

The Genocidal Pogrom in Gujarat: Anatomy of Indian Fascism

Monstrosity in the name of Religion

&

The March of the Fascist forces in India: who can stop it?

Arvind Ghosh

How many ears must one man have

Before one can hear people cry?

How many deaths will it take till he knows that

Too many people have died?

The answer my friend is blowing in wind,

The answer is blowing in the wind.

Bob Dylan, Blowing in the wind

The carnage at the Godhra railway station on 27th Feb 2002 in which 58 passengers in Sabarmati Express, majority of whom were women & children were burned alive by a rioting mob instigated by a few criminals & Muslim fanatics & the subsequent organized genocide of Muslim community in the entire state of Gujarat by Hindu fundamentalist hoodlums have stunned, shocked, outraged & pained us beyond words. As per reports we have received from Gujarat, no less than 2000 people were brutally killed & about 100,000 rendered homeless. 50000 of these homeless people are now forced to live in the makeshift camps in the most deplorable subhuman conditions without proper treatment to the injured, without adequate food, clothing & sanitation made available to them. That human beings could perpetrate such inhuman atrocities upon other human beings has overwhelmed us with a deep sense of shame & helpless anger. The chain of events which began on 27th February at Godhra & then again from 28th Feb. morning which continued unabatedly for 72 hours all over Gujarat have graphically demonstrated the extent of inhumanity & barbarity religious fanaticism & fundamentalism are capable of, aided & abated by a communalized police & a cynical fundamentalist government not only unwilling to stop the genocide but actually encouraging the mayhem for the abominable consideration of consolidating the Hindu vote bank.

We condemn the Godhra carnage as a barbaric inhuman act

Before going into the details of the genocide of Muslim community in Gujarat perpetrated by Hindu fundamentalist forces including the Gujarat Government, let us say it clearly & without hesitation that the Godhra carnage is undoubtedly a most barbaric & ghastly atrocity reminding us of 1947 partition days with stories of bogies being locked from outside before setting them on fire & specifically targeting the bogey carrying women & children. There is no question of judging the massacre on the basis of whether the act was provoked (with many stories floating around) or preplanned, or on the basis of whether the victims were karsevaks or ordinary citizens. It was a barbaric massacre and must be condemned unequivocally by all of us with a minimum human sensitivity, in the same way that we had condemned the massacre of about 7000 American citizens on 11th September 2001 in the terrorist attack on WTO.

Communal flare up in Gujarat ---a reaction to Godhra or a well planned genocide?

What followed all over Gujarat soon after the carnage in Godhra was even more heinous & barbarous: on a scale no less than an ethnic genocide of innocent Muslim citizens. The Gujarat Government which showed a complete incompetence in preempting the Godhra carnage or even in swiftly arresting & punishing the perpetrators of the crime; deliberately allowed with the cold blooded precision of a mass murderer the spread of the organized pogroms against the Muslims all over Gujarat. The Monster Ball hosted by Narendra Modi the chief minister of Gujarat saw innocent men women & children dragged out of their homes & brutally killed. Even though clearly faced with a predictably inflamed situation due to VHP's call of a state wide Bandh on 28th feb. the very next day of Godhra carnage, the Gujarat government did nothing to prevent the genocide that followed. No precautionary measures taken, no preventive arrests made, no peace committees formed, no rapid deployment of police made. Hence when the communal bomb exploded & genocide began, Gujarat government was caught 'unprepared' in a very prepared sort of way. Chief Minister Modi fiddled while Gujarat burned. One of the tunes played by him was a direct instigation to the monsters engaged in the genocide of Muslims: 'Every action has a reaction', meaning thereby that the riots could be condoned since the people of Gujarat were upset by the Godhra carnage. This was a typically fascist argument, which was taken by the mobs as a license to kill. The second tune played by Modi was quite innovative which was that the media had unleashed a non-violent secular violence in the country. He even asked cable operators to stop showing Star News, alleging that the channel was hindering the restoration of peace in Gujarat! Rajdeep Sardesai, a prominent news reporter of Star News channel said that mobs stopped even their press van on the main Gandhinagar-Ahmedabad highway just 3 km from CM's residence, smashed its windscreen & checked everyone's ID to see if any of the TV crew belonged to the Muslim community. The truth is it was the television crews & press photographers who showed with great courage that the Rapid Action Force stood by waiting to be deployed, that the army stood by waiting to be called, that the police stood by waiting for the massacre to begin.

The reason why we call it a systematic ethnic genocide & not simple communal riot is that in almost all incidents in Gujarat the attacks by mobs were not the usual riot mobs. ' They were mobs of 5-15000 that collected swiftly with precision and wrecked total destruction on life & property in brief periods and brutal ways. It is not easy to collect such large mobs in the city of Mumbai, let alone Ahmedabad, let alone a village'(Reality as we saw-report from Gujarat by Teesta Setalvad & Susobha Barve, March 7, 2002) According to a trend seen for the last two years & recorded in Communalism Combat is the 'hiring of young men on high salaries by the Bajrang Dal for the express purpose of wielding Talwar & Trishul , in fact a trained militia.' 'The training given to this militia is not simply on perpetration of violence. It is also a mental training in dehumanization of the 'enemy' through ideological hatred that enables men (and women in some cases) to attack, dismember, dehumanize, kill, burn & then enjoy the loot.'(Gujarat update, March 7,02) Without the existence of this trained militia it is impossible to explain how in the space of 72 hours, a 15-20% Muslims in the state were brutalized through violence & economically crippled. Let us repeat that the violence that the state of Gujarat witnessed was not just another communal riot.

The worst aspect of the tragedy in Gujarat is the fear psychosis, which has gripped the minority community. The post - genocide city of Ahmadabad became a tale of two cities. The unaffected Hindus came out & went about their business even as in many areas in the same city about 100000 of its residents remained shaken, morally & physically broken. Not a shop was open in these ghettos. People could not step outside their homes or relief camps for food, medicine, and clothing. The condition of the ruling camps are so desperate that they remind us of concentration camps set up for the Jews in Nazi Germany. Even the bodies of the men, women & children killed in the most brutal & inhuman manner were not given any dignified burial. To add insult to injury, while 200000 in compensation was announced for victims of the Godhra tragedy only 100000 was announced for the victims of the post-Godhra genocide, revealing the inhuman sectarian mindset of this Hindu fundamentalist government.

Humanism in the midst of monstrosity

Islands of humanism were witnessed in the midst of a sea of monstrosity that was the precious redeeming features of the tragedy in Gujarat. We have reports from all over Gujarat of tremendous

courage displayed by many Hindus as well as Muslims who did not hesitate to put their own lives to great risk in order to save other human lives.

'It was 1:30 on Saturday afternoon (2nd March,02) when the mobs arrived. There were 2000 of them' said Shabbir of room no 108, Deendayal society, Rander. We, four of my family & I fled for our lives: to the home of our neighbors Pravinbhai & Naginbhai. The mob burned our home to ashes before our eyes.' There was no response to repeated calls to the police station & the fire brigade. This Muslim family would have certainly perished but for the protection given by their Hindu neighbors. But Pravin's wife merely said, 'we saved no one's lives; by sheltering our neighbors we did only what was expected of us'.

This is just one of the many tales of sanity's triumph over the madness of communal frenzy. These are not unique stories of Feb.-march 02 either. Such stories were heard at the same place even a decade ago during Dec 92-jan 93 riots Different characters, similar plots.

Pravin Surti & his uncle Dhirenral are the only Hindu families on Amlipura's Jamadar street. There are 500 Muslim families & three mosques in the vicinity. Tension was high in this colony during these five days of Feb.-march 02. But the younger Surti says: 'we have never had any fear, not a stone was thrown at our house in 1992 or in 1998 either. The Muslims are our friends. It is the politicians who want us to fight'.

Take the story of Hilol, a village 5 km away Himmatnagar town. It has never been touched by riots big or small. Muslim population dominates the village. The village sarpanch Valgi Patel when asked what measure he has taken to prevent trouble in the village says: 'we have formed groups of people consisting of both Muslims & Hindus that patrol the village throughout the night.'

Narendra Pandya , a Hindu in a Muslim charitable trust run republic high school says : 'I attended the school everyday. My principal Shahnauaz khan stood at the school gate to welcome me the day violence broke out. A fellow teacher in the same school Pathan Shabib said: 'In a scenario when people are in a frenzy, burning each other, the onus of communal harmony falls on us teachers who are supposed to ensure that the seeds of hatred are not sown in the minds of students.'

In Star News we heard & saw Ram Rahim Nagar, a colony of 20000 where Hindus & Muslims have guarded each other for years & did so again now, even rescuing those attacked from other areas. Similarly we saw & heard in Aj Tak Channel the interview of a Hindu man who gave shelter to scores of people of minority community in the city of Ahmedabad saying that he valued humanism more than his own religion & even his own life.

These are some of the courageous, heroic, heartwarming stories from Gujarat during the genocide

Religion through history----what does it teach us?

Like all other phenomenon in the world, Religion is also a contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand it preaches us love, unity & peace but on the other hand murder, mayhem & violence is conducted on a grand scale in the name of God & Religion. All over the world faiths that teach (in one form or another) 'love thy neighbor as thyself' kill their neighbors with sickening regularity. Religious violence however is not a new phenomenon. It has been recurring for centuries. Millions of people have perished so far in Christian crusades, Islamic jihads, Inquisitions, Nazi Holocaust against the Jews, killing of Bahaiis in Iran, human sacrifices by Aztec sects in Central America & The Taiping Rebellion in China in which 20 million people were killed. Blaise Pascal has said, 'Man never do evil so completely as when they do it for religious conviction.'

While we sing songs like 'Majhab Nahi Sikhata Apas Me Bair Rakhna' (religion does not teach us to hate each other) in our Peace Rallies, we should give a thought as to why so many major massacres & genocides took place throughout history in the name of religion & why they continue to occur till today. Instead of perpetuating the holy myths about religions, it is time we scrutinize & condemn the superstitious, irrational, obscurantist & bigoted aspects of religions. The anti-woman tenets in most of the religions & casteism in Hindu religion must also be exposed & condemned. In other words in order to

confront the fanatic & fundamentalist forces, what is required is not a liberal interpretation of religion but rather a humanist critique of religion.

Nationalism vs. Humanism

Massacres, genocide & wars have taken place in history not only in the name of Religion but also in the name of Nationalism & Patriotism—the concept of superiority of one nation vis-à-vis another. These wars have killed millions of people worldwide by instigating hatred of people of one nation against another to serve the vested interests of the ruling classes of these nations. Since the partition of the subcontinent into India & Pakistan in 1947, people of both these countries have become victims of this ruling class xenophobic Nationalism in the name of which several wars have been fought between the two countries killing hundreds of thousands of people & reducing millions more to a life of extreme misery. The ongoing communal mass killings & genocide in India are also a fallout of this constant enmity between the two Nations, kept alive by the ruling classes of both the Nations to serve their own vested interests. Religious Nationalism, a combination of Religion with Nationalism espoused by the Rightwing Hindu Nationalist forces is an extremely deadly combination, which can spell only death & destruction in the entire subcontinent.

Hence it is not Nationalism & Patriotism but rather it is Revolutionary Humanism, which ought to inspire the Secular Peace Movement to which we belong.

Challenge before the Secular Movement in India

Analysis of major riots in India shows that these riots did not happen because of spontaneous mob frenzy or because of an outraged reaction to an earlier atrocity. These riots had happened because they were engineered by interested organizations having tacit or active support of government in power. We can cite the instances of 1984 anti-Sikh riots, 1992-93 Bombay riots, Bhiwandi riots, Meerut massacres, the killing of Christians. All of them were created with official support. The killers while indulging in these murders & mayhem were certain that no harm will come to them. Gujarat genocide is also not an exception. The difference lies in the extent of meticulous planning in the execution of the ethnic cleansing. Shops, hotels & commercial establishments having Hindu names but owned by Muslims were specifically targeted, looted & burnt. Apartment blocks of Muslims were selectively burnt. Rioters were transported on buses & used modern methods of communication like mobile phones, to coordinate the riots & LPG cylinders to inflict maximum damage. The remarkable precision in selective violence suggests meticulous planning & collection of information over a protracted period much before the beginning of the riot. Victims residing in relief camps have reported several instances of death due to police firing on helpless Muslims. Mobs as large as 10-15000 had targeted areas of Muslim concentration. The use of bulldozers to destroy the protected monuments & cultural sites again points to the meticulous planning that went before the violence. A recent news item in HT says that a rioters' manual was in circulation in Gujrat with instructions on how to make an organized attack on minorities look like a 'spontaneous' reaction by the public.

When seen in the backdrop of this ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Gujrat, the sinister character of the RSS resolution on minorities adopted at Bangalore on 18th March 2002 becomes clear. The resolution reads: 'Let the minorities understand that their real safety lies in the goodwill of the majority community'. The fact that the resolution does not talk of goodwill of various communities towards each other but rather the safety of the minority communities being dependent on the goodwill of the majority community reveals the filthy fascist mindset of the Hindu fundamentalist forces in India.

There is little doubt that Fascism is on the march in India & unless checked at once poses a grave danger to the entire subcontinent. The question is: who will stop this onward march of Fascism in India & how?

If secularism means complete separation of religion from state & public life, if it means relegation of religion into the private realm of the individuals, this has never been the policy of the Indian state. Instead of keeping equidistance from all religions & encouraging a rational approach to social life, the Indian state by providing huge amounts of financial & other material support to all sorts of religious organizations has

encouraged ignorance & bigotry in society. The result has been the pernicious growth of the religious fundamentalist forces in society out to destroy the multicultural plural social fabric of India.

However in spite this, the Secular Force (The anti- fundamentalist forces) is a huge majority in India & has the backing of the vast masses of egalitarian, freedom loving, peace loving people. It is to the credit of the common masses in India that although Terrorism & Religious fundamentalisms are the headline news here, they do not have a firm place in the minds & hearts of people. The problem lies in the defeatist passive mentality of this sleeping giant. As a consequence, the march of the Fascists appears unstoppable, although it is obvious that the fundamentalist, fascist forces are an insignificant minority.

The secular forces have so far reacted only after the occurrence of a communal riot or a massacre, by taking out Peace Marches. Although Peace Marches are immensely important in so far as they pacify the communal frenzy & bring about confidence among the riot affected people, they are not effective means to prevent the riots from happening in future.

The need of the hour is to go beyond Peace Marches towards an open confrontation with the fascist forces. Mohalla Committees & Vigilance Committees of common people (not political leaders) of all communities should be formed in order to keep a round the clock watch on the activities of the communal fascist forces. These committees wherever formed have proved to be the most effective means of preventing riots.

Secular forces must pose an all out challenge to the communal fascist forces It must counter on a day to day basis the myths & legends being churned out by these communal forces & poured like poison into the popular mind since these myths & legends serve as the accumulated timber, which needs only a spark to kindle it. The systematic spread of rumors by the communal forces must also be checked. The mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people against the communal fascist forces is the need of the hour. This mobilization is necessary not only during & after riots, but must become a permanent activity of the secular forces.

Time is running out. Let us act NOW.
