It is a hidden struggle that Muslims keep deep down inside.
His hands tighten up on the sides of the swing. “Let me tell you something about this government. ...They are doing what is necessary. Those people deserve it....You need to understand that.”

“Let me understand then, Nana,” I plead.

He does not pursue it. “Rajiv, tell Nani to take you to the barber Dodiya Bhai. He seemed to know a lot about the government when I went in last time.”

Dodiya Bhai has white hair, a wrinkled face and his stomach juts out of his shirt. I am glad this is not a Muslim interview and sit back in the barber chair as he gives me a history of his time as a police officer. I ask if he feels the government supports Muslims after the 2002 riots.

He takes his time, “Of course, the government is dedicated to all people equally.”

I prod, “So, you think there is no problem between the Muslims and the government, no mistreatment at all?”

He is about to answer but pauses and puts his hand on my shoulder. I feel his powerful grip dig in. “Listen carefully to me. I do not think you should be asking those kinds of questions around here.” He moves closer to the chair. “You see, some reporter tried to do this a year ago...and went to jail. I do not think you want that to happen to you, especially when there is nothing to be found.”

I nod my head and close my notebook. He gives me a fake smile and shakes my hand until I cannot feel my fingers.

The next morning, I want to be back in Connecticut or at Penn. I check my cell phone and find a message from Mohan telling me he has found a Muslim rickshaw driver who would like to meet me at his Internet café.

I walk in to find Nashar Bhai sitting in a plastic chair. He is wearing a white turban with strips of gold. His face is hidden under a thick white beard, and his white-collared shirt is spotless. When the café is silent, I ask the difficult questions about the 2002 riots. He talks about the murder of his two brothers’ children and laments that “things have still not changed.” He explains how Muslims suffer in everything from education to jobs to health care and describes the role of government in “pushing down the Muslim.” He also tells me about the rift he feels with Hindus since the riots. “It is a hidden struggle that Muslims keep deep down inside.”

When the interview is over, we go outside to his rickshaw, and I try to pay him for the time he has lost. “Rajiv,” he says leaning in closely, “all I cared about was that you listened to my story. The only thing you can do for me is ... to find more stories and bring them off people's chests. We need it.” Then he puts his callused hands on mine, spreads open my fingers and slides the hundred-rupee note back into my hand.

I take out my notebook and write down a new set of goals: I want to understand this Muslim struggle. I want to uncover the stories. I want Hindus, my family, my professors, everyone to know about it. I think back to the view from the terrace, the blanket of blackness covering the Muslim neighborhood near the Ashram. I think about the payment Nashar Bhai asked of me. His last words hit me hard: We need it.

Rajiv Bhagat is a sophomore majoring in biology. This excerpt is part of a research project still in progress.