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INDIA: The Hindu festival of Ram Navami sparked anti-Muslim riots across India

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By Thaïs Chaigne

The Observers France 24 (19.04.2023) – In India, anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence increased across the country on the

occasion of a Hindu festival on March 30, 2023. Several videos document the unrest in Vadodara, Gujarat. In a state where communal conflicts have already claimed many lives, our Muslim Observers are concerned about the rise of Hindu nationalism supported by the government.

In Vadodara, Gujarat, the Hindu festival “Ram Navani”, which celebrates the birth of the god Rama, was the scene of violent clashes. Videos posted on Twitter show processions filled with saffron-coloured flags – the symbol of Hindu nationalists – and men throwing stones or cinderblocks at Muslim homes and mosques. They also chanted Hindu nationalist slogans in the city’s Muslim neighbourhood.

Shaukat Indori is a lawyer in Vadodara and a member of an Islamic civil rights association. He said that a number of Muslims were wrongfully arrested after the festival.

“Unfortunately, what happened is that police took action only towards the Muslim community. In the FIR, the first information report, which was lodged by the police department, they mentioned that there was a mob of 500-600 people, Hindu and Muslim. And they quarrelled and stone-pelting took place. But in the FIR, that complaint the police officer made, all the accused are Muslims. Around five women also were arrested by the police department. They were not part of the mob or any part of the stone pelting.”

The scenes of arrests in Vadodara have been described as unjust and abusive by several Muslim community members. A video showing the arrest of a Muslim woman just as she and her family were preparing to break their fast for Ramadan was particularly controversial.

The five women arrested were released on bail on April 14, 2023.

For several years, this Hindu religious festival has been the scene of heated tensions between the Muslim and Hindu

communities in Gujarat. So much so that most members of the Muslim community simply do not dare to go out, as Indori explains:

“It is a celebration of the victory of Ram, Lord Ram according to the Hindu scriptures, but for the last four or five years the way they have been celebrating this Rama Yatra is targeting the Muslim community,

Fundamentalist organisations [...] use this festival to teach a lesson or to tease and harass the Muslim community. They want to polarise the whole political scenario. They want to tease and target the Muslim community as an enemy, and they celebrate in this way, not like they celebrate Diwali or other festivals.”

The festival has caused tensions throughout the country, including in Delhi, Bihar and Kashmir.

Gujarat has a history of violent communal conflict between Muslims and Hindus. In 2002, up to 2,000 Muslims were killed in three days of bloody riots in Gujarat, in retaliation for the death of 58 Hindu pilgrims.

Since then, Muslims have been increasingly marginalised and have looked on with concern at the rise of Hindu nationalism in Gujarat and throughout the country.

Minhaz Saiyed (not his real name) is a Muslim man from Gujarat.

“The 2002 incident has had a very bad impact on the lives of all Muslims in Gujarat. Before that, my family and I lived in a community mixed with Hindus. Then it became too risky, we could be targeted, so we moved to a community where there were only Muslims.

Discrimination against Muslims is routine. You don't even have to be religious, I have a name associated with my religion, so

people associate me with that. Usually they ask me if I am from Gujarat – because some Hindus say you can't be a Muslim from Gujarat. But I was born and brought up here.

[As a Muslim,] I don't feel very safe, it's a bit scary if you ask me. We are supposed to be in a democratic country, but religious fanatics today are taking more and more space in politics.

The politicisation of Hinduism worries all religious minorities. In general, religion is becoming really political, and discrimination is increasing."

The Hindu nationalist party BJP has been India's ruling political party since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014. The BJP controls 16 of India's 30 regional governments, including that of Gujarat, Modi's home state.

Photo: Gujarat was one of at least six Indian states where Hindu nationalists targeted mosques and Muslims during the Hindu festival of Ram Navami. © Observers

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