

# TWO WOMEN

REPORT ON

BOMBAY DISTURBANCES IN JAN. 1956

By

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&

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### WHY THIS PUBLICATION ?

Though the Chief Minister of Bombay stated in the Bombay Legislative Assembly, late in February 1956, that during January disturbances there were 39 cases of assault on Gujeratis of which 4 proved fatal and that there were a few cases of molestation of women (none of these registered), the havoc created by Dame Rumour for a month in distant places and also in the City is so great that we have thought it desirable, for the sake of truth, to place before the public a brief report of our personal investigations into these unfortunate happenings, which we have called "Bombay Disturbances in January 1956".

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# TWO WOMEN

## REPORT ON

### Bombay Disturbances in January 1956

1. **INTRODUCTORY:** This is our report on one aspect of the reported incidents during the Bombay disturbances in January 1956. One of us is a medical practitioner, aged 42 (Mrs. Kashibai Ayasare; M. B. B. S.); the other is the wife of the Speaker of the Bombay Legislative Assembly (Mrs. Vimalabai Kunte, aged 38).

Reports of molestation of women during the disturbances pained us deeply. The reports appeared in only one section of the press. But public gossip was more general and suggestive that molestation meant assaults on women's persons, rape, etc. A lady social worker told one of us, that a few such cases were admitted in a certain hospital for treatment. (Inquiry at the Hospital named showed that there was no such case). Sometimes the gossip gave the impression that these incidents took place on a large scale. It was taken for granted that in all cases the culprits were Maharashtrians, and that they had so debased themselves on the pretext that the City of

Bombay was kept separate from Maharashtra. It was also presumed that the Maharashtrians were attacking the Gujaratis as a community and that these offences against women were a part of that attack. Some felt that the incidents were a reminder, a repetition of what happened in the border areas in post-partition days. Though Government was daily giving some news on the incidents of the day, no official statement ever appeared on the point till the speech of the Chief Minister in the Legislature late in February. The continuous publication by a section of the Press of tendentious news and absence of contradiction or action against the Press by Government lent strong support to the gossip that was current.

We were anxious to meet the unfortunate women victims, share with them their sorrow and suffering, console them as far as we could and render to them such aid as was within our reach. We had no other axe to grind, no other object, political or otherwise. We were moved, as any woman would be moved, and have here tried to record the result of what we attempted to do and did.

**2. OUR METHOD OF WORK:** We were anxious to work as mere individuals, unattached to any organisation. We were, therefore, careful to avoid

any publicity about our work. And yet, by the time we had nearly come to the end of our journey, a local vernacular daily paper published a note, asking people not to give any signed statement to anybody. We came to know about it from some persons we met on 23rd February at Wadala. They told us that following a note published in **Praja-Tantra**, they would not like to sign their statements with us; even so, they would be glad to vouch for them, whenever called upon to do so.

We used to move about in a car. Both of us understand Gujarati, while Dr. Mrs. Avasare can also speak in that language. We were accompanied by some Gujarati women friends on almost all days. We were careful not to allow any known public figure to accompany us at any time.

We visited all the disturbed areas known to us. (We are glad to notice that the same areas have been mentioned as disturbed areas by the Chief Minister, in answer to a question in the Bombay Legislative Assembly.) As soon as we approached an area, we tried to spot out all mixed localities, interviewed the men and women **in their homes**, took down their statements in their own language and had the statements signed by them in many cases. The men and

women we met are all literate middle class people. They welcomed us warmly, liked our informality and have invited us to visit them on formal occasions. They have taken us as ones from amongst themselves.

**3. DETAILS OF OUR VISITS:** In all we visited the following areas and localities:—

| Date and time            | Area & Locality                         | No. of statements taken. | No. of persons making the statements. |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 13-2-1956<br>2 to 7 p.m. | Sewri, Cotton Green,<br>Parel Tank Road | .. 12                    | 14                                    |
| 14-2-1956<br>1 to 6 p.m. | Lalbaug,<br>Chinchpokli                 | .. 10                    | 28                                    |
| 15-2-1956<br>1 to 6 p.m. | Lower Parel                             | .. 4                     | 11                                    |
| 17-2-1956<br>1 to 7 p.m. | Parel Village,<br>Delisle Road          | .. 33                    | 48                                    |
| 20-2-1956<br>2 to 7 p.m. | Lalbaug                                 | .. 7                     | 9                                     |
| 21-2-1956<br>2 to 7 p.m. | Phanaswadi,<br>Girgaum                  | .. 14                    | 19                                    |
| 23-2-1956                | Byculla                                 | .. 11                    | 19                                    |
| <b>Total</b>             |   | <u>91</u>                | <u>148</u>                            |

We also visited Vile Parle, Andheri and Ghatkopar. Enquiry at the Hospital named showed that contrary to the report of a respectable Gujarati lady social worker, of a few women having been treated or admitted there for molestation, **there was no such case.**

**4. SUMMARY OF THE STATEMENTS:** We were on a mission to console the unfortunate women who were reported to have been assaulted. We are happy to record that **we could not come across even one single case of a woman having been assaulted as a woman.** As far as we are able to ascertain, there does not appear to have been any assault made on the person of a woman during the disturbances in Bombay in January 1956.

It appears that the incidents had a common pattern: looting of shops and residences where possible; in some cases attacking individuals for the removal of their ornaments and possessions. In this, the disturbances appear to be so radically different from the known pattern of communal disturbances in the past, wherein individual killing dominated, that it would be unfair to regard them as communal in any sense.

We were anxious to find out why or who started the looting. And the statements in our possession reveal an intriguing situation in this respect.

Some of the shop-keepers we have interviewed and whose shops have been looted, have confessed that they know the individuals who broke open their shops. "They are the illicit distillers in the locality", we have been told. We were also told that they considered it dangerous for their personal safety to give more information about the culprits but that the culprits were all known to the Police. We did not pursue this line of enquiry further.

Once the shops were broken open, people of all communities are reported to have taken part in the loot: Maharashtrians, Punjabis, Uttar Bharatiyas and even Gujaratis. Crime, it appears, is not channelised along linguistic or communal lines and the statements in our possession bear out as much. **And most of the statements are by Gujarati men and women whom we interviewed in their homes and shops and the rest are by Marwaris.**

As soon as we visited a disturbed locality, we interviewed the individuals and created sufficient feeling of mutual trust and confidence and we requested them to show us the women victims. And invariably the answer has been **"There has been no such incident of an assault on any woman in our locality.** Reports about such attacks have reached us from



other localities. Go to them and you will find out". When told by us that the answer of the people in the other localities was identical, our listeners literally gaped in amazement. This experience of ours has been repeated, **without an exception**, from locality to locality. And yet, such palpably false reports have been allowed to be freely published in a section of the local Press !

It is such reports, rumours and smear-campaigns that, have distorted the disturbances out of their correct perspective. It is such a pity that even the Chief Minister of Bombay should state, "There were a few cases of molestation of women. These offences also have not been registered and fortunately there are not many such cases," (**vide** Shri Morarji Desai's statement in the Bombay Legislative Assembly, dated 22nd February 1956) without adducing any evidence in support of his statement or stating clearly what molestation meant.

Since it was reported that the worst treatment meted out to women was in the Sewri area, we interviewed the people there more closely. And yet the answers have been the same. "Police from these areas were totally withdrawn from the night of the 18th January to 20th morning", we have been told

and yet no attack against the person of any individual took place in the locality. The shops in the locality were looted after the Police had withdrawn. It may be noted that though there was a general strike and demonstrations from 16th January, there was no looting for the first two days. It began on the 18th January.

The accent appears to have been on "looting", for which the Goondas are ever on the look-out. It is the illicit distillers and other Goondas who through a modern industrial city that set the pace of such disturbances and if anybody had to be removed from the city in anticipation of any disturbances, it should have been this anti-social element.

A searching analysis of the statements in our possession may bring out other interesting features of the disturbances, but it is not germane to our purpose and we refrain from further comments. But we are tempted to conclude as a result of our investigations that the disturbances were not communal in their character and do not appear to have inflicted any communal wounds. If anything, they were against Government : a crude expression of the pent-up feelings of a helpless people, taken advantage of by anti-

social elements, fanned by baseless rumour and unchecked false propaganda in a section of the Press.

**SUMMARY OF THE REPORT:** In all we visited, during 8 days (and 34 working hours) 15 disturbed areas and localities and have obtained from literate middle-class men and women, residents of these localities, 91 statements from 148 men and women, most of them Gujaratis and a few Marwaris, by meeting them in their homes or shops. According to these statements :

- (i) No woman appears to have been assaulted ;
- (ii) No attacks against the person of a woman of a particular community appear to have taken place in the disturbed areas, even while they were without any police protection ;
- (iii) For the first two days, though there was a general strike and demonstrations, there was no looting of shops. It began on 18th January. The anti-social elements became bold from 18th January onwards as the general conditions continued to remain disturbed ;
- (iv) Shops (and in few cases residences) were broken open and looted by Goondas, leaders amongst

them being illicit distillers. Members of all communities participated in the loot ;

(v) Panic and fear, resulting from wild rumours and press reports appear to have been responsible for the mass exodus from Bombay of the members of a particular community ; that a responsible Gujerati lady social worker should have herself believed and told us that some cases of women victims of serious assault had been admitted into a well-known public hospital of her own locality — which proved to be wholly untrue on reference to the named hospital— is an eloquent pointer to how even responsible persons are influenced by such rumours and reports ;

(vi) Gujaratis and Maharashtrians have mutually helped and protected each other through trying times.

We place on record our sense of heart-felt gratitude to the men and women who so kindly welcomed us in their midst, who have invited us to meet them oftener and who have trusted us with their signed statements in their own language. They are all Gujeratis (and few Marwaris): we are Maharashtrians : and yet, no such difference has stood in our

way. Is any further comment on the prevailing relations between the two communities necessary?

Mrs. KASHIBAI AVASARE,  
M. B. B. S.

Mrs. VIMALABAI KUNTE.

Bombay, March 1956.

## **What Gujerati Men & Women say :**

(English Translations of the original)

**A Woman Municipal Corporator from Girgaum**  
says :

"There was not a single grievance of any woman in my ward during the disturbances."

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"My shop was looted on 20th January; when two servants of the shop offered resistance, the looters replied with stones. But our womenfolk who were in the shop then, were in no way disturbed."

**—A Cloth dealer from Delisle Road.**

\*

"During the disturbances our womenfolk were living here only. They were able to freely move about."

**—Residents of a Chawl in Bhoiwada,  
Parel.**

\*

**Young Daughter-in-law was a safe messenger :**

"My shop was looted on the morning of 19th January by about 25 persons. I knew that there was sure to be stone-throwing if any man ventured out, while a woman would be safe. So I sent my young daughter-in-law to fetch the Police. She did safely go and fetch the Police."

**—A Shop-keeper in Parel Village.**

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