

The Genocidal Pogrom in Gujarat: Anatomy of Indian Fascism

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Hindutva Reign

The exclusion of any commitment to secularism from the BJP's discourse in recent years contributed in no small measure to the communal bloodshed in Gujarat.

By I.A. Rehman

Even before communal rioting broke out in Gujarat, enlightened public opinion in India was apprehensive and uneasy about communal bloodshed taking place around March 15, the date fixed by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad both for a 100,000 strong militant rally in Ayodhya as well as the beginning of the Ram Mandir construction.

Although Mr. Vajpayee had taken the position that he would rather resign his office than permit any action before the judiciary had given its ruling on the matter, informed observers of the situation believed that it would be impossible to avert large-scale communal conflict and bloodshed. This was before the BJP's electoral losses in several Indian states, particularly in Uttar Pradesh.

That the election results in the UP aggravated communal tensions in India cannot be denied. Loss of power can unhinge the mind of any political outfit, and the effect on an extremist group operating on narrow, almost non-political premises, such as the BJP, was bound to be even more unsettling. While political analysts have attributed the BJP's defeat to several non-communal factors, such as the failure of its government in the UP to meet the people's expectations, party hardliners have apparently concluded that they have suffered as a result of the dilution of their communalist agenda. They cannot find any other explanation for their rejection by the Muslim voters except communal distinction and they also attribute the revolt of the lower caste Hindus to a weakening of the dharma raj. This assessment does not appear to be confined to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad fanatics or the Bajrang Dal and may have affected the party's central leadership as well. Though in practical terms the BJP may still consider itself securely ensconced in New Delhi, it cannot ignore the psychological impact of the debacle on the wider Indian electorate. The taming of the Muslim voter, if not his physical elimination, acquired an urgency not just as an end in itself, but also as a means of reimposing upper caste political discipline on the lower caste multitudes.

However, it would be wrong to fix one's gaze solely on the BJP hardcore's fears of loss of power while looking for the causes of the latest flare-up. The contribution of three other factors that have fouled the Indian political climate need to be taken into consideration.

Firstly, the shift in the BJP's overall attitude towards secularism. In its march towards power in the early nineties, the party did not directly reject secular ideals, it only argued that the secularism of the Congress party was a sham and that it would establish genuine secularism by delivering to the majority community its due and guaranteeing the minority communities no more than what was fairly due to them. The strategy was designed to capitalise on the people's fatigue with the moribund policies of the Congress. However, realising that it could not hope to win power by itself and that it had to forge an alliance with other anti-Congress elements, the BJP reduced the rhetoric about its secular credentials and even promoted the fiction that only small groups within its fold (VHP or Bajrang Dal) were die-hard communalists. References to secularism from the party pulpits became fewer and fewer. The exclusion of any commitment to secularism (of any variety) from the party's discourse sent a message to its rank

and file that wherever they were not obligated to troublesome allies they could pursue their Hindutva agenda with greater vigour.

Secondly, the Indian middle class, including those claiming to be liberal, appeared to be uncritically willing to jump on the BJP bandwagon. The merchant class was happy that its contribution to the BJP coffers was paying dividends: in terms of economic policies, inter-party differences in the country had largely vanished, and perhaps the possibilities of making the government amenable to the interests of big capital were real. The liberals in particular judged the BJP less on merit and more in the context of their antipathy towards the alternatives. Even when they were unable to stomach the policies and doings of the saffron brigade, they idolised the figure of Mr. Vajpayee as the guardian of their interests completely ignoring the fact that the party's body-weight mattered far more than the disposition - that too assumed - of the leader of its government. At the same time, these liberals continued to harp on India's secular traditions built up in the past, without realising that that era had ended quite some time ago. They should now accept their role in making the communalists acceptable to the masses. This is not to deny the courage and level-headedness of those groups and individuals who have condemned the Gujarat authorities' collusion with the rampaging bloodthirsty gangs that went on a killing spree.

Thirdly, the impact of the India-Pakistan confrontation at the state level needs to be re-assessed. Hitherto, a great deal of attention has been paid to the effect of pre-Partition communal politics on the policies of these two neighbouring states. The contribution made by continual confrontation at the state level to keep the fires of communalism burning in both countries has not received its due attention. All those working for peace through people-to-people contacts realised this even more sharply in the wake of the Kargil affair, which unmistakably strengthened communalist trends in India. India's response to the opportunities provided by the US-led war against terrorism probably convinced its communalist adventurers that the time to finally solve the problem of Pakistan had come. The delay in the denouement of their wishes was bound to increase their frustration and anger. There is reason to believe that the advocates of Hindutva cannot be happy with Pakistan's efforts, however limited, to bury its bogey of obscurantists because their argument for turning India into a religious state is dented by every step Pakistan takes in the opposite direction.

The recent experience of the peoples of India and Pakistan leads to two conclusions. First, that communalism cannot be buried in this part of the world so long as the states of India and Pakistan continue their increasingly indefensible confrontationist policies. And, secondly, that communalism in India and communalism in Pakistan are not two separate phenomena, but in fact constitute a single integrated curse on South Asia which has to be tackled jointly by the people of the subcontinent. Once it is realised that communalism threatens the fundamental interests of the entire population of South Asia, the roles expected of the state apparatus and the civil society in both countries can be delineated.

The pressure on both states to give up their confrontation must be increased, with less emphasis on pleadings to resolve their differences and disputes and more on the possibilities of contributing to each other's stability, progress and happiness. At the same time, civil society elements in both countries that are committed to democratic, non-communal dispensation and the restitution of the rights of the under-privileged, must strive to break through the barriers to their interaction. Pakistan's outrage at the current carnage in Gujarat and elsewhere in India is understandable, but it should be inspired not merely by considerations of religious affinity with the victims but also, and perhaps in greater measure, by concern at the threat communalism poses to the entire Indian population, especially to the ideals of secularism, on which rest the hopes of a better South Asia.

(Courtesy : South Asia Citizens Wire)