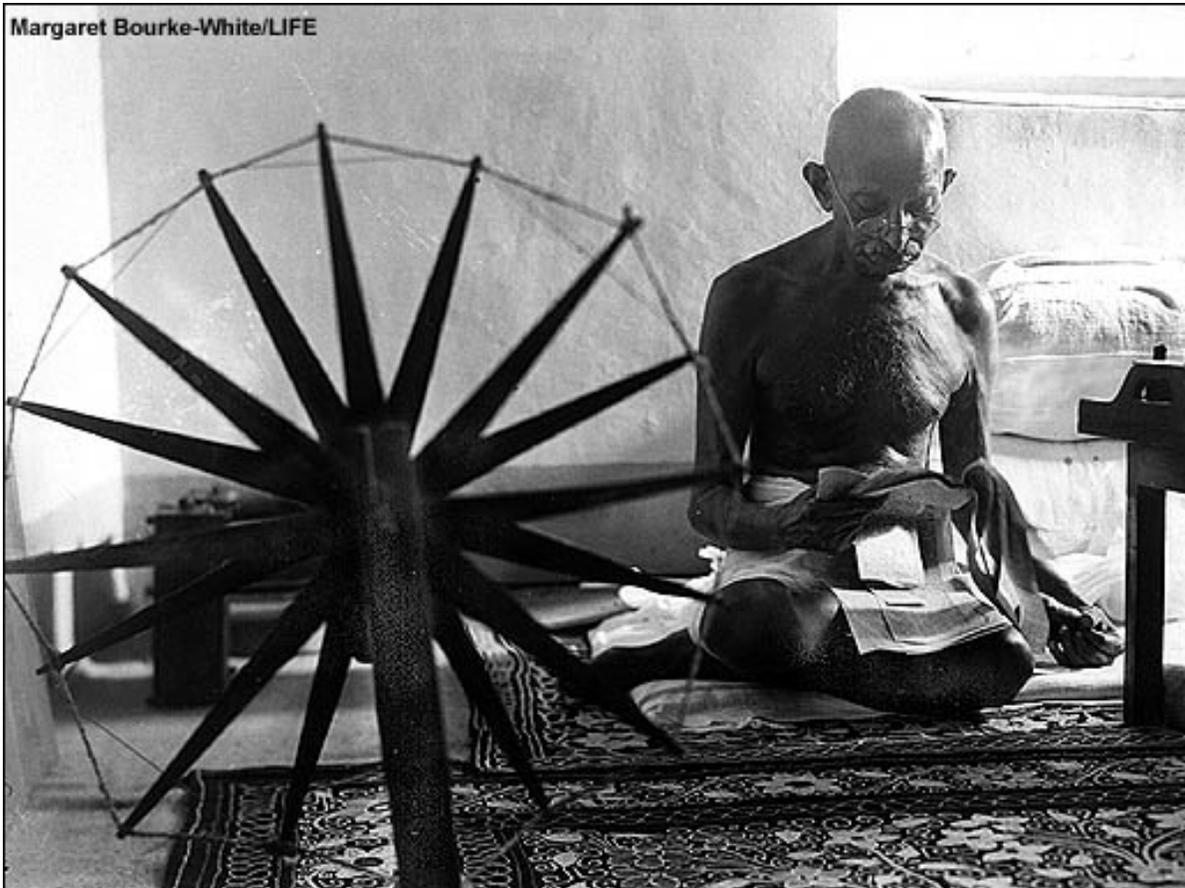


Margaret Bourke-White/LIFE



Still Gandhi's India Despite Hindu-Muslim Conflict

By Beth Duff-Brown

AHMADABAD, India – Mohandas Gandhi's wooden spinning wheel still stands among the simple throw pillows where he once sat cross-legged, threading cotton, receiving world leaders and promoting his vision of a unified, secular India.

Today, just beyond the whitewashed cottages of the independence leader's ashram, across a dry riverbed where sacred cows graze under the searing subcontinent sun, Muslims and Hindus have turned on one another with a ferocity not seen in a decade.

The handful of elderly men who live among the lush gardens at Gandhi Ashram can see the smoke from burning homes and stores. Police sirens disturb their daily prayers.

The violence in Gujarat, Gandhi's home state where he founded his ashram, has claimed more than 900 lives statewide in the last two months, mostly Muslims beaten or burned to death, or killed in police firing. Human-rights activists say the death toll may come closer to 2,000 when one counts the missing in the western state.

Gandhi, revered by his followers as mahatma or "great soul," the man who led his people to independence from the British Empire, once wrote that "Hindu-Muslim cooperation is our inevitable condition for Indian freedom," and several times he threatened to starve himself to shame his people into halting their feuds.

"Gandhi would have been very sad; he would have fasted to his death to stop all this," said Chunibhai Vaidya, an 84-year-old Gandhi disciple who lives at the ashram.

"But we have failed Gandhi, we have forgotten him, we have betrayed him."

And yet, in many ways, the vision that Gandhi promoted until his assassination by a Hindu fanatic in 1948 is still alive.

Signs of progress

A vibrant if sometimes messy democracy, a federal system and a constitution steeped in secular values allow India's 120 million Muslims to live in relative peace among nearly 1 billion Hindus.

There are many more examples of harmony than hatred among those Hindus and Muslims who live side by side in thousands of villages throughout rural India and in its massive metropolises.

Muslims serve as judges and lawmakers. India's richest man, Aziz Premji, chairman of the software giant, Wipro, is Muslim. Two of India's presidents have been Muslims. One, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, was a Muslim from the northeastern state of Assam.

Assam, 30 percent of whose 26 million people are Muslim, is an example of the coexistence that is the norm for much of India. It is symbolized by the door on a Hindu temple in Gauhati, the capital, on which is a plaque commemorating Usman Ali, the Muslim who donated the land for the temple.

Most Muslims in India think of themselves as Indians first, Muslims second. Muslims and Hindus marry each other, go into business together and play together for India's national cricket team.

India's most popular movie stars are Muslims: Aamir Khan, whose colonial cricket epic "Lagaan" was nominated for an Academy Award this year, Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan. They're known as the "the Khan Brigade."

Aamir Khan and Shah Rukh Khan are married to Hindu women. And Hindu heartthrob Hrithik Roshan's wife is Muslim.

When Virsing Rathod heard the screams of his Muslim neighbors being burned alive during the first night of the riots in Ahmadabad, the burly Hindu and his two sons jumped

in a truck, rammed their way through a Hindu mob and began pulling Muslims from the flames. They saved 25 Muslims that night and sheltered dozens more in safe houses.

"I did it out of humanity, because in my heart I knew it was the right thing to do," said Rathod.

Across the country in Calcutta live Srabani Das, a Hindu, and her Muslim husband, Naseer Khan.

"Never for a moment in our nine years of married life was there any tension because of religion," said Das.

"I still write my Hindu surname and he never interferes with my Hindu way of life. We have friendly tiffs and we try to find the loopholes in each other's religion and even cut jokes."

Das said their 7-year-old daughter, Karishma – a neutral name that could be either Hindu or Muslim – helps put things in perspective.

"Our daughter is the binding glue. She has a Muslim father, a Hindu mother and a Christian-English schooling," Das said. "I think when my daughter Karishma grows up, she will be a truly secular person."

That sort of talk disgusts Hindu-fundamentalist *kar sevaks*, religious volunteers who dedicate themselves to promoting Hindu purity and preventing Hindu-Muslim marriages or conversions.

"Everyone living in India is a Hindu," says K.C. Sudarshan, head of the hardline National Volunteer Corps. "It's not a religion, but a way of life."

Going back 13 centuries

The religious divide dates back to the Muslim Moguls who invaded in the eighth century. Independence was born in the blood of 1 million killed when the subcontinent was partitioned into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan in 1947. Frequent spasms of communal violence have followed, India and Pakistan have fought three wars and, now nuclear-armed, are spoiling for a fourth.

As more countries in the region took on a deeper Islamic hue, Hindu fundamentalism began to well up in India. The religious friction was hugely exacerbated in 1992, when Hindus tore down a 16th-century mosque at Ayodhya, claiming it was built on the birthplace of their supreme god Rama. Subsequent rioting left more than 2,000 people dead nationwide.

By the late 1990s the Congress party, standard-bearer of the Gandhi ethos and the ruling

party for much of India's post-independence history, was out of office and a coalition led by the Hindu nationalist party of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in.

The Gujarat debacle has undone much of the headway Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party has made in promoting itself as a reform-minded party with moderate views.

The train fire's aftermath

The fighting in Gujarat was ignited by a Muslim mob that set fire to a train carrying Hindus returning from a pilgrimage to the Ayodhya shrine, killing 60 of them. Since then more than 1,000 Muslim-owned businesses have been destroyed in retaliatory attacks. Fliers circulating in Ahmadabad, the state's commercial capital, have called on Hindus to boycott Muslim establishments in an effort to "break their backbones."

Gruesome accounts of babies being doused in kerosene and set on fire, and orphaned children left alone to die of their burns, have provoked much soul-searching among Indians.

Mahesh Bhatt, a leading Indian filmmaker whose mother was Muslim and father Hindu, says the violence is a reminder that religious intolerance in India runs deep.

"Whenever you have deluded yourself that you have been freed of the religious biases your forefathers lived with, the poison that flowed in their veins, comes a fierce reminder like this," Bhatt said. "The Indian mind is still shackled to its religious prejudices. Incidents like these just mirror the real soul of India."

Vajpayee has had to walk a thin line between moderates in his 19-member ruling coalition and those who insist *Hindutva*, or Hindu-ness, should be a national political platform.

He headed off a potentially deadly showdown last month by deploying police and troops to stop Hindu fundamentalists from flocking to Ayodhya and laying the first stones for a temple on the site of the razed mosque.

Yet most Muslims, as well as many moderate Hindus, believe the revenge rampages after the train fire were orchestrated by powerful Hindu nationalist groups and sanctioned by Gujarat's governor, Chief Minister Narendra Modi.

Gujarat happens to be the only state run outright by Vajpayee's party, and Modi is a longtime proponent of Hindu supremacy.

Hindus make up 82 percent of India's people, but the Muslim population is still the world's largest after Indonesia. The higher Muslim birthrate alarms Hindu fundamentalists, even though Ashish Bose, a leading Hindu demographer, believes their fears of one day being outnumbered are groundless, since the Muslim population has expanded by only 1 percent every 10 years.

Hindu nationalists accuse the Muslims of looking to Islamic Pakistan as their ideal, and the government is quick to blame Pakistan for everything from the Islamic insurgency in Kashmir to the drought plaguing northern India.

Any spectacular crime in India is typically linked to Pakistan or Islamic militants. Church bombings two years ago were blamed on Pakistani agents. When the arrests were made, they were all Indian citizens.

"This obsession with Pakistan, the relentless anti-Pakistan talk, has created a lot of hatred in this society, and then that gets extended to the minorities here, and that's the Muslims," said Zoya Hasan, a Muslim professor of political science at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

Sacred land

She said the carving up of the subcontinent is yet another thorn, 50 years later.

"A major grievance is the Hindu conception of sacred land, and partition of the sacred geography was the biggest sin," Hasan said.

That sacred territory extends to India's only Muslim majority state, Jammu-Kashmir, the cause of two wars between India and Pakistan. Both sides claim the territory.

Tens of thousands – mostly Muslims – have been killed in a 12-year insurgency by Islamic militants fighting for Kashmir's independence or merger with Pakistan. Many of the fighters come from Pakistan, and Islamabad offers them moral support.

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, followed by a suicide assault on India's Parliament building that killed 14 people, have heightened fears that Islamic fundamentalists in India may be sympathetic to Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida terrorism network.

A new law passed by Parliament in March gives authorities sweeping powers to detain suspects without charges and try anyone suspected of supporting terrorists. Hindu fundamentalists applaud it; Muslims are fearful the law will target only them.

"The Muslims of this country won't allow any outsiders to come in and terrorize India," said Munir Sheikh, a Muslim state worker in Gujarat who is helping coordinate relief for some 150,000 Muslims made homeless by the violence.

"We love this country and would give our lives for it."