslim-run schools that got established between 2002 and 2005, 8 began in 2003 – the year after the carnage. A number of new entrants to the field of education emerged, namely The Gujarat Sarvajanic Welfare Trust, Iqraa Trust, Akhil Bharatiya Sadbhavna Trust and the Dawoodi Bohra Jamaat, to name a few.

The Iqraa Charitable Foundation’s plans are more ambitious. Presided over by Maulana Ghulam Mohammed Vastanvi, also Chancellor of Jamiah Islamiyah Ishaatul Uloom, Akkalkuva, Maharashtra, the Trust has planned an entire university, based on GSEB or CBSE syllabus. Budgeted at Rs 70 crores, the Trust has already bought 1 lakh 25,000 sq yds of land near on the Sarkhej-Narol highway in Ahmedabad. It will also house an Islamic study centre for Muslim students. “It can be put in the same category as a Christian missionary educational institution where Christians have special classes on their religious texts,” says managing trustee Yusuf Hakim.

Daunting dilemmas: Amid this fantastic change in the Muslim mindset, one point that continues to worry NGO workers and educationists is

the skepticism about quality education. IFIE director, Dr Lakdawala, notes, “In our state-level surveys conducted on education, we found that Muslims feel since literacy levels are low within the community, mass education should be emphasized more than quality education.”

Besides, Muslim educationists feel that the community has failed to realise that education is as important, if not more, for self-development as for employment. This is revealed from one of the findings of the WISCOMP survey. Respondents were asked, which kind of education – mainstream or religious – can help them in employment and self-development. 74% said both religious and mainstream education are equally important. While mainstream education will get them better jobs, they said, religious education is essential for self-development.

“This reflects the failure of the community to understand the essence of mainstream education. They do not think that education can help in self-development,” says a city-based Muslim social worker who prefers anonymity.

Other problems that afflict Muslim-run educational bodies are:

No detention policy: Rasool Sheikh, former principal of Anjuman-e-Islam school and friend and co-worker of the late Ahsan Jaffri in his reform work, admits that quality of Muslim-run schools is generally not on par with that of their Hindu counterparts. “In order to encourage Muslim children to study, these schools tend to promote even weak students to higher classes. This also happens in the state government-conducted Board exams (SSC and HSC), as the exam centres for students of Muslim schools are generally Muslim schools where ‘no-detention’ is a mutual policy among the management,” he says.

Not surprisingly, Naseem Malvat, a resident of Shahpur prefers to send her son to a Hindu-run school in Paldi. “At least I’m assured of quality education for my child,” she says. So’s the case with Zakira Momin, a resident of Raikhad whose son studies in a school in Navrangpura. Muslim-run schools are closer to Raikhad and Shahpur, than the schools where these two boys go to.

Nepotism: Another important issue affecting quality education is that of nepotism which crops up with most educational institutions set up under the Minority Act. Under the Act, besides a 51% reservation policy

for the said community, appointments of management staff can be made without sanction from a representative of the education department. Says Huma Javed, a lecturer at the Hindu-run L&C Mehta Arts College, who formerly taught at a Muslim-run college, “Quality suffered because the management comprised friends and relatives of the managing trustee.”

This is probably the reason why the Aga Khan Education Society introduced the EMRP (Education Management Resource Programme) in 2003, to improve management bodies of schools and colleges. “It began with 4 city-based Muslim-run schools, including ours. But the programme got shelved mid-way because of internal problems,” says Rashid Shaikh.

AFES authorities were unavailable for comment.

Cocooning: Again, most Muslim-run schools (94%) are restricted to the eastern side (Muslim dominated) of the city. The obvious reason is, that’s where most of Muslims reside (82%: WISCOMP survey); the other reason is competition. A A Shaikh of FDES admits, “It’s not easy to survive in western Ahmedabad. And then, our community is mainly based in the eastern area.”

Critics like Rasool Shaikh and B M Peerzada (a Muslim educationist who runs the Lok Jagruti Kendra, better known as L J Society – a chain of 10 prominent educational institutions in the Hindu-dominated western side) feel that restriction of education to Muslim areas cocoons the community further.

(10% of respondents in the WISCOMP survey have never had Hindu friends “because there were only Muslims in our school.” They all studied in Muslim-run educational institutions on the eastern side.)

“Moreover, the reason for not shifting institutions to western areas is purely monetary – Muslims can be roped in easily for admissions to these institutions, simply because they live there,” says Shaikh.

But the same can be said for Muslim-run institutions (Lok Jagruti Kendra and Aroma educational institutions) in western Ahmedabad (20%). They have Hindu and Muslim students, albeit from the more affluent middle class bracket, with more Hindu than Muslim students simply because western Ahmedabad is Hindu dominated. This can explain the reason behind why these institutions were left untouched

What Muslims want... and what they will get:

A look at some findings of the WISCOMP survey:

- *'Yes, we would have been economically better off had we completed graduation': 85.7%.*

Of these, 83.3% were males, 33.3% females. Interestingly, 44% of these males opted for vocational courses either after SSC or HSC. The reason being, "We had to earn, and vocational courses seemed to be the most practical solution." Today, either they are unemployed or have incomes less than Rs 50,000 per annum. "More education would have helped," is what they all say now.

- *'Mainstream education is more important than religious education for employment as well as self-development': 26%*

Of these, 69% were males, all of whom are above 35 years and working.

The majority – 74% – said both religious and mainstream education are equally important (48% men, 58% women). All of them felt that while mainstream education will get them better jobs, religious education is essential for self-development.

"This reflects the failure of the community to understand the essence of education. They do not think that education can help in self-development," says a city-based Muslim social worker who prefers anonymity.

- *'Religion should not be part of academic study': 54%*
- Religion is a private matter, and should not be taught in schools and colleges, said 55.5% men and 44.4% women.

However, both Faizan-e-Madina and Iqraa Education Society will have Islamic education in their forthcoming institutions.

during the riots, unlike Muslim commercial establishments.

Professor Gaurang Jani, who teaches Sociology at Gujarat University, feels that the odds today are as much against Hindus as against Muslims. "There are schools in western Ahmedabad which only admit students

living within 5-10 kms of the school. Since very few Muslims live in the western part, they cannot access these schools. Secondly, running Muslim schools in western Ahmedabad may also not help in bridging the divide because of the same reason. The best idea is to open quality Muslim schools in eastern Ahmedabad or on border areas.”

Crises that Triggered Vision

Self-introspection, shunning tradition and willing to go mainstream – a handful of Muslims decide to go against the odds and lead by example.

Twenty-nine-year-old Nizamuddin Saiyed started his career as an accountant on a salary of Rs 800 a month. That was in 1994. Today he is the assistant director of sales at a leading five-star hotel in the city and easily earns enough to hire a couple of accountants himself.

Saiyed's story may seem to be the typical rags to riches tale of an enterprising young man. But there is a curious touch to his life – a hint of introspection or even reform, if you will.

“I knew that as a Muslim, I had to work much more on my survival skills than a non-Muslim in order to create a strong economic back-up for myself, in a highly competitive and equally prejudiced market of Ahmedabad,” he says.

“Survival skills” followed in rapid succession: firstly, Saiyed switched over to English medium education from Gujarati medium at the college level, started learning computers on the job without dropping out from college (he later went on to get a master's degree in Commerce) and is currently pursuing an MBA and a diploma in Finance Management.

“The riots of 1993 were the turning point in my life,” he says, “I was 17 then, and that was the time when the reality of being a Muslim hit me,” he says. Incidentally, Saiyed never belonged to an affluent family. His father was an out of work mill-worker (affected by the closure of textile mills in the city in the 1980s). “My father could only pay for my school. For college fees, I took up the job of an accountant for Rs 800 a month,” he says.

Saiyed breathes a sigh of relief today. “Had I not introduced these changes in my life, I might not have survived the aftermath of the 2002 riots.”

Nizamuddin Saiyed's case is exemplary; it illustrates how a community that has been repeatedly ostracised economically and socially can get back on its feet by adapting to the requirements of the market, through introspection and pragmatism.

“Crisis often triggers vision,” says city-based psychologist, Dr Pratima Bhattacharjee. “The realisation (here, cases of indirectly or directly hit Muslim during riots), can be in the form of generating more wealth which buffers the effect of future economic upheavals or in acquiring qualities which would help in blending with the mainstream,” she adds. Dr Bhattacharjee consulted several Muslim patients who approached her with psychosomatic symptoms after the riots. “I advised them to have a positive and less-conservative approach to life and have a vision that can empower them in future crises,” she says.

While Saiyed did not have to face an economic beating to restructure his life, there are Muslims in Ahmedabad for whom the genesis of the vision to introduce change lay in the financial losses they incurred during the 1993 riots. Subsequently, they decided to take the reins of their life in their own hands. Fate was no longer a significant element in the bigger picture of progress which they now saw ahead. The buffer of reform, consequently, helped them tide through the much worse 2002 carnage.

Graphic designer Razak Vohra too belongs to this league of extraordinary people. Vohra faced a loss of around Rs 60,000 when his two flats in the Vadaj area got looted in December 1992. “I faced an economic crunch which I had never imagined before. But, while those friends of mine who too were affected in the riots trudged on as they did earlier, I decided to understand how I can prepare myself for the worst,” reminisces 50-year-old Vohra. “I knew that communal riots in Ahmedabad are a never-ending occurrence. If a Muslim has to live in this city, he or she needs to have a back-up,” he adds.

So while the elder son Asif was sent to Kuwait (“to make his career without hindrances”), younger son Sajid was encouraged at academics. “We made sure that Sajid got the best of schooling. To provide for his study, my husband started working 12 hours a day – double than what he earlier used to,” says wife Salma, who also started working at a nationalised bank.

Sajid is an aeronautical engineer today. His gratitude towards his parents’ vision is evident from his beaming face. “I was seven years old then, yet could feel the financial pressure that my parents were undergoing. I knew I had to focus on my studies because that would make my parents happy and also bring stability to my life,” the 19-year-old says.

Consequently, the riots of 2002 did not make life as difficult for the Vohras as the 90s. “Though my office in Behrampura was burnt, causing me a loss of Rs 3 lakhs, I was comfortably placed. My elder son was already well-settled in Kuwait and the younger one had a bright future ahead.”

‘We need education and hospitals!’

Commercial polarisation and frequent economic upheavals during communal riots is one of the most common reasons for the average Ahmedabad Muslim being economically weak today. This was the answer given by 24.4% respondents in a survey of 50 Ahmedabad Muslims done by this writer (henceforth it will be referred to as “Wiscomp survey”). However, 60.9% Muslims felt that it was the lack of mainstream education that was responsible for the sorry plight of Muslims in the city.

Perhaps it was this self-realisation that made a section of Muslim individuals traverse the path of the likes of Nizamuddin Saiyed and Razak Vohra.

Suddenly you had Muslims setting up schools with the same pace and enterprise as they did madrasas until a few years earlier (68% Muslim-managed educational institutions were established between 1992 and 2005, that is, between the communal riots post Babri masjid demolition and those post Godhra. The rest 32% can be said to have come up in a span of over 100 years, considering that the oldest Muslim-managed school in the city Anjuman-e-Islam dates back to 1885).

Charity to hospitals and education was an alien concept to the Ahmedabad Muslim, who preferred giving donations for religious purposes. “There is a niche segment of elite Muslims who are altruistic, but their altruism is directed more towards madrasas and mosques,” says Afzal Memon, who entered the field of education after 2002 with The Gujarat Sarvajanik Welfare Society.

Memon’s words are endorsed by a number of Muslim educationists and healthcare workers. At the same time, they do feel that the communal riots seem to have changed the picture, albeit slightly.

Says Yusuf Hakim, managing trustee of Iqraa Charitable Hospital and Iqraa Education Society, which is in the pipeline, “It was after the communal riots in 1985 that Muslims realised they needed hospitals.

For Iqraa hospital, established in 2002, we got donations from Rs 1lakh to 25 lakh from Muslims.” While donations for the health and education sectors have mostly come in from non-Gujarati Muslims (the Allana Foundation, Mumbai, for instance), there is a visible change. Brothers Shoeb and Salman Momin, both city-based businessmen are a case in point. “We’ve always believed in helping out poor patients and students. And after 2002 we decided to donate to hospitals and schools apart from individuals,” says Salmanbhai, whose brother is known to have donated a significant amount to the Iqraa Hospital.

Other examples include the Dawoodi Bohra Jamaat’s Raj Hospital (which was revamped with the latest medical equipment in 2002) and Jamali School (est 2003), both set up largely on donations received from Dawoodi Bohra NRIs, with roots in Ahmedabad.

Certainly not lost in translation!

But the most significant change is evidently the movement to reform traditional religious education. Especially so, with 92% Ahmedabad Muslims stating that they were encouraged by their parents to pursue religious education as opposed to 86% who were encouraged by parents to pursue mainstream education.

Mehrunnisa Desai, a noted social worker in the city who runs the NGO, Ahmedabad Muslim Women’s Association, believes that the dominance of the clergy over the Muslim community is largely because Muslims are unaware of the essence of Quran. “None of the madrasas translates the Arabic verse into the mother-tongue of the pupils,” she says.

The example of 16-year-old Mohammed Altaf illustrates Desai’s point. Altaf is a student of a city-based madrasa for the last four years. He dropped out of school “because madrasa and school hours clashed”. When asked the meaning of the traditional greeting of the Muslims, “Assalam-alaykum”, Altaf coyly whispers, “It means, may God protect you.” The incredulity on the youngster’s face is evident upon being told that Assalam-alaykum means ‘May peace be on you’. Incidentally, Altaf’s teacher Sajid Sheikh shared the same incredulity.

“The day Muslims begin to understand the Quran, they will need less maulanas. The good news is that a segment of enlightened Muslims are taking this crucial aspect of reform, ahead,” says Vadodara-based activist J S Bandukwala.

And it was Vadodara that initiated reform in religious education, with the English-medium Farooq-e-Azam madrasa being the turning point. Teachers at the madrasa, which aims to cater to students from English-medium schools, are asked to focus on the interpretation of the Quran and the Hadees. Girls have to go through additional books on the role of women in Muslim society. Says Zuber Gopalani, trustee of Islamic Study Centre in Vadodara, “We encourage such madrasas because correct interpretation of the religious text will minimise fanaticism. Unfortunately in Gujarat, this is not understood.”

But understanding is seeping in gradually. While religious teachers like Shaikh are still caught between “learning Arabic first, then trying to understand it”, there are Muslims like Ruby Khan, a housewife in Ahmedabad, who insist on translation. “A maulana comes home to teach Quranic verses to my two sons. But when I saw that he did not bother to explain those texts, I insisted upon it,” she says, adding, “Unless Muslims do not shun religious conservatism and adopt a pragmatic outlook, it will be difficult for them to find a place in this world. Islam is a very logic-based religion, but sadly few Muslims understand it.”

Few, but slowly increasing. Reminds us of John Lennon’s priceless words, “You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one...”

Islands of Sanity

“When Gujarat burned, there was unshakeable peace at Ram Rahim Nagar. It was an unmatched picture of communal harmony... I wish a bright future for all of you and hope that your example of togetherness will help in bridging differences in this country”.

Lakshmi Mittal, excerpt from a letter (translated from Hindi) to the residents of Ram Rahim Nagar Jhopdawasi Mandal on March 10, 2005.

The slums of Ram Rahim Nagar along with the slums of Khanpur Darwaza and the middle-class residential apartments of Khanpur, are the only three localities which have yet remained relatively untouched by the virus of communal polarisation that has infected the rest of Ahmedabad.

Hindus being next door neighbours to Muslims may be an alien notion to Ahmedabadis, but not to the residents of these localities. And more than the communal amity, what strikes you the most about these localities is their economic status. The much written about Ram Rahim Nagar Jhopdawasi Mandal is a 23,000-strong slum dwelling of impoverished Hindus and Muslims. Impoverished to such an extent, as to make the president of the Mandal, make a rather acerbic remark, evidently directed towards the media and the NGO brigade: “We welcome the appreciation, the awards and the visits of intelligentsia to Ram Rahim Nagar. But would anyone care to help us with some money as well?”

But before we take a look at these exceptional cases, a peek at the extent of ghettoisation in Ahmedabad...

Ghettoisation – the shifting of communities from areas inhabited by the dominant community – is almost total in Ahmedabad. The seeds of ghettoisation in the city had sprouted during the riots of 1969 itself, the year which marked the RSS and Jan Sangh’s Hindutva experiment in Gujarat. But it was only after 1990 that communal polarisation took hold of entire Ahmedabad, including the walled city (old Ahmedabad), the industrial mill areas (mainly comprising Dalits who lost employment following the closure of textile mills in Ahmedabad in the 80s) and the middle-class and elite localities.

Again, until 2002, ghettoisation was only residential; thereafter it also became commercial with the total wipeout of Muslim commercial establishments in the western (Hindu-dominated) side of the city.

In terms of residences, while the posh western Ahmedabad is totally Hindu dominated except for a few pockets of Muslims (which too have become unsafe for the community since 2002), eastern Ahmedabad is home to a majority of the Muslim population (82%: WISCOMP survey. The remaining 18% are restricted to the Muslim pockets of Paldi and Navrangpura Muslim Society in western Ahmedabad).

Take for example, Juhapura – arguably the largest Muslim ghetto in India with a population of over 2 lakhs today. Till 1992, it was looked upon as a down-market area by elite Muslims living in posh western Ahmedabad localities like Law Garden, Paldi and Navrangpura. By 2002, the population of Juhapura shot up to over 2 lakhs.

Similarly, till 1985, the now Muslim-dominated areas of Jamalpur and Raikhad had a 60% Hindu population. It was after the anti-reservation riots of 1985, which had taken a communal turn, affluent Hindus started moving out of ‘lower middle-class’ areas in eastern Ahmedabad (walled city) like Jamalpur, Raikhad, Kalupur, Shahpur etc to classy localities in western Ahmedabad. For the growing population of Muslims who had no choice but to stay back, these areas started getting more cramped.

Apart from the experiments of Hindutva that the Sangh Parivar regularly tried out in Gujarat, the rapid economic progress in the state (termed as “lumpen capitalism” by noted labour researcher Jan Breman) and impractical laws made by the government like the Disturbed Areas Act (termed “unworkable” by noted city-based human rights activist and advocate Girish Patel), failed to curb ghettoisation.

I. Ram Rahim Nagar: A paradigm case

It’s a slum dwelling of around 23,000 destitute and mostly uneducated Hindus (40%) and Muslims (60%), estimated to have one unemployed person per house. Its claim to international fame is its incredible track record of maintaining absolute peace during communal riots, four times in a row – 1969, 1985, 1992 and 2002. These were riots which otherwise had the whole of Ahmedabad and Gujarat baying for the blood of “the other”. As Natwarbhai Rawat, president of the Ram Rahim Nagar Jhoddawasi Mandal (the governing body comprising a 21-member

executive committee), says, “We don’t have degrees that they (the rest of Ahmedabad) have, but we have humanism which they don’t.”

The genesis of humanism in the Mandal perhaps began the day it was established in 1973 by three men of three different faiths – Madarsingh Thakor (Kshatriya Hindu), Amarsingh Gandhi (Sikh) and Gulabbhai (Muslim). Since then, there has not been a single instance of communal disharmony amongst the residents. A Hanuman temple right opposite a dargah, stand witness to their fortitude. “During riots, we barricade the slums to prevent outsiders who might incite our people. We organise entertainment programmes during curfew hours to avoid vulnerable minds from getting distracted,” says vice-president Abdulrazak Badami. The post of president of the Mandal alternates between a Hindu and a Muslim every year. Badami further adds, “Our shops are open even during curfew hours to cater to the needs of residents in the vicinity.”

Sociologists term the peculiarity of Ram Rahim Nagar as a case of strong economic inter-dependency. However, what’s more striking about the slum dwelling is its composition and level of education (the lack of it, rather).

Dalit-Muslim bhai-bhai.. in 2002 too:

Of the 40% Hindus residing in the slums, only 8% belong to the upper-caste; the rest are Dalits. Most of the Dalits worked in the textile mills of Ahmedabad until they were rendered jobless following the closure of the mills in the 1980s. Half of these marginalised workers got employed with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation as safai kaamdars, around 1985.

Nalini Trivedi, professor of Sociology at the city-based H K Arts College did an extensive study in 1985, on the composition and character of Ram Rahim Nagar. “Communal amity amidst a Dalit-Muslim population was not unusual till the 1980s. However, that the slums remained peaceful even in 1992 and 2002, is remarkable.”

A quick look into history will throw light onto Trivedi’s statement.

Dalits were victims of anti-reservation riots in Gujarat in 1981 and 1985. However, by the mid-1980s, Dalits along with STs and OBCs were lured by the BJP under its Hindutva campaign, because they formed 75% of the state population, hence a potential pillar of support

to the BJP. Subsequently, in the riots following Advani's rath yatra in 1990, Dalits and OBCs were set against Muslims.

Dalits had all the more reason to become the lumpen elements under the Sangh Parivar's umbrella, considering that they formed the chunk of marginalised workers who lost their jobs following the closure of textile mills in Ahmedabad in the 1980s.

As Pyar Ali Kapadia, former president of the Mandal points out, "The Dalits here could have easily got enticed by monetary rewards, as did many others. But somehow they knew we all had to stick together."

'We don't need no education'

Pink Floyd couldn't have got a better example for their classic. The residents of Ram Rahim Nagar don't quite understand the logic behind education making us human beings any better. And somehow you are enticed into believing them.

Leelaben, a vegetable vendor and mother of two, doesn't send her children to school. "They work in a gas agency. We can't afford to educate them," she says. President Rawat has studied till class 4 and ex-president Kapadia till class 10. The 23,000-populated dwelling has just one school, run by the municipal corporation. "We use common sense rather than theoretical knowledge and bookish values. Common sense tells us that living together is profitable to all," says Kapadia, while Trivedi observes, "Illiteracy is high, but the economic interdependency of both the communities on each other has made them realise the importance of humanism without having studied it in books."

At the same time, they do realise the inevitability of degrees in getting a square meal. "If we had some money, we would make sure that our children go to nearby schools," says Rawat, hoping to get financial help some day.

II. Khanpur Darwaza slums

They may not be as remarkable as their Behrampura counterparts, yet do give a lesson in inter-communal living to the rest of the city.

Khanpur Darwaza is one of the 12 fortifications of the city, established by Sultan Mahmud Begada in the 15th century. In the 17th century,

Sayyed Hasankhan Barcha, an official of Emperor Aurangzeb, established the Khanpur village on the Sabarmati river be, which gave the darwaza its name (ref: Ratnamanirao Bhimrao's Gujarat nu Patnagar: Amdavad). Over the years, the 'village' (now slums) became home to migrants and citizens belonging to the lower economic strata.

Today, the 70-year-old slums comprise around 15,000 residents, all Muslims except 35. Says Salimbhai, a house painter, "The poor understand each other, therefore live in harmony." A more practical rationale is given by Pravinbhai, the care-taker of the solitary temple inside the dwelling, who says, "We steer clear of trouble."

Economically as well as educationally, they are a shade better than their counterparts at Ram Rahim Nagar. Since the slums are located in the upper middle-class locality of Khanpur, a lot of women find employment as domestic help, whereas most men are autorickshaw drivers, daily wage labourers or employed in private companies as drivers, peons, etc.

A bal anganwadi has been running inside the dwelling for the past 20 years. Around 25% people send their children to school, most municipality-funded, some private. The locality has examples like Khwaja Shaikh, a driver in a private company, who has left no stone unturned in educating his six children. "One of my sons is an MBA, another a pharmacist, third a mechanical engineer. Both my daughters attend English medium schools," says the class 9-passed Shaikh.

III. Khanpur

The irony of Khanpur is that it is part of the Shahpur ward of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation – an area known to break into a riot at the drop of a hat. However, the tiny locality of Khanpur is considered to be one of the safest in the city, and cosmopolitan. Well, relatively at least. While it is slowly becoming Muslim-dominated (since Shahpur is a violence-prone area, and now Muslim-inhabited as well), a substantial number of Hindus, Christians and Parsis who have been living together along with Muslims in the apartments of Khanpur, have no desire to move to another locality.

Take the majestic 1966-established Firdaus Flats, for example. Of its 68 members, 54 are Muslims, 7 Parsis, 3 Hindus, 2 Christians and 1 Jain.

Kantilal Gaekwad, a retired employee in private firm, has been living in the building since 1969. “I have seen all the major riots of Ahmedabad. Yet, the thought of shifting has never occurred to me, as I always wanted to live in a cosmopolitan culture,” says the 62-year-old, who has a Dawoodi Bohra family as his next door neighbour.

Jasmine Flats, placed right next to Firdaus, is now largely Muslim inhabited (a couple of Hindu doctors have clinics here, so does a Jain chartered accountant). Till 1992, Jasmine was also home to an equal number of Hindus, as Muslims. “Hindus shifted to western Ahmedabad because they had progressed economically and wanted bigger homes. It had nothing to do with safety because Khanpur has always remained unharmed during riots,” says Naushad Lightwala, secretary of Jasmine Flats.

Most of these residents can be placed under the upper middle-class bracket, some fairly opulent as well. Therefore, the rationale of living together being the functional need of people belonging to the lower economic strata, gets substituted by various others.

Closed doors: “It’s a peculiar area,” says Patel, “Somehow the secluded nature of the apartment culture, led neighbours belonging to different communities remain disinterested in each other.”

This reason may not be entirely true, as the apartment culture in the rest of the city remains fairly interested in whether neighbours belong to a particular faith, whether they eat non-vegetarian food etc.

Hotel hub: Others feel that being a ‘hotel haven’ (around 6 premier hotels, including Le Meridien, a five-star hotel and Cama Park Plaza, a four-star hotel, are located within stone’s throw), Khanpur has not been affected even during the 2002 carnage. Top-level officials in the hotel industry attribute the invincibility of the locality to the likes of Mumbai-based Usman Balwa (owner of Le Meridien) and Jehangir Cama (owner of Cama Park Plaza), whose clout had forced the otherwise-absconding Gujarat police to make security arrangements in the area. Since people have not felt insecure, they have stayed put.

Multi-ethnicity: But it’s the third reason, as given by women’s rights activist Sheba George, which seems to make most sense. Multi-ethnicity. George, a Christian, is married to a Muslim; both live in the Hindu-inhabited locality of Bodakdev in western Ahmedabad. “Our neighbours

are Punjabi, Maharastrian and Rajasthani Hindus. I think the multi-ethnic character of the place, combats communal sentiments,” she says.

In the case of Khanpur too, this reason seems to hold water. In Firdaus Flats itself, of the three Hindus two are Maharastrians, including Gaekwad. Likewise, the Muslims are an almost even mix of Dawoodi Bohras, Khojas and Sunni Bohras. Jasmine Flats, which adjoins Firdaus, is largely Muslim inhabited but houses clinics of a couple of Hindu doctors (one Gujarati, another Bengali). Then there’s the Hindu-dominated Royal Apartments right opposite Firdaus which again has a couple of Christian families.

Indeed, Hindus are moving out of the locality “not out of fear, but because they have options” says a Hindu resident of Khanpur. The rest, like Gaekwad, prefer to “live together”.

Living Together: Ram Next Door to Rahim...

A survey conducted among Hindus and Muslims in Ahmedabad reveals that most of them prefer living together than within their own community. With the riots of 2002 adding commercial ghettoisation to the already established residential ghettoisation, this hope seems to be a far cry.

It would be rather utopian to imagine Hindus and Muslims as next-door neighbours in Ahmedabad. For a city that has become completely polarised – comparable with an apple pie cut into two pieces by a rather gluttonous child, with the bigger one for the Hindu majority and the smaller one for the Muslim minority, and the rest of the minorities sprinkled all over as garnish – it comes as a surprise when people in Ahmedabad (Hindus and Muslims) expressed the hope to live in a mixed community some day.

This came about in the findings of a random survey of 50 Ahmedabad Muslims, 20 Hindus (90% upper-caste, 90% vegetarians) and 5 Jains (all vegetarians) conducted by this writer (henceforth, it shall be referred to as ‘Wiscomp survey’). The following facts were revealed in the survey:

- 62% of the total Muslim respondents choose to live in mixed community localities, had there been no fear of communal violence in Ahmedabad. Reasons cited: “I would like my children to get the best of all religions” to “I have a cosmopolitan outlook”.
- Presently, 78% Muslim respondents live in Muslim ghettos or pockets (Juhapura, Millatnager, Chandola, Navrangpura, Paldi) or in eastern Ahmedabad which used to have a sizeable Hindu population three decades ago (Kalupur, Dariapur, Shahpur, Jamalpur etc). Of them, 32% are not happy with their current residence. Reasons cited vary from lack of poor civic amenities to wanting to live in a mixed community locality. Half of these have actually stated, “I wish to move to mixed community areas or be allowed to live wherever I want”.
- 33.3% Muslims have felt that their food habits do make their Hindu

friends/visitors uncomfortable.

- 60% Hindus and 1 Jain expressed the wish to live in a mixed community. All of the Hindu and Jain respondents live on the western side of the city.

All the Hindu and Jains say they have “several” Muslim friends.

All of these views and wishes come as a contradiction to the existing scene of complete communal polarisation in Ahmedabad and also to the April 2005 Supreme Court order permitting housing societies to restrict membership on lines of community and caste (termed as “unconstitutional and retrogressive” by city-based lawyer and human rights activist Girish Patel). Especially so, when societies in Ahmedabad have started segregating themselves on the basis of caste and community (Shilalekh Hindu Society or Navrangpura Muslim Society, for example).

Well, as former professor of sociology at Gujarat University Dr Edwin Masihi, who has been actively involved in conducting sociological surveys for long, says, “Every survey has a margin of error, especially if it deals with controversial questions on volatile issues.”

Having said that, one can consider a certain percentage of the respondents’ replies as politically correct, if not phony. Yet, giving the benefit of the doubt to the rest, it becomes interesting to find out the possibility of a Hindu resident have a Muslim neighbour next door, some day.

But before that, just a brief look at how the now well-known phenomenon of communal polarization in Ahmedabad, spread from 1993 (post Babri Masjid riots), to 2002 (post Godhra riots) and now.

How the ghettoisation virus permeated Ahmedabad : Ghettoisation – the shifting of communities from areas inhabited by the dominant community – is almost total in Ahmedabad.

The seeds of ghettoisation in Ahmedabad had sprouted during the riots of 1969 itself, the year which marked the RSS and Jan Sangh’s Hindutva experiment in Gujarat. But it was only after 1990 that the process of ghettoisation took hold of entire Ahmedabad, including the walled city (old Ahmedabad), the industrial mill areas (mainly comprising Dalits who lost employment following the closure of textile mills in Ahmedabad in the 80s) and the middle-class and elite localities.

Again, until 2002, ghettoisation was only residential; thereafter it also became commercial with the total wipeout of Muslim commercial establishments in the western (Hindu-dominated) side of the city.

In terms of residences, while the posh western Ahmedabad is totally Hindu dominated except for a few pockets of Muslims (which too have become unsafe for the community since 2002), eastern Ahmedabad is home to a majority of the Muslim population (82%: Wiscomp survey. The remaining 18% are restricted to the Muslim pockets of Paldi and Navrangpura Muslim Society in western Ahmedabad).

Take for example, Juhapura – arguably the largest Muslim ghetto in India with a population of 2 lakhs today. “It was looked upon as a down-market area by elite Muslims living in posh western Ahmedabad localities like Law Garden, Paldi and Navrangpura. That was until 1992. The riots in 1992-93 changed it all,” says Mehrunnisa Desai, director of the Ahmedabad Muslim Women’s Association, an NGO based in Juhapura. In fact, till 1985, Juhapura had a mixed population of around 30-50,000 of Hindus and Muslims mainly belonging to the lower economic strata.

Similarly, till 1985, the now Muslim-dominated areas of Jamalpur and Raikhad had a 60% Hindu population. It was after the anti-reservation riots of 1985, which had taken a communal turn, affluent Hindus started moving out of ‘lower middle-class’ areas in eastern Ahmedabad (walled city) like Jamalpur, Raikhad, Kalupur, Shahpur etc to classy localities in western Ahmedabad. For the growing population of Muslims who had no choice but to stay back, these areas started getting more cramped.

“At that time while the ‘paghdi’ (illegal non-refundable deposit) for a one-bedroom house was around Rs 3 lakh in the walled city, houses with the same area were available for sale in Juhapura for Rs 40,000,” informs Ibrahim Shaikh, a social worker in Juhapura. That’s when an exodus of Muslims began, and thus began the creation of India’s biggest ghetto.

By 2002, the population of Juhapura shot up to over 2 lakhs and the cost of houses escalated from Rs 40,000 to anything between Rs 1 lakhs and 25 lakhs.

“Juhapura has a total of 240 societies of which 50 were started after 2002. Also, 100 new flat schemes came up after the riots. Muslim sects

of Dawoodi Bohras and Khojas who so far lived in localities which, until 2002, had never been affected during riots (Saraspur and Maninagar respectively), had no option but to shift to this ghetto,” informs Shaikh. Around 100 families from the Dawoodi Bohra Saifee Society in Saraspur moved to Juhapura after 2002. So did elite Muslims like Akbar Divecha, a retired justice of the Gujarat High Court, whose home in the upmarket Law Garden area in western Ahmedabad was attacked in 2002. Today he prefers to remain mum on the issue but is visibly not happy in moving to a ghetto.

Why ghettoisation could not be curbed: Apart from the experiments of Hindutva that the Sangh Parivar regularly tried out in Gujarat, the rapid economic progress in the state (termed as “lumpen capitalism” by noted labour researcher Jan Breman) and impractical laws made by the government, led to increasing ghettoisation.

Commenting on the Wiscomp survey results, Patel says, “I do not think these are politically correct replies, unless these were public figures. Yet, while there is a will among people to live together I don’t think it is possible, looking at the extent of ghettoisation and even the Supreme Court now validating it.”

To prevent panic selling of property during riots, the state government invoked The Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Prevention for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act (1991), popularly known as the Disturbed Areas Act. Under the Act, residents were not permitted to sell their property without the permission of the district collector after an area has been notified a ‘disturbed area’.

But people discovered ways of circumventing it, such as by giving the power of attorney, which saved time and the expenses of transfer fees. Besides, there is no ban on giving out a house on long-term lease. If there is physical transfer of house or property without outright sale, the district administration cannot take legal action.

“The Act was never workable,” says Patel. “When security is of prime concern, no one cares about the law. To top it, the Supreme Court’s judgement in 2005 made ghettoisation official,” he adds.

Is living together wishful thinking: “It is,” says professor of Sociology at Gujarat University, Gaurang Jani, “but it’s not baseless. It’s more

evident among the older generation that passed its youth in the 1960s and lived in mixed communities in Ahmedabad, especially in pols. They have not left those memories behind.”

The Pol culture of old Ahmedabad: Pols are a unique architectural characteristic of Ahmedabad city. The Ahmedabad Chronicle (Vastu-Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design) describes these as residential precincts amid winding lanes which are flanked by densely packed, four storeyed row houses.

The architecture of pols, therefore, induced (voluntarily or involuntarily) different communities to live in the same vicinity. So you had the Hindu-inhabited Dhana Suthar ni pol sharing its walls with the Muslim-inhabited Khiskola pol and Bakar Ali ni pol.

But a culture that was meant to encourage interaction between communities, instead created soft spots for communal chaos because of the close-set, multi-community housing. Gradually, the more affluent Hindus started moving out of these ‘mixed localities’. But, like Jani says, many continue to miss the culture.

Sharad Desai, a 50-year-old businessman, shifted to the posh Ambavadi area in western Ahmedabad in 1984. Until then, he lived in Panchbhaini-pol in the walled city. While the pol he lived in was Hindu-inhabited (upper-caste mainly), Muslims lived right opposite. “Muslims and Hindus frequently visited each others’ homes. I often shared the food thal with my Muslim friends. I really miss that,” says Desai, who wishes to live in a mixed locality if he had the choice and if security was not a concern in Ahmedabad.

Incidentally, 90% inhabitants of Panchbhaini-pol were non-vegetarians. “There were some Jain families but they always maintained a distance, and do so even today,” says Desai.

Food habits: Which brings us to the Wiscomp survey which indicates a lot of Hindu youth who wish to live in a “cosmopolitan culture”, but at the same time, feel apprehensive about the idea of living next to a “non-veg eating neighbour”. Rachna Shah, a homoeopath is a Jain residing in a Hindu-inhabited locality of Satellite in western Ahmedabad. “Being Jains, we would never want to live in a mixed community. It’s about food habits more than religion. Even non-veg eating Hindus are not allowed.” Ironically, Shah has “a lot of Muslim friends”, has practiced in the Muslim-dominated Behrampura area and is currently

working at Mariam Hospital, managed by a Muslim trust. “I have no communal feelings against Muslims,” she says.

Contrarily, Jani feels that much hue and cry is being made about food habits mainly because the number of vegetarians in Ahmedabad is as such very low. “I feel the communal feeling is as much due to religion, as with food habits. Vegetarianism is a feature of upper-caste Hindus. Like the Muslims, the Dalits, OBCs and STs eat non-veg food. Moreover, there are only 25% upper caste Hindus in Ahmedabad and only 2% Jains. Since almost all of them are concentrated in western Ahmedabad, one can see this shunning of non-vegetarian residents in those areas.” That apart, it is common knowledge (though unendorsed) that non-vegetarianism is rampant even among upper-caste Hindus. Muslims and Hindus relishing plates of mutton chops and bheja fry at roadside stalls on the Sarkhej-Juhapura road, is a common sight every evening.

So are food habits more reason for intolerance than religion? Nazim Sayyed (name changed), a 35-year-old man who lived under the pseudonym of “Kumar” for one and a half years at the Hindu-inhabited Mangalya apartments in Paldi, waives it off as a sham. “I was new to Ahmedabad in 1998 and couldn’t get a decent accommodation. Being used to the cosmopolitan culture of Mumbai I did not want to live in a Muslim ghetto. To get a decent residence, I did change my name but not my lifestyle. I continued eating non-vegetarian food and no one objected because no one knew I was a Muslim!” he smirks.

Lifestyle: Yet another important hindrance to mixed community living in Ahmedabad can be the lifestyle of Ahmedabadis. A study called ‘Social Engagements of Intellectuals in Civil Society’, was undertaken as part of Gujarat Harmony Project, initiated by CARE in Gujarat in 2003. In that, 610 professionals belonging to different religions, from six cities in Gujarat including Ahmedabad, were interviewed. One of the objectives of the study was to sensitise civil society by examining the form and extent of their social engagements in various groups and organizations.

According to the study, 94% of the professionals say they get opportunities to come in contact with members of other religions, though 87% say it was out of professional duty. Reasons like social activity is 5%, religious celebration is 0.5%.

Prof Masihi who analysed the survey, feels that the lack of social interaction between communities has played a major role in ghettoisation.

Meanwhile, Patel finds the idea of mixed localities having ever existed in Ahmedabad, incredulous. “Even in pols, you would never find Hindu and Muslim families as next door neighbours. Hindus lived in one cluster of houses; Muslims in another. Meaning, there has never been inter-communal living in Ahmedabad. And whatever little social interaction existed between communities then, was substituted by commercial interaction later.”

Exceptions: The slums of Ram Rahim Nagar (60% Muslims, 40% Hindus) and Khanpur Darwaza (35 Hindus living amid 18,000 Muslims) and the middle-class residents in Khanpur (apartments are known to have Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians and Parsis living as next door neighbours) are probably the only examples of inter-communal living in Ahmedabad. “Slum residents belong to the lower economic strata, a segment where communal harmony is usually more prevalent. That’s because there are strongly inter dependent on each other for earning their daily bread. Moreover, the feeling of economic rivalry increases as one goes up the economic ladder,” explains Masihi.

“We’ve never felt unsafe, nor faced nuisance from neighbours,” says Kantilal Gaekwad, a resident of Firdaus Flats in Khanpur since 1969. Gaekwad being of Maharashtrian origin may dilute the incredibility of the example, as apart from one Gujarati Hindu living in the building the rest are Maharashtrian Hindus.

Probably that’s one of the reasons why Dr Hanif Lakdawala and his Christian wife Sheba George, both social workers, have remained unharmed despite living in the ‘forbidden territory’ of Bodakdev (Hindu-inhabited, western Ahmedabad).

“Our neighbours are multi-ethnic Hindus – Punjabis, Maharastrians, Rajasthanis,” says George. She feels that the will to live together can overcome the seeming impossibility of the idea. “It is a possibility and a necessity, if we want to maintain a socio-cultural setting. After all, every 11th person out of 100 in Ahmedabad is a Muslim; at some point in life, one has to interact with them.”

But looking at examples of Hindus being attacked in trying to save Muslims living with them, mixed communities seem a far cry. “It’s not

possible. I remember the time I was threatened to be burnt when I tried to save a Muslim cobbler in Khadia, where I earlier resided,” says Patel.

Even Hamid Kureshi, a Supreme Court advocate who has been residing in the Hindu-inhabited Swastik Society since 1951. He’s the only Muslim in the society comprising 70 flats. His house was burnt twice – in 1969 as well as in 1993. “Yet, there’s a vast difference between my Hindu neighbours then and now. While the earlier ones offered help during riots, the newer lot remains indifferent. But I don’t blame them; after all, even Hindus are attacked while trying to save Muslims,” he says.

It could take a renaissance before the two communities start living together in Ahmedabad. Before that, all they need is the will to do it.

Facing the Odds

A questionnaire that looks into the mind of the

Ahmedabad Muslim

Where does the average Ahmedabad Muslim place himself or herself on the social and economical ladder? A questionnaire to understand the psyche of the Muslim citizen was conducted. The sample size though small, attempted to cover as many sub-sects, vocations, ages and areas of residence as was possible during three months. And, to say the least, the findings were rather revealing. A short report:

About the sample: The size was 50; males 27, females 23. Age groups included Below 18 (8%), 19-25 (18%), 26-40 (26%), 41-60 (44%), Above 60 (4%). Sunnis in Gujarat (and Ahmedabad) account for the majority in comparison to Shias. This was reflected in the cross-section of the sample, which comprised 80% Sunnis, 20% Shias. The Sunnis included sub-castes Sunni Bohra, Shaikh, Sayyed, Ansari, Ghanchi, Kadri, Pathan, Memon, Mansuri and Sipahi. The Shias included sub-castes Dawoodi Bohra, Momin and Khoja.

58% were married, 40% unmarried, 2% others (widow/widower/divorced/separated).

In terms of occupation, the sample included businessmen, professionals, teachers, students, housewives, religious teachers, government servants, private servants, self-employed and in-service skilled workmen (mechanics, drivers etc) and unemployed youth.

METHODOLOGY AND PROBLEMS

A questionnaire (in English and Gujarati) covering segments on Education, Work and Housing, was given out at random to Muslims from each of the five zones of Ahmedabad city (North, South, East, West, Central).

The main problem, if it can be termed as such, could be the political correctness of the respondents. This was particularly true of questions that could prompt an ideal rather than an honest answer. For example, “Have you felt an urge to receive religious education over the years?” or “If you take prayer breaks at work, has it resulted in reduction of clients or a feeling of antagonism among members of the majority community?”

FINDINGS

The questionnaire sought to look at three important areas within the Muslim community: Education, Work and Housing.

EDUCATION

The segment on education aimed to answer questions such as,

- a. How does the Ahmedabad Muslim perceive mainstream education vis a vis religious education? An ActionAid report states that of the 16% Muslim population of Gujarat just before the 2002 carnage, 2.1% were educated till Higher Secondary (12 yrs of schooling) and only 0.6% till graduation level (or above). Therefore, it becomes important to know the view of the Muslim in this regard.
- b. Has the urge to delve deeper into religion increased after the increasing communalisation in Ahmedabad?
 - Currently studying: 18%
 - Dropped out before class 10: 10%
 - Completed class 10, but dropped out before graduation: 34.14%
 - Took up vocational courses after class 10 or 12: 12.19%

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

1. *'The lack of mainstream education is responsible for the poor economic condition of Ahmedabad Muslims': 60.9%*

Of these, 68% are males, 32% females. Only 17.07% cite discrimination on account of religion, as the reason.

It was this realisation that probably led to the spectacular rise in the number of mainstream school that Muslims opened between 1992 and 2005. (Of the 59 Muslim-run government recognized private educational institutions, 68% were established between 1992 and 2005. The rest 32% can be said to have come up in a span of over 100 years, considering that the oldest Muslim-run school in the city Anjuman-e-Islam dates back to 1885.

2. *'Yes, we would have been economically better off had we completed graduation': 85.7%.*

Of these, 83.3% were males, 33.3% females (including the total 10% who dropped out before class 10). Interestingly, 44% of these males opted for vocational courses either after SSC or HSC. The reason being, “We had to earn, and vocational courses seemed to be the most practical solution.” Today, either they are unemployed or have incomes less than Rs 50,000 per annum. “More education would have helped,” is what they all say now.

3. ‘Mainstream education is more important than religious education for employment as well as self-development’: 26%

Of these, 69% were males, all of whom are above 35 years and working. It indicates that the importance of mainstream education was realised by them once they faced competition in the employment market.

The majority – 74% – said both religious and mainstream education are equally important (48% men, 58% women). All of them felt that while mainstream education will get them better jobs, religious education is essential for self-development.

4. ‘Religion should not be part of academic study’: 54%

Religion is a private matter, and should not be taught in schools and colleges, said 55.5% men and 44.4% women.

5. ‘My parents did not encourage me to take mainstream education in my childhood’: 14%

This comprises 71.4% males. Of the 14%, 57% belong to the age group 16-25 years. “Poor economic condition” is the reason cited by the males; females say “parents did not feel it’s necessary for us to study”.

Only 8% (equal number of males and females) were not supported by parents for religious education.

6. ‘My children will certainly be encouraged to take mainstream education’: 96%

Of course, it’s only the respondents with children who were asked this question and who comprise the aforementioned 96%, but the 14% too, when asked informally, said that they will not hinder their child’s pursuit of education.

7. *'We have not felt an urge to delve deeper into religion, after the 1992 or 2002 riots': 46%*

Of these, 51% are males, 39% females. This could be taken with a pinch of salt for two reasons: Firstly, of the total respondents 16% never took religious training themselves as children, but send their children to a madrasa or maulvi. Secondly, the number of madrasas in Ahmedabad have increased with the same pace as Muslim-managed schools, between 1992 and 2005. For example, madrasa Faizan-e-Madina had just one centre until 2001. Thereafter, it opened an additional 4 branches. "In rural areas, where our work is focussed, the urge for religious education has deeply increased," notes social activist Sukhdev Patel, whose NGO Gantar works on education in 105 villages of Gujarat.

8. *'We have experienced communal bias at school/college': 20%*

All of these (50% males, 50% females) belong to the age group of 18-35, that is, they were students at some point of their lives between the years 1992-2005. Biases cited range from communal attitude of teachers to not allowing participation in extra-curricular activities.

Summary

1. Contrary to general perception, the percentage of Muslims with 2 children is the highest – 30%. The majority of them (77.7%) belong to the new generation, that is, all are less than 40 years of age. Only 6.8% have 5 or more children, and they all are above 50 years of age.
2. Muslim women happened to be better educated than men. In comparison to males, there are less female dropouts (40%) and more female graduates (62.5%).

Firstly, it is important to note that 30% of unmarried women were in their late 20s. They chose to remain unmarried "unless we get a suitable match". All of them are career-oriented, with graduate or post-graduate degrees.

WORKPLACE

The segment on workplace aimed to focus on discrimination at the

workplace and the economic condition of the average Ahmedabad Muslim.

- 48% work in the private sector
 - 77.4% work in eastern side of Ahmedabad
 - 9.75% are unemployed
1. *“We are comfortable working with Hindus, and so are they”*: 78.7% said the former; 75.7% the latter

The remaining approximately 25% don't have Hindu co-workers. Only 1 of the 50 Muslims said that he was removed from his job following riots in 1969, after which he began his own business in the Muslim-dominated Dariapur area.

2. *“Wish we could move our workplace to western Ahmedabad: 16.13%*

Incidentally, 80% of these feel that in moving to western Ahmedabad, they will face a lot of problems during riots.

3. *“The average Muslim of Ahmedabad is economically in bad shape”*: 82%

Interestingly, 60.9% blame the lack of education within the community for it, and only 17.07% attribute it to communal bias. Other significant reasons include, conservatism and unwilling to be part of the mainstream.

Summary: Overall, Muslims do not feel discriminated against at their workplace. In fact, 64% say they never felt any antagonism from Hindus even when they took prayer breaks during work, nor has their clientele been affected because of this. Again, a very small percentage attribute the poor economic status of Muslims to communal discrimination.

Apparently, a lot of Muslims seem to have come to terms with the polarisation of Ahmedabad, having no choice but live in 'down-market' Ahmedabad.

LIVING TOGETHER

This was a rather interesting segment as it focused on a very hypothetical

question: Does the Ahmedabad Muslim want to live together with Hindus?

- 82% Muslims live in eastern Ahmedabad
- 78% do not live in mixed localities, ie. They have only Muslim neighbours
- 96% are non-vegetarians

1. *“I wish I could live in a mixed locality”*: 62%

Of which, 61.3% are males. Reasons include “I would like my children to have the best of all religions” to “I have a cosmopolitan outlook”

2. *“I would like to live in a different locality”*: 32%

Of these, 18% say they are “not happy” in their current locality, while 14% say they “have no choice but to live here”. Poor civic amenities and recurrent rioting, are reasons for their answer. 37.5% of them want to shift to “more developed” western Ahmedabad, but 50% feel it’s “not possible”. Reasons include polarisation of the city, Muslims are not given homes in western side, we will have to sell our homes at a price less than the current market price

3. *“We have Hindu friends and visitors who come home”*: 84%

Of them 23.8% say that the frequency of their visits has gone down since the riots of 2002. While 33.33% of the total sample stated that food habits (non-veg) are looked down upon by their Hindu friends, none belongs to the 23.8% people.

Summary: Despite the evident will to live together, sociologists in the city feel it’s but wishful thinking now. “It is wishful, but not baseless thinking,” says professor of Sociology at Gujarat University, Gaurang Jani. “It’s more evident among the older generation that passed its youth in the 1960s and lived in mixed communities in Ahmedabad, especially in *pols*. They have not left those memories behind,” he adds. His worry is endorsed by human rights activist Girish Patel who illustrates the April 2005 Supreme Court order permitting housing societies to restrict membership on lines of community and caste, and calls it “unconstitutional and retrogressive”.