

Indian army general praises instigator of 2002 Gujarat pogrom

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A senior officer in the Indian Army, Major-General I.S. Singha, has lavished praise on Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief minister of Gujarat, in an incident that, according to the *Times of India*, has “sent ripples across India’s armed forces.”

Modi, who is known to harbor national political ambitions, was instrumental in instigating the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat. In an orgy of violence during which state security forces largely “stood down,” more than 1,400 people, most of them Muslims, were killed, according to government figures. Other estimates put the death toll at 2,000 or more. To this day, tens of thousand of Muslims who were chased from their homes during the pogrom languish in squalid refugee camps.

Speaking alongside Modi at the March 14 opening of a “Know Your Army” exhibition in Ahmedabad, Gujarat’s capital, Singha praised Modi for his “vision of development for the state and nation.”

“He [Modi] works like we in the army do. He sets a deadline for completion of projects and then ensures that targets are achieved in time. These are qualities of a successful army commander.”

It is rare, if not unheard of, that a serving senior general in India’s ostensibly politically neutral armed forces should publicly praise an active politician or government leader. All the more striking is that Singha—the highest ranking army officer stationed in Gujarat—should hail the arch-communist Modi and in terms that flatter his thuggish and authoritarian *modus operandi*.

Singha’s remarks were so extraordinary and explosive in their implication that army spokesmen were obliged to say, when promoted by press inquiries, that they would be investigated.

On March 18, India’s army Chief General V.K. Singh repeated the earlier claims that the matter was being examined to determine whether Major-General Singha had violated the military’s code of conduct, while insisting that the “army is absolutely apolitical.”

“We are studying it as to what he [Singha] said,” asserted the army chief, claiming that he did not know the “context” of the remarks. “I can only say one thing, that there is no politicization in the army.”

Although the head of India’s army was speaking to reporters four days after the Major-General’s Ahmedabad address, he claimed to be ignorant of the basic facts of the case, an indication that the military top brass was preparing to brush the controversy under the carpet.

His remarks were seconded by Defence Minister A.K. Antony, who, when asked about Major-General Singha’s statement, said, “I cannot comment on the basis of media reports. One good tradition of the armed forces, compared to many others, is that they are apolitical. I am sure our armed forces will continue with that tradition.”

Almost two weeks later, it is abundantly clear that Singha will at most receive a mild reprimand and probably not even that. The military and Congress Party-led central government have said no more about the matter and the press has dropped it.

From the beginning there were elements in the military who were advancing alibis on the Major-General’s behalf, saying his remarks, which were made in Hindi, had been mistranslated or that he was only trying to butter up the Gujarat chief minister because he wants the state government to set aside land for new housing for serving and retired military personnel. One officer told the *Times of India*, “Too much was being read into a customary welcome speech ... It has been twisted out of context in English translation.”

Longstanding and deepening collusion

The true context in which Major-General Singha’s remarks must be evaluated is one of decades-long and ever-deepening collusion between the personnel of India’s state institutions—especially the police and judiciary, including their top echelons—with the Hindu supremacist right. Moreover, there is growing evidence that elements within the military are actively pursuing and promoting communalist politics.

In India the failure of the police, courts, and government authorities to prosecute and convict those responsible for instigating and organizing communal violence is, or should be, a national shame. This goes for the Congress Party-instigated anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 and for the communalist violence instigated by the BJP and its allies in the RSS-led network of Hindu supremacist organizations, most notoriously, the 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and the bloodletting that followed across much of north and west India, and the 2002 Gujarat pogrom.

In the Ayodhya and Gujarat outrages, the courts have not only manifestly failed to convict the perpetrators; in the past six months they have delivered “judgments” that serve to legitimize the original crimes.

In the early 1990s, the BJP and its allies instigated a virulent communal campaign to have the Babri Masjid mosque torn down and replaced by a Hindu temple dedicated to the god Ram, claiming that this was essential for the rebirth of “Hindu India.” This campaign culminated in Hindu rightist activists storming the mosque and tearing it down, while senior BJP leaders watched from the sidelines, and the BJP state government ordered police to do nothing—openly flouting a Supreme Court order to ensure that the mosque was not damaged.

Last fall the Allahabad High Court awarded two-thirds of the site of the razed Babri Masjid to Hindu communalist and fundamentalist organizations after upholding their trumped-up, irrational claim that the mosque had been built on the birthplace of the mythical Hindu god Ram. In a ruling with frightful implications for democratic rights, the judges ruled that it did not matter whether Ram existed or not. The fact that Hindus hold that he did makes his existence legal fact. (See “Indian High Court abets Hindu supremacists with Babri Masjid ruling”)

And last month, in what was a blatant judicial frame-up, a Gujarat court found 31 Muslims guilty of conspiring to cause a February 2002 train fire in Godhra that killed almost 60 people, most of them Hindu communalist and fundamentalist activists. In doing so, the judge ignored numerous contradictions in the testimony of prosecution witnesses; a mountain of evidence, including the conclusions of a central government inquiry, that the train fire was accidental; and, last but not least, the fact that the origins of the case lay in a conspiracy on the part of local BJP leaders to pin responsibility for the fire on Muslim political opponents. (See “Gujarat court frames Muslims for train-fire used to incite 2002 Gujarat pogrom”)

The Godhra fire was the pretext for the 2002 Gujarat pogrom. Before there had been any investigation, Chief Minister Modi publicly declared the fire an act of Muslim terrorism and indicated that the Muslim community as a whole should be held responsible.

In neither case did the courts adjudicate on the legality of the communal violence unleashed by the Hindu right. But by giving political and legal legitimacy to the reactionary pretexts used to incite anti-Muslim hysteria, they provided Modi and Co. with alibis and justifications—allowing them to plausibly contend judicial “vindication.” This is in addition to the impunity they have already been allowed to enjoy thanks to the complicity and cowardice of the courts, police and their ostensible opponents in the political establishment.

While it is the police, courts, and the politicians staffing the central and state governments that have hitherto been most conspicuous in covering up, conniving in, and whitewashing the crimes of the Hindu communalist right, Major-General Singha’s endorsement of Modi comes even as authorities are in the midst of a lengthy investigation of the links between Hindu communalist terrorists and the military.

In the fall of 2008, police revealed that a series of bombings in Malegaon and Modasa that they had previously attributed to Islamacists were in fact the work of Hindu rightists. At the heart of this Hindu terror plot was one Lt.-Colonel Prasad Purohit, a military intelligence officer, as well as others with connections to the Bohnsala Military College, a private, military-associated cadet school.

Indian authorities now contend that the Hindu terror cell, using explosives supplied them by Lt.-Colonel Purohit, carried out other bombings, including the 2007 Samjhauta Express train blast that killed 68 passengers, including 43 Pakistanis returning to their native country.

The investigation into the Hindu terror plot has proceeded at a snail’s pace. No doubt this is largely due to political reasons. The BJP and the Hindu right have raised a furor because the investigation has revealed ties between the RSS-led *Sangh Parivar* and terrorist bombers. But this is no more than the half of it. Exposure of the Hindu terrorist network cuts across the narrative promoted by the Congress-led government and the Indian elite as a whole that “democratic” India is under threat from Islamacist terrorism exported from Pakistan and that absent Islamabad’s machinations India would be free of communalist terrorism.

Modi a darling of Indian big business

The Indian ruling class will on occasion deplore certain “excesses” of the BJP and its allies—that is, its stoking of communal violence and promotion of religious obscurantism. But none of this has stopped it embracing the BJP as its alternate party of government. Less than six years after the razing of the Babri Masjid had provoked the worst communal convulsion since Partition, the BJP was leading India’s government as the dominant partner in the National Democratic Alliance and would continue to do so for the next six years.

Modi, the instigator of the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, revels in his role as strongman for *Hindutva*, the ideology of Hindu supremacism, making frequent Muslim-baiting speeches, openly defending police implicated in summary executions, and otherwise trampling on democratic rights. But he is a veritable darling of Indian big business.

In words not all that different from those of Major-General Singha, India’s captains of industry have praised Modi’s ability to bend and break rules and, above all, run roughshod over opposition, so as to get things done. Or, as was said of Mussolini, to get the trains to run on time.

When widespread popular opposition to the Nano car project drove the Tata Group to abandon its plans to assemble the car in Stalinist-ruled West Bengal, Modi immediately stepped in and offered Tata tax breaks, land and a highway connection. Tata Group quickly decided to locate the Nano project in Gujarat and its chairman Ratan Tata declared himself “impressed by what Narendra Modi has done in terms of administering and managing the state.”

Thanks to an inflow of investment—big business’s choice means of expressing approval—Gujarat has been in the forefront of India’s industrial growth, recording one of the highest economic growth rates. But under Modi’s rule, Gujarat is also experiencing widespread hunger and social devastation. A study released earlier this year by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) found that “advanced” Gujarat has one of the highest incidences of hunger in India, exceeding even that of Uttar Pradesh, which is considered among India’s poorest states. In terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), Gujarat ranks at the bottom, scoring even worse than Orissa where the poverty rate is worse than in the 26 poorest countries in Africa.

The complicity of the Congress Party

The Indian bourgeoisie’s premier political party, the Congress Party, depicts itself as the bulwark of secular India in implacable opposition to the BJP. At times Congress leaders will denounce the BJP as extremist or even fascist. In a revealing 2009 US diplomatic cable obtained by WikiLeaks, the US Ambassador to India, Eric Romer, reports on a conversation he had with Rahul Gandhi, in which the son of party president Sonia Gandhi and heir apparent to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh makes stark warnings about the threat posed by Hindu communalist extremism. According to Romer, Gandhi said a “bigger threat” to India than Islamacist groups “may be the growth of radicalized Hindu groups, which create religious tensions and political confrontations with the Muslim community.”

But when his remarks became public knowledge, Rahul Gandhi quickly distanced himself from them.

The reality is the Congress Party, like the India elite as a whole, has for decades, stretching back to the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, connived and conciliated with the Hindu right. Indeed, as Congress’s popular appeal waned with the manifest failure of state-led development (dubbed “Congress socialism”) to fundamentally improve the conditions of India’s toilers—all the more so since the Indian bourgeoisie turned to neo-liberal policies and full integration into the world capitalist market in the 1990s—the Congress Party has adapted to and collaborated with the Hindu right.

The Congress governments of Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao aided and abetted the campaign to build a Hindu temple on the site of the Babri Masjid. In the 2002 Gujarat state elections, held some nine months after

the pogrom, the Congress Party led a campaign that sections of the press derisively dubbed “Hindutva lite.” On coming to power in 2004, the Congress government took no action against the Modi government, although the Congress has repeatedly used the central government’s constitutional prerogative to replace governments in states where law and order has broken down when it has suited its factional political purposes. The Congress-led central government has failed to condemn or seek to overturn either of the recent court verdicts relating to ownership of the site of the razed Babri Masjid or the Godhra fire.

While the Indian ruling elite take every opportunity to boast about presiding over the world’s “largest democracy,” the reality is it has incubated a foul, aggressive and militaristic Hindu communal-nationalism, as well as all manner of reactionary communalist and ethno-nationalist movements.

As recent events in India show—including the praise lavished on Modi by a senior military commander and the indifference to this within the country’s military and political establishment—Hindu communalism is now an endemic part of India’s bourgeois body politic, with all ruling-class institutions, including the ostensibly secular Congress Party, the security forces, and the judiciary complicit in the crimes of the Hindu right, whether by commission or omission.

The Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India—have justified all manner of reactionary alliances that subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie, including propping up the current Congress-led government from May 2004 through June 2008, in the name of opposing the communalist BJP and defending secularism.

These alliances have only served to aggravate the social crisis that nourishes reaction. The struggle against communalism and in defence of democratic rights necessitates the independent mobilization of the working class in struggle against the bourgeoisie and fighting for a program of democratic and socialist demands aimed at addressing the needs of all the toilers—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian.

The authors also recommend:

Gujarat court frames Muslims for train-fire used to incite 2002 Gujarat pogrom

[12 March 2011]

Indian High Court abets Hindu supremacists with Babri Masjid ruling

[2 October 2010]



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