

Neighbourhood Profiles: Caste, Communal Violence and Displacement in Ahmedabad

Sanjeevini Badigar
Assistant Professor
University of Mumbai

Gujarat, the westernmost state of India with its long coastline and history of maritime trade whose economy in the heartland was monetised since precolonial times was among the first regions in the Indian subcontinent where processes of industrialisation took root. With the opening of the first textile mill in Ahmedabad in 1861 and the subsequent laying of the railway line between Ahmedabad and Bombay, processes of modern industrialisation started to spread so that by 1911 there were 53 mills in Ahmedabad and by the 1950 half of the city earned its employment from textile enterprises. By 1980s however, as factories started to close their gates, caste and communal violence also sharply increased. While declining social relations were attributed to processes of deindustrialisation (Breman 2002), it has however also been argued that while the unique trade union movement of Majoor Mahajan Sangh that played a pivotal role in labour rights in the city and worked for communal harmony, its Gandhian technique of class harmony and departmental unions that corresponded to caste and communal groups came in the way of developing a working class solidarity among labourers (Shah 1970).

This paper examines spatial changes in the apparently cosmopolitan city of Ahmedabad through major instances of communal violence. It draws on fieldwork in Ahmedabad between 2008-2009, media and independent reportage, reports of Commissions of Inquiry and legislative assembly debates in the state of Gujarat to examine major instances of caste and communal violence in 1969, 1981, 1985-86, 1990, 1992 and 2002 to examine socialisation towards violence, where people act in anticipation of violence as well as polarisation of living spaces due to repeated instances of violence. It argues that patterns of settlements that experienced a churning through processes of industrialisation, deindustrialisation and liberalisation were reconstituted but persisted through them. While the East-West binaries of representations of Ahmedabad are rightly challenged (Jasani 2010), the paper argues for the persistence of caste based patterns of settlements in new formats and processes.