BBC documentary indicts Modi for 2002 anti-Muslim Gujarat pogrom

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India's Narendra Modi-led Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has responded with vitriol to a BBC documentary that examines the current prime minister's role in facilitating and overseeing the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom.

The communal violence that convulsed the western Indian state of Gujarat for three days, from February 28 through March 2, 2002, officially killed 1,044 people, of whom the vast majority, 790, were Muslims. The true death toll is believed to be closer to 2,000. In addition, hundreds of thousands of impoverished Muslims were rendered homeless after mobs of vigilantes—some led by well-known BJP politicians, others by leaders of Hindu communalist groups closely associated with the BJP—terrorized them and burned their homes to the ground.

The role Modi, Gujarat's chief minister from 2001 to his ascension to the prime ministership in 2014, played in instigating and enabling the February-March 2002 pogrom has long been known.

Under conditions of a war-crisis with Pakistan whipped up by India's then-BJP-led national government, Modi fomented anti-Muslim violence. He did so first by immediately blaming Muslims for a February 28 train fire at Godhra in which 59 Hindu fundamentalist activists perished, and in a manner that effectively declared Gujarat's Muslim minority collectively responsible; then by supporting calls from Hindu communalist groups for a state-wide general strike. When, as could only be expected given the state-backed communal incitement, anti-Muslim violence erupted, Gujarat's chief minister instructed police not to intervene.

If Modi has not spent the last two decades languishing in a prison cell it is because he has been protected by a highly communalized state apparatus, from the police and judiciary to the Gujarat state and Indian governments, with the complicity and support of India's capitalist ruling elite.

That said, the two-part documentary titled "India: The Modi Question," the first part of which aired on BBC 2 last Tuesday, has provided additional corroboration of the calculated and coordinated character of the 2002 "riots" and Modi's culpability in mass murder.

The documentary cites at length from a secret British government report on the Gujarat pogrom, whose very existence was hitherto unknown. It was prepared by a Foreign Office inquiry team that travelled to the western Indian state shortly after the communal bloodletting.

The report says that "the extent of the violence was much greater than reported," and was well-orchestrated: "a systematic campaign of violence" with "all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing." The report goes on to state that "The aim of the riots was to purge Muslims from Hindu areas," adding that "Widespread and systematic rape of Muslim women" was perpetrated to terrorize the populace.

The report highlights the role of activists from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in fomenting the violence. The VHP is an affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary organization dedicated to the revival of the "Hindu nation." Modi has been a life-long member of the RSS and routinely consults its leaders on major government decisions.

However, the BBC report underlines that the Hindu communalist thugs of the VHP and their ilk could never "have inflicted so much damage without the climate of impunity created by the state government." For that, it asserts, "Narendra Modi is directly responsible."

The BBC documentary also points to the results of a separate investigation conducted by the European Union. That inquiry reportedly concluded that ministers in Modi's BJP state government "took an active part in the violence and the senior police officers were instructed not to intervene in the rioting."

"India: The Modi Question" also includes an interview with a former diplomat, whose identity is not revealed and who presumably was actively involved in the work of the Foreign Office inquiry team. "At least 2,000 people were murdered during the violence," says the ex-diplomat. "The vast majority were Muslims. We described it as a pogrom–a deliberate, and politically driven effort targeted at the Muslim community."

The BBC documentarians also interviewed the then-British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who, as one of the architects of the illegal 2003 US-British invasion of Iraq, has hands, like Modi's, that are dripping with blood.

Straw explained the background to the Foreign Office establishing the Gujarat inquiry team, saying, "These were very serious claims–that Chief Minister Modi had played a pretty active part in pulling back the police and in tacitly encouraging the Hindu extremists."

Straw called the team's report "very thorough," then defended the British Labour government's failure to make its findings known on the grounds that it would have hurt Britain's interests, i.e., the commercial and strategic interests of British imperialism. While Straw was invoking "human rights" in fronting British imperialism's predatory foreign policy, including in justifying the Iraq war, when it came to India, he had, he claims, "fairly limited" options. "We were never going to break diplomatic relations with India," he says, "but it is obviously a stain on his (Modi's) reputation."

Much further evidence of Modi's complicity in the Gujarat pogrom emerged in the months and years after the British Foreign office conducted its inquiry—an inquiry, it need be noted, that did not have at

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its disposal any of the compulsory investigative powers of the Indian police and courts.

Of especial importance is evidence provided by Haren Pandya, revenue minister in Modi's Gujarat state government, and Sanjiv Bhatt, a deputy commissioner of police who participated in an "unofficial meeting" Modi convened at his residence on the night of Feb. 27, 2002. According to Pandya, who was assassinated under mysterious circumstances in March 2003, the meeting had a singular purpose. Modi instructed those assembled to "allow people to vent their anger and not come in the way of a Hindu backlash." In 2009, Bhatt testified that he was present at that meeting and corroborated Pandya's account.

But at every step of the way, Indian authorities have thwarted investigation of the 2002 events, especially any in which Modi and his chief henchman, India's current home minister, Amit Shah, were implicated. The few convictions that have taken place have generally been the result of tenacious efforts on the part of the victims, as in the case of Blikis Bano, who was 21 and five months pregnant when she was brutally gang-raped in 2002, while 14 other members of her family were killed.

So blatant were the efforts of the police, judicial and government authorities in Gujarat to shield those responsible for the 2002 pogrom that ultimately the Supreme Court was compelled to intervene. India's highest court, however, was quick to put its ill-deserved reputation for judicial probity at the service of Modi and his accomplices.

This culminated in a verdict last June that will live in ignominy. The Supreme Court dismissed the plea of Zakia Jafri, the widow of a Congress MP who was slaughtered along with 68 others in a Muslim neighbourhood of Ahmedabad on February 28, 2022, that it investigate whether their deaths were part of a "larger conspiracy"—that is, a calculated campaign of anti-Muslim violence and ethnic cleansing.

In so doing, the court not only absolved Modi, Shah and the Gujarat authorities, giving them a so-called "clean chit," it denounced Jafri and her co-petitioner, the journalist and activist Teesta Setalvad, for wanting "to keep the pot boiling for ulterior design," and said they should themselves be "in the dock" and prosecuted. The next day, citing this Supreme Court judgment, the Gujarat Police's Anti-Terrorism Squad arrested Setalvad and R.B. Sreekumar, a former top Gujarat police officer who has exposed police complicity in the pogrom.

This is part of a larger process in which the Indian ruling class has embraced Modi as the "strongman" it needs to wage class war against India's workers and toilers and aggressively pursue its great power ambitions in alliance with US imperialism. The BJP, whose activist base is made up of fascistic Hindu supremacists, has been transformed into its principal party of government. In addition to leading India's national government, it now holds power in some two-thirds of India's states.

As elsewhere, the rise to power of far-right forces has been facilitated at every point by the sharp turn to the right of the ostensible "left" and liberal parties. In the name of fighting "Hindu fascism," the twin Indian Stalinist parliamentary parties, the CPM and the CPI, have for decades subordinated the working class to the big business Congress Party, and where they have held power in various states, they have implemented what they themselves describe as "pro-investor" policies.

Two decades on, the Gujarat pogrom remains a festering wound on the Indian body politic. Tens of thousands of Muslims driven from their homes by the events of February-March 2002 are now ghettoized in what are for all intents and purposes internal displacement camps.

Modi and his BJP continue to use the 2002 events to rally their Hindu supremacist base and polarize the electorate. In the run-up to last year's Gujarat state election, the state government released to a hero's welcome all 11 of those sentenced to life prison terms for their role in the murder of Blikis Bano's family.

The BJP also delisted its sitting state legislative assembly member for the Naroda neighbourhood of Ahmedabad so that it could stand as its candidate Payal Kukrani, the 30-year-old daughter of a BJP activist who was convicted for the Naroda Patiya Massacre, in which 96 Muslims were killed.

Predictably, India's government, much of the corporate media and the BJP's extensive diaspora network have responded to the BBC documentary with a deluge of vitriol. Indian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi denounced it as a "propaganda piece," shaped by "bias" and a "colonial mindset."

Well aware of Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, Western imperialist governments initially thought it wise to keep some distance from him. He was not allowed to travel to the UK for a decade or so, and only after he became Indian prime minister in 2014 was he welcome in Washington. But that is all ancient history.

Throughout his nine-year tenure as prime minister, but especially since his re-election in 2019, Modi and his BJP have fomented anti-Muslim and anti-minority bigotry with the ideological aim of transforming India into a Hindu *rashtra* (a state where the supremacy of Hindus is acknowledged and minorities live in sufferance), and with the political aim of channeling mounting social anger over mass joblessness and deepening poverty and social inequality along reactionary lines and splitting the working class. Yet this communalist gangster is now lauded and feted by the likes of Biden, Macron, Scholz and Trudeau as the leader of the world's most "populous democracy" and a staunch defender of "freedom" against autocratic China.

In keeping with this, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak rushed to disassociate himself from the BBC's exposure of Modi's role in the Gujarat pogrom. He told the British Parliament Wednesday he did not agree with its "characterization" of India's prime minister.

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