

# Forgotten Worlds

A tale of transit camps

## I

Transit camps are a world of their own. They possess an irony that extends from their naming to their very continuity in time. Transit camps are rarely temporary. They begin as an act of desperation, created as a fragment by some desperate councillor and sustained by a few NGOs. As funds run out, even the NGOs leave. Located miles away from the main road, these camps are soon forgotten. They seem to operate in a different space and time.



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Ekta Nagar is a sandwich of 45 flats in three sombre tiers. The walls outside are cobwebbed and dusty. Even the dust looks aged. Cycles lie huddled. A few tired graffiti offer some signs of commentary.

They seem drawn by children. The municipality makes Kafka's castle seem simplistic. Men talk of mythical cheques they have tried to obtain. They claim that the clerks seek to swallow (*hajam*) cheques belonging to survivors. The municipality creates a labyrinth of problems the survivor talks about with awe, talking of paper chases and xerox trails which lead nowhere. For the survivor, the municipality is a form of power which demonstrates their powerlessness. The municipal corporation tyrannises these little *nukkads* (corners), these habitats eking, surviving and dreaming of a gutter line and a tap connection.

What connects the camps to reality is corruption; the corruption of the municipal corporations and the violence of the goons who disallow any act of progress, any little repair or improvement, in case they lose control of their turf. The names of the areas bring out the irony of disaster relief. These areas are named in hope, or maybe cynically, as Ekta Nagar, invoking unity, Citizen Nagar, summoning entitlements.

Waste is ubiquitous. Stale plastic and stiff cloth substitute for grass. Dirty quilts lie desperate for a touch of the sun. The only signs of hope are dogs, content on the road, and kids curious about visitors. Governance, as the World Bank would describe it, is non-existent. Corruption and the desperate games it creates become the only chain connecting survivor and state. As Rafiquebhai, a guide, said, "These groups are twice cursed. When the riots came, they targeted the lowest strata of Muslim society. Their lives were unfortunate before the riots, their lives are miserable after the riots." It is as if poverty conspired with the carnage to create a vulnerability that leaves little hope. Ten years, and almost nothing has happened in these areas. Only children are proud of school and list out their classes as honour lists. Maybe education is a way out.

Curiosity becomes an obscene partner to witness as you wonder what these groups of houses consume. Wayside shops are a good marker of surplus in subsistence. The first sign is packaging. The little shop at Ekta



Nagar camp was listless. It has a string of gutkha pieces, adding to the cheerfulness. The variety of gutkha is one sign of the consumer revolution. There is Captain, Mahak, Guava, Zatpat, Mijaj. Gutkha becomes the favourite brunch and timepass of the camps. There are no cigarettes on the shelf, just a few packets of bidis. A Bubbalo packet in pink offering a chewing gum that lasts. A few bars of Ghadi soap. One tired box of Maxo mosquito coil. One hardly sees currency; just kids scurrying with coins, asking for Tarzan, a *papdi* mix (snack). The shop is bare, almost apologetic in its sparseness, almost empty of hope.





## II

The camp at Citizen Nagar is deep in the shims. As we walk through the lane, one tries not to exaggerate the surreal bareness of things. One realises exaggeration is obscenity and rage sounds sentimental. But as one walks the lanes, one sees the streets are now gutters, black with a filthy, polluted water one has to skirt past. There is no foliage of any kind, just one palm tree pretending it is part of a barren postcard of poverty. The smell eats into the mind, and yet we are unprepared for what we encounter.



One sees a wasteland of garbage, a Borobodur of waste piled high like a monument to 2002. It is the *tekra* (hill) sewage farm, run by the municipal corporation. Its scale humbles the spectator. Dogs and humans scurry on its surface, foraging, scavenging a bit of value. Fires smoulder all over it, acrid to the eye. There is also a dump for chemical waste. The guide remarks that it is bearable in winter but in summer the dump catches fire and the smell and the sight is unbelievable.



The visitor feels like an archaeologist at a monument, a memorial to waste, junk, and garbage smouldering like the people. Bulldozers come in every day and vomit their new pile of indifference while kites keep a vigilant eye. It is almost as if the shit of the city is piled on the survivor, saying this is what we think of you. A walk suggests a war zone; the only touch of colour is bits of plastic and shreds of cloth that punctuate the way. A resident tells us that the dump is over 10 years old. “It was less than waist-high when I came.” It is twice the height of Humayun’s tomb now. A young boy in tight jeans flies a kite featuring Aamir Khan’s *3 Idiots*. The senses compete to stun you. The dump is colossal in scale, the smell eats into you. As a monument to waste in every form, it seems a cynical tribute to the wasted survivors of 2002, a statement that life goes ruthlessly on. So colossal is the obscenity that it does not allow exaggeration. A young boy stops us and asks curiously: “Will your visit change anything?”, implying our forgetting is only another form of waste, the wasted hope of people who believed in the state.







The size and the scale of the dump leave you in awe. It is like an inverted heritage site selected by a surreal UNESCO to mark the violence and carnage of 2002. It is obscene, it is everyday and it grows like a guano dump as machines add to its size. A sculpture of obscenity, it needs no exaggeration as it leaves you helpless, wondering whether this mass of waste is a heritage site of city development, a monument to every form of decay, shredding even hope. Stray dogs run on it in happy freedom. It is a 10-minute walk from a locality aptly called Citizen Nagar. Words like governance, citizenship, progress and rights appear silly before this monument to indifference.

The visitor is asked the same question in different variants. It is as if each response is a dialect of their emotions. One greets us with cynical indifference, saying: “Take your pictures, nothing will change. Your pictures only freeze time.” Another asks shyly whether there is a chance of a gutter line. A group stares



angrily, saying: “Why do you come? You know nothing is going to happen.” One senses their anger has been bleached by waiting. In fact, survival wavers between an ethnography of waiting and the task of moving on. Words like temporary and transit acquire a density of permanence. The kids walking cockily around have known no other life. Corruption contaminates survival. Visit after visit to the corporation yields nothing. Hope piles on like garbage. Only hope cannot be composted. It turns acid with waiting. One realises that for many, waiting has made them sluggish; it has created a form of dependency, a sense of sloth, as the magic of the state and the promises of politicians have failed to work. Life becomes hopeless, a habit, where each day repeats its arid self. The heroism of subsistence and survival has few storytellers.

### III

There is something about the alchemy of the camps, the unstated pain and suffering which asks questions of those who visit it. Is one a spectator? Is a spectator a consumer of disasters? A voyeur of the new histories of pain and suffering. Is he an activist living off the compost heaps of suffering? Does he use suffering to promote himself? Is he a consumer of disaster sites advocating a distant humanitarianism or suffering disaster fatigue which asks you to switch off?

There are however the more critical roles of the survivor and the witness. As witness, one provides testimony. As survivor, one rebuilds a life. In rebuilding oneself, one rebuilds a society and hope in the norms and dreams of the society. A witness provides a testimony and testament for justice. One needs an ethics of memory even in forgetting. Yet what one sees in the camps is not communalism or the weak liberalism of the secular. One sees the crime of indifference, of silence, which refuses to listen or even let the survivor speak. The murderer and rapist now find new company in the citizen who is silent, who feels suffering is the prelude to obsolescence, a fact to wish away or sweep under the table with new buzzwords like progress or development.

## IV

The ethnography of camps demands a range of reflections. One has to admit that merely visiting them, sitting with survivors, walking around, is not living in them. To understand that, one needs to make a leap of imagination, to understand lifeworlds devastated by violence. As one visits different camps, one realises that there is a gradient of pain and suffering. Everyone begins with the story of the Carnage but then tells the story differently. As one compares the difference, one is faced with uneasy questions: Is waiting for help, or even justice, a form of addiction? Does waiting corrupt the giver and the receiver? There are other questions. How does a society where so many ordinary people were murdered, raped and looted live so easily with itself? One sees few traces of guilt. In fact, one sees explanations of the act as if history has at last redeemed itself; one hears the litany of the same arguing that Godhra validated their violence. One feels that a society has canned the event and moved on blissfully. Gujarat, as a society, has washed its memories away.



One is reminded of a sign on the way to Himmatnagar. The tropic of Cancer passes through it. There is a map of the line tracing its trajectory through the town. For a moment one forgets that it is an imaginary line. It almost feels real. One can trace its way across the town. The imaginary line seems more real, more real than the riots are to Gujarat. It is as if facts, reports, dissolve before the refusal to listen. But ‘the real’ hits you as you enter the camp.

We move to Sardarpura, Mehsana. Twenty-two families live together as a clan. As a resident explains, we live together as a clan (*parivar*) but stay separately as families (*ketumb*). There is the solidarity of a camp, where all members are tied together by ancestry and by the memory of one event. They call themselves the Sheikh *parivar*. Twenty-two families, 110 individuals. They all remember that 33 of the family died after the Godhra *haadsa* (tragedy).

History becomes a backdrop to the problems of everydayness. Central to everything is work and the paucity of employment. This is a clan of labourers who work in the fields or who are hired for daily work, contracts



for house painting. They also serve as rickshaw-drivers. Most of them do “colour *kaam*”. They whitewash, distemper, plaster houses. They complain that there is little to do. Stories of hunting for work weave into narratives of 2002. They talk matter-of-factly. When work comes, they earn Rs 50 a day, of which Rs 12 goes in transport to Himmatnagar. They complain that life is tough. Water is a problem. There is water but it is only adequate for cleaning and washing. It is not drinkable. Jaundice seems rampant in the area and medical debt becomes burdensome. Clean water has to be bought in bottles at Rs 20 a bottle. Medicines are expensive and sickness adds to unemployment.



As the workers gather around, they talk of *dhanda-pani*, the need for work and the lack of capital to start any small enterprise. They are unemployed for 15-20 days of the month. Hunting for daily work is also expensive. One spends Rs 20 a day hunting for work, whether one gets it or not. Survival becomes difficult. They see no romance to it. They feel like a forgotten fragment. “No one comes here. No *netas* [politicians] visit the camp.” The government is of no help. They complain that their houses are slapdash. The AFM charitable trust which gave them this plot built the base. It was a mound, a skeleton to which they added as life went on. They have no papers to claim that this is their land. One of them claims that some other villagers had offered them land, as they work their fields. But the offer was in fragments and they chose to stay together.

They talk of Baserabibi. Her husband, a labourer, died during the riots. She was left with three children. Her children are 12, 14 and 17 today. Two of them work and one goes to school. But they see school as a sideshow with no facilities and no effort. She had no job, she was not literate. For the members, as daily workers and survivors, work is history and they feel that the history of 2002 has kept them from work. *Dhanda* (work) in any form dominates their minds. Without livelihood, survival, even in the solidarity of a clan, becomes difficult. Time gets carved into daily units, emptied further when there is no work. The past unfolds behind them but the future seems truncated. Yet there is a confidence that

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justice will come, even if work is erratic, *inshallah*. They state proudly that 31 perpetrators of the Sardarpura massacre have been sentenced. But the appeal is still on.

Initially, the conversation is all about prices and budgets. Their greater worry is education. Education is expensive. To go to school in town, costs Rs seven one way. Annual school expenses, including fees, stationery and books, add up to Rs 2,000. The local school offers no future. Students feel frustrated and unprepared to transfer to other schools. They lack the skills and the attitude, they feel incompetent to proceed. There seems to be no future without competent teachers. The conversation of the young turns to *badla* (revenge). They feel frustrated that the riots blocked their future twice, once as Muslims, once as workers. Their question is: “How can we move on when we cannot move ahead?” They mention the fact that citizenship seems difficult.



The riots and the story of the riots appears as an aftermath to the story of everydayness. The members of the Sheikh family were *mazdoors* (labourers) working on a farm. Initially, the Patels, who they worked for, assured them that they were safe. Such a trust in the Patels made them unprepared for what followed. “They exploited us but we did not know that they would harass and torture us. We were sitting targets. The Patels had prepared for the attack. Halogen lamps lighted the space around us. Our houses are tiny and huge volleys of stones smashed into us from the big house above. They must have been collecting them. There was no escape. Some of them hid in a cabin built by the Indira Awaas Yojana. As the attacks proceeded, a police van drove into the area. However, it did not stop. That became a clear signal to the Patels that they could do what they wanted with us. If the police had stopped that day, 33 of our family would be alive. They had chemicals which ate into the walls and chewed our skins. It is difficult not to feel that the violence was planned.” They add wistfully: “Today we have constables to protect us.”

As we leave, an older woman comes and holds our hands. She is dumb but enacts an eloquent mime. She blesses us, a smile tracing a line across the webbed face.

## V

We drive past Himmatnagar. Our two guides, who are Muslims, talk of the problems the riot has created. They mention systematic targeting, referring to the way rich shopkeepers had been targeted. They then talk of the two kinds of indifference. They talk of administrative surveys (*shaasans*) which map, inquire, collect and move on callously. Then they refer to the dominance and indifference of the Patels in the area. Whether they are Chaudharys, Kadava or Leuva Patels, they are anti-Muslim in attitude. They added that land is a huge temptation for Patels. The power of land overcomes any hesitation. “The Patels always want to acquire the piece of land next to theirs.” Consolidation of land is a constant itch. They felt that what diverts a society against the Muslims is the rabidness of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the organisational skills of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Rafiqsaab, our guide, is an old Janata Dal activist. He mentioned that the RSS has established 123 institutions, each specialising in one aspect of social life. “One organisation would focus on students, one on peasants. There is one just for lawyers. Every segment has a special unit.” Rafiqsaab, who has worked in many areas, added that the patterns of riots almost behave like waves of a business cycle. A riot emerges and flattens out Muslim livelihood and business. The Muslims rebuild again and as soon as this grows, another riot emerges to flatten it out. Rafiq added: “Look at the years ’47, ’69, ’81, ’92, 2002; each flattened the economic foundations of Muslim livelihood. I do not know whether they are correlations or causations but it is time we read the patterns of riots.” He added that the systematic nature of riots is present in discrete facts. The 2002 riots saw the presence of a new chemical that eats into skins, even into house surfaces. It comes in little bottles and was almost ubiquitous during that time. Deep down, he noted, the VHP has changed the climate by changing attitudes and mentalities. The tribals were more than obvious as perpetrators. The VHP’s role in strategising the tribal areas into a new domain needs to be understood.

Rafiq added that the rules of the game have changed. Any protest or complaint is seen as defiance. “The police implicate you in false cases, turning law into a nightmare rather than a procedure for justice.” Rafiq was shrewdly reflective. He said that the odds are stacked against them. Poverty, violence, the riots as disaster and the climate of hostility turn the Muslim into a vulnerable figure. Poverty, minoritarianism and marginality are potent inflictions. “But the Muslim has to think of himself as Muslim and citizen to break through. Waiting and fear will not help; agency is needed to propel him out of his situation. Unfortunately, democracy turns ironic in its electoralism and the law becomes a labyrinth. To stay, citizens and witnesses require a different courage.”

## VI

We move to a small camp of 16 families living together in a three-storeyed, half-built house. They are members from different villages. They remember violence in capsules. They said that the village in which they stayed was not violent till outsiders taunted the villagers with bangles. Some people did protect them. One cited the case of a child that a Bania hid. She was in a room from where she could watch the violence.



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Her friends had to stifle her cries so that she would not reveal herself. Such a memory brands you, scalds you. Otherwise, life seems better at this camp.

The buildings are badly built, even rudimentary as structures. People assemble the rest like an absent-minded jigsaw puzzle. The corporation is the villain here and con men fleece people, promising them below poverty line cards. “They took 100 rupees from each of us and never came back.” The houses have not been allotted to them. They have been asked to pay Rs 30,000 per unit. “Where can labourers get that kind of money?”



The Muletti camp has 27 families. The houses are at least somewhat more substantial. Sewing kits grace the houses, conveying handiwork and stability. Somehow the machine signifies everydayness beyond the riots. We sit in a drawing room with kitschy furniture, the number 786 (considered auspicious in Islam) prominent on the walls. Many survivors explain that they came from small hamlets where they were, at the most, two or three families. Chances of survival were slimmer. A gathering of women talk of the past.

Zubeida talks of the day. There was to be a wedding. The trousseau was piled up on beds. It was all burnt. Worse, the anger extended to the dead. Bodies, over two months old, were brought out of coffins and burnt. What continues to smoulder is fear and anxiety. A lot of them sold their plots of land and fled. Fear creates a market for land. Fear sells real estate. Sometimes riots seem to be a real estate manoeuvre, a hunger for land at any cost, at any place.

Their narratives are pained but nuanced. Anyone who helped, Bania or Adivasi, is singled out for grateful mention. One of them mentions how the Thakur who otherwise exploited them hid them in the fields. However, he was pressurised by other villagers and asked to move them.



Sakinabibi, a woman of 65, bursts in. She runs back to her house and returns carrying a large photograph of her husband. She tells us: “When they could not find my husband, they stabbed his picture.” She holds up the picture to show two large rents, scars in the picture, wondering what kind of people could do such a thing.

The narratives move to trends and comments rather than stories as concrete nuggets. They talk with sadness yet with a dignified resignation. They cannot go back to the villages, even to reclaim objects, as the Patels threaten them with further violence. They talk of the anarchy and chaos of escape, the fight for survival when families abandoned someone and then spent agonising moments searching for lost ones. Sakina talks of a *miya bibi* (couple) who abandoned their child in panic. “*Beta phak diya* [They left their son behind].”

Past and present merge in their narrative. Things are better. The only real complaint is the stagnating water in the rains and the waste disposal. Yet there is also the everydayness of trauma. Trauma refuses to go away. “My child sleeps with me, waking up again and again screaming. The violence never goes away.”

Looking around, one senses that the land on which they stay is barren or rugged. Our guide, a woman, shrugs it off, pointing to a fortress in the distance. Time almost seems like a sandwich. One can pick the slices of time one wants to fill it with.

The women gather to review the past. They explain that not everyone was violent. Parmars and Rajputs in their areas were not. Who they feared were Adivasis and the Bajrang Dal. Their stories become a chorus as they echo a sequence of how they fled, abandoning their houses, hiding in the fields, watching the looting, and waiting for help. No one came to help. In fact, the police stopped people from entering the area, creating a cordon for violence.

Memory however cannot compete with files, as files only recognise official memory. Pain and trauma do not qualify till they are medicalised. Even here people are fair, saying: “*Dukaan ka paisa mila, makaan ka nahin* [we

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got compensation money for the shop but not the house].” There is little rancour. The “Godhra *kaand* (incident)” seems or appears like an impersonal force of history, the outside, which tore up their village lives. While Rajputs and Parmars receive thanks, the Patels are remembered with fear. One of them even mentions how the sarpanch reassured them of safety in his wily way. It is the Adivasis, they said, who were the instruments of violence.

An old man with a hearing aid signals desperately that he wants to speak. He says: “My son is in jail. Can you do something?” The young man was picked up after Godhra and is in Kolkata jail. The father is too poor to visit him. He has no work. His eyes plead. “He is 25 years old. Allah will bless you if you do something.” Hope still sticks tenaciously to this barren wasteland.

