

In run-up to Gujarat elections

Magazine exposé shows BJP state government organized 2002 pogrom

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An exposé in *Tehelka* magazine has provided further damning proof that the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in the west Indian state of Gujarat was fomented and organized by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government of Narendra Modi. The BJP acted in concert with a network of Hindu nationalist and fundamentalist organizations, including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has long supplied much of the BJP's cadre and leadership, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Hindu World Council) and the VHP's youth wing, the Bajrang Dal.

Chief Minister Modi, his government, and the *sangh parivar* (i.e. the family of Hindu right organizations) used an unexplained train fire at Godhra in late February 2002, which killed 59 Hindu activists returning from a pilgrimage to the site of the razed Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, as a pretext to incite Hindu-supremacist goons to rape and kill Muslims. While the official death toll from the riots is just over 1,000 Muslim dead and missing and 254 Hindu dead, many reputable reports place the number of Muslims killed at closer to 2,000. The orgy of looting and destruction also left some 100,000 Muslims homeless.

In a sting operation organized by *Tehelka*, several important functionaries of Hindu right organizations boasted before a hidden camera of how, with the help of the BJP government, they instigated the carnage and subsequently organized for the escape and/or acquittal of key mob leaders. The functionaries were present at meetings after the train fire at which Modi told them to do whatever they wanted, i.e. to massacre Muslims in reputed revenge for the Godhra fire, for three days, after which he would be obliged to stop them.

Modi made public statements, before any proper investigation had been conducted, asserting that the train fire had been deliberately set and that held Muslims collectively responsible for it. To facilitate the organization of anti-Muslim violence, Modi and his government supported the VHP's called for a state-wide *bandh* or general strike to protest the Godhra fire. And then as anti-Muslim violence erupted across Gujarat, Modi expressed his support by declaring that "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction." (See: India's ruling party abetted communal carnage in Gujarat.)

The BJP has dismissed the *Tehelka* exposé. "We were expecting this kind of a political stunt," said BJP spokesperson Prakash Javdekar. "Tehelka is CIA, which means, Congress Investigating Agency. This story will not affect the elections in any way as Tehelka has already lost its credibility." The Gujarat State Assembly elections are to be held in two phases, December 11 and 16.

The reality is the Congress Party has joined with the BJP and the corporate media to effectively bury the *Tehelka* exposé for fear that it could cut across its electoral strategy of courting BJP dissidents, including several who were senior figures in Modi's government at the time of the

2002 anti-Muslim program.

While the Congress proclaims itself a defender of "secularism" and the Stalinist-led Left Front justifies its propping up India's Congress Party-dominated United Progressive Alliance government with the claim that this is the only way to keep the Hindu right at bay, the Congress has a long history of adapting to and conniving with the Hindu supremacists. Even India's corporate media labeled Congress' campaign for the 2002 Gujarat state election as "Hindutva-lite." (*Hindutva* is the name V.D. Savarkar coined in the 1920s for his Hindu supremacist-nationalist ideology.)

Tehelka editorial chief Tarun J. Tejpal has, for his part, denied any association with the Congress. Writes Tejpal, "The fact is the Congress is today run by petty strategists who no longer know what it is to do the right thing.... They fail to see that once great men sutured a hundred fault-lines—of caste, religion, race, language, class—to create the idea of India out of a diverse, colonised, feudal subcontinent. Foolishly they preside over the reopening of these fault-lines, unable to see the chaos that will ensue... At best they are vote accountants who waver between the profit and the loss of various elections."

India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has recommended a CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) probe into the *Tehelka* revelations, saying, "The allegations had far-reaching implications and raised vital constitutional issues which need to be promptly addressed in the interest of all." But India's state authorities, in keeping with their stance over the past five years, continue to refuse to seriously, let alone aggressively, investigate the role play by the Gujarat government and police in the February-March 2002 pogrom.

According to *Tehelka*, the chief auditor of Maharaja Sayajirao (MS) University, Dhimant Bhatt, who is also an RSS member, admitted to attending a meeting convened by Hindu supremacists soon after the train fire at which plans were laid for launching a murderous assault on Muslims. Chief Minister Modi was present at this meeting.

"After Godhra," Bhatt told *Tehelka*. "there was this reaction and a certain climate was created in the Parivar by the top leaders, meaning the RSS, the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, the BJP and the Durga Vahini [the VHP's women's wing] ... and in that we had Narendra Modi's support...and now if we don't do anything, if we don't generate an adequate reaction, another train will be set on fire.... This was the idea, the thought that came from him [Modi]... I was present in the meeting."

Haresh Bhatt, former Bajrang Dal president, now a BJP MLA from Godhra, said he was also present at a meeting after the train fire at which Modi "had given us three days to do whatever we could. He said he would not give us time after that, he said this openly."

Tehelka has also reported that Gujarat Director General of Police P.C. Pande, who was recently removed from his post by the Election

Commission, ordered the bodies of 700-800 people killed at Naroda Patiya, the scene of some of the worst atrocities, be secretly removed and dumped at other places so as to cover up the toll of the massacre.

It continued, “Not only did the Modi government allow the mob fury to continue unabated, it also tried to shelter the perpetrators from the law. Modi himself arranged for Babu Bajrangi, the prime accused in the Naroda Patiya case, to stay at Gujarat Bhavan in Mount Abu, and transferred two judges to help Bajrangi get bail...Since the police were in control all over Gujarat, Modi instructed them to side with the Hindus, thus giving the rioters a free hand for three days until pressure from higher quarters necessitated the calling in of the army.”

A state Intelligence Bureau chief, RB Sreekumar, told the magazine, “I took over in April 2002; by then, the frenzy had calmed. I had sent reports (to a government commission of inquiry into the Gujarat events) saying FIRs (police First Information Reports) were not registered properly, many offences were being clubbed together and that the names of the VHP leaders at the head of the mob were being left out of FIRs. This became a controversy. On none of these reports did the government take any follow-up action or seek any clarification. That is very relevant.”

On March 6, 2002, Modi set up a commission of enquiry headed by retired High Court Judge K.G. Shah to probe the Godhra train incident and the subsequent mass communal violence. From the start, as the *Tehelka* exposé has further shown, the commission was under the control of Modi’s government and manipulated it in its favour. Witnesses were intimidated by the police and Hindu mobs. According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, *Discouraging Dissent: Intimidation and Harassment of Witnesses, Human Rights Activists, and Lawyers Pursuing Accountability for the 2002 Communal Violence in Gujarat*, Modi’s government “created a climate of impunity, where perpetrators of the riots and those who took part in the violence feel they can threaten activists and witnesses to discourage them from pursuing justice, without response from state authorities.”

Following complaints from victims and NGOs over Shah’s close relationship to the BJP, Justice G.T. Nanavati was appointed joint head of the commission by the Modi government. However, Arvind Pandya, the BJP government counsel at the commission, revealed to *Tehelka* during its sting operation that Nanavati was just as pro-BJP as Shah and only interested in money. He told the magazine that each of them “was calling me in his chamber and showing full sympathy for me...giving full cooperation to me, but keeping some distance...The judges were also guiding me as and when required...how to put up a case and on which date...because basically they are Hindus...so help from each and every class of people came forth...the people remained united and their only motive was the survival of Hinduism.”

In response to the *Tehelka* article, Pandya has resigned from his post, but maintains he was tricked into giving false statements.

Justice Nanavati was quick to give credence to Pandya’s claims, saying, “We...have to ascertain how reliable the exposé is. We cannot act in a hurry. We have to be careful.”

Modi’s government reacted quickly to the *Tehelka* revelations by censoring TV channels CNN-IBN, IBN-7 and Aaj Tak, claiming reports of the revelations could provoke communal violence.

When questioned recently about the 2002 events on CNN-IBN’s “Devil’s Advocate” program, Modi refused to say that he regretted what happened, then abruptly got up and walked out.

As for the Congress Party, it was several days before its leaders reacted to the *Tehelka* revelations and when they finally did their comments were very cautious. The Congress General Secretary in Gujarat, B.K. Hariprasad, claimed there is no “new revelation” in the *Tehelka* report and added, “It’s an old story, but it is still shocking to hear it from the individuals (who were involved in the violence).”

The Congress-led UPA government has defended the censoring of the

reporting on the *Tehelka* revelations and the Congress Party has forthrightly declared the events of 2002 will play little role in its Gujarat election campaign.

“We are not going to rake up that (riots) issue,” said Congress spokesman Himanshu Vyas—this under conditions where not only have many Muslims who lost their homes and jobs in 2002 not been rehabilitated, but where the police and state apparatus is complicit in the oppression of the state’s Muslim minority.

One reason the Congress Party has joined hands with Modi to bury the *Tehelka* revelations is that it has been pursuing an electoral alliance with a dissident faction within the Gujarat BJP in the hopes this will provide it with the margin of victory in the upcoming state election.

These dissidents include former BJP Chief Minister Suresh Mehta and Gordhan Zadaphia, who was the state Home Minister—that is the minister in charge of the police—in 2002. Under Zadaphia’s leadership the police aided and abetted the pogrom. According to Rahul Sharma, a Superintendent of Police, “From egging on murderous hordes to go for the kill, to supplying them with ammunition, to transporting bombs between districts, to opening fire at Muslims who were already under attack from Hindu rioters—the police facilitated the massacre in every possible way.”

Moreover, the *Telekha* article shows that Zadaphia was colluding with the organizers of the communal violence. A leader of the Barjang Dal, Babu Bajrangi, told *Tehelka*, “I was the first to start the [Naroda] Patiya operation...At 7 o’clock, I called the home minister and also Jaideepbhai [Jaideep Patel, VHP general secretary] and told them how many people had been killed and said that things were now in their hands “

It is not, however, just electoral opportunism that explains the Congress’ stance. The Congress Party leadership fears coming into conflict with substantial sections of the judiciary and police, which are sympathetic to the BJP and the Hindu right, if not complicit in their crimes. Five years after the Gujarat pogrom, none of those who played a leading role in fomenting and organizing this outrage have been convicted.

With few exceptions, the corporate media has joined with the Congress in suppressing the *Telekha* revelations, arguing that the Congress leadership was correct to do so, for were the Congress to trumpet them, it would only help Modi and the BJP.

The *Hindustan Times* criticized the *Telekha* exposé, saying, “The continuous screening of past events, and that too on the eve of the Gujarat polls, neither serves any journalistic purpose, nor does it help preserve communal harmony. Even as the state is trying to recover, the sting has revived ugly memories of incidents that are, in any case, being probed by the Justice G.T. Nanavati Commission. The screening is bound to lead to a deepening of the communal divide, which may contribute to the improvement of Modi’s electoral prospects. The Gujarat Chief Minister must be amused by the fact that while he has consciously stuck to his development agenda, others are helping him out by bringing up an event that had helped the saffron brigade to retain power during the last polls.”

The right-wing *Newindpress* has written, “The truth is that the Congress is worried about doing anything which could polarise Gujarat along Hindu-Muslim lines, and become Advantage Modi again. It is ironic—and tragic—that Muslim leaders in the Congress are imploring the leadership to desist from doing anything lest it intensifies the religious divide. “It is this fear which lies at the heart of Congress’s inaction of the last five years. Though in power at the Centre since 2004, it did not even actively pursue the killing of its own ex-MP Ehsan Jaffry who was burnt alive in the 2002 riots.”

In so far as it is true that the Congress fears Modi’s ability to exploit communal fears and hatreds, it is an indictment of its own rightwing politics, not only its adaptations to the Hindu right, but its pursuit of an incendiary social agenda that benefits a tiny minority while increasing the insecurity and poverty of the vast majority.

The Congress' suppression of the *Tehelka* exposé and the BJP dissidents will only strengthen the Hindu right, thereby facilitating the daily victimization of Gujarat's Muslim minority and sowing the seeds for further communal bloodbaths.

After the *Tehelka* exposé, the Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), the principal component of the Left Front, condemned Gujarat's ruling BJP, saying Modi and his government were "fully responsible for this gross violation of human rights and subversion of the Constitution." It said the recording tapes "should be taken as prima facie evidence and the Supreme Court and the Central government should move expeditiously to see that all those guilty are brought to justice."

However the Stalinists, who are propping up the Congress-led UPA government, have shut their eyes and made no sound as the Congress has wooed the BJP dissidents, offering them Congress tickets or agreeing not to stand candidates against them if they stand as independents. In fact, the CPM has struck its own electoral alliance with the Congress in Gujarat.

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