

Communal War in Gujarat, India

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AS RIOTS FLARED across Gujarat, people started clutching at straws in the hope of saving something from the crisis. The immediate cause was supposedly the Godhra carnage — where several train cars carrying Hindu militants were burnt, killing fifty-eight. Not only was the incident condemned, but the real cause — the Ram temple issue — began to be addressed very seriously, with a hope to the development of some sort of compromise.

[The “Ram temple,” where Hindu fanatics intend to build a temple on the purported birthplace of the god Ram, is on the site of the Ayodhya mosque which was destroyed by mobs in 1992. See further discussion below —ed.]

The proposal of Jayendra Saraswati, Shankaracharya of Kanchi (deemed to be a very Holy office) appeared to many as a voice of sanity by contrast with the rampaging mobs of the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP).

The VHP and its ilk had destroyed a centuries old mosque a decade back. Now they were fighting to build a temple exactly on that spot. Their offer to the Muslims was simple: Accept this meekly, and (for the moment) we will leave you alone (though we will later raise the issues of several other temples and mosques already on our agenda).

By contrast, the Shankaracharya was suggesting that there should be a dialogue between the Hindu community and the Muslim community, as represented by the VHP and the All India Muslim Personal Law Board respectively, and some sort of guarantees to the Muslim community as well. So we who resolutely oppose this proposal need to explain our reasons clearly.

“Authenticity” and Fascism

For a decade and a half, the Ram temple has been at the center of the fascist drive for power. Between 1987 and 1992, a massive campaign was waged, to “prove” the authenticity of the Ram Janmabhoomi claim (i.e. that Ram, the hero of the myth Ramayana, had indeed been born in Ayodhya, in the spot where Mir Baqi, a general of Babar, had built a mosque. Allegedly, Babar had ordered the destruction of a temple in order to build the mosque.)

Hindus were urged to stand up as Hindus, and secularism was condemned as de facto pandering to minority communalism. In 1992, this stage of the campaign ended with massive communal mobilizations and the destruction of the Babri Masjid.

This was followed by dithering on the part of the Congress Party and then of the united front governments, while the far right pressed ahead with its agenda. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the electoral arm of the combine, campaigned and increased its parliamentary seats. Important sections of the Indian big bourgeoisie began to conclude that a) it was desirable to climb on to the BJP bandwagon; and b) a full-scale implementation of neoliberal policies required the prior atomization of the working class, which in turn necessitated the empowerment of the BJP.

At the same time, the fighting arms of Hindu fundamentalism “Hindutva” —ed.], like the Viswa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal and so on, claimed to stand for all Hindus and to speak in their names, regardless of parliamentary ups and downs.

Political Uses of Fanaticism

Thus the VHP, and the “holy men” it gathered at times, went on focussing on the construction of a Ram temple. Contrary to the belief within sections of the left, this was not simply a ploy to garner votes. To think that the BJP is the “real” force while the rest are its adjuncts is to make a major mistake.

The continuous harping on the Ram temple was a twofold signal — a signal to the supporters that here was a political force which did not allow political exigencies to harm “core” political issues, and simultaneously to the ruling class that accepting a long term BJP government would entail the acceptance of certain political terms.

The aim of the VHP was to shift politics by force in the direction of the extreme right. The announcement of specific programs, like the beginning of temple construction from 15th March 2002, were intended to keep the far right supporters and extremist activists at a temperature steadily near the boiling point.

The rhythm of this work, however, was not “totally” unconnected with parliamentary political developments. In early 2002, four provinces went to the polls. Despite the Prevention of Terrorism Act targeting Muslims (including a one-sided attack on Muslim communal organizations while leaving untouched the virulent Hindu communal ones), despite the blatant communalization of the state apparatus, the BJP was an “also-ran” in all four states.

In the Punjab, in Uttaranchal, and in Manipur, the BJP and its allies were firmly shown the door. But in Uttar Pradesh, where a hung assembly was produced, the central government and its local agent, the state governor, started playing games.

The Governor, Vishnukant Shastri, was reportedly a “holy worker” in 1990. This man now demanded that the leader of the party with the biggest number of seats, Mulayam Singh Yadav, should prove his majority before the governor, rather than on the floor of the House.

The increasing aggressiveness of the Hindutva brigade should also be seen in this context. They are aware that coming to power by basing themselves on a Hindu identity is impossible if the thrust is purely, or mainly, parliamentary. As with classical fascism, there is a bid to blend legal and extra-parliamentary, violent mobilizations.

Godhra and the Gujarat Pogroms

Godhra is a powder-keg in the center of Gujarat, India's most communally polarized state, and a Hindutva "laboratory." During the 1970s and 1980s, Godhra used to record violence or curfew on as many as 150 days in some years.

The fact that the town had a Muslim majority population; the endemic rivalry between Muslims and the surrounding Adivasi (tribal) groups, and caste Hindus; sharp Hindu-Muslim competition over trading interests; and Hindutva's spread among the upper castes, all gave Godhra a special, incendiary, character.

Only a thorough, impartial and credible inquiry can establish just what led to the gory Godhra incident in which fifty-eight people were charred to death by a mob. This must investigate who was responsible for setting fire to the coaches of the Sabarmati Express on February 27, and determine the cause of failure of the intelligence agencies.

No such inquiry can ignore the relevant background: increasing harassment of Indian Muslims since September 11 and especially since December 13, and the maligning of Muslims as the principal perpetrators or sympathizers of terrorism; growing communalization of Gujarati society; the desperate tactics of the BJP and its associates in launching the incendiary temple-building campaign in Ayodhya just as the party faced an ignominious electoral defeat in four states; the mobilization of thousands of kar sevaks [Hindu militants —ed.] from Gujarat; and their movement by rail, and the many instances of verbal abuse and manhandling of Muslims by them, reported in Faizabad's Janmorcha newspaper.

None of the foregoing constitutes a valid provocation for gruesome acts such as burning people alive. But they highlight the intelligence failure and warrant a serious rethink about whether Godhra was a "cause," or a chain link, in a developing violence against Muslims, including through provocations.

The February 27 carnage was preceded by numerous unpleasant episodes: kar sevaks shouting militant Hindu slogans, taunting or cheating Muslim vendors, and verbally abusing their womenfolk.

These "provocations" were seized upon by some extremists to perpetrate a totally barbaric act. The fact that a several hundred-strong mob was mobilized as early as 7 a.m. suggests serious planning and preparation on the part of Muslim communalists. Their far more dangerous counterparts among the Hindu communalists looking for an opportunity then seized upon this.

What followed suggests both planning on the part of Hindu communalists and state collusion. If one excludes state complicity, one cannot even begin to understand the partisan conduct of the Gujarat police.

In several gory incidents, it not only failed to deter or stop the violence; it actively encouraged it. The Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, virtually called on VHP and Bajrang Dal forces to commit murder and pogroms.

Just as in Bombay in 1992-93, the Gujarat police refused — in spite of repeated warnings and orders to intervene in time, knowing this would result in mass murder. Worse, it participated itself in arson, abduction, armed intimidation and downright homicide, besides looting and destroying property.

It takes more than passive acquiescence for the police to watch the stoning of the Defense Minister's

car without stern action.

Ten times more Muslims have already been killed in Gujarat than the Hindus murdered in Godhra. For millions of citizens, Gujarat has turned into a veritable purgatory. Vishwa Hindu Parishad goons took over more than thirty cities and towns, and rampaged, burned and killed at will. Amidst their depredations, the police were nowhere to be seen. Once again, hardcore communalists suborned agencies of the state.

Buildup to Barbarism

This has been the result of years of build-ups. A vast number of innocent Muslims were arrested under the (now defunct) Terrorism and Disturbed Areas Act (TADA). More recently, marriages between Muslim boys and Hindu girls have been excoriated, with claims flying around, like “Madrasas train Muslim boys in how to seduce Hindu girls” (this was a state VHP leader’s assertion). This is exactly the kind of charge calculated to send temperatures soaring.

Unlike the unknowns in Godhra, there is little about its far bloodier aftermath that is in doubt, in particular the elaborate planning and preparations that had taken place well in advance of February 27, including the stockpiling of firearms, swords and trishuls.

Already there is overwhelming evidence of the involvement of agencies of the state in the escalation of violence, which began barely twenty-four hours after the Godhra incident. Consider the following information gathered through extended conversations with activists in Gujarat, and through the media:

* During the crucial interval between Godhra and the first targeted attacks on Muslims, the police failed, or were ordered to fail, despite mounting reports of the coming “Hindu backlash,” to go through the routine drill they have been trained to carry out for over 100 years, including special patrolling, rounding up bad characters and communal goondas, setting up meetings of mohalla and residential colony representatives, etc.

* Early on, Narendra Modi gave out unambiguous signals that he did not want preventive action. He discouraged tough police measures even after the VHP and the BJP launched their virulent campaigns for arson and murder.

* In countless instances, the police stood and watched as Hindutva hooligans went about looting, burning and killing. Pande, the Commissioner of Police of Ahmedabad, even provided justification by saying that the forces under him were not separated from their social milieu.

Many officers deliberately delayed despatching constables or summoning the fire brigade when Muslim localities came under attack — as a means of letting the “natural reaction” (read, extreme anti-Muslim hatred) work itself out. Soon, the police themselves started participating in these crimes.

All this emboldened the pogromists. Thus in Baroda, Prof. Bandukwala’s house, raided the first day, was burnt down the next day as police inaction showed that there was no danger in intensifying the attacks.

* After the first major day of violence, in which 150 people were butchered in cold blood, Modi expressed “full satisfaction” with the working of the police and the law-and-order machinery. This was a loud and clear message to the VHP, as well as to the extremely threatened Muslims, that the

very apex of the state would remain complicit in the pogrom.

* Mobs of the Hindutva hooligans specifically and accurately targeted Muslim homes, buildings and shops — on the basis of the electoral rolls provided by the municipal or state election authorities.

What happened from 28th February was not a riot as India has sadly enough been accustomed to, but a pogrom, as in 1992-3. And Narendra Modi assertively defended the pogrom. His response to queries was that these riots were nothing more than Newton's Third Law.

When STAR channel tried to show the real nature of the communal violence, Modi's government ordered cable TV operators not to show this particular channel on 2nd March.

The Long-Term "Hindu Bloc" Strategy

Despite the well-known connections among the VHP, the RSS and the BJP, a big chunk of the media has been putting up a pretense of big distinctions between these. So at this point, a detour into history becomes necessary. The fountainhead of all these Hindu communal organizations is the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh.

Founded in 1925, the RSS evolved a whole series of organizations. Given the centrality of gender in the Hindu communalist discourse (pre-dating the RSS) its first branch had been the women's organization Rashtra Sevika Samity.

After 1947, its organizations included the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (labor), and the Jan Sangh (the first electoral outfit on an all-India level spawned by it). In 1977, the Jan Sangh merged with a number of other bourgeois and petty bourgeois opposition parties to form the Janata Party, which formed a national government [the first post-independence defeat of the Congress Party —ed.].

Immediately, the RSS started pushing its agenda. This led to a conflict and the break up of the Janata Party, and the subsequent formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party. After an initial lip service to an oxymoron called Gandhian socialism, the BJP switched to a line of controlled, but steadily ascending Hindutva.

Every time the non-Congress parties, including particularly the mainstream left, which had a serious responsibility as the major force within the working class, decided that in order to better fight the Congress an alliance with the BJP was needed, they strengthened the latter.

Eventually they created a polarity where the BJP and the Congress, two right-wing parties, appeared as one of the two choices to which all other parties must drape themselves. The BJP by contrast appeared a model to its supporters<197>a party which was unwilling to throw away its "principles."

It is within a framework of this long-term strategy of consolidating a "Hindu" bloc that the RSS goal must be understood.

This is not one more party among several seeking political power while serving the bourgeoisie. This is a party that is telling the bourgeoisie that it will deliver the economic goods (in the present situation, the economic policy of neo-liberalism, which was initiated by the Congress, but which neither the Congress nor the United Front could carry off smoothly), but in exchange it will refashion the political setup drastically.

Already, it has succeeded in penetrating the coercive apparatus, sections of the lower judiciary, etc., if not through direct recruitment, then through the permeation of its ideas.

Congress Party Opportunism

The shift to a war of movement was substantially aided by the waning fortunes of the Congress. In the early and middle 1980s came the efforts of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi to play the “Hindu card,” communalizing the state apparatus on an unprecedented scale.

This occurred first at the time of the Punjab crisis, then, after the murder of Indira Gandhi, through the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 and the subsequent cover-up of the guilty. All this directly prepared the ground for the Ram Janmabhoomi blitzkrieg of the Sangh Parivar, now spearheaded by the VHP.

It must not be forgotten that prior to 1989, the Ram issue had been sought to be utilized by the Congress. It was the Congress government that updated the Ramayana epic into a pseudo-nationalist TV serial. The idols installed inside the Babri Masjid in December 1949 had been placed there in collusion with a previous Congress regime.

And it was Rajiv who made a series of catastrophic political moves (bringing in a bill that sought to appease Muslim communalists; as a balancing act, also trying to appease Hindu communalists by allowing the shilanyas at Ayodhya).

Toward the Destruction of Democracy

It was around Ayodhya that the RSS and its fronts went on the offensive, pressing into service the latest in advertising and audio-visual techniques on a scale and with resources never before seen on the subcontinent.

Between 1989 and 2002, it has been sufficiently successful in shifting the discourse to the right, that even the proposal of the Shankaracharya of Kanchi for a settlement between the All India Muslim Personal law Board and the VHP/the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas appear “reasonable.”

To accept this proposal means to accept the claim of the VHP that it does indeed have the right to represent the Hindus of India. While less immediately troublesome, it equally means accepting the right of the AIMPLB to represent all Muslims of India. Once this is done, one might as well put up a signpost, saying, constitutional democracy ends here.

Yet many bourgeois democratic media and media personalities are working overtime to prove the reasonableness of the compromise on offer. According to them, VHP extremists like Giriraj Kishore have been isolated by it, while people like Ashok Singhal have emerged as moderates.

To portray Prime Minister Vajpayee as a “good” nationalist statesman who has risen above the “petty views” of the RSS by inviting the mediation of Jayendra Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Kanchi, is to court disaster. To accept the mediation of religious heads with other religious heads is to ensure that there will be no space left for secular politics.

The very idea that Hindus constitute a homogeneous community is dangerous. In the core Hindi belt areas, let us also remember, the BJP still gets a fraction of the votes. [[1](#)]

The Mask of Vajpayee

Since the “moderate, statesmanlike” Vajpayee is daily being held up as a model, as the man to be propped up, let us look closely at him once again.

The RSS strongman Govindacharya had justly called him a mask. He is a successful mask because an increasing section of the bourgeoisie is willing to put up with occasional violations of rights of Muslims and Christians (to say nothing of communists, trade unionists, atheists and other oddballs who stand in the way of the great and glorious globalization), and therefore to project him as an upholder of secular traditions.

What of the reality — what has actually occurred under the Vajpayee government? The murder of Graham Stein? The rape of nuns in Jhabua and the VHP statement that this was a reaction by patriotic Indians to conversions? The spreading of communal propaganda in Gujarat over inter-community marriages, going to the extent of saying that madrassas provide training to Muslim youth in the art of seducing Hindu girls?

The application of Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance against “only” Muslim communalists, showing it is actually an anti-Muslim, not an anti-terrorist law?

Half a millennium ago, an Italian statesman turned political theorist named Machiavelli explained clearly certain policies that rulers need to follow: They have to be both loved and feared. A ruler must make himself the object of fear, but not of hatred.

Drawing from his experiences of Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli cites the case of Borgia’s occupation of Romagna. It was a new territory and it was necessary to make himself feared. So he sent it a tough governor, Rimirro di Orco.

When repression became too much, di Orco was recalled and unceremoniously executed. Borgia got the advantage of the repressions but threw off the opprobrium by executing the hated governor.

This is not to suggest that Vajpayee intends to execute or even imprison Singhal. Rather it is to stress that the division of labor — Singhal, Togadia, etc. as bogeymen and Vajpayee, Jayendra Saraswati, and the like as reasonable, gentle people — is an old, old ploy.

How, then, is resistance to be built? Sadly, it is not only the Vajpayees who follow Machiavelli. People like H.K.S. Surjeet, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) General Secretary, are also more interested in the discourses of advice to princes than in the defense of Republicanism. [2]

Certainly, in fighting pogromists, all allies are useful allies. Every MP outside the BJP and the Shiv Sena, the two avowedly communalist parties, should be pressured. Pressure should be put to ensure that the government does not retreat from the existing commitments. But to rely on only legal and parliamentary battles means to detach this struggle from the anti-liberalization and anti-capitalist struggles.

The destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 had been followed by the National Campaign Committee of trade unions abandoning the struggle against capitalist neo-liberalism and its pressures on the working class.

If the focus, once more, were to be on parliamentary alliances to prop up a government of a broad anti-BJP bloc including all right-wing parties willing to oppose pogroms, this would mean a surrender before the current onslaughts of privatization, destruction of the state sector, destruction of jobs, the simultaneous withdrawal of subsidies from the poor and the creation of massive subsidies for the rich, etc.

By contrast, it is only when the class struggle will be strengthened that the class identity will be established more firmly than any communal identity.

In a united front against riots, all should be welcome who actually stand up against rioters. To invite all of them to form a government with working class support is a different matter.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 98, May/June 2002.

Footnotes

[1] For its showing in Bihar the VJP has to depend on support given by the Kurmi caste-based Samata Party of Nitish Kumar. In Uttar Pradesh it has been driven to the third position by Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party and Kanshi Ram and Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party. Regardless of the personal characters of the leaders, these parties profess ideologies of intermediate caste and low caste assertion respectively.

[2] The ready and easy way, as no doubt the upcoming CPI(M) Congress will discuss, is to detach a few allies from NDA, notably Chandrababu Naidu (whose party, the TDP, once had extremely good relations with the CPI(M) and even boasts of a leading body entitled Politburo). This solution is no solution.