

Fascism's Firm Footprint in India

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Gujarat, the only major state in India with a government headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has for some years been the petri dish in which Hindu fascism has been fomenting an elaborate political experiment. In spring 2002, the initial results were put on public display.

It began within hours of the Godhra outrage -- in which fifty-eight Hindus were killed when a train returning from the disputed site of Ayodhya on February 27 was set alight as it pulled out of a station in Godhra, in Gujarat. Even now, months later, nobody knows who was responsible for the crime. The Forensic Department report clearly says that the fire was started inside the coach. This raises a huge question mark over the theory that the train was set alight by a Muslim mob that had gathered outside the train. However, the then-Home Minister (now elevated to the post of Deputy Prime Minister), L.K. Advani, immediately announced -- with no evidence to back his statement -- that the attack was a Pakistani plot.

On the evening of February 27, Hindu nationalists in the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, the World Hindu Council) and the Bajrang Dal movement put into motion a meticulously planned pogrom against the Muslim community. Press reports put the number of dead at just over 800. Human rights organizations have said it is closer to 2,000. As many as 100,000 people, driven from their homes, now live in refugee camps. Women were stripped and gang-raped, and parents were bludgeoned to death in front of their children. In Ahmedabad, the former capital of Gujarat and the second-largest industrial city in the state, the tomb of Wali Gujarati, the founder of the modern Urdu poem, was demolished and paved over in the course of a night. The tomb of the musician Ustad Faiyaz Khan was desecrated. Arsonists burned and looted shops, homes, hotels, textile mills, buses and cars. Hundreds of thousands have lost their jobs.

Across Gujarat, thousands of people made up the mobs. They were armed with petrol bombs, guns, knives and swords. Apart from the VHP and Bajrang Dal's usual lumpen constituency, there were Dalits (untouchables) and Adivasis (indigenous peoples), who were brought in on buses and trucks. Middle-class people participated in the looting. (On one memorable occasion, a family arrived in a Mitsubishi Lancer.) The leaders of the mob had computer-generated lists marking out Muslim homes, shops and businesses. They used mobile phones to coordinate the action. They had not just police protection and police connivance, but also covering fire. The cooking-gas cylinders they used to burn Muslim homes and establishments had been hoarded weeks in advance, causing a severe gas shortage in Ahmedabad.

While Gujarat burned, our prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was on MTV promoting his new poems. (Reports say cassettes have sold 100,000 copies.) It took him more than a month

-- and two vacations in the hills -- to make it to Gujarat. When he did, he gave a speech at the Shah Alam refugee camp. His mouth moved, he tried to express concern, but no real sound emerged except the mocking of the wind whistling through a burned, bloodied, broken world. Next we knew, he was bobbing around in a golf cart, striking business deals in Singapore.

One hundred and thirty million Muslims live in India. Hindu fascists regard them as legitimate prey. The lynch mob continues to be the arbiter of the routine affairs of daily life: who can live where, who can say what, who can meet whom and where and when. Its mandate is expanding quickly. From religious affairs, it now extends to property disputes, family altercations, the planning and allocation of water resources. Muslim businesses have been shut down. Muslim people are not served in restaurants. Muslim children are not welcome in schools. Muslim parents live in dread that their infants might forget what they've been told and give themselves away by saying "Ammi!" or "Abba!" in public and invite sudden and violent death.

Notice has been given: This is just the beginning.

No matter who they were, or how they were killed, each person who died in Gujarat deserves to be mourned. There have been hundreds of outraged letters to journals and newspapers asking why the "pseudo-secularists" do not condemn the burning of the Sabarmati Express in Godhra with the same degree of outrage with which they condemn the killings in the rest of Gujarat. What they don't seem to understand is that there is a fundamental difference between a pogrom and the burning of the train in Godhra. We still don't know who exactly was responsible for the carnage in Godhra. But every independent report says the pogrom against the Muslim community in Gujarat has at best been conducted under the benign gaze of the state and, at worst, with active state collusion. Either way, the state is criminally culpable.

While the parallels between contemporary India and prewar Germany are chilling, they're not surprising. (The founders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS], the National Volunteer Force that is the moral and cultural guild of the BJP, have in their writings been frank in their admiration for Hitler and his methods.) One difference is that here in India we don't have a Hitler. We have instead the hydra-headed, many-armed Sangh Parivar -- the "joint family" of Hindu political and cultural organizations, with the BJP, the RSS, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal each playing a different instrument. Its utter genius lies in its apparent ability to be all things to all people at all times.

The Sangh Parivar speaks in as many tongues. It can say several contradictory things simultaneously. While one of its heads (the VHP) exhorts millions of its cadres to prepare for the Final Solution, its titular head (the prime minister) assures the nation that all citizens, regardless of their religion, will be treated equally. It can ban books and films and burn paintings for "insulting Indian culture." Simultaneously, it can mortgage the equivalent of 60 percent of the entire country's rural development budget as profit to Enron. But underneath all the clamor and the noise, a single heart beats. And an unforgiving mind with saffron-saturated tunnel vision works overtime.

Whipping up communal hatred is part of the mandate of the Sangh Parivar. It has been

planned for years. Hundreds of RSS shakhas across the country (shakha literally means "branch," and RSS shakhas are "educational" cells) have been indoctrinating thousands of children and young people, stunting their minds with religious hatred and falsified history, including unfactual or wildly exaggerated accounts of the rape and pillaging of Hindu women and Hindu temples by Muslim rulers in the precolonial period. In states like Gujarat, the police, the administration and the political cadres at every level have been systematically penetrated. It has huge popular appeal, which it would be foolish to underestimate or misunderstand. The whole enterprise has a formidable religious, ideological, political and administrative underpinning. This kind of power, this kind of reach, can only be achieved with state backing.

Under this relentless pressure, what will most likely happen is that the majority of the Muslim community will resign itself to living in ghettos as second-class citizens, in constant fear, with no civil rights and no recourse to justice. What will daily life be like for them? Any little thing, an altercation at a cinema or a fracas at a traffic light, could turn lethal. So they will learn to keep very quiet, to accept their lot, to creep around the edges of the society in which they live. Their fear will transmit itself to other minorities. Many, particularly the young, will probably turn to militancy. They will do terrible things. Civil society will be called upon to condemn them. Then President Bush's canon will come back to us: "You're either with us or with the terrorists."

Those words hang frozen in time like icicles. For years to come, butchers and genocidists will fit their grisly mouths around them ("lip-sync," filmmakers call it) to justify their butchery.

Bal Thackeray, the leader of the Shiv Sena -- the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist political party in the state of Maharashtra, responsible for a pogrom in which hundreds of Muslims were massacred in the city of Bombay in 1992-93 -- has the lasting solution. He's called for civil war. Isn't that just perfect? Then Pakistan won't need to bomb us, we can bomb ourselves. Let's turn all of India into Kashmir. When all our farmlands are mined, our buildings destroyed, our infrastructure reduced to rubble, our children physically maimed and mentally wrecked, maybe we can appeal to the Americans to help us out. Airdropped airline meals, anyone?

Fascism's firm footprint has appeared in India. Let's mark the date. While we can thank the American President and the "Coalition Against Terror" for creating a congenial international atmosphere for its ghastly debut, we cannot credit them for the years it has been brewing in our public and private lives. The massed energy of bloodthirsty patriotism became openly acceptable political currency after India's nuclear tests in 1998. The "weapons of peace" have trapped India and Pakistan in a spiral of brinkmanship -- threat and counterthreat, taunt and countertaunt.

Fascism is about the slow, steady infiltration of all the instruments of state power. It's about the slow erosion of civil liberties, about unspectacular, day-to-day injustices. Fighting it does not mean asking for RSS shakhas and madrassahs that are overtly communal to be banned. It means working toward the day when they're voluntarily abandoned as bad ideas. It means keeping an eagle eye on public institutions and demanding accountability. It means putting your ear to the ground and listening to the whispering of the truly powerless. It means giving

a forum to the myriad voices from the hundreds of resistance movements across the country that are speaking about real issues -- about mining, about bonded labor, marital rape, sexual preferences, women's wages, uranium dumping, weavers' woes, farmers' worries. It means fighting displacement and dispossession and the relentless, everyday violence of abject poverty.

While most people in India have been horrified by what happened in Gujarat, many thousands of the indoctrinated are preparing to journey deeper into the heart of the horror. Look around you and you'll see in little parks, in empty lots, in village commons, the RSS is marching, hoisting its saffron flag. Suddenly they're everywhere, grown men in khaki shorts marching, marching, marching.

Historically, fascist movements have been fueled by feelings of national disillusionment. Fascism has come to India after the dreams that fueled the freedom struggle have been frittered away like so much loose change. Independence itself came to us as what Gandhi famously called a "wooden loaf" -- a notional freedom tainted by the blood of the hundreds of thousands who died during Partition. For more than half a century now, that heritage of hatred and mutual distrust has been exacerbated, toyed with and never allowed to heal by politicians. Over the past fifty years ordinary citizens' modest hopes for lives of dignity, security and relief from abject poverty have been systematically snuffed out. Every "democratic" institution in this country has shown itself to be unaccountable, inaccessible to the ordinary citizen and either unwilling or incapable of acting in the interests of genuine social justice. And now corporate globalization is being relentlessly and arbitrarily imposed on India, ripping it apart culturally and economically.

There is very real grievance here. The fascists didn't create it. But they have seized upon it, upturned it and forged from it a hideous, bogus sense of pride. They have mobilized human beings using the lowest common denominator -- religion. People who have lost control over their lives, people who have been uprooted from their homes and communities, who have lost their culture and their language, are being made to feel proud of something. Not something they have striven for and achieved, but something they just happen to be. Or, more accurately, something they happen not to be.

Unfortunately there's no quick fix. Fascism itself can only be turned away if all those who are outraged by it show a commitment to social justice that equals the intensity of their indignation. Are we ready, many millions of us, to rally not just on the streets but at work and in schools and in our homes, in every decision we take, and every choice we make?

Or not just yet . . .

If not, then years from now, when the rest of the world has shunned us, as it should, like the ordinary citizens of Hitler's Germany, we too will learn to recognize revulsion in the gaze of our fellow human beings. We too will find ourselves unable to look our own children in the eye, for the shame of what we did and didn't do. For the shame of what we allowed to happen.

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