

9 October 2014

A common thread appears to have emerged from a series of communal incidents in Gujarat over the last two weeks, with residents of the areas affected blaming an alleged nexus between local VHP activists and police in triggering the violence. All the clashes were sparked by crackdowns on the sale of beef during Navratri and Bakrid — the slaughter of cows is banned in Gujarat.

Following the incidents in Vadodara and Ahmedabad, the latest clash was reported from the Muslim-dominated Dabhel village of Navsari on Monday night when police, tipped off by VHP's 'gau rakshaks' (protectors of cows), detained a resident for allegedly selling beef. The villagers retaliated by attacking the police, who opened fire leading to injuries to two residents. The villagers then started throwing stones at the police force, injuring three policemen.

The latest clash comes just a day after a youth died after being shot by police in Ahmedabad's Shahpur area following a similar clash the day before during a crackdown over the alleged sale of beef. In the communally sensitive Shahpur Rangila Chowky area, residents claimed that officials from the Detection of Crime Branch (DCB) were accompanied by VHP men during a search operation for suspects involved in the alleged trafficking of calves in Mirzapur on Friday and Shahibaug on Saturday.

According to government sources, these police raids were conducted following pressure by VHP activists on the local security apparatus. On October 2, the VHP had submitted a representation to Ahmedabad Police Commissioner Shivanand Jha, claiming that his force was not doing enough to prevent cow slaughter.

Also on Saturday, the VHP held protests against cow slaughter in Dariapur, another communally sensitive area, with activists declaring that they would set up surveillance points to check the sale of beef and trafficking of cattle. The Ahmedabad police had rounded up some VHP activists following these protests.

A VHP office bearer in Ahmedabad, requesting anonymity, told The Indian Express that the organisation had 62 teams of 'gau rakshaks' in the city alone, each comprising four-five members, "depending on the area". "We deploy the teams at entry points to the city and work in close coordination with the police," said the VHP member, claiming that the anti-cow slaughter campaign was 25 years old and usually gained momentum during Bakrid.

The VHP member added that the organisation deployed bigger teams in Muslim-dominated areas of the city, such as Sarkhej, and kept the police informed of their movements. "But in Hindu areas, we catch illegal cattle traders ourselves, because the trucks that carry cattle mostly have just the driver and cleaner," the office-bearer said.

The latest clashes come within days of the VHP launching another controversial campaign seeking to prevent Muslim youth from entering grounds hosting the garba to "entice Hindu girls". In Godhra and Narmada, Hindu Asmita Hitrakshak Samiti, a right wing outfit, even wrote to the district administration and police demanding that Muslims be kept out of garba venues.

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in Bharuch, witnessed an incident such as the one in Dabhel. According to a now-retired IPS officer, who was posted in Palej then, "the VHP had circulated CDs of alleged cow slaughter and there were clashes leading to police firing. But the police contained the incident then."

Gujarat VHP president Kaushik Mehta, however, sought to play down the organisation's latest campaign, saying "there is nothing new that we are doing". "The fact is that the media has started highlighting our work like never before," he said.

"Earlier, nobody used to notice our work. We are also celebrating the 50th year of the parishad's foundation and taking up issues with much vigour which is why we are getting people's support. This year we took out Janmashtami processions in more than 260 locations across the state which was never done before."

<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/gujarat/common-thread-in-gujarat-clashes-vhp-aiding-police/2/>

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