

# The Gulberg House Manifesto

**More than memory or testimony, this museum invokes a different future**

Gulberg Society, a House, a collection of Houses which were once homes, spaces which still hold on to the idea of place. These houses are not abandoned. They have been left empty. They are tributes to people who refused to give up, who seek a satisfying resolution to a problem we call the Gujarat riots of 2002.

A solution. Anything in any form. A ritual. A plea. A prayer. A statement. A sacrament. A judgement. Something to create closure. These houses are a mnemonic, an aesthetics of protest; there is no outrage. The screams died long ago. The pain is scratched into the surfaces of walls. Fire creates its own texture and textuality. Fire burns but it does not always cleanse. This building is more than a museum. Even a museum by itself is more than its materiality. It is a reminder, a memo pad of things undone, words unsaid. It recruits silence to perform the act of speech. Silence speaks, especially as the voice of the dead. The corrosive softness of silence speaking the speech of waiting. Yet we need to go beyond the speech of silence to voices, to conversation, to create a vision. Ready to forget, forgive, move on, move away but only when the rituals of civility and citizenship are complete. This house of possibilities is now your house. It is for you to live it out. It is an invitation to a homecoming, to a Gujarat all of us share.

A lot of what we say might sound like repetition, one witness echoing the same old story or each story sounding like a variant of the other. As stories pile on, they appear like noise; but repetition is a sign that our voices have not been acknowledged. This overlap of stories creates a new universe of a ganglion of pain and suffering, where voice, visuals, objects, create a new site for invention. We repeat, hoping you may remember. A museum does not preserve or pickle pain. This site is a reminder of possibilities, of promises made and those not yet kept. We merely ask you to listen, look, touch, reflect. It is our idea of a thought experiment.

We are not asking for anything. We are only hoping that you remind yourself of your humanity, your sense of person, place, your sense of stories aborted. There is nothing as tragic as a story left unheard or half-said.

This manifesto evokes a list of the missing. A roll-call of remembrance, as faces, names, numbers. A wailing wall. A prayer on stone. Each face a story, each name, an act of storytelling. Missing but not forgotten. There but not there.

Missingness, an acid that eats into the everyday enjoyment of living. Missing – the other face of waiting. A roll-call of absences. A census as a prayer. A Facebook of premature obituaries. Our emotions lie bare as bones.

The starkness eliminates the sentimentality.

When we hear the stories, each unique in itself yet repeating a refrain, creating a redundancy of proof, we may realise that proof is a banal word in a charnel house of pain.

Evidence lies piled up like bodies at Naroda Patiya. Each story bare in its statement but each adding flesh to testimony. It is not dying that we object to. It is your need to exterminate our community, our identity, our will to live.

We share a nation, a civilisation, a Constitution, a city, a community. It is not pity we ask for. Pity needs no memorials. It is our humanity built on difference that we want to speak about. His holiness, the dalai lama, with that puckish sadness, reacting to the violence of George Bush, once said that George Bush brings out the Muslim in him. We only ask that what you see makes us part of you, constitutionally, in the full double meaning of the word.

We may be survivors but you are spectators. You watched. You felt it in your skin. So it is our story we preserve as ours.

Memory is what we share but it needs reciprocity. See and recognise. We are reciting the roll-call of the dead as a refusal to die. It is not justice that will redeem us but hope, the constitutionality of hope. Let us explain.

Gulberg House cannot begin with Gulberg. Gulberg has to talk about Godhra. One form of violence does not redeem another. It becomes two variants from an anthology of evil.

The killing of the *kar sevaks* was wrong. This house is equally a memorial to them. But what followed Godhra was obscene. The arrest of innocent people, including a blind man, adds little to justice. Revenge does not balance the scales of justice. It only adds to the quantum of violence. Narendra Modi rewrote Newton that day. To say, as he did, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction is fine for machines but illiterate about people. Machines are not people. People are not artefacts. They make choices. They discriminate. They suffer pain and guilt.

Sadly, Godhra becomes the trigger, the rationale, the magic word that explains away everything that happens afterwards. Godhra cannot balance the scales of history. What happened was sad but what followed was sickening.

To say Godhra was wrong does not make the violence of Gulberg right. Revenge can be measured in body counts, not justice. Revenge cannot justify an escalation of murder into genocide. Revenge cannot add multipliers to maths and say 56 equals 2,000.

A life – any life – is priceless. Beyond number, beyond measure. Gulberg House begins by mourning Godhra. But it cannot stop there. There was a difference in the quality of violence of the two events.

A riot is a composite of battles. It is war over land, over neighbourhoods conceived as real estate. A riot is a war against livelihoods, especially as those living on subsistence lose their living. A right to life includes a right to livelihood. A riot is a battle to erase difference, to wipe out identity and the places that evoke it. To call a 120-day riot a spontaneous outburst is to treat citizens as ethical idiots.

## THE GUJARAT GENOCIDE

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This seems too systematic; stage-managed to evoke an outburst. Riots earlier had a sense of repair, of reciprocity, of apology, at least in their aftermath. This riot lacked apology; it sought to root out a community.

An organised riot does not stop at violence; it seeks boycott, ostracism, it perpetuates terror to create displacement. A riot like this breaks up old reciprocities, friendships, business relationships. We are caught between erasure and the shrinking ghetto. A riot ghettoises the mind of a citizen. Gulberg House seeks a non-ghettoised society.

Gulberg House asks that all of us unravel the layers of violence in a riot. Murder. Arson. Rape. Terror. Displacement. Denial. Delay. Missingness. Erasure. One recollects the words of the French philosopher Baudrillard: “Forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself.”

We realise that there is a battle implicit between our testimony and the nature of investigative records. The SIT is lord of the textual archive and yet it deliberately overlooked police control room records, station diaries, fire brigade registers, mobile phone records of conversations between politicians and civil servants.

When power protects the literate and the digital, voice and orality have to create different forms of memory. Our voice appeals to the materiality of stone, brick and artefact. These houses as they stand, speak. Their silence has textures that few texts will have. These houses create a materiality of protest and memory. Burns on the wall evoking scars on the body. Come smell. Touch. Feel. Listen. This is a sensorium of the survivor where every bodily sense appeals to a different sensibility. This is the house and the colony that Ahsan Jaffri built. These are the neighbours that remember. This is the Jaffri house where people took refuge only to die after Jaffri was murdered.

Remember fire has its own artistry. The burnt siennas of fire evoke a palette of greys, blacks, browns, seeking to convey traces and textures of violence.

Remember this fire is not the fire of hearths, kitchens or homes, of logs warmed in love, of cooking fires. This is fire as arson, fire from a gas cylinder. Riots create their own irony, inverting the use of tools. They produce their own archaeology of weapons, subverting instruments from their original purpose. The *dhariya* (scythe) was an agricultural implement, not a tool for disembowelling bodies. The gas canister was a middle-class convenience, not a twin torch and explosive for devastating homes. With the carnage, tools for conviviality become lethal instruments of destruction.

We realise that death produces its own graffiti, smudges on walls, textures in stones, shadows on ceilings, a mix of colours creating its own impressionistic sadness, a visuality that defies art in its artistry. In these so-called museums, artefacts are not sacred objects but everyday objects. The ritual objects of memory are sparse. A table. A *laari* (handcart). A cloth sponging dust, footprints becoming imprints, a kite clinging to a wire.

There is no narrative matrix except that of everydayness. Just spaces like huge punctuation marks, connecting the said and the unsaid. Memory is not a catalogue. It is protean. A table triggering my anguish of loss might

be my neighbour's laughter. It is not merely a memory that triggers autobiography; this is a mnemonic for a collective politics, for events that seek closure in forgiveness, not forgetfulness.

Gulberg House is neither a monument nor a memorial. Memorials are cathartic ceremonies, a way of mourning as a last goodbye. Monuments are often historic, empirical, a tribute to a people. This set of houses is neither a tribute nor a farewell. Even the word museum is a playful irony because these houses as space are a womb for new possibilities. It is a thought experiment asking you to interact and participate, to add your dialects of meaning to our struggle. This museum is more than memory or testimony; it is a manifesto for a different future. It is asking us, can we be a mirror to you?

This is a survivor's effort claiming that life goes on. There is nothing more banal or poignant than an empty house. This is not public art and its evocation of sentimentalities. There is an invitation to citizenship which begins with history because it hopes to go beyond it. In that sense, it is not historically referential, being tied only to one event. This house could be any house, anywhere. Gulberg House is a metaphor for all such events, to those marginals, minorities, for all the vulnerable who feel that the Constitution still belongs to them. Ordinary people will continue believing in the Constitution because that is all we have. The police and the politicians may laugh at law but our hope is that law and justice have the last laugh. That is all a survivor can ask.

We realise that there is no magic to evidence. Evidence can be piled before us and be left to rot like garbage. We know investigations have become aborted stories, that the foetus of truth has not survived, so what we ask is, when evidence is ignored, what can people do to screw justice to its sticking place?

We want to say that our memory speaks to life. We do not want a memory caught in old utterances. Our bodies, our speech, have to be a text for a new life. Our politics seeks to speak all the dialects of pain and deprivation.

All Gulberg asks is that a right to life be a right to livelihood and everydayness, the right to live life without fear, to work with hope, to be families in a world of communities. By imagining this, can we imagine *not this*? Can we think of a future without Godhra, Gulberg, Delhi 1984, the Orissa of Staines? This is our invitation to citizenship.

Remember ours is not merely a fight for justice around one event or one community. This museum is a reminder of all the failures of justice. The roll-call includes Manipur, the Delhi of 1984, the tribals fighting mines, the Dalits challenging every atrocity. Waiting for justice is a fine art, a subaltern science. This museum is not a list of obsessions but an exploration of possibilities. It is a statement on behalf of survivors, victims, the innocent and the oppressed, that faith never dies, that resistance always survives. This much a survivor can hope for. Welcome to Gulberg.