

Hindu-Muslim Riots Show: India Must Face Reality

by Ramtanu Maitra

The killing of almost a thousand poor Muslims and Hindus by frenzied mobs and security personnel under orders to shoot, in Gujarat over a six-day (Feb. 27-March 4) period, has brought to focus the threat to India's stability, and poses the need for the government to finally seriously address the deepening economic and social crisis.

Both the Gujarat state government and the national government in New Delhi have feigned surprise and blamed intelligence failures. As thousands died, and thousands of others were rendered homeless and their livelihoods were taken away, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee promised that he would "crush the violence." At the same time, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an international organization based on promoting Hindu superiority, particularly over Islam, is going ahead with its plan to start building the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, on March 15. The temple is to be constructed at the site where the 16th-Century Babri Mosque once stood (it was demolished by Hindu chauvinists in 1992). The plan may trigger a huge wave of violence in the state, the home of at least 30 million Muslims and 120 million Hindus.

The Gujarat Incident

What happened on Feb. 27 at Godhra, a small Muslim-majority town in the state of Gujarat, was not only barbaric, but seemingly well-planned. Soon after the Sabarmati Express train, carrying VHP activists returning from Ayodhya, pulled out from the Godhra railroad platform, someone inside the train pulled the emergency chain and brought it to a halt. A large mob appeared, carrying petrol bombs and canisters full of gasoline. They doused a coach, where some of the VHP activists were, with gasoline and set it alight. The fire killed 58 people, many of whom were

women and children. Within hours, anti-Muslim riots broke out, led by Hindu slum-dwellers from the inner city of Ahmedabad, and from Rajkot, Surat, and other towns of Gujarat.

As the riots began to spread into small hamlets in Ahmedabad, the VHP called for a nationwide strike on March 1. Although the riots did not spread much more widely, it became evident that neither the Bharatiya Janata Party-led state government of Gujarat, nor New Delhi, under a BJP-led coalition government since 1999, was doing anything more than leaving things to "fate." As deaths mounted all over Gujarat, and some were reported from Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, a few suspects were arrested, and Home Minister L.K. Advani, whose personal role in 1991 had precipitated the temple-mosque dispute into a full-blown confrontation between the Hindus and the Muslims, blamed Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) for its alleged involvement in torching the train. Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, a Hindu fanatic whose head is at the moment on the political chopping block, continues to feign surprise.

What the Home Ministry and Indian intelligence must try to answer, however, is the question, why a train full of VHP activists shouting virulent anti-Muslim slogans, travelling through areas where millions of Muslims live, was not given adequate security protection. It is known to almost every Indian adult, whether of the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Jewish, or any other religious faith, that the building of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya had long been a highly contentious issue, opposed by many Muslims. Or, was New Delhi under the false impression that Gujarat Minister Narendra Modi, or any of his political associates, had taken all possible measures to prevent anti-Muslim riots from breaking out in the state?

Dangerous Politics

The BJP is now a much weaker political force in Gujarat, as also in some other major states, than it was when it came to power nationally in 1999. Some observers believe that to spark a Hindu-Muslim riot is considered by some BJP activists as a convenient way to get the support of backward Hindus. Such a formula has been used time and again by other political parties, particularly by the Congress Party, in India's electoral equations over the decades, to create fear and social insecurity among the impoverished communities, to win over their electoral support.

As usual, the Indian media and a majority of non-poor Hindus and Muslims, among others, are trying to explain to irate outsiders how ashamed they all are. Prime Minister Vajpayee, no doubt deeply hurt and politically weakened by the killings, called them a "blot on India's image." Pakistan, on the other hand, having been on the receiving end of criticism for harboring and breeding terrorism, is trying to capitalize on the horror, and has questioned the reality of Indian democracy, where the system does little to protect the lives and property of the minority Muslims. Pakistan has also denied any involvement of the ISI in the Godhra incident.

Setting aside the shame, apathy, and plots, it is high time for India to address the real problems, with a full-scale retrospection. Truly, it is not India's "image" that has been sullied by the riots, but the present situation forces everyone to address the Indian realities.

The realities that led to this riot, and many other riots before it, and that encourage many more in the future, are: dire poverty, which cuts across religious and ethnic barriers, within a large section of India's population; a high level of illiteracy, particularly among the Muslims and the tribal groups; a very slow growth of employment; a growing disparity between the haves and have-nots; and the consolidation of a political system which feeds upon the poor and the deprived, irrespective of their faiths. For years, many Indians have demanded improvement in these areas. It is evident that like so many previous administrations that have come and gone, this one, led by the BJP, has failed to achieve what really counts.

Where To Go From Here

While the answer as to how to stop these riots is not a difficult one to answer, it is much more difficult for Indians to mobilize their political leadership to act. The Congress Party, now a crooked shadow of what it was during the days of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, is perhaps the worst culprit in this regard. Having formed a solid coalition of backward caste Hindus, Muslims, and upper caste Hindus (who mostly formulated party policies) since the pre-independence days, the party had managed to keep the illiterate and poverty-stricken Muslims in its fold, orchestrating riots throughout the northern belt from time to time. The Congress leaders kept control over the Muslims by spreading fear of a "resurgent Hindu political grouping," organizing such riots

FIGURE 1



at the ground level at periodic intervals. It is the Congress Party, during whose regime in 1992 an "uncontrollable mob" brought down the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, which sowed the seeds for the current crisis.

Like so many illusions, however, this dangerous one did not last forever. The Congress found out by the end of the 1980s, that the votebank had vanished, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, the largest Indian state with 150 million-plus people, and once the bastion of the Congress Party's political power. The vast majority of 25-30 million Muslims who live there voted for the Samajwadi Party in February's state assembly elections, making it the single largest party. The Congress Party's other votebank, the backward caste Hindus in Uttar Pradesh, have formed the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which now competes with the BJP and the Samajwadi Party for power in the state.

On the other hand, the BJP, which had systematically antagonized the Muslim population and used that to win Hindu votes, built its political base projecting the superiority of the Hindus, as opposed to promoting a "secular" adminis-

LaRouche on Gujarat Riots

Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., in his March 5 radio interview with Jack Stockwell, was asked about the riots in Gujarat. "The targetting of India," he explained, "for operations such as the religious conflict which was orchestrated in Gujarat, comes from a circle inside the United States, from the period of late 1998. People like the Cato Institute, up from around Harvard, are typical of many groups which formulated this policy, of targetting India as the major threat to the United States. . . ."

"What we're seeing in Gujarat, in India, is a directed, Anglo-American-directed orchestration, by covert intelligence special-warfare means, of an incident which is intended to set forth the destruction of India, by bringing this Clash of Civilizations religious-conflict philosophy into India, to destroy it from within. And if you go back to the letters from the Cato Institute, at the end of 1998, you'll find exactly this policy; it's very clearly expressed, when you read the Cato and Rand Corporation studies, in light of the Clash of Civilizations policy." (See *Feature* for the full text.)

tration. The BJP's electoral campaign stresses a stronger and better India under the leadership of those who are imbued with "Hindu consciousness." It is this window through which rabid Hindu mobs found their footholds in the BJP.

The Hindu consciousness campaign for political gains, however, has lost much of its steam. The Vajpayee Administration, during its three years of existence, has muddled along, doing little to alleviate the conditions of the poor. The message was sent across clearly in the four state assembly elections that took place in February. The BJP lost electoral ground in each one.

What has begun to dawn on the BJP leaders, is that those Hindus who abhorred the Congress Party's politics of riots and manipulations, and voted for the BJP in the earlier elections, are now having second thoughts. Hence, it is not unlikely that some, if not most, in the BJP leadership have begun to worry. Maybe the party's political strength can be restored by getting a chunk of the vast votebank of backward Hindus, some of these leaders think. For such BJP leaders, riots do polarize population and votebanks shift allegiance. Was the Gujarat riot, then, triggered by some such conscious calculations?

Immediate Measures

Prime Minister Vajpayee's concern, of course, is India as a whole, and not the party alone. The Gujarat riot and the temple issue have pushed him into a situation which must be attacked forthwith.

To begin with, the anti-Muslim campaign by a section of his party is fraught with danger. There is a growing number of radical anti-Islam voices within India's new-found friends, such as the United States and Israel, who seek a war with the Muslim nations. Israel is the leading proponent of such a dangerous policy. India has developed strong military links with Israel, and Israel has spread its influence within the BJP. This could very well be one of the reasons why the VHP is acting so stridently and recklessly. According to recent reports, despite Prime Minister Vajpayee's opposition to the Ram Temple construction plan, and the tacit support he secured from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological mentor of the BJP, still the VHP wants to begin construction on March 15. If this plan is not thwarted, much bigger riots are sure to break open in densely populated Uttar Pradesh.

Secondly, the Muslim leadership must weigh the situation correctly. One Muslim leader told the press that the Godhra incident was "unfortunate," but the BJP was fully to blame for what followed.

The Muslim leadership, in unison, should not only condemn the torching of the train, but should actively pursue bringing the criminals to justice.

Gujarat borders Pakistan, and India-Pakistan animosity has been at a very high level since the aborted terrorist attack on India's Parliament House on Dec. 13. New Delhi has produced evidence of Pakistani terrorist groups' involvement in that attack. Gujarat also harbors a whole range of mafia dons, most of whom are Muslims, and who are in direct contact with Saudi Arabia. This connection, as was proven earlier, has been exploited by the Pakistani ISI to create terrorism and chaos in western India, in particular.

Gujarat is also one of most developed industrial states in India. It is the home of a wide range of industries, from textiles to fertilizer. It is also a target area of foreign investors. There are reports that a large number of migrant workers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, who came to work in Gujarat, are leaving. While most of these workers are Muslims, a significant number are Hindus as well.

Finally, the Muslim leaders must realize that the Ram Temple, though the campaign to build it is led by noxious Hindu fanatics such as the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, will be welcomed by the majority of Hindus. The Babri Mosque, not a significant mosque by any account, no longer exists. In the interests of Hindu-Muslim unity, and as a bargaining chip, the Muslims, as an act of generosity, should allow the temple to be built, and even send volunteers to take part in the construction. This will defuse the Hindu-Muslim tension and steal the thunder from the fanatic Hindu groups. This will also allow the Muslim leaders to bargain successfully on issues that would improve the lot of their community.

It is time that the Muslims make such a positive representation to Prime Minister Vajpayee. It is likely that he would listen.