

Report exposes role of government in communal violence in India

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A report released in late April by Human Rights Watch is a clear exposure of the role played by the police and the government in the communal violence that plagued India in late February and early March. The large-scale slaughter of mostly Muslim residents of the western state of Gujarat was made possible through the active participation of the BJP-controlled state apparatus with the connivance of the federal government. Hundreds of people have died and new cases of communal murder continue to be reported throughout the country.

The report provides interviews from many of the victims that document the extent of the brutality of the fascistic violence. Hindu chauvinist mobs organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) raped, beat, killed and incinerated hundreds of Muslims and carried out a systematic pogrom against Muslim homes and businesses. Both of these organizations are closely tied with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is the main party in the national government. None of the organizers have been punished and tens of thousands of refugees remain internally displaced in squalid and inadequately maintained camps, unwilling or unable to return.

The violence—which occurred mainly in Gujarat’s largest city, Ahmedabad—was superficially a response to the arson attack on two cars of a passenger train carrying Hindu chauvinists through the city of Godhra. The attack was allegedly carried out by Muslims, and the report concludes that it was a spontaneous attack on the activists. A total of 58 people were killed, including many children.

However, plans for violence against Muslims had been planned well before the incident at Godhra. The state government of Gujarat is dominated by the Hindu fundamentalists, who have systematically promoted the influence of the fascistic Hindu organizations in the police, as well as in the civil service and the schools.

Members of the RSS and VHP have a great deal of authority in the Gujarat state government, as indeed is the case with the federal government. State government workers have reported that RSS members feel free to direct government business as if they themselves are in control. Governor Narendra Modi himself is a longstanding member of the RSS, and of all the high-ranking government officials he is perhaps the most openly fascistic.

The promotion in the police corps of elements sympathetic to the ideology of the RSS played an important role in the violence. The report declares, “In almost all of the incidents documented by

Human Rights Watch the police were directly implicated in the attacks. At best they were passive observers, and at worst they acted in concert with murderous mobs and participated directly in the burning and looting of Muslim shops and homes and the killing and mutilation of Muslims.”

The violence against Muslims in Gujarat began after the VHP called a *bandh* (shutdown) throughout the state for February 28, which the state government then endorsed. The VHP activists and other Hindu communalists interpreted the *bandh* to be a call to action that had state support, and prepared to implement the pogrom confident the police would not interfere. Graffiti left behind in one burnt school said: “This is inside information, the police are with us. We will kill. Long live Bajrang Dal. Long live Narendra Modi.” The Bajrang Dal is the youth organization of the VHP, formed in 1984.

The police were apparently under orders from Modi not to act swiftly, to allow the mobs 24 hours to carry out their violence. The weekly magazine *Frontline* reports that BJP Health Minister Asko Bhatt sat in the police control room throughout the initial days of the violence. The federal government sent in the army, but only after a delay of one day as requested by Modi.

Human Rights Watch interviewed victims from two of the hardest hit neighborhoods in Ahmedabad: Naroda Patia and Gulmarg Society. Both areas are located very close to police stations. Naroda Patia is across the street from the State Reserve Police quarters, and Gulmarg Society is less than a kilometer from the closest station. Nevertheless, the large Muslim populations in these areas were attacked with impunity on February 28.

In Naroda Patia, 65 people were killed by a mob of about 5,000. As was the case in many of the other areas plagued by violence, victims were hacked to death and then burnt. All the victims were Muslim—their homes were attacked while adjacent Hindu homes went untouched. The most powerful and damning aspect of the report is the interviews with those who survived.

The recollections of a 13-year old boy: “The police was with them [the mob].... We kept calling the police but no one came.... The police would pick up the phone and hang up when they heard it was from Naroda Patia.” Samuda Bhen, a mother of two: “The police sided with them.... First the police came, they searched the mosque, they were checking for weapons to see if it was safe for the others to come. Then the others came.” 40-year-old Naseem Banu: “Wherever we hid, the police showed them where we were. The police remained standing when our home were burned down.”

A resident of Naroda Patia told Citizen's Initiative, a coalition of NGOs (non-governmental organizations), her story: "A mob of 5,000 came and we started running. We were cornered from all sides. SRP [State Reserve Police] personnel were also chasing us.... The mob caught hold of my husband and hit him on the head twice with the sword. They threw petrol in his eyes and then burned him. My sister-in-law was stripped and raped. She had a three-month baby in her lap. They threw petrol on her and the child from her lap was thrown in the fire. My brother-in-law was hit in the head with the sword and he died on the spot. His six-year-old daughter was also hit with the sword and thrown in the fire. My mother-in-law had with her the grandson who was four years of age and he was burnt too.... The police was on the spot but helping the mob. We fell in their feet but they said they were ordered from above [not to help]. Since the telephone wires were snapped we could not inform the fire brigade."

In Gulmarg Society, as mobs descended upon the community on the morning of February 28, over 250 people sought refuge in the house of Ehsan Jaffrey, a prominent Muslim in the community and former member of parliament. As the mob gathered around Jaffrey's house, he made many calls to the police, all with no effect even though the police station was nearby. The houses owned by Muslims in the neighborhood were systematically torched, and eventually the phone lines from Jaffrey's house were cut, leaving hundreds of people trapped and defenseless.

Early in the day, the police commissioner visited the house and told Jaffrey not to worry, that something would be done, but by the late afternoon the mob attacked the house in a rampage that left at least 65 dead.

The pattern was similar to that which took place in Naroda Patia. Mehboob Mansoori lost 18 family members in the attack. He told Human Rights Watch: "All the women died. My brother, my three sons, one girl, my wife's mother, they all died. My boys were aged ten, eight and six. My girl was twelve years old. The bodies were piled up. They first cut them and then burned them. Other girls were raped, cut, and burned.... Jaffrey was also killed.... There was no police at all."

The police played a key role throughout the violence. Relating a story similar to many of those interviewed, one victim of the violence told Human Rights Watch, "We were able to handle the crowd, but when the police joined in then we couldn't stop them.... The police burned the house with their own hands. They also looted. Now everyone is afraid of the police; they were only firing on Muslims. They were not firing for riot control." Modi has stated that the police used violence to control the mobs.

Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of the violence was the treatment of women. As with many fascist organizations, the ideology of the RSS and similar organizations has always had a strong male chauvinist component combined with an undercurrent of extreme sexual violence. Citizen's Initiative reports, "Among the women surviving in relief camps, are many who have suffered the most bestial forms of sexual violence.... A majority of rape victims have been burnt alive."

It continued, "There is evidence of State and Police complicity in perpetuating the crimes against women.... No effort was made to protect women.... State and Police complicity in these crimes is

continuing, as women survivors continue to be denied the right to file FIRs [First Information Reports]. There is no existing institutional mechanism in Gujarat through which women can seek justice."

In addition to those that have been killed, at least 98,000 people, the vast majority Muslim, have been displaced from their homes and are now living in relief camps. Security at these camps has been lax, and assistance, including food, has been delayed. The government has done very little, and according to the report local NGO and Muslim organizations have been forced to provide the bulk of food and medical supplies. No government aid arrived at the camps until at least a week after the violence began.

At Chartoda Kabristan a camp in Gomtipur, 6,000 internal refugees have been kept in a cemetery, forced to sleep in the space between graves. One resident noted ironically to Human Rights Watch, "Usually the dead sleep here, now the living are sleeping here." Many of these refugees cannot return to their homes, either for fear of further violence, because their houses have been burned down, or because their old jobs have been given away.

The Human Rights Watch report also detailed the complete absence of official action against those who led these attacks, many of whom were leading members of the RSS, VHP and BJP. This includes those implicated by name by the victims. The Associated Press reported that a prominent member of the BJP, Deepak Patel, was at the head of the mob that attacked Jaffrey's home, and yet he has never been arrested. Police reports directly naming members of these organizations have been altered, and police officers who have attempted to take action against these leaders have been removed or pressured to take back their charges.

An attorney in Ahmedabad told Human Rights Watch, "People don't trust the police. They are saying that all this happened in their presence.... When witnesses file complaints, the police enter their statements according to their preference.... In one case, for example, seven people were identified but they didn't write their names."

Even as the leaders of the mobs have gone unpunished, large numbers of Muslim youth have been detained. Rather than arrest those responsible for the violence, police have arrested the victims. All this has the complete support of the Gujarat state government with the complicity of the national government.

The extent and character of the violence in Gujarat is sickening, yet it is the logical consequence of the policies carried out by the BJP, which has had the support of a large section of the Indian ruling class. Anti-Muslim chauvinism has been used both to deflect social and class conflicts along communal lines and to advance the interests of the Indian ruling class against Pakistan. The BJP's reliance on the most extreme Hindu chauvinists was expressed in the inability of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to make the gesture of sacking state governor Modi for sponsoring the violence.



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