

“They didn’t even know & they were punished.”*

Pseudo Hindus Run Amok in Gujarat

○ Madhu Prasad

The country seems to be descending into an abyss as one flashpoint after another reaches crisis proportions. Who or what is responsible for the rapid and systemic deterioration in the rule of law and the dangerous escalation of communal divisions?

After the Babri masjid was demolished in December 1992, L.K. Advani, flush with the success of a nine-month long *rath yatra* to build a Ram mandir on the very site of the masjid, coined a new expression to counter the widespread shock and anger at the demolition. Those who opposed the lawless destruction of a protected monument and rejected the divisive politics behind the vandalism were ‘pseudo-secularists’. The real ‘secularists’, Mr. Advani claimed, were his associates in the Sangh Parivar and the BJP who did not believe in ‘appeasing the Muslims’. They were the torchbearers of national pride with their *hindutva* ‘way of life’ as a litmus test for all ‘genuine’ citizens of the country.

Hindutva’s Laboratory

Ten years later, Gujarat, one of only three states ruled by the BJP and a ‘laboratory’ for *hindutva* and the Hindu *rashtra*, is in flames. Home Minister Advani, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, BJP President Jana Krishnamurthy and even the Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee are shouting from rooftops

that ‘secularists’ are to blame for the Gujarat holocaust. Are they taking the responsibility for Gujarat on themselves? Nothing could be further from the truth. Contemptuously rejecting the verdict reached by civil rights groups, and reports produced by academicians, judges, civil servants, parliamentarians, and even the National Human Rights Commission - that the Sangh Parivar had long prepared for and facilitated the systematic massacre of Muslims (non-official sources and victims put the death toll at upwards of two thousand) – today they are openly attacking ‘secularists’.

Hindu Vote Bank

Stunned by the string of electoral defeats suffered by its political wing, the BJP, the Sangh Parivar is ruthlessly attempting to fashion and consolidate a ‘Hindu vote-bank’ to stave off the rout threatening its political ambitions. However, the Sangh and its apologists



argue that this strategy has been forced on them because of ‘secularists’ who, they claim, promote and cultivate minority interests at the expense of the majority community. The task of defending majority sentiments thus devolves upon them.

It is crucial for the future of the country that this claim be critically evaluated. The urgent need for such an examination arises from the ongoing tragedy of Gujarat and the Sangh’s claim to defending ‘Hindu’ interests has to be judged in the context of Gujarat.

The Sangh Parivar’s argument involves the following propositions:

- ➔ Secular opinion did not express condemnation of the Godhra incident.
- ➔ The Godhra event was unprovoked and therefore an instance of brutal aggression by a minority community emboldened precisely because of appeasement by secularists.
- ➔ The majority community’s ‘reaction’ was spontaneous and natural because of their perceived sense of being unfairly treated by a secular establishment.
- ➔ The revenge killings have achieved their desired end – the minorities have learnt that they must ‘earn the goodwill’ of the majority community and not entertain hopes that a secular establishment can ensure their welfare.

Let us examine each of the propositions.

The first is factual and can be easily settled. The truth is that not only did leaders of all national parties condemn the horrendous Godhra incident but prominent leaders of the main all-India Muslim organisations *immediately* condemned “the barbaric and brutal violence at Godhra” and the “culprits of this criminal act, whosoever they be, without any reservation, whatever the provocation”.¹ No non-RSS/VHP/BJP spokesperson or media person that one heard or read either “explained away” or ignored the Godhra incident. They certainly analysed a wide range of conditions that contributed to its having happened but absolutely no one even suggested that it was defensible, or forgivable. It is significant that the Sangh provides no instances to substantiate the charge which is being systematically leveled by all its affiliates and leaders. Even the Prime Minister has now claimed that the Gujarat carnage followed Parliament’s failure to condemn the Godhra killings. Opposition leaders have been quick to point out that as the leader of the Lok Sabha, the primary responsibility for this ‘failure’ lies with Mr. Vajpayee himself. Home Minister Advani and the PM had in fact pleaded with members of the House to allow normal business to proceed so that the Budget could be presented on February 28 as scheduled.

The news of the Godhra attack came in along with, or was quickly followed by, early reports of sporadic murderous reprisals and the ominous threat of a countrywide flare-up during a bandh called for the next day by the VHP and supported by the Sangh Parivar including the BJP. Consequently, reactions condemning the massacre expressed anxiety about

this threat, although perhaps no one could have anticipated the ferocity of the carnage that actually followed. However, the editorial stance of major national dailies exemplified the unambiguous condemnation of the massacre which reflected the response across the nation: “What happened in Godhra ... is a dastardly act ... and no provocation can even remotely be brought in to justify the slaughter of innocent people.”² The electronic media and cable TV focused attention on the horrific devastation in coach S6 of the Sabarmati Express and heart-rending images of the charred bodies of women and children dominated media coverage.

In stark contrast, the Gujarat CM Narendra Modi, the RSS spokesman engaged in negotiations with the VHP, Mohandas Devi, and other VHP leaders repeatedly and consistently claimed that the horrendous killing of hundreds of innocent, defenceless Muslims and systematic destruction of their homes and businesses was a ‘natural and spontaneous reaction’ to the attack on the Sabarmati Express. Modi even commended the self-control shown by the killer mobs stating that “the five crore people of Gujarat have shown remarkable restraint under grave provocation.”³ He could ‘understand their reaction’ he said as he stereotypically blamed Muslims for being ‘by their nature’ prone to violence.

The grotesqueness of his statements is accentuated by the unprecedented brutality of the revenge killings. During the bandh, in a single incident in which 47 Muslims were slaughtered, ex-MP Ehsan Jafri was not merely burnt. He was stripped naked, paraded in the locality as he was hacked to pieces and his decapitated head finally thrown to the waiting mob. At Naroda Patia, Ahmedabad more than 80 persons

were murdered. Kausar Bano “was nine months pregnant. They cut open her belly, took out her foetus with a sword and threw it into a blazing fire. Then they burnt her as well.”⁴ Members of a fact-finding women’s panel report having “seen photographic evidence of the burnt bodies of a mother and a foetus lying on the mother’s belly, as if torn from the uterus and left on the gash.” They do not know if that was Kausar Bano.⁵

Like Modi, Mohandas Devi blandly stated in a television interview that the ‘whole society’ supported, and was thus implicated in, the orgy of unbridled violence in Gujarat. However, as weeks pass and violence continues unabated, it is becoming clear that only the RSS, its affiliates and the BJP national executive have passed resolutions justifying the carnage. Cabinet minister Shanta Kumar, the only BJP leader to take a stand against the Gujarat CM and condemn the bloodbath has been forced under threat of disciplinary action to retract his statements.

The Prime Minister faithfully voiced the Sangh’s standpoint at a public rally in Goa when he attacked the entire Muslim community, (one-fifth of India’s population happens to be Muslim), saying “they do not want to live with others peacefully.” He also stated that Islam and Christianity constituted a threat to the nation. Even the allies of the NDA government led by Vajpayee have balked at the intemperateness of his statements. The PM’s speech was a terrifying reproduction of the mind-set articulated by office-bearers of the Gujarat state units of the VHP and Bajrang Dal. “As long as there is Islam in this world there will be crusades – which means wars and killings, atrocities and genocide. Islam is not a religion, culture, tradition or a spiritual movement. There is no truth, non-

violence, humanity, pity or love in Islam. It only preaches violence and atrocities. It is the plot of Arab Muslims to force itself on all the peoples of the world. To think of or call Islam as a religion is folly, a denial of facts.”⁶

Thus the facts show that secular opinion, minority religious organisations, and the national print and electronic media, unambiguously condemn the Godhra incident, whereas the Sangh Parivar adamantly justifies and refuses to unequivocally condemn the carnage that continues even today.

Godhra as Justification

As regards the second proposition, the linkage between the VHP’s temple construction programme – later converted to a *yagna* and *shiladaan puja* - at Ayodhya and the deteriorating law and order situation which climaxed in the Godhra massacre, was not something manufactured by ‘secular’ opinion. It was clearly acknowledged by the government as soon as the incident occurred. The PM and the home minister were the first to call for suspension of the VHP’s March 15 *shiladaan* programme, and issue orders preventing the entry of karsevaks into Ayodhya. Advani warned of stern action against those “who defy court orders or create problems for law and order”⁷.

Of course, once the Sangh Parivar’s justification of the ensuing carnage on the action-reaction principle of Newton’s third law became public posture, the RSS publications - *Organiser* and *Panchjanya* – recognised that it would be “fatal to link” the Godhra incident to the Ayodhya movement. They projected it as a “pre-meditated conspiracy” hatched by the infamous ISI and even alleged that so-called secular forces were “irked by the fact

that the NDA is working smoothly”. The Gujarat executive, CM and Home Minister Zadaphiya, identified the Ghanchi Muslims and Pakistani ISI agents as culprits. Having served the purpose for which it was introduced (that of adding fuel to the flames), this claim receded into the background. Although L.K. Advani resuscitated it in the course of the parliamentary debate on Gujarat, a recent statement of the chief investigating officer of the CBI probe into the incident is unambiguous – he has found no evidence whatsoever suggesting even that Godhra was pre-planned, let alone inspired by a ‘foreign hand’.

Earlier, the inquiry conducted by the Railway Protection Force and the local administration had arrived at the same conclusion. “The authorities and all informed persons in Godhra were quite categorical that there was no significant evidence to prove any ‘foreign hand’ in the tragedy... The focused attack on coach S6 also suggests that rumour (of molestation, even abduction of a Muslim woman) had it that the perpetrators of the alleged crime were in that coach.”⁸ Data provided in the Report of the CPI(M)-AIDWA delegation, *State-sponsored Carnage in Gujarat* also strengthens the view that it was not pre-planned. The train was running late by 4 hours and 40 minutes, so it arrived well after daylight instead of at night. The RPF had no information that karsevaks were travelling on it. On the way to Ayodhya the Railways had, as usual, been informed and an officer had accompanied the train to the next junction to ensure that fights with vendors did not get out of hand. Railway officials state that the large number of tea and food stalls at Godhra station and a bustling Muslim busti by the tracks account both for the large crowd that quickly gathered and the ready access to kerosene. The

speed with which the coach (S6) burned also suggests the prior presence of inflammable material, possibly cooking gas/ kerosene, as stoves and jerry cans were found inside the compartment. According to District Magistrate Jayanthi Ravi, the police reached within a few minutes after receiving the message that some carriages had been set on fire. Two Muslims were killed in police firing to disperse the mob. The situation in Godhra was brought under control within three hours due to decisive action by the local administration.

However, there are factual accounts of provocation and extreme harassment of local vendors and residents by karsevaks. Media reports of activities routinely associated with an aggressive mobilisation of cadres of the Sangh Parivar such as looting and damage of kiosks and small shops, lumpenism and use of viciously abusive language, particularly by cadre en route from Gujarat to Ayodhya and back, were coming in intermittently for almost two months. Although they can never justify atrocities like the Godhra incident, they cannot be denied if we wish to understand events.

It is necessary to bear in mind that in Gujarat such behaviour is not isolated. It is part of a strategy that has been followed since BJP came to power in 1998. As a laboratory of *hindutva*, Gujarat has seen an erosion of constitutional norms in government functioning, a social and ideological instilling of hatred towards minorities and a consequent heightening of feelings of insecurity among them. Attacks on places of worship and religious meetings, forced evacuations from towns and villages, selective destruction of minority property and murderous assaults have continued with impunity as even

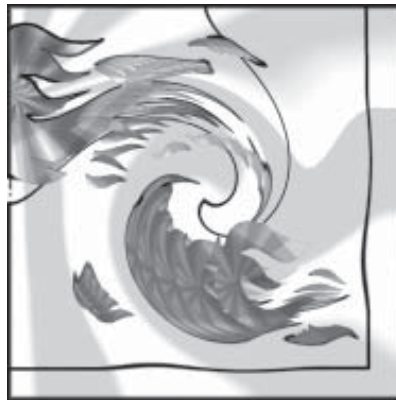
FIRs naming top leaders of the Sangh Parivar are not acted upon. In July 1998, a police cell was set up for Monitoring Inter-Religious Marriages, even as an existing cell monitoring atrocities against women was disbanded. Till January 1999 the Christians were targeted in a terror spree culminating, but not ending in, the Dangs attacks. In February, circulars to DSP's and Police Commissioners of Gujarat state asked for selective information on Christians and Muslims. Following protests, the communal census was withdrawn but the circulars were not cancelled. In July 1999, Kargil war was communally used to target and attack Muslims. Even the catastrophic earthquake revealed the power of the Sangh's affiliated organisations over the government machinery resulting in gross discrimination against Dalits and minorities in reaching and distributing relief to quake victims.

Here is a report filed by a correspondent of *Jan Morcha*, a Hindi daily published from Faizabad (Ayodhya), datelined February 24, 2002 and carried in the paper the following day. Its significance lies in the details it provides as also in its having been published just two days before the Godhra attack. Under the headline, "Bajrang Dal Karyakartaon ne Sabarmati Train mein Muslimon ko Peeta, Jai Shri Ram ke Nare Lagvaye", the report, in translation, states:

"According to eyewitnesses, close to two thousand Bajrang Dal workers on board the Sabarmati Express coming from the direction of Lucknow began indulging in these activities from the Daryabad station. Anyone identified as Muslim on the train was mercilessly attacked with trishuls and beaten with iron rods. Even women and innocent children were not spared. Burqas were pulled off, women were beaten with iron rods

and were dragged. People waiting at the platform were similarly targeted.

This continued between the Daryabad and Rudauli stations. According to an eyewitness, a youth protesting against this barbarism was thrown off the train between Patrang and Rojagaon stations. Several women, badly wounded and bloodied, jumped off the train as it pulled into Rudauli around 8 a.m. The Bajrang Dal activists also got off the train and started attacking those that they identified as Muslims among those present at the platform.



Ata Mohammed from Takiya Khairanpur waiting to catch a train to Allahabad was badly beaten, some others were forced to shout 'Jai Shri Ram', some escaped by declaring that they were Hindus. 50 year-old Mohd. Absar lives near the station. He was grabbed as he stepped out of his house, his long beard was rudely pulled before he was repeatedly stabbed with trishuls. Another man from the Rudauli Police Station area who happened to be at the station was badly beaten with iron rods. Local residents rang up the police.

By the time the Bhelsar police chowki in-charge arrived with a force, the train had left and the injured were being rushed to hospitals. No report was registered at the police station as the officer in

charge was not available. The injured have no idea why they were attacked."

Thus facts reveal the role of the Sangh, VHP, Bajrang Dal and others of the Sangh Parivar., in seriously vitiating the communal atmosphere in the country as a whole, and particularly in Gujarat in the period immediately preceding the Godhra massacre. A terrorised minority community was, more often than not, denied even police protection and the question of their being 'emboldened by secular appeasement' is completely fictional. The claim that Godhra was a pre-meditated attack perhaps planned by the ISI has been conclusively debunked by the local authorities, the Railway Protection Force and so far even by the CBI which has failed to find any evidence to support it.

Spontaneous Reaction?

The third proposition, that the Gujarat carnage was a "spontaneous and natural reaction" to the Godhra massacre, has been seriously undermined by senior police officials, bureaucrats, members of the judiciary, parliamentarians, civil rights groups, the electronic media, the national and foreign media, and victims and witnesses alike. Senior officials have expressed shock that killings and arson continue even eight weeks after Godhra. No riot, they argue, is 'spontaneous' beyond the first three or four hours.

The electronic media has brought the images onto our TV screens and we have all seen police constables and even officers doing absolutely nothing to control the mobs. The brief, televised argument between Rajdeep Sardesai, reporting for Star TV from Ahmedabad that the police was doing nothing, and Union Law Minister Arun Jaitley at the channel's New Delhi studio, reprimanding him for not showing restraint, spoke volumes.

Star TV was banned for some hours by the state government. Significantly, the Central and Gujarat state governments objected to media coverage, holding media responsible for flaming communal passions, only when the continuing violence against Muslims became the focus of media coverage. The criticism of the English and Hindi national print and electronic media was not extended to sections of the Gujarati language press even though the Gujarati *Sandesh* in particular propagated rumour in a manner that was nothing short of incendiary. The government did ban some local TV channels but no action was taken against *Sandesh*. "The editor of *Sandesh* would tell the Editor's Guild team which went to Gujarat to look at the role of the media, that he had a paper to sell and a rival to out-manoeuvre. His paper's circulation during the month of the massacre was up by 150,000, he is reported to have told them. The Guild team was shown a letter of congratulation sent by the Chief Minister to some Gujarati newspapers, for their coverage. And of course none of them asked for his resignation as the press in the rest of the country did."⁹

An overwhelming majority of media reports have emphasised the manner in which minority homes and establishments, including *benami* properties, graves of prominent poets and musicians, and places of worship were specifically targeted, burnt and bulldozed which indicates meticulous planning and preparation. The tomb of Wali Gujarati, the celebrated late 17th century *sufi* poet, was not only destroyed, the road was immediately tarmaced, so all signs of its location have disappeared.

Police Complicity in Riots

Reports of witnesses and victims are even more damning. Many spoke

of how the police far from helping them actually directed them to waiting mobs. Central and state level BJP leaders have made much of the number of people killed in police firings as evidence of their impartiality in dealing with the targeted attacks on Muslims, but the facts speak for themselves. According to Gujarat police figures, of the 184 people killed till May 2, 104 were Muslims. Only in Bhavnagar and Banaskantha districts was the number of Hindus (five in all) killed in each district higher than that of Muslims. The Police Superintendents of both districts were transferred. The statistics substantiate allegations of riot victims from virtually every part of the state that the "local police . . . actually turned their guns on the helpless Muslim victims."¹⁰

Two state ministers, Health Minister Ashok Bhatt and Urban Development Minister I.K. Jadeja, were in Ahmedabad's Shahibaug police control room and the state police control room in Gandhinagar respectively for approximately four hours from about 11 a.m. on February 28, reportedly co-ordinating mobs and organising murder, arson and looting. Top police officials countrywide stated that it was "shocking" and "unheard of" that politicians sit in at these police nerve centers and influence the independent functioning of the force. Haren Pandeya, the Minister for Revenue, is accused of having led mobs in his constituency, Ellis Bridge, Ahmedabad. The police is refusing to register FIRs based on 12 complaints of incidents of February 28. The homes of Justice Divecha and Justice Kadri, which were looted and completely burnt, fall within his constituency. BJP MLA Mayaben Kodnani, and Corporators Ashok Saheb and Vallabh Patel, VHP state chief Jaideep Patel

and Bajrang Dal leader Pradhuman Patel are all named in FIRs dealing with the terrible Naroda Patia killings.¹¹

The National Human Rights Commission Report and the National Minorities Commission have called for explanations from the Gujarat Government to explain its many acts of omission and commission. The former has demanded that five major incidents, including Godhra and Naroda Patia, be investigated by the CBI as state government investigations lack credibility. Julius Robeiro, Police Commissioner of Mumbai during the post-Babri masjid riots, stated on TV that the police force was either totally ineffective against its political masters or else actively communalised. Those who did perform their duty were transferred as a warning to others.

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, condemning Godhra and the events that followed, identified the "partisan and illegal manner outside the limit of their constitutional mandate to maintain law and order and protect all citizens equally" in which state machinery, particularly the police, functioned during the "continuation and course" of the violence. "The selective targeting of the minority community with remarkable precision suggests a planned pogrom against Muslims rather than any spontaneous mob frenzy characteristic of a communal riot."¹²

The British High Commission's three-member team investigating the death by burning of a British national has, according to sources, been extremely critical of the Sangh Parivar, particularly the VHP and Bajrang Dal. Its report is said to have stated that if the Sabarmati Express tragedy at Godhra hadn't happened, another flashpoint would have been created to justify the pre-meditated violence.

Further, it says that in some areas the police force was instructed not to act, although in other areas it was so communally polarised that it needed no prompting from political bosses.

¹³ Germany and Holland have also now filed reports of investigations by their diplomats which are said to indict the Modi government for failing to protect innocent citizens, specifically targeting Muslims and for dismal conditions in relief camps where minorities live in fear. The German report remarks that the partisan administration and police have changed international perceptions about India and the nation's secular and democratic credentials have been damaged.¹⁴

Pre-Mediated and Planned

The inescapable truth conveyed by the facts shows once again that the brutal massacre and economic devastation visited upon the Muslim community was pre-meditated, planned and ruthlessly executed. The claim of spontaneity was propagated both as a justification for the ethnic cleansing, "aimed at removing Muslim influence from parts of the state", and as a cover-up for the obvious complicity of the state apparatus and the political party that governs Gujarat.

This brings us to the last proposition, and the 'lesson' that it claims has been 'taught' to the Muslims. This has always been the stated intention of the RSS, as excerpts given below from reports of various commissions of inquiry into earlier communal disturbances and the demolition of the Babri masjid show. But in Gujarat for the first time the Sangh has the full support of its own state government and a pliant BJP-led NDA government at the center. "Aum", says a *hindutva* document accessed and translated from Gujarati by the Mumbai-based

magazine *Communalism Combat*, "Now that we have our own government we should take proper advantage of it and should get our work done by it." Around the same time, January 2000, the Gujarat CM revoked the ban on government servants joining the RSS – an organisation that rejects even the basic structure of the Indian Constitution. L.K. Advani stated that the Central government would soon follow suit, but a nation-wide hue and cry led to re-imposition of the ban.,

The 1970 *Report of the Justice D.P. Madon Commission of Inquiry into the Communal Disturbances at Bhiwandi, Jalgaon and Mahad* states that, "if the events surrounding the Shiv Jayanti procession in Bhiwandi, Jalgaon, and Mahad are looked at more closely... the organisers did not make any attempt to disguise the real motive and anti-Muslim slogans and provocative floats were part of the celebrations from the very beginning, the first year..."

In spite of police opposition, the organisers made every attempt to incite rioting by insisting on taking their procession through Muslim dominated areas, throwing *gulas* at mosques and shouting incendiary slogans In his report to his superiors the SP, Thane district, has stated: 'I found that a section of



Hindu elements, particularly the RSS and some PSP men, were bent upon creating mischief. Their idea in accompanying the procession was not so much to pay respects to the Great Shivaji but to establish their right and if possible to provoke and humiliate Muslims."

Remedy for Riots?

Way back in 1971, Justice Joseph Vithayathil had commented: "Guruji Golwalkar is said to have a very simple remedy for communal riots in India. He said: 'Let Muslims look upon Rama as their hero and the communal problems will be over.' (*Organiser*, June 20, 1971). This is what the rioters who attacked the house of Kunhammad asked him to do. . . . But you cannot expect the 70 million Muslims of India to do that as a condition for maintaining communal harmony in the country. This attitude of the RSS can only help to compel the Muslims to take shelter under their own communal organisation."¹⁵

'Teaching a Lesson'

It is important to note that the 'lesson' hangs as a threat before all other religious and non-religious 'minorities' too. "The RSS adopts a militant and aggressive attitude and sets itself up as the champion of what is considered to be the rights of Hindus against minorities. It has taken upon itself to teach the minorities their place and if they are not willing to learn their place to teach them a lesson."¹⁶ It is instructive to see how the RSS methodology for provoking communal violence during the prolonged confrontation between Hindus and Christians was detailed by Justice Venugopal:

- a) "Rousing communal feelings in the majority community by the propaganda that Christians are not loyal citizens of this country.

- b) Deepening the fear in the majority community by a clever propaganda that the population of the minorities is increasing and that of the Hindus is decreasing;
- c) Infiltrating into the administration and inducing the members of the civil and police services by adopting and developing communal attitudes.
- d) Training young people of the majority community in the use of weapons like daggers, swords and spears.
- e) Spreading rumours to widen the communal cleavage and deepen communal feelings by giving a communal colour to any trivial incident.”

The lesson of a crude majoritarianism being propagated by the RSS and its affiliates has far-reaching political implications for the secular democratic fabric of the nation. “We have allowed them to do their prayers and follow their religion”, declared Mr. Vajpayee at Goa, “no one should teach us about secularism.” Ex-MP Arif Mohammed Khan had to remind the PM through an open letter that in the Constitution, “`We`. . . means the people of India belonging to all religious denominations, sects and regions.”¹⁷

Our Pluralist Heritage

We would do well to remember why even the terrible experiences of the Partition did not deter India from its commitment to this constitutional principle. Muslims and Christians are not the nation’s only religious minorities - Sikhs, Buddhists, Jews, Zorashtrians (Parsis), as also tribal communities with distinct belief systems have been an integral part of this richly pluralistic country for centuries. Would we want to, even if we could, deny this reality without seriously damaging the foundations of Indian society? Further, who is

targeted as a ‘minority’ is never something permanent or fixed, still less is it determined by religious criteria alone – the Shiv Sena had attacked Malayalees as a regional minority in Mumbai before they became such hardcore supporters of *hindutva*.

We need to ask ourselves - isn’t every dissenter a ‘minority of one’? And doesn’t the strength of democracy lie precisely in its claim to defend ‘according to the law’ the rights of all individuals?

In practice when the system fails to defend ‘minority’ rights, and the threat to them could come from different sources at different times, the democratic corrective always re-asserts the constitutional principle by the struggle to defend those whose rights are being threatened. That is why secular democrats are always seen to defend the ‘minority’, whoever that minority maybe, whenever their democratic rights are violated.

The Sangh Parivar, on the other hand, selectively makes use of past failures to justify a blanket denial of rights to this or that section of the population. The outrageous remarks of Defence Minister George Fernandes during the Gujarat debate in the Lok Sabha that this is not the “first time” that women have been gang-raped or that pregnant women have had the foetus ripped out of their wombs, is proof of how well he has imbibed the training given by his current RSS masters. Past atrocities should not be used to alert governments to what has to be avoided in the future. By the Sangh’s perverted logic they become ‘standards’ of what is permissible for future barbarism.

Majoritarian danger

When even the Prime Minister promotes majoritarianism as secularism, democracy is in grave danger of being replaced by

authoritarian power. When rights can be denied by arbitrarily stigmatising as unworthy those who constitute a minority, then all citizens are exposed to the threat of fascist oppression.

A democracy is only as secure as its ‘minorities’.

Geetaben was stripped naked, bloodied and battered to death at a bus-stop near her home in broad daylight on March 25. She faced the wrath of the mob because she defied their stereotypical doctrine of hatred between the two communities. In love with a Muslim, she had stood her ground against the mob, to allow him the time to flee.

Those who committed the ‘lesser sin’ of merely demanding a return to peace were not spared either. For days, threats of violence were issued against visiting MP’s and leaders of political parties, as also local residents opposed to the carnage. The disruption of a peace meeting, finally organised on April 8 at Sabarmati Ashram, where an unruly mob physically attacked Narmada Andolan activist Medha Patkar and others, is well documented. The police severely assaulted press reporters and photographers.

A report compiled by a senior diplomat in the German embassy is said to contain instances of Hindu establishments that were attacked because they violated the ‘code of conduct’ of the VHP which forbids Hindus to own properties jointly with Muslims and to have any dealings with them.¹⁸

The RSS and its parivar have exploited democratic procedures to promote their majoritarian agenda under the benign gaze of an indulgent central government. However, a series of electoral defeats have made them desperate. That is why this political force - which wrested power after bloody

confrontations between Hindus and Muslims following the *rath yatra* and the demolition of the Babri Masjid; which turned upon the Christian community to hold on to power when the grip seemed to loosen; which has promoted the worst forms of bigotry in the sphere of education, culture, the arts, and even in sport - is recklessly trying to create once again that climate of hatred and confrontation in which it thrives because rational needs and options are pushed aside by mindless and divisive brutalities. The Ram Mandir is not their goal. It is merely a stepping-stone to overturning India's pluralist democracy and replacing it with a majoritarianism in which, stifling and eliminating all dissent, the Sangh sees itself as finally being firmly in power.

The shameless attempt to secure a mandate at least in Gujarat by exploiting a communal polarisation that has already cost thousands of lives, has only just been deferred because of the pathetic 'politics of numbers' which is the Sangh's particular perversion of parliamentary democracy. The BJP is afraid that some of their present 'allies' maybe constrained to withdraw support and other parties they were counting on to replace them, have opposed both the present leadership of the Gujarat government and the plan to hold snap elections. The Election Commission too does not appear to be inclined to accommodate them as lakhs of people in Gujarat are traumatised and homeless, and the killings continue even today.

Facade of Normalcy

All kinds of ploys are being adopted to create a façade of 'normalcy'. "After infamous omissions, the administration in parts of Modi's Gujarat is once again making its presence felt. Some senior

officers are trying to hammer out a model *samadhan* or settlement which expects victims to 'pardon' attackers, rapists and arsonists. The deal proposes that Muslims do not press charges even if they identify attackers." They will then be allowed to return and resume businesses and the administration will provide them compensation without FIRs. Collector B.M. Vidyarthi felt, "legalities apart, nothing could be better than a community solution 'even if it may seem unfair to you and me.'" ¹⁹

In proposing this 'peace without justice', the government's minions are conveniently ignoring the vituperative VHP pamphlets ordering Hindus to do no business with Muslims. Fear of the VHP, which acts under the protective umbrella of the administration, has resulted in this being widely implemented. Salma *aapa*, interviewed at the Vatwa Relief camp on March 4, said: "Today when we went to the other side of the 'border' to buy vegetables, vendors were threatened: 'Do not sell vegetables to Muslim women, nor milk for Muslim children.'"

Panchayat elections have been held. Exams have also been held on time - in spite of claims of 98 percent attendance the government now has to reschedule exams for minority



community examinees. Muslim students, who were too frightened to attend examinations in centers shifted to Hindu-dominated areas because even Hindu students had felt insecure, have been accused of 'politicising' the situation as the government claimed it was providing them with police protection and buses to transport them to the centers. Had this administration, this police force and these buses been made accessible to them when their families and their neighbours were being slaughtered, when their mothers and sisters were being tortured, raped and burned before their very eyes,²⁰ then maybe the children and their parents could have trusted the government to provide them protection. As it stands, the present administration and its political bosses, whose complicity is now shamelessly evident, will have to go before any attempt at normalcy can be made.

Who is responsible for the Gujarat holocaust? Is it those who insist that India must remain a secular and democratic state so that its citizens, members of one of the most pluralistic societies of the world, have rights and protections irrespective of the religion, region, caste or gender to which they belong? No. For only a secular state can punish the guilty but protect the innocent. In principle it would not spare the perpetrators of violence because they belonged to a 'majority' community or fail to defend innocent victims because they did not. This is what the *hindutva* laboratory of the Hindu *rashtra* in Gujarat has absolutely failed to do and that is why it has to be rejected outright. Lacking any civilised criteria of justice, it is incapable of safeguarding the interests of either Hindu or Muslim, young or old, man or woman. There can be no peace without justice.

Footnotes

* "On March 1, our first day in the camps, there were hundreds gnawing at us, begging us to hear what had happened. . . . They asked me about Godhra. They didn't even know. And they were punished." Sheba George, member of the fact-finding women's panel, speaking at the press conference where the report was released. *Hindustan Times* April 17, 2002.

¹ Statement in *Hindustan Times*. February 28, 2002.

² *The Hindu*, March 2, 2002.

³ Modi quoted in *The Times of India* March 1, 2002.

⁴ Saira Banu, sister-in-law of Kaisar Bano's sister. Interviewed at Shah-e-Alam camp.

⁵ *The Survivors Speak*. (Fact-finding by a women's panel sponsored by Citizens Initiative, Ahmedabad.)

⁶ Letter, dated 4-4-2002, addressed to

members of C.G. Road Shop Owners Association, Ahmedabad by Chimanbhai N. Patel, Gujarat VHP leader on his official letterhead.

⁷ *The Hindu*, February 28, 2002.

⁸ *Gujarat Carnage 2002*. Report of an independent fact-finding mission including Dr. Kamal Mitra Chenoy (JNU), S.P. Shukla former Finance Secy and Member of the Planning Commission, K.S. Subramaniam, former Director General of Police Tripura and journalist Achin Vinaik.

⁹ Sevanti Ninan 'Media Ethics: An Ounce of Image, A Pound of Performance'. *The Hindu Magazine* April 28, 2002.

¹⁰ *Hindustan Times*, May 3, 2002.

¹¹ Sources: *Genocide Gujrat 2002* and *Hindustan Times* May 8, 2002.

¹² *The Hindu* April 10, 2002.

¹³ *Hindustan Times* April 15, 2002.

¹⁴ *Hindustan Times*, April 24, 2002.

¹⁵ *Report of the Justice Joseph Vithyathil Commission of Inquiry, Tellicherry Disturbances*, 1971.

¹⁶ *Report of Justice Venugopal Commission of Inquiry into the Kanyakumari Riots*, 1982.

¹⁷ *Hindustan Times*. April 17, 2002.

¹⁸ *Hindustan Times* April 24, 2002.

¹⁹ Vipul Mudgal reporting from Anand. *Hindustan Times* April 15, 2002.

²⁰ "I saw Farzana being raped by Guddu Chara. Farzana was about 13 years old. She was a resident of Hussain Nagar. They put a saria (iron rod) in Farzana's stomach. She was later burned. 12-year old Noorjehan was also raped. The rapists were Guddu, Suresh and Naresh Chara and Haria. I also saw Bhawani Singh who works in the State Transport Department kill 5 men and a boy." Azharuddin, 13 years. He witnessed the rapes and killings while hiding on the terrace of Gangotri Society. *The Survivors Speak*.

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