

India Sabka - A Report

Gujarat 2002 - the carnage, the state collusion, the futility of all our efforts 'to do something' - anything... relief, rehabilitation, documentation, peace or protest rallies, campaigning, legal initiatives. What is to be done ... what are we capable of ... who is our constituency ... are we to work only when the war is on ... does the carnage ever start without a warning... what are we to do in peace times... in other places, which are yet to go the Gujarat way. We had failed to reach out to a wider audience... perhaps we needed to re-invent our strategies, more in tune with the times. It is within this phase of self-doubt that the idea of a youth festival emerged.

In September, 2002, Majlis, a legal and cultural centre and Open Circle, a group of visual artists joined hands to organise the festival. Students would be invited to participate in contests on concerns around secularism. The process would culminate into a festival of two days structured within popular culture. Posters announcing the art and cultural competitions were pasted in 100 colleges in and around Mumbai. It was a tough task to create an interest among students around the theme of multi-culturalism and communal intolerance in a city where student activities are restricted to sari day, traditional day and Valentine's day.

We used every possible strategy. Principals were cajoled, progressive teachers were chased, student leaders were lured and torn posters were replaced. It went on and on and at first seemed to have no effect. We regretted the themes and regulations, which were perhaps too tough. After all, it is not an easy job to design a newspaper front page, write a film script or design an architectural intervention on secularism.

Besides, the prize offers of book coupons might not have been the best strategy to attract students. Deadlines were extended, friends and families were summoned to influence students in each home. Entries started trickling in and adding upto around 250. Phew! we made it by the skin of our teeth.

But more students had to be attracted. It was a festival, not a workshop. Bollywood stars were solicited. Secular icons like K. R. Narayanan, Mahasweta Devi and Narayan Murthy were invited, none of them could make it and we were heart broken. But we remained undaunted. By the end of November, another set of posters, listing out the events were pasted - 5000 in all. In addition 500 banners were put up all over the city.

Café Coffee Day (the coffee shop chain) publicised the event through its outlets, the Red FM radio channel agreed to be a co-sponsor. Eminent publishers sponsored prizes. The Western Railway gave prime space to put up art installations. An acquaintance sponsored two hoardings. The resident editor of Indian Express assured us his co-operation. The Khadi Gramodyog met the cloth and paper requirements. A printing press in Chennai printed the brochure at concessional rates. But as is the rule of life, with each affirmation there were twice the number of negations.

The festival was scheduled for December to commemorate the 10th anniversary of Babri Masjid demolition in Dec '92 and in its wake the communal riots that broke out in Bombay. But then came the anxious moments. Do we really know what attracts the youth of today? Were we diluting our ideology in order to reach out? Would the cultural programme have the fine balance of politics and popular patronage? A new surge of doubts each day even while we were running against time to meet the deadlines.

We started with the agenda of rendering voices of the secular Hindu audible and thus countering the call of Hindutva. The idea was to ask more Hindu artists, intellectuals and professionals to participate and voice their clear position against the Hindutva lobby. But as time passed we realised that this was indeed a tall order. The number of Muslims prolific in the field of art and popular culture is overwhelming. It was not possible to create an interesting programme without them. Hence we had to abandon our agenda.

The elimination rounds started at different venues from early December. Alongside, the nitty gritty of the final event had to be smoothed out. A cartoon stall where you could get yourself sketched in different identities: Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh in 15 minutes. A photo studio titled Photo Hindustani to provide Polaroid snaps with Aamir Khan as Bhuvan and Karisma Kapoor as Zubeida. A DJ to remix patriotism and multi-culturalism, a kiosk to print your own T-shirt. In order to extend the discourse of identity beyond the dominant polemic of Hindu-Muslim, a brochure on the invisible minority communities and a photo-feature of dwellings of various communities was designed.

But beneath the gaiety and the festivity, the ideological dilemmas continued. Well, we may just about manage to assert *India Sabka*, even make it a fashionable slogan, but is it enough? Should we not talk about the politics of Sangh parivar more directly? Isn't it an occasion to do a bit of pedagogy? Are fun and frolic detrimental to the seriousness of the issue? Would not piggybacking on popular culture be counter productive in the long run? Campaigning for the forthcoming elections was gaining momentum in Gujarat. What were we doing at such a time? Was this worth it?

Then suddenly, in the first week of December, our booking at Patkar hall got unceremoniously cancelled. Mr. Manohar Joshi, speaker of Loksabha, better known in Mumbai as a henchman of Bal Thakeray, was expected to address a function at the same venue. Were we important enough for 'them' to invent this? Or was it a simple case of bowing to the powerful and accidentally stamping our feet?

We had two choices, either publicise this development, claim victimisation, let a scare spread among students and let the actual festival suffer or alternatively work harder to counter the eventuality of being pushed to an invisible corner. We chose the latter, as we wanted to believe and spread the belief that it is still possible to assert an audible voice for secularism. Overnight we shifted the venue to Y. B. Chavan Centre.

The depression and anxiety were set off with some wonderful entries for the video competitions, some reasonably good fictions on '*Food that my neighbours eat*', some good hoarding designs. The day before the festival, our office was swamped with entries for the architecture competition.

We roped in our technician friends to make films of two best entries for script writing. The best hoarding design was put up at VT station, two art installations were mounted at Churchgate station and Bandra bandstand and suddenly *India Sabka* was a public affair, far beyond our doubts and hesitations. Friends were requested to prepare 10 questions for the quiz programme. Conditions, the questions should be light in look, multiple in meaning, fun to think about and related to *India Sabka*. Tall order. Many failed but others stepped in. 250 questions on multi-culturalism in cuisine, games, fashion, popular culture, folklores etc. were collated. We enjoyed every moment and learnt a lot in the process. Here's a sampling -

Who said this while discussing the issue of beef eating '*that may be so, but if the meat is tender, I shall eat it*'?

- a. George Fernandes b. Yagnavalkya c. Sonia Gandhi d. Swami Agnivesh

A film festival was put together. Mahesh Bhatt and Pooja Bhatt lent it an official aura by agreeing to inaugurate it. A call was given to fellow artists and filmmakers to make special short videos for the occasion. No production money, screening conditions uncertain, but thirteen new videos came by. We ran them in loops through six monitors throughout the festival. An effort most rewarded by audience presence.

Some more last minute hectic improvisations: a puzzle on the geography of India, a few games on history (a small-private resistance to NCERT) and it was already 17th December. The regular hiccups of organising an event. Barkha Dutt's flight failed to take off due to fog in Delhi. Farooque Shaikh graciously stepped in and saved the day. Alyque Padamsee threw artists' tantrums causing us to shift the meticulously planned, glamorous prize distribution ceremony to the unceremonious foyer. In the public lecture, Kapil Sibal slipped into Congress election manifesto, Vijay Tendulkar resorted to predictable cynic peer bashing of secularists' inertia and Malini Bhattacharjee was discontent about the time constraint.

Through all this, the final reward was the student participation. The students came, nearly two thousand of them. They played games, wrote slogans, were regaled by Javed Akhtar's poetry, tried out the quiz, won prizes and laughed or lost and cried, but generally enjoyed and shouted again and again and again *Indiaaaaa Sabka*. And by the way, if you have attempted the sample question, the answer is 'b'. So join in the chant *Indiaaaaa Sabka*.

The festival is over. And we are wiser. We know how to reach a hundred colleges, a thousand odd students. Well, but what do we do with this information? How do we carry it forward? The task ahead is enormous. Do we

have the stamina to conduct such events on a regular basis? If we do, we know that there are people out there who will lend a helping hand; there are students who will respond enthusiastically. We are sure of greater visibility.

Visibility is one thing we have decided to fight for. All the questions that we started with are not resolved, but we feel better that we have at least made a feeble attempt to approach those questions through different routes and forms. Taufiq Qureshi ended the festival with the concert and the slogan, '*India Sabka; hum sabka, hai, tha aur rahega*'.

I end with the assertion that we had coined, if we are together, we can make *India Sabka* - a call, a movement, a fashion.

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for *India Sabka*