

The Genocidal Pogrom in Gujarat: Anatomy of Indian Fascism

BJP'S RIOT - FREE INDIA

by Asghar Ali Engineer

(Secular Perspective March 16-31, 2002)

The riots in Gujrat in which so far 704 persons have died (official figures, unofficially it is much more) is, perhaps, Independent India's worst riots, both in terms of numbers and brutality of killings. The BJP, in its manifesto of 1999 Lok Sabha elections had promised 'riot-free India', if voted to power. So this is BJP's version of riot-free India. These riots have not taken place in any Congress-ruled or any other party ruled state, but in a BJP-ruled state of Gujrat which, is also a laboratory of Hindutva.

Thus it is the 'laboratory of Hindutva' which became killing fields of people belonging to minority community. To be sure what happened in Godhra on 27th February morning was highly condemnable and no one who respects human life would ever condone it or explain away its occurrence. It was highly inhuman whatever the provocation by the karsevaks.

What followed from next day in Gujarat (when the call for Gujrat bandh was given) was utterly shocking. No secular democratic country would stand such horror killing. In a democratic country law should take its course and people cannot be allowed to take revenge on the street. Those involved in Godhra massacre of karsevaks and some other innocent citizens in those two sleeping coaches (S5 and S6), were promptly arrested and the Chief Minister Narendra Modi even declared that they have been arrested under POTO.

That means the law had started taking its course and soon inquiry was also to be announced. A protest bandh call by the VHP next day was hardly needed. Bandh calls are given when the government refuses to take action against some grave and shocking event. Here the Government was more than ready to take action. And if despite having announced action against the culprits of the Godhra incident if bandh was announced by the VHP, was it necessary to kill hundreds of innocent people so brutally?

And if the VHP had gone blind by animal passion for vengeance what had happened to the Gujrat Government and its administrative machinery? It is more than obvious that the Government was unwilling to take any preventive measures to stop ensuing blood-bath. And knowing the nature of VHP and Bajrang Dal's militancy it was not difficult to imagine the nature of blood bath. And even then if the state government did not take any measure, do we need any more proof for its complicity. Even army was not called for full two days and when called, was not deployed saying enough magistrates were not available to accompany each column of the army.

When Mr. George Fernandese was sent as trouble-shooter of the NDA Government and he pressed for deployment of army his car was stoned publicly. Many insiders felt it was done at the instance of Mr. Narendra Modi. The brutal killings went on for about a week and spread to rural areas where large number of people were burnt alive, one cannot be sure how many so far as bodies are being discovered.

Gujrat has not witnessed communal violence for the first time. Besides smaller incidents of communal violence there have been several major flare-ups, particularly in Ahmedabad. The first major communal carnage took place in 1969 in post-independent India in which about 660 people died officially. The number of dead in the current riots have already reached 704 and which is also likely to exceed as more bodies are recovered from rural areas. This when the Chief Minister's office was busy giving out figures last month when Narendra Modi was contesting by-election to show how peaceful Gujrat has been in last six months since Modi took over as Chief Minister. Thus within six months of Modi's take-over the 1969 record has already been pushed to the second place.

Gujrat witnessed several more riots since 1969, in 1981, in 1985, in 1990, in 1992-93 and now in 2002 and several other riots in between. According to the Times of India report under Madhav Singh Solanki who was chief minister on three occasions, 276 people died in 117 incidents of mob violence. Under Amar Singh Chaudhuri, 582 persons died in 413 incidents of violence. And under Chimanbhai Patel, who was chief minister twice, 563 persons died in 370 incidents of violence. In 1990 when L.K. Advani-led rath yatra began from Somnath to Ayodhya, 220 people died; in 1992 riots after Babri demolition 325 people were dead and in 1993 another 116 people lost their lives.

All these riots which took place during the Congress regimes the Jansangh or the BJP's role was obvious though the Congress also cannot be exonerated by any means. The BJP had chosen Gujrat from beginning as the laboratory of Hindutva. The question is of course why Gujrat was chosen? There could be number of reasons for this.

Gujrat is predominantly state of traders where neither left movement had ever in influence nor any movement by lower castes, particularly the Dalit movement. Dalit movement acts as a countervailing force for communal movement. Gujrat never witnessed such a movement. Neither there was any Mahatma Phule there nor any Ambedkar.

The socialist movement was also very weak. No social reform movement as in Maharashtra ever took place in Gujrat. The reform movement called Swami Narayan movement attracted mainly trading classes, particularly the Patels in its fold. It never attacked the caste system. Also Gujrat, including Saurashtra, has largest number of princely states and feudal influence was very strong and since independence the Jansangh allied with Swantantra party which was set up by Rajaji and which was joined in a large number by the princes.

It is, therefore, not very surprising that earlier the Jan Sangh and now the BJP, has systematically used the dalit masses to advance its own political agenda and also have always used them for attacking minorities. The poor dalit youth are always in the forefront of all the riots. The dalit leadership, itself very weak, finds itself almost helpless in controlling the dalit youth to perpetrate communal violence. The job of killing is done usually by dalit youth and upper caste followers of the BJP keep themselves away from this 'dirty job'.

The middle castes are extremely conservative and unhesitatingly align themselves with the BJP and most of the NRIs in U.K. and USA also belong to these castes which help the Sangh Parivar generously. The NRI money has greatly helped the Sangh Parivar financially. They have really helped make Gujrat the laboratory of Hindutva. Also, every communal carnage has furthered the cause of BJP and its political agenda. And it is for this reason that it found it easy to come to power in Gujrat unaligned with any other political party. The Solanki government tried to take help of lower and backward castes and minorities through KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims) formula by giving them reservation in government jobs. However, a powerful anti-reservation movement launched by these middle castes and led by the BJP sabotaged it and Solanki himself was thrown out after more than year and half long communal violence in 1985-86 engineered by the BJP. Thus the BJP furthered consolidated its position and Congress was further weakened besides being torn by faction fights.

The recent carnage in Gujrat is culmination of years of unabated communal violence. It was for this reason that Mr.L.K.Advani also chose Gandhinagar constituency for contesting Lok Sabha elections every time. Every time communal violence takes place in Gujrat it surpasses itself in brutality from previous instances of violence. This time all deaths were most brutal, burning the victims alive and throwing even young children into leaping flames.

This time a concerted effort was also made to systematically destroy the economy of Muslims in Gujrat. Incidentally Gujrat is the only state where three trading communities of Gujrati Muslims have flourished over a period of time i.e. the Bohras, Khojas and Memons. All these trading communities are peaceful and almost a-political. They generally do not take part in political movements, let alone in any communal violence. Yet these communities are increasingly suffering in the Gujrat riots and this time it was very systematic destruction of their factories, godowns and shops.

Because of the Sangh Parivar's intense activities in Gujrat all sections of Gujrat civil society and state organs have been thoroughly communalised. Even judiciary is no exception. When Babri Masjid was demolished in 1992 twenty judges, out of twenty three, according to a lawyer of Ahmedabad High Court, felt happy; only three said that they felt sad. No wonder that in all these riots over 33 years since 1969 hardly any culprit belonging to the majority community has been punished. The police and civil servants are no exceptions. Whenever riots break out in Gujrat they spread very fast as entire administrative machinery either looks the other way or even helps the marauding mobs. In the carnage which, broke out after the Godhra incident even minority judges and high police officers of the rank of Inspector General of Police were targeted. High court judges belonging to the minority community had to flee from their houses and their plea to the authorities fell on deaf years.

Some people have suggested that only a vibrant civil society can check communal violence but when the civil society itself is so highly communalised how can it check communal violence. There is so much illiteracy, so much poverty and unemployment, how can we have a vibrant civil society. Our politicians, particularly of the BJP variety are misusing religion for political ends recklessly as the Sangh Parivar has done in last twenty years not only by challenging secularism (calling it pseudo secularism since early eighties) and then raising the Ram mandir issue and using it continuously election after election to increase number of seats in parliament.. It is crucial moment for Indian polity and Indian secularism. The BJP politicians are pushing the country to the precipice to climb up to power. The strong resistance is needed now from the people. The secular parties are fighting among themselves the Samajwadi with the BSP, the socialists with the Congress and some of them easily aligned themselves with the BJP to finish of the rival secular parties. This rank opportunism on the part of NDA partners should come to an end if they care for secularism and unity of the country.

(Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, Mumbai.)