

Hindutva, Modi, and The *Tehelka* Tapes

The Communal Threat to Indian Secularism

Neil Gray

“Communal politics is essentially the manipulation of social consciousness based on religion for political purposes.”

K.N.Pannikar¹

“The danger to India, mark you, is not communism. It is Hindu right-wing communalism”.

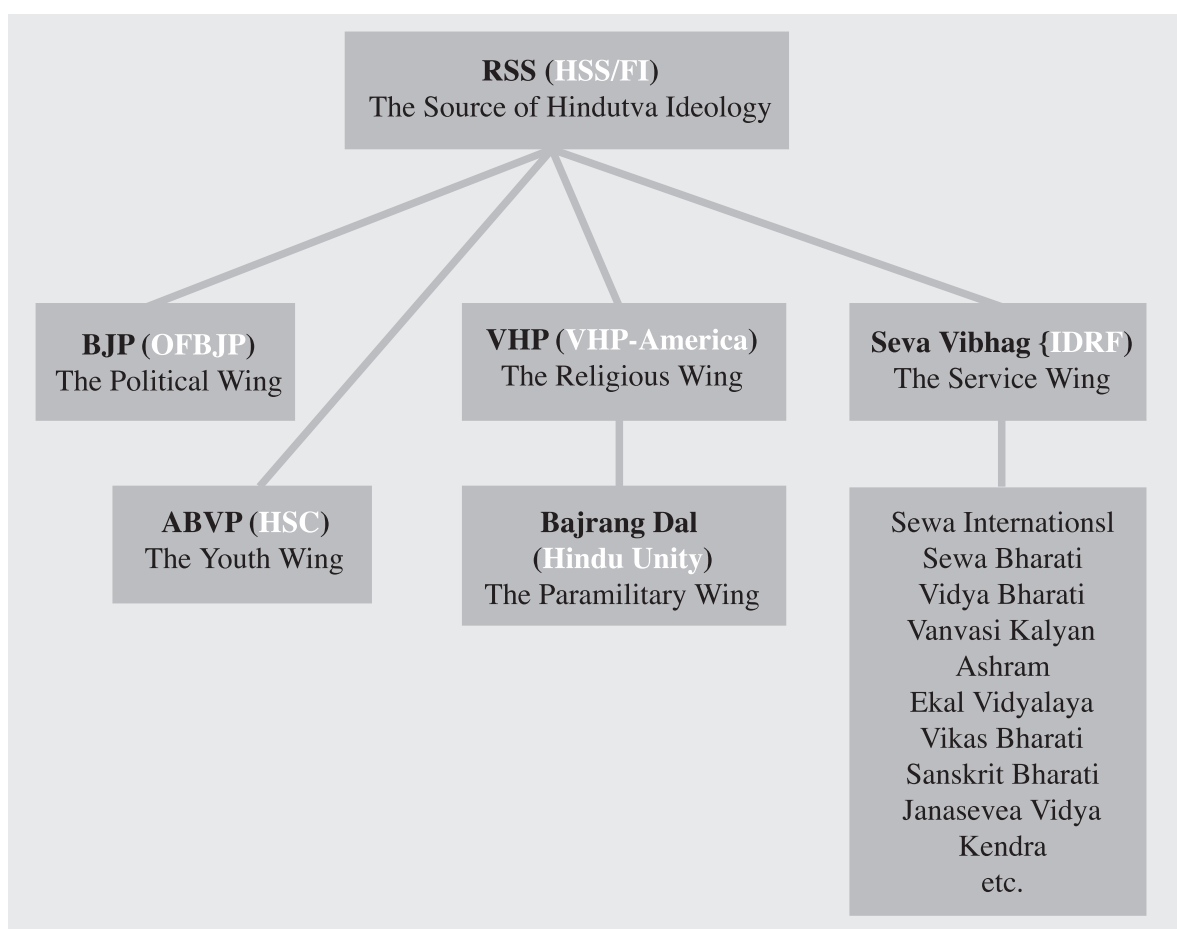
Jawaharlal Nehru 1963²

Hindutva is a communalist Hindu Nationalist ideology seeking to equate the very idea of ‘Indian-ness’ with ‘Hindu-ness’. The chief exponents of Hindutva are organised under the umbrella of the Sangh Parivar organisation, avowedly inspired and influenced by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a “social and cultural organization” with a known fascist pedigree and a Hindu majoritarian political agenda. The importance of this movement can be gauged by the presence within its ranks of the former ruling party of India, now the main party of opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the fact that over 80% of the Indian population identify themselves as Hindu (when asked to proffer a *religious* identity). This represents a potentially enormous vote-bank for Hindu fundamentalist groups to draw from. The undoubted crucible of Hindutva hegemony in India is the state of Gujarat, “a laboratory of hate”³, held by the notorious BJP Chief Minister Narendra Modi. For many people, a religiously communalised Gujarat represents, in microcosm, the deeply problematic “Face of India’s future”⁴.

Evangelical neo-liberal advocates and boosters, fronted by the bought media worldwide, are busy extolling the ‘competitive’ and ‘dynamic’ virtues of India’s de-regulated economy, boasting year on year 9% growth rates, while leaving (in a less celebrated statistic) 77% of the population living on less than half a dollar a day. Disavowal is a necessity for the perpetuation of neo-liberal narratives, and the concomitant emergence of this virulent form of ultra Hindu Nationalism (Hindutva) has been largely neglected in the celebratory discourses surrounding the Indian economy.

The horrific pogrom of over 2,000 Muslims in Gujarat (December 2002) by Sangh Parivar activists, assisted and abetted at all levels of the state, has gone down in infamy. Investigations by NGOs and Indian State Commissions have revealed complicity and culpability in the highest levels of state government, right up to Modi himself. The state courts however, under Modi’s tenure and reportedly at his behest, have so far failed to satisfy civil rights groups’ demands for justice. The issue recently erupted again after the celebrated ‘sting’ of late October 2007 by *Tehelka* magazine. A *Tehelka* reporter managed to infiltrate a rightwing Hindu organisation for six months, to obtain damning spycam video footage of Hindu activists bragging about killing Muslims and detailing the support they received from the highest echelons of state government.

These confessions were the first time that members of Sangh Parivar had openly admitted their culpability, and the crucial new evidence helping to substantiate the reports of various civil rights and human rights groups following the Gujarat genocide of Spring 2002.



Sangh Parivar Combine – ‘The Family’

Gujarat, under the BJP, is the experimental “petri-dish” in which Hindutva has emerged most violently. It is important to acknowledge its historical development within the wider network of Sangh Parivar groups. This broad alliance (Sangh Parivar translates as ‘Family of Associations’) provides right-wing Hindu fundamentalist groups with a varied base of platforms from which to advocate communalist positions. A hegemonic “constellation of forces”, produces fluid and varied discourses around Hindutva, and allows it to maintain a face for every occasion – from the outright sectarian hatred of the Bajrang Dal to the ‘respectable’ parliamentarianism of the BJP. Established in



Right:
Narendra Modi

1980, The BJP led the ruling NDA (National Democratic Alliance) coalition government from 1998 until its electoral defeat in 2004 by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The party is now recognised as the main opposition party in India and is a political force of undeniable weight and influence, ruling five states without need of political allies and forming part of a coalition government in four others.

Understanding the ideological role of the RSS-led Sangh Parivar in the BJP’s political ascendancy is crucial for an understanding of contemporary Indian politics. L.K Advani, current leader of the BJP and long-time member of the RSS, elucidated the links between the RSS and the BJP position in 1990: “There has been a conscious effort on the part of the *swayamsevak*s [RSS volunteers] who are working in the BJP to make each one understand the ideological base to which we belong, and our connections with sister organizations [...] which are all based on the inspiration from RSS”⁵ [my italics]. He continued; “We have to intensify our efforts to project the viewpoint of the RSS, which is not being reflected, so that with the *instrumentality* of the BJP in politics it gets more acceptance...”⁶ [my italics]. This instrumentalist, entryist, line (from an allegedly non-political organisation) is openly acknowledged on the BJP’s Gujarat state Government website. The website declares that the RSS participates in politics, “...most often by deputing its pracharakas [apparatchiks] to BJP and other supplementary organizations”⁷. The former Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Vajpayee, the current BJP President, Mr. Advani, and the Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, were all deputed to the BJP in this manner⁸.

More generally the Sangh Parivar, of which the BJP is but one component, consists of innumerable sister organisations with connections to the RSS. The main groups, however, are the Parivar ‘trident’ of the BJP, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Bajrang Dal, each performing their own function under a ‘division of labour’ for the promotion of Hindutva. The VHP also known as

'The World Council of Hindus', clearly stated its objectives on its inception in 1964. These were, "...To consolidate 'Hindu society', to spread the Hindu values of life, to establish a network comprising all Hindus living outside India, and to, 'welcome back all who had gone out of the Hindu fold and to rehabilitate them as part and parcel of the universal Hindi society'"⁹. The VHP have been at the centre of most of Hindutva's major National mobilisations, and were the central organising force behind the hugely significant demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque – a conspicuously sordid cause celebre for the communalist cadres.

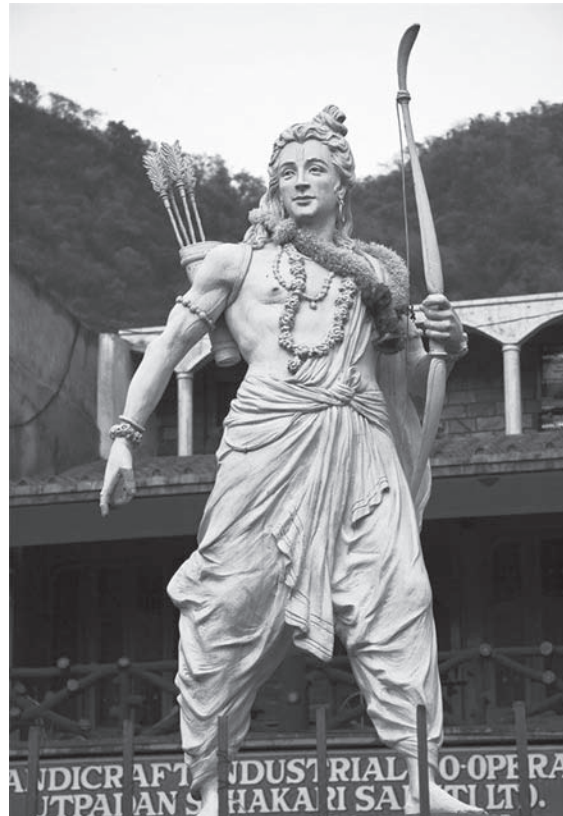
Completing the trident is the Bajrang Dal, the "violently energetic youth wing of the VHP"¹⁰. Paul Brass, an authority on Indian riots, has characterized the Bajrang Dal as "a fighting 'protection' squad for the other organizations, a somewhat pathetic, but a nevertheless dangerous version of the Nazi S.A."¹¹. The Bajrang Dal are the 'goons' of the Sangh Parivar; an 'uncontrollable' element known for their provocative agitations, and enthusiasm for violence at the service of the Sangh. Often operating outside the formal structures of the 'family', their actions (appreciated in private by 'respectable' elements within the Sangh) can be publicly disavowed and characterised, if need be, as the 'spontaneous' and emotional response of "the will of the people" operating outside the jurisdiction of the main Hindutva organisations.

The central ideological role of the RSS in the Sangh Parivar is an open secret. Advani's statements above are but one manifestation of that. The declarations, on the record, of M.S. Golwalker, an RSS founding father and key influence on Sangh Parivar ideology, baldly intimate the nature of that link.

Golwalker – The Fascist Face of The RSS

The RSS was founded by Dr. Hedgewar in 1925. He was succeeded on his demise by M.S. Golwalker, who led the organisation from 1940 to 1973. Inheriting the title 'Supreme Leader', Golwalker was a defining influence on the Sangh Parivar over a thirty-year period. The central themes and concerns of the Sangh are unambiguously championed in his writings: a demonised Muslim 'Other', religious nationalism, anti-secular, anti-democratic ideology, and the prevalence of typically lamentable unscholarly forms of historical revisionism. In 1951 the academic Jean Curran described Golwalker's 'We Our Nationhood Defined' (1938) as 'The Bible' of the RSS. His admiration for Nazi Germany is evident from frequent references to it in this text and others. He clearly intimates that the concept of 'German National pride' in 1930's Germany was widely discussed, and admired, by his comrades in the Hindu nationalist camp: "*German national pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the Nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races – the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here*" [my italics]¹².

For Golwalker, the instructive value of the Nazi's genocidal policy was clear: "Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences [...] to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by" [my italics]¹³. According to Golwalker, the alleged violation of Indian racial purity and national pride had its defining moment with the arrival of Muslims in the sub-continent: "Ever since that evil day, when Moslems first landed in Hindu-sthan, right up to the present moment, the Hindu nation has been gallantly fighting on to shake off the despoilers... The Race Spirit has been awakening"¹⁴. This 'race-spirit', in an important departure from Nazi racism, has a specifically Hindu sectarian character in the Hindutva formulation; the religious basis of which allegedly provides the correct social and political context for the Indian nation: "...in Hindusthan, Religion is an all-absorbing entity... With us, every action in life, individual, social or political, is a command of Religion. We make war or peace, engage in arts and crafts, amass wealth and give it away, indeed we are born and we die – all in accord with religious injunctions"¹⁵.



Left: Statue of Ram

Crucially, Hindu nationalist politics are to be conducted as 'a command of Religion'. The secular Nationalist politics fought for and instituted in the Indian constitution by the Indian Congress Party "...put the race on the wrong track", by propagating the concept of *Territorial Nationalism* rather than *Hindu Nationalism* (or Hindutva): "The idea was spread that for the first time the people were going to live a National life, the Nation in the land naturally was composed of all those who happened to reside therein and that all these people were to unite in a common 'National' platform and win back 'freedom' by 'Constitutional means'"¹⁶.

Jawaharlal Nehru was a pivotal figure in the Indian independence movement and the first Prime Minister of independent India. His generous vision of India as "an ancient palimpsest" embracing all layers of religious and racial groupings, and his notion of a non-sectarian, secular, democratic India, which including all these groups on an equal basis, is lambasted by Golwalker: "...we began to class ourselves with our old invaders and foes under the outlandish name – India – and tried to win them over to join hands with our struggle. The result of this poison is too well known"¹⁷. According to Golwalker, the antidote to this 'poison' is an authoritarian and sectarian, pseudo-inclusive Hindu Nationalism. What the 'Hindu Nation' should entail, he makes abundantly clear: "The foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming no, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – *not even citizen's rights*"¹⁸.

The current RSS website openly acknowledges the organisation's debt to Golwalker: "With his great erudition, he cogently propounded the historical and sociological background and the logicity of the concept of Hindu Rashtra [Hindu nation or polity]"¹⁹. The political leaders of the BJP ("India's largest political party" according to the BJP website) who were deputed from the RSS, can lay equal claim to this abhorrent heritage.

Gujarat – A Hindu Jihad

"Last night a friend from Baroda called. Weeping. It took her fifteen minutes to tell me what the matter was. It wasn't very complicated. Only that a friend of hers, Sayeeda, had been caught by a mob. Only that her stomach had been ripped open and stuffed with burning rags. Only that after she died, someone carved 'OM' on her forehead".

Arundhati Roy²⁰

"... We made the whole plan... to start a Hindu jehad [sic]... we were successful in Gujarat..."

Dhimant Bhatt, BJP²¹

Over 2,000 people, mainly Muslim, were slaughtered in the Gujarat riots of 2002, with more than 150,000 people forced into refugee camps. One refugee camp with 6,000 residents was located on the site of a Muslim graveyard leaving residents to sleep in the open between graves. The riots severely affected at least twenty-one cities and sixty-eight provinces throughout Gujarat²².

Ostensibly, revenge was the reason for the carnage. The violence in Gujarat was triggered after a Muslim mob's torching of two train coaches on the Sabarmati Express at the Ghodra train station on February 27, 2002. Fifty-eight passengers, including Sangh Parivar activists returning from Ayodhya, were killed in the horrific attack. The immediate reaction of Narendra Modi, the BJP Chief Minister of the Gujarat state government, was to claim that the massacre had been engineered by the Pakistan ISI (Inter Services Intelligence). No evidence was given for this highly inflammatory revelation. The situation was further provoked by his decision to publicly parade the charred bodies in an emotive and provocative cavalcade from Godhra to Ahmedabad²³.

The Concerned Citizens Tribunal hold Chief Minister Modi culpable for inciting the brutal revenge attacks which followed, claiming that the evidence collected was: "...not sufficient to come to any conclusion that the attack on S-6 coach was a pre-meditated one"²⁴. Despite the Hindutva leadership's preferred line of an "ISI hand" behind the attack, evidence gathered from eye-witness reports and the Banerjee Committee indicate that the horrific massacre was a spontaneous gross over-reaction by a Muslim mob to provocations from Hindutva activists returning from Ayodhya. A Muslim 'conspiracy' remains unproven in the courts, despite reports of bribery and coercion by Sangh Parivar activists in an attempt to prove that high-ranking Muslims were involved²⁵.

A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report based on testimonies collected by the Citizens' Initiative, a coalition of over twenty-five NGOs, confirmed the scale and savagery of the ensuing genocide. In Naroda Patia, located just across the road from the State Reserve Police (SRP) quarters, "...at least sixty-five people were killed by a 5,000-strong mob that torched the entire locality within minutes". Sexual abuse and gang rape were rife: "We were 400-500 people on the terrace... The girls were stripped and then two men held them down by legs and arms. Those who raped were 20-25 in number. The girls screamed so loud that even now when I remember my blood boils". Other residents related similar experiences: "They took young girls, raped them, cut them, and then they burned them"; "Some girls even threw themselves into the fire, so as not to get raped". A Human Rights Watch report summarised: "Gravediggers testified that most bodies that had arrived – many were still missing – were burned and butchered beyond recognition. Many were missing body parts – arms, legs, and even heads. The elderly and the handicapped were not spared. In some cases, pregnant women had their bellies cut open and their fetuses pulled out and hacked or burned before the women were killed"²⁶.

In the Chamanpura area of Ahmedabad, 65 people were slaughtered when they attempted to shelter from the riots at the home of Ehsan Jaffrey, a former Member of Parliament who had previously criticised the BJP government. Mansoori Abdulbhai lost nineteen members of his family in the attacks: "First they cut people so they couldn't run and then they set them on fire. One or two women were taken aside and gang-raped. After five hours the police came and brought us here. It was so well planned". Mehboob Mansoori lost his whole family: "They burnt my whole family [...] Eighteen people from my family died [...] the bodies were piled up. I recognized them from parts of their clothes used for identification. They first cut them and then burned them". Before the slaughter started in earnest, the attackers pelted stones at the building and victims testified to hearing the mob chanting religious slogans eulogising Ram, the hero of the Hindu epic, 'The Ramayana': "Ram, Ram, Jai Ram [Ram, Ram, Praise Ram]"²⁷.

The police participated in the atrocities alongside the rioters. A thirteen-year old boy saw police murdering young men: "The police was with

them. The police killed seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds. The mob also burned down our home. At 10 a.m. they went after our mosque...". A father witnessed the police shooting his son: "My son was running to save his life and the police shot him [...] no one was answering the police phone. The police took their side and not ours". Many victims testified that the police led the mobs directly to their homes and places of business. Emergency calls to the police went unheeded or were met with responses such as: "We don't have any orders to save you"; "We cannot help you, we have orders from above"²⁸. The attacks were clearly part of a "meticulously planned pogrom"²⁹ against the Muslim community. Witnesses testify that the mob specifically targeted Muslims and their businesses. Computer printouts of Muslim voter lists and business addresses, reportedly obtained by Sangh Parivar cadres from the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, were an integral part of the carnage³⁰.

While Narendra Modi characterised the pogrom as a "spontaneous reaction", this implausible description of events was repudiated by Human Rights Watch who maintained that, "...the attacks on Muslims throughout the state were planned, well in advance of the Godhra incident, and organized with extensive police participation and in close cooperation with officials of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP) state government". The report further stated: "The groups most directly responsible for violence against Muslims in Gujarat include the Vishwa Hindu Parishad [VHP], the Bajrang Dal, the ruling BJP, and the umbrella organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps, RSS)..." These organisations – The Sangh Parivar – are described in the report as "militant groups that operate with impunity and under the patronage of the state". The report emphatically concluded: "The attacks against Muslims in Gujarat have been actively supported by state government officials and by the police"³¹.

Despite the findings of Human Rights Watch and the National Human Rights Commission, Narendra Modi was re-elected as Chief Minister soon after the riots with a majority of 127 out of 182 seats.

The *Tehelka* Sting

The *Tehelka* sting operation, revealed just prior to the Gujarat December election of 2007, compounded the allegations of NGOs after the Gujarat riots of 2002. This time, however, the testimony came from the perpetrators themselves. Several members of the Sangh Parivar were caught on tape admitting their role and that of the state government in the Gujarat genocide. Based on the evidence obtained from covert spycam footage, the case alleging Sangh Parivar collusion with the government of Gujarat in the riots of 2002 is overwhelming.

Bajrang Dal leader, Babu Patel, had this to say about police complicity in the riots: "By the end, there were about 700-800 bodies. They were all removed... The Commissioner came that night and said that if there were so many dead at one place, it would create trouble for him... So he had the corpses picked up and dumped all over Ahmedabad..."; "The Muslims kept making calls to the police, kept running to the police... They had one man called Salem [...] he got into a police jeep... got right inside... I myself caught him and dragged him out... The cops said kill him, if he's left alive, he'll testify against us... He was taken a little way away and finished off right there...". Patel also admitted that Chief Minister Modi perverted justice to get him released from jail: "Narendrabhai [Modi] got me out of jail... He kept on changing judges... He set it up so as to ensure my release...". Modi allegedly enforced a change of judges three times until the 'right' one was found: "Next he posted a judge named Akshay Mehta... He never even looked at the file or anything... He just said [bail was] granted... And we were all out... We were free... For this, I believe in God... We are ready to die for Hindutva..."³².

Suresh Richard also gave evidence of police complicity: "The police were with us... I can tell you so myself even now [...] That day was great... They were shooting right in front of us... They must have killed 70 or 80 or more... didn't even spare women...". Richard also claims that the



Right: Mural of 'Gujarat carnage'

police informed the rioters of Muslims hiding in a sewer: "...That was when the police called us... They said some Muslims were hiding in this sewer [...] we closed the lid and weighted it down with big boulders... Later, they found eight or ten corpses in there...". Crucially, Richard alleges on tape that Chief Minister Modi arrived on the evening of the riots at Naroda, where 200 people had been "butchered and burnt" to 'bless' the rioters: "...around 7.15, our Modibhai [Modi] came... Right here, outside the house [...] He went around to all the places... He said our tribe was blessed... He said our mothers were blessed [for bearing us]..." Babu Patel corroborated that Modi visited and encouraged the rioters: "Narendrabhai [Modi] had come to see that things didn't stop the next day... He went all around Ahmedabad, to all the places where the *miyas* [Muslims] were, to the Hindu areas... told people they'd done well and should do more..."³³.

The VHP's Ahmedabad president, Rajendra Vyas, corroborated allegations that Modi tacitly approved the riots: "...he gave us a free run to do whatever we wanted [...] the police was with us... Please understand what I'm trying to say — the police was on our side...". Haresh Bhatt, a BJP member of the legislative assembly for Godhra, confirmed a widely held suspicion that Modi allowed the rioters a fixed period to take their revenge: "He had given us three days... to do whatever we could. He said he would not give us time after that... He said this openly...". Ramesh Dave of the VHP also stated that Modi, enraged by the Godhra massacre, ensured that the cadres could unleash their 'revenge' without undue restraint from the already communalised police: "...He was in a rage... He's been with the Sangh from childhood... His anger was such... he didn't come out into the open then but the police machinery was turned totally ineffective [...] the police were very helpful... very helpful [...] because, after all, what were the police? ... The police were Hindu too"³⁴.

The *Tehelka* operation substantiates, with self-confessions comprising crucial evidence, what was revealed by a host of media reports – the investigations of Communalism Combat; the Concerned Citizens Tribunal report; the Human Rights Watch report; and the National Human Rights Commission – before and after the genocide. Teesta Setalvad of Communalism Combat is one of India's most trenchant critics of Communalism. She believes that what the spycam tapes "blatantly revealed" could have been exposed as early as 2003, "...if the trials that have been stayed since November 2003 had been re-investigated, transferred and prosecuted. If the deliverance of justice had been speedy and fair. If the courts had responded to the victims' plea for justice and not succumbed to the state's efforts at delay and digression"³⁵.

The Sangh Parivar, however, were well prepared for the battle to subvert legal processes after the genocide. Dhiman Bhatt and Deepak Shah, members of the BJP, told *Tehelka* that key

members of the Sangh Parivar – including the BJP, VHP, Bajrang Dal, and RSS – met on the night of the Godhra incident to make a plan of action for retaliation and to constitute a panel of advocates to defend the rioters. Narendra Patel and Mohan Patel of the RSS told *Tehelka* that after the riots the RSS had formed a body to provide legal aid to Hindu rioters. The VHP ensured that lawyers with sympathy to the VHP represented both the prosecution and the defence in many cases involving the rioters. The VHP general secretary of Gujarat, Dilip Trivedi, also admitted to *Tehelka* that he had organised the Sangh Parivar response to all the riot cases in Gujarat, "...from coordinating with government lawyers and defence advocates to talking to cops who were reinvestigating the riot cases". Everybody knew, he boasted, that after the riots, he had camped in every district holding meetings with government prosecutors, his own workers and police officers³⁶.

The Gujarat Advocate General, Arvind Pandya, also made a series of astonishing revelations to *Tehelka*. Pandya has been selected to represent Modi's Gujarat government before the Nanavati-Shah investigative Commission. In the *Tehelka* report Pandya claims that Modi had given oral instructions to the police to "be with Hindus". That had it not been for Modi the Hindutva mobs could not have taken their "revenge" for the Godhra killings. That had there been a non-BJP government in power in 2002 the riots would never have happened. Pandya himself said that the mass killing of Muslims in Gujarat should be celebrated every year as "victory day", and that crippling Muslims was better than killing them, as a crippled Muslim would also serve as a "living advertisement" of what Hindus were capable of. For Pandya, having a "Hindu-based" government at the time of the riots was a "happy coincidence"; "The people were ready and the state was ready", he told the reporter³⁷.

How much more evidence is required to oust the BJP government in Gujarat and imprison the parties guilty of murder, one might ask? The Gujarat electorate again answered this question with a comprehensive turnout for Modi in the December elections of 2007, re-installing the BJP government, and Narendra Modi as the Chief Minister for his third term, with 117 seats out of a possible 182.

Congress Demise and Hindutva Hegemony

That Narendra Modi and the Hindutva right have been returned to power for the third time is a severe indictment of the political system and rule of law in India. Many have pointed the finger at the Congress for its ineptitude, lack of coherent policies, and moral surrender in facing the challenge of Hindu fundamentalism. Radhika Desai, researcher and writer, argues that while the Congress, the traditional party of the poor in India, have played vote-bank regionalist politics, pandering to shifting constituencies according

to exigency, the Hindu right has successfully consolidated a middle caste and upper middle-class/ caste constituency in Gujarat and elsewhere in India. Hindutva, according to Desai, performs a “major service” to the Gujarati propertied classes by increasing violent competition with the Muslim bourgeoisie of the state: “Among the 9% Muslims of Gujarat, there is also a large bourgeoisie and riots provide plum opportunities to settle business scores”³⁸. She also notes how sectarian ruptures in the new ‘religious borders’ have reconfigured Gujarat’s urban geography, through riots, “...with blatant connections to real estate transactions”. Muslims, who no longer felt safe after the riots, left behind property and position “...to be grabbed by those who feel secure in current conditions”³⁹.

For Desai, one of the major political tragedies in India is that the lower classes and castes with the deepest investment in secularism and egalitarian economic development “...have only ever been offered populist and opportunistic forms of political mobilisation”. Indira Gandhi’s 1970’s re-institutionalisation of the Indian National Congress (INC) towards spectacular, nominally welfarist and populist sloganeering, and the failure of her Garibi Hatao (Abolish Poverty) campaign to alleviate inequality has led to a middle-class alienated from the Congress, and a crisis of faith in the Congress among the poorer parts of the electorate. The Indian National Congress, “evading its vocation” as a party of the poor, an always fragile position given their Faustian pact with industrial and rural elites in the nationalist independence project, has become nothing more than a “protest vote repository” trading on the reputation of its more progressive founders, while providing little or no hope for an impoverished multitude. The failure of the Congress-led coalition central government to take the legal action within its power on Gujarat, underscores its vacillating fear of losing the ‘Hindu vote’ and deeply undermines its credibility as a secular force⁴⁰.

While the Left dithers the poor suffer. In stark contrast to the neo-liberal rhetoric of ‘Shining India’ and ‘Vibrant Gujarat’, the poverty and inequality statistics in India are devastating. A *Frontline* magazine report by Parful Bidwai declares that: “...income and wealth inequalities are rising alarmingly in India”. The statistics beggar belief. The 77% of the Indian population on less than half a dollar a day translates into 840 million citizens. In the global hunger index India ranks 94, way below China, and lower even than the basket case of Pakistan. Almost one half of India’s children are malnourished and underweight. A recent analysis of ‘Patterns of Wealth Disparities in India during the Liberalisation Era’ (*Economic and Political Weekly*, September 22nd, 2007) shows that there was: “...a perceptible (and probably underestimated) increase in inter-personal wealth inequality in India between 1991 and 2002”. In the same period, the top ten per cent of the population increased its overall share of the national wealth to 52 per cent, while the share of the bottom fell to 0.21 per cent. 100,000 HNIs (high net-worth individuals with assets over \$1 million) now hold \$350 billion in assets, or approximately half of India’s entire gross domestic product. Patwant Singh, author of *The Second Partition: Fault Lines in India’s Democracy*, sums up: “...Several hundred million have been left to starve...while the country’s new urban rich, indifferent to – if not contemptuous of – their luckless fellow countrymen – coarsely flaunt their new found wealth”⁴¹.

Narendra Modi and the BJP government in Gujarat have consistently pointed to Gujarat’s apparently healthy economic status as proof of their administrative success, but disavowal is again the major alibi. Shivam Vij points out that Narendra Modi has consistently swelled Gujarat’s growth rates to 12% in public declarations, while the real figure, according to his own government’s statistics is nearer 8%. To achieve this figure, Gujarat’s debt burden has detonated; the state is now: “...one of the highest indebted states in the country”⁴². Farmers are reeling from the debt. In the year 2006-2007 alone, 148 farmers were driven to suicide. Gujarat has also taken a nationwide lead in privatising health infrastructure. In the 6-35 month age group, 80.1% of all children suffer from anaemia. In ‘Vibrant Gujarat’ though, poverty doesn’t exist. In order to mask its real extent the



Left:
Hindu protest
against Modi

Gujarat government has expediently re-adjusted poverty lines. The generally accepted international figure is a measly \$1 dollar a day. The Gujarat government, however, has deemed that urban dwellers on more than \$0.45 dollars a day are no longer poor. Village dwellers fare even worse with a rate of \$0.30 dollars a day deemed a satisfactory figure. The impact on the ‘re-adjusted’ is severe. Those gerrymandered above the poverty line now receive no benefits from poverty alleviation and development programmes⁴³.

This is the punitive, polarised, neo-liberal economic context in which Hindutva has emerged. Radhika Desai argues that neo-liberalism can find within its own operations no “adequate hegemonic ideology” to mask such ferocious social fissures. She places the emergence of Hindutva alongside the growth of New Right, neo-conservative discourses which emerged under Reaganism and Thatcherism in the ‘80s. For Desai, Hindutva, like neo-conservatism, is the, “...counterfeit answer to the accelerating universalism of capitalism, which it supports and promotes”⁴⁴. Hindutva, as a culturalist discourse, provides the means to mask the savage material realities wrought by economic liberalism under an increasingly authoritarian capitalist class. Emerging as a keen neo-liberal alibi, Hindutva successfully transmogrifies rage and resentment borne of inequality and poverty into spiritual reflection and partisan identity politics. Meanwhile it provides a ‘ready-made’ scapegoat in the form of a demonised Muslim ‘Other’.

The success of Hindutva, however, transcends the mobilisation of the disaffected masses. The stabilization of the Hindutva vote amongst India’s “...richest, most educated and socially elevated sections has, in recent years, become fully clear”⁴⁵. Hindutva features all that this powerful class could wish for: “Neo-liberal economic policies, Hindu assertion, [and] the full range of stances towards Muslims and others with the capacity to disturb their comfortable position by demanding their rights”⁴⁶. For Desai, the hegemonic influence of particularist cultural discourses overlaying and obscuring the murderous edges of ‘integrated world capitalism’ represents: “the ingenious reality of the right today”. Hindutva, both supplementing and obfuscating neo-liberalism, epitomises this tendency in its own particular form. The failure of the Congress to represent the needs of the labouring poor and sub-alterns, and the concomitant failure of the new social movements, to find an adequate hegemonic replacement, has, for the moment, opened up the ground for the religious right.

Notes

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