

Unity strengthened the feeling of Communal Harmony, Peace and Justice

In 2002, the Godhra Carnage led to communal violence all over Gujarat. Throughout the state, the hatred between Hindus and Muslims led to total destruction of the families. The Muslims bore the maximum brunt of this senseless violence. Their houses and belongings were burnt in front of them. Murder, rape, looting of belongings was done as if in cold blood.

This led to increased mistrust, fear, lack of security, satisfaction and peace between Hindus and Muslims. And the Muslims of Dahod and Panchmahal districts were the worst / pathetic. Their livelihood itself was threatened what with their shops or their goats and hens were either looted or burnt down. A similar fate for their homes and belongings – completely destroyed – looted or burnt down. The families had to flee. The entire social atmosphere was full of mistrust destroyed – and there was no peace.

During this period, Utthan had been working in Dahod and Panchmahal districts on watershed and livelihood security issues. Keeping the sensitive situation and the need of the hour of that time, Utthan began program focusing on peace and justice. The basic purpose was to bring back the trust between Hindus and Muslims, and create an atmosphere of unity and security especially in 12 villages in Santrampur block.

The peace and justice program was initiated by bringing Hindu and Muslim women and formed the Ekta Mahila Bachat Sangathan. To build the capacities of the women members Utthan began focusing on themes such as legal awareness, gender parity, peace and justice, leadership training, exposure visits were organized. Further meetings discussed issues that affected women across religions. These included livelihood security, safety of women, domestic violence, social obligations, ill health, children's education and other issues. Solutions to these vexed issues too were discussed.

The members of Ekta Mahila Bachat Sangathan efforts brought about peace and justice in the village of Vanziakut. Propelled by this, the Ekta Mahila Bachat Sangathan decided and were able to catch the thieves who had stolen the goats and hens as these were the livelihood sources for the Muslims.

Vanziakut is a village in Santrampur block. About 15 Muslim families reside in this village. These families, apart from farming, also rear goats and hens to support their incomes. Even during the post Godhra riots, the tribals of the village and hid the goats and the hens in a safe place. Later, they would buy goats and hens from

the Muslims whenever they needed them as they knew that these were a source of income for the Muslims.

But a few from Vanziakut, would steal the goats while they were out grazing. They would then go to Santrampur and sell these goats on the sly. When the Muslim families realized that their goats were being stolen, they began making inquiries. When they realized who had stolen them, the Muslim families were categorically told that during the post Godhra riots, these few had saved the goats and hens and now if some were taken and sold, there was nothing wrong. The Muslim families were threatened to keep quiet and not raise the issue else they would find it difficult to continue living in the village. Such threats created fear and silenced the Muslim families.

Silence led to increase in the number of goats / hens that were stolen. The other communities – except the Muslims were agitated as the number increased.

When this issue was being discussed at the village level, the Muslim families got an opportunity to share the facts to the village community. The people who stole the goats and the hens and where these were sold were also shared. Most of the women and men were angry. They felt embarrassed that they were all members of the Ekta Mahila Bachat Sangathan. That they believed in unity, peace and justice. Yet some Muslim families in their village out of fear had to face injustice in such a manner. They all decided to remain united, catch the thieves and punish them.

They caught the goat thieves, marched them to the Santrampur police station and got them to confess how many and from where had they stolen goats and hens. They saw to it that the thieves were in jail for two days. Further, they decided that the Muslim families who had lost goats / hens due to the thieves were to be financially compensated.

Before Utthan initiated the program of peace and justice, the Hindus and tribals who believed they were Hindus derived pleasure in harassing and meting out injustice to the Muslims. But through the Ekta Mahila Bachat Sangathan, the communities had learnt to uphold communal harmony, peace, and justice and human rights. This helped them to solve the issue of the Muslims in a sympathetic manner. They were therefore able to challenge and get the thieves caught and punished – people from their own community who were stealing goats - the very livelihood of the Muslims. Further the Muslims were financially compensated for their losses. This set an example that just like the Hindus, Christians, Tribals and other communities have a right to live in the village, the Muslims too have an equal right. Ekta Mahila Bachat Sangathan taught the lesson of love, communal harmony, equity and justice.