

Modi orders raids on BBC offices after documentary points to his role in 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom

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Four weeks after the BBC aired a documentary that examined the role Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi played in instigating and enabling the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom, his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government ordered tax officials to mount a massive raid on the BBC's offices in Mumbai and the nation's capital, New Delhi.

Beginning on Tuesday, February 14, and continuing for three days, scores of Income Tax (IT) Department officials harassed and intimidated BBC journalists, technical staff and other employees while searching the BBC premises. The tax officials confined the journalists and other staff to their offices for hours on end and seized numerous documents, laptops and cell-phones, including those belonging to BBC staff. Several employees, including journalists, were reported to have undergone "questioning" for 60 hours.

The BBC tweeted on Thursday that "some of [the staff] have faced lengthy questioning or been required to stay overnight."

Indian authorities claimed that the tax officials were investigating the BBC's "diversion of profits, tax evasion and non-compliance with Indian laws." Unsurprisingly, last Saturday the IT Department released a statement claiming to have "uncovered irregularities," adding that the income and profits of the corporation are "not commensurate with the scale of (its) operations in India."

In justifying the attack on the British state-owned BBC, the Hindu-supremacist BJP government and its supporters tried to frame it as a blow against "western" bullying and even "colonialism." None of this could hide the twin raids' true aim. Nor was it truly meant to, for that would have run counter to their sinister purpose.

The raids were intended to intimidate the press or anyone who dares shed light on the crimes perpetrated by Modi and his Hindu-supremacist BJP by demonstrating that they are prepared to use all the resources at their command to target and silence their critics. Not even the state broadcaster of a major ally and one of the world's largest media conglomerates is off limits.

The BBC documentary, *India: The Modi Question*, did not add much to the vast body of evidence that proves Modi, who in 2002 was Gujarat's chief minister, helped instigate mass anti-

Muslim violence, then ordered police to allow it to unfold. This resulted in the deaths of at least 2,000 people, the vast majority of them Muslims, and rendered hundreds of thousands of others homeless. But the first part of the two-part BBC documentary did bring to light that the British government, based on an on-the-spot investigation in the days immediately following the February–March 2002 pogrom, had concluded that the violence had been well-orchestrated, bore "all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing" and "Narendra Modi is directly responsible."

The Modi government and BJP spokespersons responded to the BBC's airing of the documentary in Britain with venom and have gone to extraordinary lengths to try to block its dissemination. In a tweet, Kanchan Gupta, an adviser to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, boasted that "Videos sharing @BBCWorld hostile propaganda and anti-India garbage, disguised as 'documentary' on @YouTube, and tweets sharing links to the BBC documentary have been blocked under India's sovereign laws and rules."

When students at several Delhi universities tried to organize showings of the documentary, the authorities intervened. At Jamia Millia Islamia University, large numbers of riot police were deployed in advance of a planned screening and a dozen or so students arrested. Power and internet service were cut to prevent the film from being shown at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Government spokespersons cynically described last week's raids of the BBC as "survey operations."

The Press Club of India called the raids "a clear cut case of vendetta." A handful of major English-language Indian publications, like the *Hindu*, issued editorials, which with varying degrees of forthrightness, dispensed with the government's lies and called the raids a frontal attack on freedom of the press. Several opposition parties, including the Congress Party, which itself has a long history of trampling on democratic rights, issued pro forma statements condemning the raids. But by and large, the corporate media, which like Indian big business as a whole is strongly pro-BJP, treated the raids as a sideshow or breathlessly regurgitated the government's claims about their aim.

The Modi government has by now a long record of using the state machine, including trumped-up tax investigations, to lash out at those it perceives as getting in its way. This is part of a much larger reactionary modus operandi in which the BJP's promotion of rabid communalism goes hand-in-hand with its use of authoritarian measures to suppress working class opposition and even marginalize and silence its rivals in the bourgeois political establishment.

In July 2021 the tax authorities raided the Hindi-language daily *Dainik Bhaskar*. This occurred after the *Dainik Bhaskar* carried critical reports showing the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and criticized the Modi government for its ruinous mishandling of the pandemic.

Amnesty International—which had operated in India since 1966 and documented numerous gross human rights violations by the BJP government and its predecessors, including in Kashmir—was completely driven out of the country in 2020 after the Modi government froze all of its bank accounts. The previous year the Central Bureau of Investigation, the Indian equivalent of the FBI, had raided Amnesty's offices claiming it was receiving money from foreign sources without government authorization. In February 2021, the Directorate of Enforcement, a government intelligence agency focusing on financial crimes, seized Amnesty International's property worth \$2.5 million.

Critical journalists have been a frequent target since Modi and his BJP came to power in May 2014. Dozens have been charged under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), which is supposed to target terrorism, or colonial-era "sedition" laws and imprisoned for months, even years, without a court hearing.

One of the most prominent examples of this was the imprisonment of the Indian journalist Siddique Kappan, who had traveled to Uttar Pradesh to report on the gang rape of a Dalit woman by upper-caste men close to the BJP. He was subsequently charged with numerous criminal offenses and imprisoned by the BJP government in the state whose Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, is a close Modi ally and notorious fomenter of communal violence. Entirely innocent, Kappan only walked out of prison in early February having spent about two-and-a-half years under horrid conditions.

Another notable attack on the press occurred on March 6, 2020, when a Malayalam language TV station, The Media One, headquartered in the southwestern state of Kerala, was forced off the air for 48 hours by the order of the Modi government. Media One was targeted because it correctly reported on the murderous attack upon Muslims in Delhi in February 2020 by goons belonging to the BJP's parent organization, the paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). In response to widespread protests against the BJP government's discriminatory Citizens Amendment Act (CAA), local BJP politicians and RSS activists incited communal riots in which 53 people, most of them Muslims, were killed, and mosques

and numerous Muslim properties set ablaze.

The Modi government did not hide the fact that it was using the Indian state apparatus to impose the BJP's brand of Hindu supremacy. The order shutting down the station claimed it had aired "attacks on religions or communities, promoting communal attitudes." In other words, it had exposed the violent attacks by goons and terrorists sponsored by the BJP and its Hindu right allies against innocent Muslims. The order then shamelessly went on to state that the "Channel's reporting on Delhi violence ... seems to be biased as it is deliberately focusing on the vandalism of CAA supporters. It also questions RSS and alleges Delhi Police inaction. Channel seems to be critical towards Delhi Police and RSS."

Subsequently in 2022, the Home Ministry headed by Modi's chief henchman, Amit Shah, intervened and got the Information and Broadcasting Ministry to refuse the renewal of Media One's license to operate. This egregious attack was later stayed by India's Supreme Court

The western imperialist powers routinely tout India under Modi as the "world's most populous democracy," and turn a blind eye to an ever-expanding list of communal atrocities and authoritarian actions. This is because India is seen as a vital strategic counterweight to China. For its part, the BJP government, with the quasi-unanimous support of the political establishment and big business, has integrated India ever more completely into the US war drive against China, developing an ever-expanding web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-security ties with the US and its chief Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

The White House and State Department have studiously avoided comment on both the initial controversy over the BBC documentary's exposure of Modi as culpable in what was undoubtedly a crime against humanity and last week's raids on BBC India. However, they have made sure to emphasize their confidence in Indian "democracy."

As for the BBC, its reaction to the Modi government's allegations and the mistreatment of its own staff has been muted, largely consisting of pleas that it is ready to cooperate with Indian authorities. No doubt this reflects the attitude of the British government, which rushed to distance itself from *India: The Modi Question* almost as soon as the first of its two parts was broadcast.



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