

THE UNACKNOWLEDGED TERROR: Hindu Nationalism

by Jo-Anne Prud'homme

Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Western press and politicians have put the issue of fundamentalism at the core of global political discussions. In these terms, however, the definition of fundamentalism appears to address only Islamic fundamentalism. In a period where Middle Eastern Muslims are being scrutinized by Western powers, Indian Muslims have fallen prey to a different brand of terror: Hindu nationalism.

The implications of the increasing success of the Hindu nationalist movement are massive, both for India and for global tolerance of human rights violations.

Since its election to power as the leading member of India's coalition government, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP) has embarked on a Hinduizing mission. The BJP is the political wing of the larger *Sangh Parivar* or "family" of Hindu nationalist groups. Campaign work for the party is usually funded and aided by the umbrella organization of the collective family, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps, RSS).¹ Although the BJP was only elected as the leading party in India's coalition government in 1998, the idea of a Hindu India has for decades

been a factor affecting Indian politics. Despite decades of effort, however, it has only been in the last five years that politicians have been able to take long strides in this direction. In February of 2002, the culmination of these efforts was seen in the tragic mass-sacrificing of hundreds of Muslims in the state of Gujarat.²

In the three days following a Muslim attack on a train carrying Hindu religious activists, mobs of Hindus in Gujarat left hundreds dead and tens of thousands dispossessed in a retaliatory killing spree. Muslim homes, places of worship, and businesses were looted and burned. As is typical during episodes of large-scale violence against minorities in India, women were particularly victimized. Hundreds of Muslim women and girls were brutally raped, some mutilated and burned to death. Reports of the bellies of pregnant women being slashed open – with the fetus inside ripped out and tossed into a fire – have become shorthand testimony for the horror. The riots stand as the country's worst religious bloodletting in a decade. Sadly, the riots also set the stage for the direction of Indian politics.

Equally disturbing was the complicity and participation of the government in the attacks. Although the Gujarat government has portrayed the violence as a “spontaneous reaction” to the attack on the Sabarmati Express train, the evidence found by numerous non-governmental organizations and the Indian press, indicate that the attacks on Muslims in Gujarat were planned well in advance of the Godhra incident.³ These findings also show that the attacks were organized not only with extensive police participation, but also in close cooperation with officials of the BJP government.

Despite the huge number of police reports filed by victims of the violence, and First Information Reports given to police officers, containing names and addresses of the perpetrators of the violence against Muslims, not one conviction has been made at the time of this writing. All have been allowed to enjoy impunity for their actions. In some cases, names of police officials and even BJP politicians were included in victims' reports; however, in such cases the names were edited out of the reports, leaving political leaders to enjoy impunity for their actions.

By promoting and exploiting communal tensions, the BJP successfully managed to further their political rule in Gujarat, winning the December 2002 state assembly elections with a landslide victory. Many referred to the election campaign as the “Hindutva lab,” and BJP and RSS activists have hinted that this campaigning method might be used in other state assembly elections where the BJP is running. Although several states have since gone to the polls, no such large-scale violence has occurred. However, communal divide remains the most widely used method for BJP campaigns. And while the BJP did not enjoy landslide victories as they did in Gujarat in 2001, they have continued campaigning to gain popularity. In 2004, national elections will take place, elections in which the direction of the Indian government may finally become apparent.

The implications of the increasing success of the Hindu nationalist movement are massive, both for India and for global tolerance of human rights violations. Although Western powers have been able to focus on and expose fundamentalist organizations, this label has been reserved for groups affecting only the western world. India's government, which has been referred to as fascist by some Indian politicians, fits the criteria

used for defining Islamic fundamentalist groups – terrorist activity, murder, rape, and other atrocities committed, with impunity offered to those responsible.⁴ Despite this, Western powers have continued to concentrate their efforts in countering fundamentalism and terrorists only in the Middle East. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that the world's largest democracy has elected a fundamentalist government into power.

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1 The RSS was formed in 1923, as a reaction to British colonial rule. Dr. K.B. Hedgewar, founding father of the RSS, famously asked, "Who gave the Englishmen right to trample on the native people and rule over them oppressively? The British claim of being the rulers of Hindusthan is a brutal murder of justice, morality, and Dharma." Added to the colonial question, the so-called Muslim "threat" concerned Hedgewar. The aim of the RSS was, then, to create a group of people, trained physically and spiritually in Hindu traditions, to quell such a threat. As Hedgewar demanded, "Let Muslims look upon Ram as their hero and the communal problems will be all over." The Bajrang Dal is the militant youth wing of the organization. The creation of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council, VHP) has a similar history. Its formation was the result of a heightened majoritarian inferiority complex: the idea that Christian conversions posed a threat to Hinduism. See Hedgewar in self-defense (Trial for "seditious speech," 1921); and Tapan Basu, *Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1993).

2 On February 27, 2002, while the Sabarmati Express was stopped in the town of Godhra, in Gujarat, it was attacked and torched by a Muslim mob. The attack killed 59 people, mostly women and children. The train was carrying *kar sevaks*, Hindu religious activists, back from the town of Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh. This town is home to a religious site that has been the root of many communal uprisings. According to Hindus, this site is the birthplace of the god Ram. Muslims believe that an ancient mosque rests there. In 1992, Hindu activists destroyed the Babri Masjid in the town, which resulted in some of the worst communal rioting the sub-continent has ever seen. The *kar sevaks* on the Sabarmati Express had been in Ayodhya to discuss the construction of a Hindu temple on the ruins of the Babri Masjid.

3 See "We Have No Orders to Save You," (Human Rights Watch, April 2002), and "Crime Against Humanity," Vols. I and II.

4 See "Defeat 'fascist designs' of BJP, allies, says Congress," *The Hindu*, 22 September 2002.