

BJP leaders' cover-up of rape and murder of Kashmiri Muslim girl provokes outrage across India

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The attempts of local authorities and leaders of the Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to shield the perpetrators of the brutal gang rape and murder of an eight-year-old Kashmiri Muslim girl have provoked outrage across India.

Asifa Bano was kidnapped, repeatedly raped, then killed last January in what the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) state police charge was a conspiracy aimed at terrorizing and forcing the semi-nomadic Bakkarwal from J&K's Kathua District.

Six men, including the guardian of a Hindu village temple and two police officers, have been charged with mounting the brutal attack. Two other police officers, those initially tasked with investigating the case, stand accused of colluding with the perpetrators, including by destroying evidence.

The case has been a political and communal flashpoint in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, for weeks. However, India's national media only gave it coverage after BJP leaders in the state instigated protests, to try to physically prevent the eight being charged in court and to demand the case be turned over to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which is under the control of India's BJP-led national government.

BJP leaders have sought to whip up communal animosity in Kathua and other Hindu-majority parts of Jammu and Kashmir, claiming that, because some of the officers who investigated the atrocities inflicted on the eight-year old Asifa Bano are fellow Muslims, the police investigation was biased.

This foul campaign has been spearheaded by a new organization, the Hindu Etk Manch or Hindu Unity Forum, whose president is none other than BJP J&K state secretary Vijay Sharma.

Last weekend two of the BJP ministers in Jammu and Kashmir's People's Democratic Party (PDP)-led coalition government—Forest Minister Lal Singh and Industries Minister Chander Prakash Ganga—were prevailed upon to resign by the BJP national leadership, after their role in Hindu Etk Manch protests prompted an India-wide outcry.

The BJP is claiming that India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, personally ordered the sacking of Singh and Ganga, who since returning to the BJP backbench have continued to play a

prominent role in communalist protests hailing the eight accused as "victims" of a Muslim-orchestrated witch hunt.

Modi himself is an arch-communalist. A life-long member of the Hindu supremacist RSS, he first came to national prominence when as Gujarat Chief Minister in 2002 he instigated an anti-Muslim pogrom that resulted in the deaths of well over a thousand people and rendered hundreds of thousands homeless.

Throughout his four-year tenure as prime minister, Modi has sought to distance himself and his government from the communal outrages and even murderous violence committed by BJP cadre and RSS-allied activists only when faced with a groundswell of opposition and alarmed warnings from the corporate media that his government's legitimacy is being undermined.

India's elite fears the impact of the Asifa Bano case on the political dynamics of Jammu and Kashmir, the state that has been at the center of India's reactionary military-strategic rivalry with Pakistan for the past seven decades.

Publicly India's government, whether led by the BJP or the opposition Congress Party, has tried to present the political-communal crisis in Jammu and Kashmir as the result mainly, if not solely, of the machinations of the Pakistani state, which has long provided support to an Islamist-Kashmiri nationalist anti-Indian insurgency.

However, the reality, known to all in New Delhi, is that there is mass disaffection among Kashmir Muslims, due to decades of abuses at the hands of the Indian state and the Indian ruling elite's evermore pronounced embrace of Hindu communalism.

The more than half-million state security forces that have occupied Jammu and Kashmir for the past quarter-century have acted with impunity, carrying out countless crimes, including fake encounter killings, disappearances, and torture.

In both 2016 and 2017 there were months of anti-Indian government protests, in which Kashmiri youth clashed with security forces on virtually a daily basis.

The BJP government's only response has been increased repression, the whipping up of a bellicose and Hindu-communalist laced Indian nationalism, and intensified military

and diplomatic pressure on Pakistan, that threatens to plunge South Asia into all-out war.

Last year security forces killed more than a hundred civilian protesters in J&K and injured thousands more.

Modi was also thrown on the defensive by events in Uttar Pradesh, where he has installed as Chief Minister a Hindu mahant (high-priest) with a long history of inciting violence against Muslims, Yogi Adityanath.

Late last week, in the midst of mounting public outrage over the Kathua rape-murder, the CBI arrested a BJP member (MLA) of the Uttar Pradesh state assembly, Kuldeep Singh Sengar, on charges of raping a 17 year-old girl in Unnao district last June 4.

The arrest came only after a months-long campaign by the victim's family, which had made them the target of reprisals from the Uttar Pradesh police.

According to press reports, the girl's father was arrested by the police for Arms Act violations on April 3, and put in jail on April 5. Shocked by this injustice, the girl attempted to self-immolate in front of Chief Minister Adityanath's house on April 8. The next day, her father was found dead in his cell jail with, according to the findings of a postmortem report, serious injuries on his body.

Facing a mounting public outcry over the UP police's complicity, the state government handed the case over to the CBI on April 12 and the next day Sengar was arrested. This did not deter associates of the BJP MLA from visiting the rape-victim's village last Saturday and threatening residents not to give statements.

Last Friday, Modi felt it politic to make reference to the two cases. Without naming them, he deplored the "incidents being discussed since past two days," pledged "our daughters will get justice," and promoted the strengthening of "law and order" and "our family system" as the answer to sexual violence.

Speaking yesterday in London, where he is attending the Commonwealth summit, Modi cynically attacked the BJP's political opponents, saying they were seeking to "politicize rape incidents." "I have never indulged in counting the number of rape incidents in this government and that government," declared Modi, deliberately conflating the rape question with the mountain of evidence demonstrating that there has been a surge in communally motivated attacks on Muslim, Dalits, and other minorities under his government.

While the Congress Party and various regional and casteist opposition parties have denounced the BJP for fomenting communalism they are utterly incapable of mounting a genuine struggle in defense of democratic rights and against communal reaction. First, they themselves have a long history of conniving with Hindu communalism and/or the BJP and making reactionary casteist appeals. This is especially true of the Congress Party, which abandoned its democratic-secular program and acquiesced in the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, instigated the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, and

connived in the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid.

Second, the opposition parties, including the Stalinist CPM and CPI, are all defenders of the Indian bourgeois order and have helped steer the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to transform the country into a cheap-labor haven for global capital. As such they are organically incapable of undercutting communal reaction through the mobilization of India's workers and toilers, across caste and communal lines, in a joint struggle against poverty, social inequality and imperialist war.

The *New York Times* published an editorial Monday that took Modi to task for his silence on the communal outrages committed by the Hindu right. Such comments are frequent in the organs of international finance capital, like the *Times* and the *Economist*, and are echoed in India's liberal press. The liberal media applaud Modi for pressing forward with social incendiary pro-market reforms and integrating India every more completely into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China, but express concern, even alarm, over his so-called bad side, his promotion of communal reaction. They fear the latter's politically destabilizing impact on India and see it as cutting across their attempts to cast India as a "democratic" counterweight to China.

But there are not "two sides" to Modi. His big-business economic agenda and his attempts to realize the Indian ruling elite's great power ambitions by harnessing India to America imperialism's drive for world hegemony are cut from the same cloth as his promotion of Hindu supremacism. If the Indian bourgeoisie has found itself compelled to embrace the BJP, it is because it can only find a popular basis for implementing a program antithetical to interests of the vast majority of the Indian people, by appealing to communal-religious identity, promoting mysticism and backwardness, and scapegoating minorities.



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