

Gujarat

## Denial of US visa to Narendra Modi: What Next?

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It is one of the ironies of our times that the US Government, notorious for its human rights violations across the world has unwittingly gladdened the hearts and minds of those in India and abroad fighting for social justice and secularism by denying US visa to Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of the Indian State of Gujarat. He is a hard-line Rashtriya Swyamsewak Sangh (RSS) Pracharak (propagandist) who masterminded the communal violence in Gujarat that killed over 2000 Muslims in February-March 2002 besides destroying millions of dollars worth of properties and personal belongings of the minority community and rendering thousands of them homeless. Ignoring the criticism made by human rights organizations and individuals, groups and parties representing secular opinions and sentiments in the country, Modi provocatively allowed in the first week of July 2002 a traditional Hindu procession to take place through the streets of Ahmedabad, the commercial capital of Gujarat State including some of the city's Muslim neighbourhoods. This was in keeping with the usual practice of the Hindu bigots to exploit the chariot procession to incite anti-Muslim pogroms. Modi used the occasion as the pretext for a massive police operation involving 30,000 police officers and other security personnel, including members of the Rapid Action Force, the Border Security Force and the Central Reserve Police Force. Police lined the streets along the 14km route, while marksmen were placed on neighbouring rooftops and hundreds of plainclothes police mingled with onlookers. The heavy police presence did not reassure the local Muslim population, many of whom fled into relief camps set up in Ahmedabad.

It was clear from the beginning that the cynical use of communal card by Narendra Modi with the approval of those in the top echelons of the BJP, particularly L.K.Advani, the former Deputy Prime Minister of India, had the aim of fomenting communal hatred to ensure the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the next state election. The poll was due in February 2003 but the BJP was debating the possibility of holding the election early. An opinion poll in May 2002 indicated an unprecedented communal polarisation of the urban and rural areas of Gujarat thanks to the systematic hate-campaigns conducted by the RSS and other Hindu communal organisations under its guidance. Four days before the outbreak of riots in February, the BJP lost two of the three seats contested in assembly by-elections. The losses in Gujarat were just part of a series of sharp electoral reversals in state elections over the past two years, including states such as Uttar Pradesh that have been regarded as BJP strongholds. Fearing defeat in the general election, Modi decided to whip up Hindu communal sentiments to divert attention from his government's failure to redress in any way the deepening poverty facing masses of ordinary people-Hindu and Muslim alike and succeeded to a great extent in polarising the society.

Investigations by the National Human Rights Commission, the Central Bureau of Investigation directly under the control of the Union Government and scores of NGOs have documented numerous acts of commission and omission, pointing out official connivance with the perpetrators of the violence. Even assuming that Modi knew nothing at all about the manner in which more than 2000 Muslims were slaughtered across the state, his failure to investigate these crimes and punish the guilty is obvious as pointed out by India's highest judicial body - the Supreme Court...

Unrepentant of his massive crimes, Modi continues to be the leader of a state government that has committed and continues to commit atrocities against Christians and Muslims. He was invited to visit the U.S. and U.K. in late March 2005 by the Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA), an organisation that includes many small motel owners of Gujarati origin; its board has several ardent supporters of Hindutva on it. The public events that Modi was going to address included: a speech at Madison Square Garden in New York City sponsored by the Association of Indian Americans for North America (a front organisation of the pro-Hindutva Non Resident Indians), a keynote address to the AAHOA annual convention in Orlando, Florida, and another speech at California State University in Long Beach, California. The Florida event was co-sponsored by many premier American multinational corporations such as American Express, the Cendant Corporation and US Franchising Service. That is part of the money-spinning hotel industry. AAHOA members themselves own massive real estate wealth estimated at \$40 billion. Chris Matthews, host of the NBC TV show "Hardball", was to share the stage with Modi in Florida for which he was supposed to have received a fee of \$50,000. These huge amounts are indicative of the financial clout under the disposal of the pro- Hindutva NRIs.

One positive result of the news of Modi's intended visit to US was the coming into being an Umbrella Organisation - Coalition against Genocide - comprised of 40 different outfits of secular Indians, Muslims and Sikhs living in North America. It launched a series of actions to delegitimise Modi's visit. Its action ranged from requesting the AAHOA to withdraw its invitation to Modi to pressuring the U.S. State Department to deny Modi the diplomatic visa in view of his direct complicity in the communal carnage. It also called upon the corporate business sponsors to cancel their sponsorship of the Florida event and requested Matthews not to share a platform with Modi and issued press notes informing the US press of the track record of this murderer... All these efforts resulted in the decision made by Matthew not to participate in the AAHOA and another by the corporate sponsors to cancel their participation.

In the meanwhile two members of the U.S. Congress tabled a resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives denouncing Modi for his role in the communal riots. While some prominent South Asian academics in various U.S. universities wrote to the U.S. government protesting against the planned visit of Modi. The Institute for Religion and Public Policy urged the State Department to deny Modi entry into the U.S. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a body chartered by the U.S. Congress, expressed serious concerns about Modi's visit through a statement by its Chairperson, Preeta Bansal, who is herself of Indian origin.

While the decision of the US Government taken on March 18 to deny the diplomatic visa to Modi besides revoking the business/tourist visa already granted to him under Section 212 (a) (2) (g) of the Immigration Act (which made any foreign government official who was responsible for or directly carried out, at any time, particularly severe violations of religious freedom ineligible for a visa) came as a pleasant surprise to the secular forces here, one is not sure whether CAG's opposition to Modi and Hindutva played any significant role in the U.S. government's decision. It is most likely that factors like the Congressional resolution and the pressure from U.S.Christian groups that are upset with Hindutva's actions against Christians in India were crucial in forcing the US government to make that decision.

The decision of the US Government to deny Modi a diplomatic visa and revoke the one given earlier sparked off a variety of debates covering a number of issues ranging from the double -standards adopted by it in issuing visas to the hypocrisy of the Hindutva forces in talking about the 'national pride' (that according to them were hurt by the superpower.) What was lost sight of in all these debates and controversies is the fact that despite the defeat of BJP in the parliamentary elections held last year, its social base remains secure as indicated by the recent state elections in Jharkhand and Bihar. In the US itself, though the Modi visit was canceled, his admirers went ahead with the

programs in New York and Florida bringing his speech in by a video-link. The protest demonstrations by a few hundred members of CAG that went on for four hours outside the Madison Square Garden venue in New York and a similar one in Florida proved to be no match to the numerical and financial strength of the supporters of Hindutva. That nearly 4,000 gathered inside Madison Square Garden to listen to the satellite-transmitted speech of Narendra Modi was indicative of the fact that the venom spread by the Sangh Parivar is deep-rooted and has created anti-Muslim, anti-Christian culture, which has seeped into the minds of millions of Hindus. The poisonous seeds sown in the minds of these Hindus have sprouted and grown into gigantic trees casting dark shadows across the sub-continent. The paramount duty today of all the secular and democratic forces in India and abroad is to devise ways and means to take on the Hindu Right in the streets and win over those ordinary Hindus from its deadly clutches.

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