

India: further evidence Hindu-supremacist BJP culpable in Gujarat pogrom

Kranti Kumara

9 March 2005

Fresh evidence has emerged that demonstrates that the February-March 2002 pogrom against Gujarat's Muslim minority was orchestrated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the dominant partner in India's then coalition government, and its Hindu-supremacist allies.

K.R. Narayanan, who was India's president at the time of the Gujarat events, recently told a Malayalam-language magazine that he implored Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to immediately deploy the army to Gujarat with orders to suppress the anti-Muslim riots, but the BJP leader ignored his pleas. "If the army had been given the powers to suppress the violence," said Narayanan, the Gujarat riots would never have escalated into a state-wide convulsion that left more than 2,000 Muslims dead and 150,000 homeless.

"But the [BJP] state government did not do it; the Centre also did not do it. It was a conspiracy between the state and the central government that was responsible for the Gujarat violence."

Vajpayee, whom the BJP and much of India's media have long lauded as a moderate although he is a lifelong member of the Hindu supremacist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has cavalierly dismissed Narayanan's charges.

The BJP leadership has likewise failed to offer any serious rebuttal to the preliminary report issued by a government-appointed committee of enquiry into the February 27, 2002, Godhra train fire—the event that served as the pretext for the anti-Muslim pogrom.

From the beginning, the BJP and its RSS allies have insisted that the fire that killed 59 people—most of them *Kar Sevaks* (right-wing Hindu militants), who were returning to Gujarat from Ayodhya—was set by Muslims, possibly with the assistance of Pakistan's intelligence services.

Within hours of the fire, leaders of the BJP and allied Hindu communalist organizations were inciting Gujaratis to come into the streets to protest the Godhra deaths. When Muslims became the target of violent attacks, they depicted the attacks as spontaneous, arising from Hindus' desire for "revenge," although there is much evidence to show that BJP officials and cadres of the RSS-aligned Vishwa Hindu Parishad (or World Hindu Council) and Bajrang Dal (or Hindu Youth League) fomented and led attacks on Muslims.

The inquiry into the Godhra fire headed by retired Supreme Court Justice U.C. Bannerjee emphatically rejected the explanations that the BJP, RSS, and the BJP-led state and police authorities in Gujarat have advanced for the train fire. According to the inquiry's preliminary report, the fire that engulfed carriage S-6 of the Sabramati Express was in all likelihood not deliberately set, but rather "accidental."

The Gujarat government and police have contended that the fire was lit by persons who were part of a group of Muslims protesting against the *Kar Sevaks* on the Godhra train station platform or who used the protest as a cover to directly enter carriage S-6. In either case, the perpetrators are alleged to have used inflammable liquid to set the fire.

The Bannerjee committee argues that the forensic evidence cannot support either theory. It cites tests done at Gujarat's forensic laboratory to show that due to wind and the height of the train, only 10 to 15 percent of any liquid sprayed from the platform would have made it into the carriage, and those seeking to light the carriage afire would themselves have been splashed by the liquid. As for the theory that a person or persons entered the carriage and poured inflammable liquid onto the floor, the Bannerjee committee notes that this is not consistent with the fire victims' burns, many of which were to the upper, not lower, body. "The inflammable liquid theory," argues the report, "gets negated by the statement of some of the passengers who suffered injuries on the upper portion of the body and not the lower body and who crawled towards the door on elbows and could get out without much injury."

The report also argues that it is highly unlikely that someone could have penetrated the carriage and poured large amounts of an inflammable liquid onto the floor unbeknownst to the *Kar Sevaks*, who were armed with three-pointed spears or *trishuls*.

The Bannerjee committee report is highly critical of railway authorities, noting that they were quick to embrace the claims that the fire was deliberately set, thereby ignoring such contributing factors to the tragedy as train overcrowding and thus helping to fan communal passions. Western Railway officials allowed the partially burned neighboring coach, S-7, to proceed to its final destination of Ahmedabad, instead of preserving it as evidence. Nor have they ever bothered to conduct a statutory inquiry into the fire.

The Bannerjee committee does not say what it believes caused the fire, but it is known that some of the *Kar Sewaks* were cooking on the train.

The Bannerjee committee's conclusions concerning the Godhra fire have been supported by a technical investigation carried out by a Delhi-based non-governmental organization, the Hazards Center. That investigation, which compared the damage to carriage S-6 with railway carriages burned in fires known to have been accidental, concluded that the fire began from within carriage S-6 and was consistent with a long-smoldering source, rather than the igniting of a flammable liquid.

The BJP has long been associated with communal violence. The *Kar Sewaks* who were killed in the Godhra train fire were returning from Ayodhya, where they had been agitating for the building of a Hindu temple on the former site of the historic *Babri Masjid* mosque. In 1992, Hindu-supremacist militants razed the mosque—the culmination of a years' long agitation led by L.K. Advani, the home minister in Vajpayee's government. The destruction of *Babri Masjid* set off the largest nationwide wave of communal violence since the 1947 communal partition of south Asia.

Nevertheless, the Gujarat pogrom, which came at a time when the Indian government had amassed almost a million soldiers on the Pakistani border and was threatening to invade, marked a new stage in the development of the BJP.

Advani, Vajpayee and other BJP leaders feigned ignorance of the plan to raze the *Babri Masjid* mosque, which violated a Supreme Court order. The BJP Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, did little to hide his role in fomenting the anti-Muslim pogrom, subsequently ran successfully for re-election in December 2002 by inciting communal hatreds and burnishing his image as a Hindu strongman, and has since emerged as a national leader of the BJP.

Modi supported a statewide "general strike" to protest the Godhra fire, ordered the burnt bodies of its victims to be brought to the state capital where they were paraded about by the VHP, RSS and BD, and then, when violence erupted, indicated that police should sit on their hands.

Vajpayee and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, meanwhile, resisted any and all demands for Modi and his state government to be called to account. At one point, Vajpayee did express some dismay at the extent of the bloodshed in Gujarat and the bad name it was giving India internationally, but only to embrace Modi's claim that the anti-Muslim pogrom was an understandable reaction to the anti-Hindu violence at Godhra.

Similarly, in last year's general election campaign, Vajpayee sought to appease big business's concerns over the disruptive character of the BJP's incendiary communal rhetoric by insisting that he was staking his government's bid for re-election on its economic and foreign policy record. Nevertheless, Modi soon emerged as one of the BJP's most

important campaigners. And the Gujarat government he leads continues to protect from prosecution the pogrom's foot soldiers and more senior organizers. To this day, there have been virtually no, if any, successful prosecutions of persons who participated in Gujarat's anti-Muslim pogrom.

The BJP's reaction to the Bannerjee committee report only demonstrates that all sections of India's second-largest party—from the *Hindutva* hardliners like Modi, through the so-called moderates—have the blood of Gujarat's Muslims on their hands.

The BJP politicians have been united in their efforts to discredit the report. Recognizing that they are on shaky ground, they have sought to focus their attack on the fact that Railway Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, a bitter BJP adversary, set up the Bannerjee inquiry and that he no doubt timed the release of its preliminary report a month before elections were slated to be held in his native Bihar in the hope of influencing the outcome.

A former Bihar chief minister and the current railway minister in the Congress-led United Progress Alliance government, Laloo Prasad Yadav, is a notoriously corrupt politician who has used populist and caste appeals to dominate the politics of Bihar, one of India's poorest state, for the better part of two decades. His cultivated image as an uncouth spokesman for India's rural lower castes has long made him a convenient *bête noire* for the BJP's core middle-class, upper-caste constituency.

Meanwhile, the Gujarat government has set up its own enquiry commission, also headed by a retired Supreme Court justice, to probe into the Godhra fire. That this will not be an impartial review of the facts is underscored by the inquiry's mandate. The Gujarat inquiry will not investigate the causes of the Godhra fire, but rather the circumstances that led to the "setting of fire."

Whether the Godhra fire was, as appears increasingly likely, a tragic accident or the result of a communal clash is certainly not irrelevant. More than 100 Muslims remain in jail for their alleged involvement in setting coach S-6 ablaze. However, whatever the true cause of the Godhra fire, there is and never was the slightest justification for holding Gujarat's Muslims collectively responsible for the fire, let alone unleashing indiscriminate violence against this largely impoverished minority. Those—beginning with Modi, Vajpayee, Advani and the RSS and VHP leaders—who seized on the Godhra fire to foment hatred against Muslims and anti-Muslim violence, or who abetted the carnage by failing to order police and military forces to stop the bloodbath, stand indicted of a horrific crime against humanity.



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