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India

Gujarat riots: Against communalism and state complicity

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On February 27 2002, several compartments of a train were set on fire near Godhra in Gujarat. The train was carrying many "kar sevaks" or cadres of the Viswa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council).

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/comunal.jpg>]

The Inquilabi Communist Sangathan unreservedly deplores the torching of the train compartments leading to a large number of deaths. While warning the people of minority communities that this cannot be any legitimate response, and condemning the action, we also need to situate it in the proper context. For several months, the VHP has been whipping up communal tension and targeting Muslims with its renewed focus on temple building at Ayodha. This is the site where the Babri Masjid stood until December 6, 1992.

With a BJP dominated government at the centre, as well as a BJP government in Gujarat, the VHP had had ample support. Its forces had carried on extremely provocative activities without any hindrance. Without in the least condoning the massacre, it must be set in the perspective of continuous Hindutva provocations - provocations that had goaded some people of the minority communities evidently beyond endurance and had led to such a reprehensible act.

There has been continuous violence against Muslims in BJP ruled provinces (also elsewhere, but particularly in those states). In recent times, new anti-terrorist laws have been targeted against Muslims. Even when communalists have been challenged, only the Muslim communalists have been the target, while the Hindu communalists of the VHP and other groups have not had a single hair on their heads touched.

The immediate reaction of Hindu communalist and fascist forces has been to talk, as usual, of Hindu tolerance and its abuse by the perfidious Muslims. The truth is quite different. Massive riots have been unleashed, with the epicentre at Gujarat and tremors being felt as far away as Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. The organised lumpen-gangs and storm troopers of the Hindutva brigade went on the rampage for two days. The promulgation of curfew did not halt them. By the afternoon of March 1, even the government was formally admitting to 150 deaths, a figure that rose to over 300 by the end of the day. The former Congress M.P. Ehsan Jaffrey has been burnt to death in Ahmedabad. Prof. Bandookwall-ah's house was burnt down in Vadodara. In both cases, despite repeated urgings, the police played the role of silent spectators. In Naroda, near Ahmedabad, a thousand strong crowd surrounded a slum, dragged out people, and burnt 67 of them alive. In every case, where the Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, has even bothered to comment, he has claimed that the sequence of events proves that the blame cannot fall on the VHP. Modi patted the police on the back, and claimed that Jaffrey was responsible for his own death, because he had opened fire. What is a man, facing a violent mob, and having found the police non-responsive to his plea for help, supposed to do? Police Commissioner P.C. Pande, in open justification for the communal role of the police, stated that the police "were not insulated from the general social milieu". They allowed 36 hours to pass without any serious intervention (the same pattern as in 1992 after the Babri Masjid destruction) and now the army is being deployed. By declaring a curfew, the government formally took the position that the situation was serious - but did nothing beyond that formality.

It is not only the state government, but also the Central Government that must be held responsible. We opposed the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance. But the government claimed this law was needed in the interests of India - and then hesitated to apply it to the VHP? The government treats the kar sevaks and the VHP as a whole as though they are extremely reasonable forces. And this is no surprise, since the VHP is part of the Sangh Parivar, the same family of organisations as the BJP itself.

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So each case of intensification of communal provocation by the VHP has been met by warnings to Muslims not to lose their cool while the VHP has been given still more elbowroom. When the Central Defence Minister, Mr. George Fernandes was to pass through sensitive areas of Baroda, women from minority community in several areas were desperate for three days. They did not have milk vegetables or any necessities to feed their children in their homes. Children were crying without food. At night they couldn't sleep because of threats and mobs moving around freely in the area.

In desperation women from one area decided to stop Mr. Fernandes and ask him to listen to them. They came out of their homes as his cavalcade with several cars and police vehicles came past. They tried to wave their hands and make gestures to stop him - but the big shot did not stop. Immediately after his car went by, the local police attacked these women, beating them with batons and used vulgar sexual abuse for trying to "tarnish" their image in the eyes of Fernandes. This led to fear among women and their families. If this can happen when Mr. Fernandes was just a few metres away, what will happen to them at night!

And this is not an isolated incident - in several places women have suffered abuses and violence in the hands of police. We demand immediate action against whoever is responsible for this incident and we demand safety for those women and their families. It is women and children suffer most when there are shortages so we also demand that the necessary action is taken to ensure the supply of milk, vegetables and other necessities reaches all the affected by the curfew without discrimination on the basis of caste and community.

On March 3, local TV cable operators in Gujarat were instructed to block Star News Channel as they were showing the reality of the government's utter failure to prevent continuous violence. On the same day, Union Home Minister, BJP leader, and Gujarat MP, L. K. Advani finally found time to visit Gujarat. He started off by asserting, without a shred of proof, that the Godhra incident was pre-planned. He also asserted that police in Gujarat were perfectly fine, and rejected all criticisms of them.

Even as the violence continues, there is a ray of hope from initiatives in some places where peace committees are being set, involving people from both communities. These are having daily meetings so that no outsider also comes and creates any tension in the area. There are instances of majority community people saving their neighbours who practice minority religions. As a matter of principle, we believe that the state should not be given the right to curtail anyone's civil liberties, because this is a weapon that the state is likely to turn against the oppressed. We also believe that communalism, a product of reactionary capitalism utilising often pre-capitalist ideologies, cannot be extirpated by the bourgeois state. Only a resurgent working class, exercising its hegemony over the other oppressed, can successfully achieve that goal.

However, this is different from the question of tackling communal riots. A communal riot of the scale unleashed by the VHP currently cannot be tackled directly by the working class at its present stage of disunity and weakness. In order to defend human lives and conditions of existence, the governments, both at the state and the centre, must be compelled to take a firm stand.

We demand: Immediate and effective application of the army to stop all riots; the sacking of Gujarat Home Minister and Chief Minister for their failure to apply the law of the land and to stop riots, indeed, for their complicity in the riots; the arrest of all VHP leaders under the ordinary criminal laws; the scrapping of the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance; the weeding out of all communalist elements from the police; we call on working class and democratic/human rights movements active in India and abroad to publicly voice their concerns, and to mobilise against the fascists.

We urge that messages of condemnation and demands for action go to; The National Human Rights Commission, Sardar Patel Bhavan, Sansad Marg, New Delhi-110001. Tel (011) 311560; 3348478 fax (011)3340016 Fax no of

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Chief Minister of Gujarat 091-79-3222101/3222020