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RADICAL DESI

"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."
Desmond Tutu

Justice for Samjhauta blast victims

This month marks ten years of the Samjhauta blast, which took place on February 18, 2007, when the Samjhauta rail that connects India and Pakistan was targeted by Hindu extremists as it passed through the Haryana state on its return journey to Pakistan. The bombs used in the crime killed 68 people and injured 50. Most victims were Pakistanis returning to their homes after visiting relatives in India. The two countries were one before 1947, when India was divided on religious lines, enabling Muslim Pakistan to come into being. The Samjhauta rail service was started to connect families separated by partition, but relations between the two neighbouring countries have mostly been hostile. The religious fundamentalists on both sides do not want peace in the region. Often the political leadership in both countries either succumb to this pressure or try to exploit these hostilities for their own survival.

India has always accused Pakistan of sponsoring Islamic extremists active on its soil from across the border. But the existence of Hindu extremists who also pose a threat to the peace in India has never been fully acknowledged or accepted. In Hindu-dominated India, there has been a general tendency to blame all terrorist crimes on minority extremist groups. Prejudices against Muslims in particular continue to prevail in the police and the intelligence departments, despite the fact that India is a secular democracy. When the Samjhauta blast took place, Pakistan-based terrorist groups were instantly blamed, and some Muslims were also rounded up for interrogation. It was later revealed that this was actually the handiwork of Hindu extremists who wish to turn India into a Hindu state. The organizers of the attack also wanted to settle scores with Islamic extremists blamed for bombings of Hindu temples. They have also been involved in other bomb blasts which were blamed on Islamic groups. Thanks to the efforts of some honest police officers, the whole

conspiracy was unearthed and those involved were eventually arrested. Yet, the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) that is currently in power tried to down play the whole controversy. Not only is the BJP government exerting pressure on the National Investigation Agency (NIA) to go slow on handling these cases, there are efforts to discredit the previous investigations. So much so, not a single Hindu fanatical outfit is included in the list of banned terror groups on the NIA website. Those on the list are either Maoists, or Sikh and Muslim extremist groups, or those representing struggles on behalf of oppressed nationalities. Extremists from these groups are frequently killed using extra-judicial means or thrown into jails for longer periods. Not surprisingly, they are subjected to trial by media and branded as terrorists without being given a chance to defend themselves in courts. But the previous Congress government under which the

blast took place must also share some responsibility. For the Indian state, which has always tried to isolate Pakistan internationally by accusing it of being involved in terrorism, any admission of the Samjhauta blast being an inside job would have been an embarrassment. For this reason, attempts were made to cover up the facts and instead focus on finding clues to nail Pakistan. It's a shame that in the post 9/11 environment, only the Muslim community is being singled out for any terror related incident, while the mainstream both in India and outside is not willing to accept the ugly reality of terrorism in the name of Hindu nationalism. In the meantime, those who suffered because of the Samjhauta episode remain unworthy victims. Neither the US nor its allies who are leading the so-called war on terror are willing to address this, and India lacks a strong will to go after the Hindu extremists. On the tenth anniversary of the blast, social justice activists across the world must unite to break this silence and shred the shroud of double-speak on terrorism. Those who did this must not be spared and any attempt by the BJP government to help them must be challenged.

-Editors

Modi-fied India

Fifteen years after the Gujarat violence, the experimentation of Saffronising India gets underway

In February 2002, Muslims felt completely unsafe in Gujarat state of India, when well-orchestrated violence against the community broke out. Exactly fifteen years later, they feel threatened anywhere in India under Narendra Modi - the controversial Prime Minister of the so called largest democracy of the world.

Such an environment of intimidation and fear in a country that is otherwise known for secularism, and governed by a constitution that guarantees religious freedom and equality, has not

been created in one stroke. It took many years of social engineering, of which Modi has been a part.

Having previously served as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, where close to 2,000 people died in the anti-Muslim pogrom under his administration, Modi now symbolizes the eruption of sectarian violence in the entire country.

Even as memories of the Gujarat massacre, that started following the burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims, refuse to die, the ominous signs preceding the catastrophe that

happened back then are now being felt throughout India.

Over 50 people died when a train caught fire under mysterious circumstances in Godhra on February 27, 2002.

The Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Modi blamed Muslim extremists for the incident and accused them of acting at the behest of Pakistan, a neighbouring country that shares a border with Gujarat.

One commission of enquiry had found that it was an accident caused by fire from

inside the train. But the Modi administration dubbed it a terrorist act committed under a well-planned conspiracy by the enemies across the border. What followed has become history, or so the perpetrators think.

The mass murders of Muslims and gang rapes of women by Hindu fundamentalists, in connivance with the police, are well documented by human rights activists. In the name of revenge, Modi allegedly allowed the mayhem by asking the police to look the other way and let Hindus vent out their anger. Although never convicted for these crimes, Modi was denied visa by the US and other countries until he was elected as the Prime Minister in 2014.

Since then Modi's government continues to tell the world to forgive and forget, something the survivors of the violence, who are still struggling for full justice, cannot be expected to do. Nevertheless, in a pragmatic geo-political environment, such incidents are conveniently overlooked if the focus of the nations, including those claiming to be human rights leaders in the world, is business, profit and development.

Neither the determination of the survivors, nor the indifference of the international political leaders should surprise anyone. What is significant about this bloody episode is that it was an

outcome of an experimentation of turning India into a Hindu theocracy. Initiated much before Modi became the Chief Minister of Gujarat, this experiment is now being implemented across India as he governs the entire country.

Laboratory of Hindutva

Teesta Setalvad is one of those social justice activists in India who had noted, much before the 2002 massacre, that an ideology that aims to transform India into a Hindu state had started wielding its influence over the political landscape.

Well known for her advocacy for the victims of Gujarat violence, she got drawn to activism back in 1993 following anti-Muslim riots in Bombay by the Hindu fanatics. She quit her job as a career journalist to start *Communalism Combat*, a secularist magazine dedicated

to cover sectarian violence, but also to help the victims of such violence in their fight for justice.

A Gujarati herself, who grew up in Bombay, Setalvad began noticing how the state of Gujarat had become a launching pad for the followers of Hindutva, a political movement that desires to reshape pluralist Indian society into an exclusionist Hindu nation, under the BJP government when Modi was not even the Chief Minister. At least that's what her memoir reveals. Released on January 26, *Foot Soldier of the Constitution* tells us not only that anti-Muslim violence was planned much earlier, but the idea of transforming India into a Taliban-like state in the name of Hindutva was pioneered in Gujarat.

The groundwork for structural violence against religious minorities in a Hindu dominated, but officially secular India, was laid before the country gained independence from British occupation in 1947.

The Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh (RSS), with a clear mandate to establish a Hindu nation, was created in 1925. The group remained indifferent to secularist forces that wanted to liberate India and establish an egalitarian society. The RSS, of which Modi's BJP is a political arm, had one point program to

strengthen the ideology of Hindutva even if it meant cooperating with the British. Non-Hindus, particularly Muslims and Christians were seen by them as second class citizens. Their activities contributed to the partition of India on religious lines the same year when the British left. The Muslim dominated Pakistan was separated from India because of this division. The development led to large scale sectarian violence and the RSS volunteers targeted Muslims forcing them to abandon their homes in India and move to Pakistan. Likewise, the Muslim fanatics forced Hindus and Sikhs to flee from Pakistan. Thanks to the popular leadership of India, the country chose to remain secular in character. Frustrated by the fact that India did not become a Hindu state, the RSS and its affiliates have continued their activities to mobilize Hindus in the name of religion since then.

Ironically, the self-styled secular Congress party, which has been in power for very long, did not effectively check the growing threat of RSS. Barring temporary bans that followed some incidents of violence, it was never outlawed permanently. The pragmatic politics of Congress never left an opportunity to woo the followers of the RSS, giving it even more legitimacy. Particularly during the 1980s, the Congress gave enough

fodder to the RSS to grow stronger.

Following the assassination of then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards, the Congress leaders organized a Gujarat-like massacre of Sikhs across India. The murder was in retaliation to the army invasion that year of the Golden Temple Complex, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar. The military attack was ordered to flush out religious extremists, who had fortified the place of worship and had been terrorising Hindus in Punjab. The incident left many innocent devotees dead and the buildings inside the complex heavily destroyed. But the RSS was pleased, and its leaders justified both the army attack and the anti-Sikh pogrom, despite the fact that the RSS considers Sikhs as part of the Hindu fold.

The late Rajiv Gandhi, son of Indira Gandhi, got elected with a brute majority in the general election following the violence, riding an anti-Sikh wave. Notably, the BJP at that time won only two seats in the parliament, whereas the Congress bagged 401 out of 508 seats.

The turbulent 1980s marked the emergence of many other groups dedicated to the ideology of the RSS. Around this time, all these groups started a movement to liberate ancient Hindu temples, which according to them were destroyed and turned into mosques by the Muslim rulers in the past. One of these was the Rama temple in Ayodhya. The RSS-BJP clique claims that the original temple standing at the site of the birth of Lord Rama, one of the most revered gods of Hinduism, was replaced by a mosque

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built by Babar, a Muslim emperor.

On December 6, 1992, the Ayodhya mosque was destroyed by a fanatical mob in the presence of the BJP leaders. The incident is deeply connected with the violence in Gujarat a decade later. The train that caught fire in Godhra carried pilgrims returning from the disputed site of Ayodhya, where the BJP aspires to construct a grand Hindu temple. Those aboard included supporters of the Hindutva ideology, who often harassed Muslim passengers and vendors at rail stations along the route during these pilgrimages patronised by the BJP government in Gujarat.

The Ayodhya incident followed celebrations in Bombay by Hindu extremists, which led to violence and the subsequent anti-Muslim massacre that changed the course of Teesta's life.

Things got worse when the BJP came to power in Gujarat in 1995. The divisions between Hindus and Muslims grew sharply. Muslim children began facing harassment at schools. The toxic curriculum introduced to young minds demonized Muslims as invaders. In case of inter-religious affairs, particularly those involving Muslim men and Hindu women, BJP supporters would threaten couples.

The cow, which is considered a sacred animal by devout

Hindus, became a major bone of contention. Not only Muslims but Christians too were frequently accused of indulging in cow slaughter and assaulted physically.

Teesta began noticing how the cow vigilantes, or Cow Taliban as she refers to them in her memoir, operated brazenly.

Even before Modi replaced his predecessor Keshubhai Patel as the Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2001, the BJP government became controversial for attacks on churches and the Christian community by the Hindutva extremists in 1998.

If Muslims were seen as potential terrorists or Pakistani agents by the Hindutva goons, Christian missionaries were accused of mass conversions. Those who investigated and documented the cases of violence against Christians back then had predicted that Gujarat is indeed a laboratory

of Hindutva fascism. As a matter of fact, signboards reading "Welcome to Hindu Rashtra (nation)" greeted visitors at 1200 villages in the state. The Minorities Commission demanded action following more than 40 complaints of violence against Christians and Muslims in the first six months of that year. The burning of hundreds of Bibles in Rajkot, and the forcible eviction of the entire Muslim population from a village after two Muslim boys married Hindu girls, were amongst the complaints filed with the commission.

Shamsul Islam, an activist and a researcher who is an authority on the RSS history, documented these attacks. It was his independent report that first described Gujarat as a Hindutva laboratory. He observed that what was happening in Gujarat was a well laid strategy of "religious cleansing" of the minorities at the micro level, in order to extend the experiment at macro level in India later.

The Gujarat earthquake in January 2001 also exposed the real face of the BJP government, as the members of minority groups were discriminated against during relief distribution.

Clearly, the post-Godhra violence that came later was culmination of this divisive politics.

Godhra and after

The year 2002 was very

important for the BJP. Not only did the party have a government in Gujarat, it led the ruling alliance at the national level. BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister. While he is largely projected as a moderate face of the BJP, the Gujarat massacre occurred right under his nose. The fact that he was running a coalition government with the support of other parties did not matter. The national government failed to intervene when the stories of anti-Muslim violence began pouring in.

The impunity with which the Muslims were targeted with the connivance of the police is permanently etched in the memories of the survivors.

Teesta's memoir indicates how the whole tragedy was exploited by the Modi government to win the next election, by perpetuating violence against Muslims, and consolidating Hindus in the name of security and revenge for a terrorist incident. She began her work of documentation and advocacy right in the middle of the violence that continued for several months. From the pattern, she saw it was clear that the Godhra episode was only a trigger, while the preparations for the massacre had been going on for very long.

The list of allegations against Modi is long. He is accused of inciting hatred, encouraging

violence and destroying evidence by using his power.

The bodies of the rail passengers burnt to death were allowed to be paraded to incite passions. So much so, Modi had asked the police to look the other way if Hindus protested angrily. At least one slain BJP leader who was earlier a minister in the government had reportedly testified about this meeting before a committee constituted to find the truth. Haren Pandya was mysteriously murdered in 2003.

The BJP leaders were seen moving around and instigating the mobs, and forcing the police to either remain mute spectator to the killings or openly participate in the bloodshed.

The police officers who dared to follow the rules and tried to protect the Muslims were either transferred or denied promotions, whereas those who sided with the mobs were awarded with promotions.

The participants in the violence later revealed during a media sting that they were given a free hand by the police, and Modi helped them in the courts by exerting pressure on the judiciary.

The most serious charge against Modi was that he had refused to help former Congress MP Ehsan Jafri, whose house was surrounded by a mob. Jafri gave refuge to Muslims and phoned Modi for

help. Instead an eyewitness claimed that Jafri was abused. His daughter Nishrin, who lives in the US, maintains that Modi flatly refused to help him. Jafri was brutally murdered along with others, while the police did not intervene.

Later, the Modi government came under criticism for not treating the victims of post-Godhra violence on par with victims of the Godhra incident. The Muslim victims were not given the matching compensation. Also, Muslims arrested in connection with the train incident were charged under anti-terror law, while this was not the case with those accused of killing Muslims in an organized manner.

When it came to giving bail to those arrested in connection with anti-Muslim violence, the courts were more lenient. In sharp contrast, those arrested for torching the train in Godhra were treated harshly.

Muslims who lost their homes had to stay in relief camps for a long time, as they could not return to their communities in the face of social boycotts imposed against them by the Hindutva goons. Modi even taunted the Muslim-dominated relief camps as child birthing factories.

As pressure started building up on Vajpayee to take action against Modi, the latter pretended to resign. Subsequently, fresh elections

were held in Gujarat, in which Modi came back to power riding on a vicious campaign against Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, which many felt was a veiled campaign against Muslims in a post-Godhra environment aimed at attracting Hindu votes. Modi was just using the tool used by Rajiv Gandhi in 1984 to consolidate his position in politics.

Even as the Muslim community was still recovering from the shock, an era of staged shootouts of alleged Muslim terrorists began. The Gujarat police now claimed that Muslims seeking revenge from Modi were increasingly becoming terrorists. Human rights activists exposed how Muslim men were being killed after being branded as terrorists in an extra-judicial manner.

In the meantime, the Congress-led coalition governments came to power in New Delhi. This had no impact on the Modi administration in Gujarat, where religious intolerance continued to thrive. Barring several convictions of a few foot soldiers involved in the massacre, Modi was never criminally prosecuted.

By 2014, the Congress lost its charm, due to corruption and failure to deliver. This resulted in a leadership vacuum filled by none other than Modi, who by now had become the face of a vibrant and developed

Gujarat.

Bitter harvest

Modi's direct involvement in violence against Muslims remains unproved in the courts, but if the results of the December 2002 Gujarat election results are any indication, the BJP definitely gained out of the tragedy.

Following criticism, Modi resigned and the state assembly was dissolved, prompting a mid-term election. The results were encouraging for the supporters of Hindutva, as the BJP bagged 125 out of 182 seats in the state assembly. It was a major win for the BJP, which increased its strength in the house from the 117 seats won in the 1998 election.

Journalist and author Dionne Bunsha, who currently lives in Vancouver, believes that the violence worked for Modi. In her famous book *Scarred: Experiments with violence in Gujarat*, based on her first-

hand reporting of the massacre, she wrote that the BJP's greatest gains were in riot hit areas. According to her, in places untouched by violence, the BJP lost ground. Notably, Modi repeatedly attacked then-Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in his election speeches. He tried to convince voters that he was fighting against Pakistan based terrorists whom he blamed for the Godhra incident. The narrative was similar to the one used by Rajiv Gandhi in 1984, when the Congress wanted to win on the slogan of national unity in the wake of his mother's assassination.

Encouraged by the Gujarat election results, BJP governments in other states began extending experiments done in Modi's territory in their jurisdictions.

Dionne's book reveals how some Hindutva leaders cheerfully reacted to acknowledge that the Hindutva laboratory had started functioning. Praveen Togadia of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which was in the forefront of anti-Muslim violence, boasted, "A Hindu Rashtra can be expected in the next two years."

Shortly after the BJP government came to power in the neighbouring state of Rajasthan in 2004, Hindutva groups began organizing against Muslims and Christians. The tridents that

were widely used to kill Muslims in Gujarat were openly distributed by supporters of the ruling BJP. The ban imposed on distributing tridents by the previous government was lifted after the BJP came to power in the state. Attacks on the Muslims and Christians grew.

Such incidents did not remain confined to Gujarat and Rajasthan. Under the BJP government in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, violent attacks on Christians and Muslims became sharper.

In 2011, the Hindutva activists intensified their hate campaign under a BJP government in Madhya Pradesh. A controversial program of Ghar Waapsi (homecoming) was introduced to convert Christians in the tribal areas to Hinduism. The expression of homecoming was used to suggest that the tribal Christians were originally Hindus who were converted to Christianity by the missionaries, whereas tribals have their own independent beliefs. At least 200 incidents of physical attacks on Christians were reported between 2004-2011.

The most disturbing story of state patronage to the intimidation of Christians came in the form of an illegal order from the Bhopal office of the Senior Superintendent of Police. The order asked police

stations to collect information concerning Christian activities across the state. It asked for the details of the community in terms of demographic composition, localities where they live, details of church-owned schools and even a list of Christians implicated in criminal cases.

Close to the parliamentary election in May 2014, many incidents of assaults on minorities were reported in different parts of India.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its 2015 world report pointed out that incidents of violence against minorities spiked in 2013 in the run up to national elections. According to the government sources, the report said 133 people were killed and 2,269 injured in more than 800 incidents.

In the sectarian violence of Muzaffarnagar more than 60 people died, mostly Muslims. The HRW report noted that the BJP chose Sanjeev Balyan, who incited violence during the bloodshed, as their candidate for the parliamentary election and later appointed him as a minister in the government.

Against the backdrop of these events, the BJP swept to power with a brute majority in the May 2014 election. From merely two seats in the parliament in 1984, the party increased its tally to 282 out of 543 seats in 2014. Call it a coincidence or the result of years of social engineering,

the BJP made a historic win exactly 30 years after Rajiv Gandhi rode to power with such force in 1984. The divisive politics finally paid dividends to the BJP.

Saffronising India

The first solid indication of India being Hinduized came in October, 2014 several months after Modi came to power.

The live telecast of RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat's speech on Doordarshan, the state broadcaster, created ripples. In his hour-long speech on the occasion of Vijay Dashmi, when RSS was founded in Nagpur, Bhagwat lauded Modi and said that his government was moving in the right direction. Vijay Dashmi is an important religious festival of Hindus who celebrate on this day the victory of Lord Rama in his battle against the emperor of Lanka.

There was an uproar from the opposition. But Teesta Setalvad wasn't surprised. She always anticipated that the RSS would eventually get patronage under the Modi government. She had already predicted what was coming while working in Gujarat. The RSS, according to her, had neither participated in the freedom struggle nor ever accepted the Indian constitution and its principles of egalitarianism. She saw the live telecast of the speech as first step towards saffronisation of India. She was referring to the colour of

the RSS flag that symbolizes the power of a Hindu nation. The RSS had rejected the tricoloured flag of India, adopted after the freedom. The current Indian flag represents the diversity of the country, while the RSS reveres the saffron flag. For die-hard secularists, saffron is not just another colour, but remains a politically incorrect statement coming from the RSS-BJP family. For this reason, any attempt to turn India into a Hindu nation is referred to as saffronization.

Modi left no one in doubt about the direction of his government when he acknowledged in 2015 that he is proud of being a volunteer of the RSS. In at least 14 educational and research institutions, followers of the Hindutva ideology were appointed under his government. This would obviously enable the policy makers to see through a saffronized lens.

Looking into cases of terrorism involving the members of Hindutva outfits, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) were directed to go slow on their investigations with the change of guard in New Delhi. It is no coincidence that the list of banned groups on the NIA website does not include any of the extremist Hindutva outfits involved in terrorism and organized violence, while those belonging to the Muslim community continue to be dealt with an iron fist.

In October 2016, eight members of a banned Islamic militant group were killed by the police in Madhya Pradesh. They were all undertrials and detained in a high security Bhopal jail. The police claimed that they all escaped using ropes and were killed in self defence. Though these men did not possess arms, they were shot above the waist. Human rights activists believe they were all murdered, as the cases against them were weak and there was no way prosecution could prove anything in court to get them convicted.

Emboldened by the actions of the Modi government, the Hindutva groups intensified their controversial Ghar Waapsi campaign among Muslims and Christians. They announced plans to reconvert 3,000 Muslims back to Hinduism, and insisted that Christians and Muslims in India were originally Hindus.

In 2015, Mohamad Akhlaq, a Muslim man, was lynched to death in Dadri after being accused of keeping beef in his fridge. Gradually more stories about growing cow vigilantism started pouring in from other parts of India.

In December 2016, Christians celebrated Christmas under fear. The growing religious intolerance was noticed internationally.

Student groups affiliated with the RSS-BJP combine continue to intimidate their political opponents on

university campuses. Those mostly affected are the leftists or students belonging to minority communities.

Najeeb Ahmed of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi remains missing after his brawl with Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the BJP, in October 2016. It is suspected that the ABVP is involved in his disappearance, but police have not been able to trace him. Perhaps, the police lack the will to sternly deal with ABVP members.

Umar Khalid, a student leader who is campaigning for justice for Ahmed, feels that this is another reminder of the fact that the Gujarat experiment is being extended everywhere.

Right from intimidating minorities by using both state violence and non-state actors, and implementing a program of social engineering through academic bodies and public institutions since the days of the Gujarat massacre, the BJP has clearly established its credentials as a wing of an ultra-Hindu nationalist organization that harbours an ambition to establish a homogenous society under one saffron flag. With those on the margins still struggling to occupy the shrinking secular space, it remains to be seen whether India officially becomes a Hindu state, or regains the lost glory of openness and humanism once cherished by its founding fathers.

-RDNB

Memoir reveals how Gujarat was used by Modi and his cohorts as Hindutva laboratory

A memoir penned by a journalist-turned-activist who has been spearheading a campaign for justice to the victims of the anti-Muslim pogrom that rocked Gujarat state in 2002 has revealed that it was the result of years of social engineering to turn India into a Hindu theocracy.

Foot Soldier of the Constitution, authored by Teesta Setalvad, is about her first-hand experience as an activist who advocated for the rights of victims of the violence, in spite of many challenges. Released on January 26, the unveiling of the book coincides with fifteen years of the Gujarat massacre. Setalvad, who has visited Vancouver in the past, worked on the frontlines when the violence started in the wake of the burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims on February 27, 2002. The incident that left more than 50 passengers dead was blamed on Muslim fundamentalists by the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government, led by Chief Minister Narendra Modi.

Though one commission of enquiry found that it was an accident, BJP supporters blamed so-called terrorists,

aided and abetted by Pakistan. The Hindu fanatics began targeting innocent Muslims across the state with the connivance of the police. Close to 2,000 people died in

the tragedy. Modi, who is currently the Prime Minister of India, had reportedly given orders to the police to let the Hindus vent their anger. He was denied visa by the US and

several other countries for his alleged complicity in these crimes, until he was elected as Prime Minister in 2014.

Even though Modi was never criminally prosecuted, the facts given in Setalvad's book suggest that he was responsible for instigating the violence, patronising the perpetrators, and destroying the evidence. Those convicted until now are mostly the foot soldiers. Setalvad's efforts continue to get Modi and other top officials charged and convicted.

However, she had quit as a career journalist much before, taking to activism against divisive politics. The turning point came in 1992-93 following violence against Muslims in Bombay. The pogrom was organized by a Hindu fanatical group Shiv Sena in the aftermath of the demolition of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992. BJP supporters had razed the mosque, claiming that it was built by Babur, a Muslim emperor, after destroying a Hindu temple that stood on the site of the birthplace of Lord Rama, one of the most revered gods of Hinduism. The Bombay violence started after Hindu activists decided to celebrate demolition of the Babri mosque. She and her journalist husband, Javed Anand, noticed that the police sided with the Hindu extremists. The majoritarian prejudice not only prevailed in

the police force, but also in the media. These bitter experiences prompted them to quit and launch *Communalism Combat*, a magazine that closely monitors the landscape of sectarian politics.

Notably, the Gujarat violence is deeply connected with the Ayodhya incident. The Hindu pilgrims aboard the train were returning from Ayodhya. These trips were often sponsored by the BJP government. BJP supporters who frequently participated in these pilgrimages harassed Muslim passengers and vendors at rail stations along the route. Whether or not it was a conspiracy, Setalvad writes quoting a BJP leader that when the news of the tragedy came, Modi reacted that the Hindus will awaken now. Setalvad believes that the preparations for the violence suggested that they were made long before.

The assembly election that followed the pogrom paid dividends to Modi, who had resigned under pressure, because of which the assembly was dissolved and a mid-term election was held in December 2002. Modi came to power with a brute majority with 125 seats out of total 182. In the previous election, the BJP had 117 seats in the legislature. It was a big leap for Modi, who used sectarian rhetoric during the campaign. Setalvad had also tried to get

Modi prosecuted for hate speech during elections, when he used anti-Muslim rhetoric during campaigns.

The bodies of the deceased passengers were paraded in the state, with the permission of Modi's administration, despite warnings by some senior police officers against arousing passions. A meeting was also held where Modi had allegedly asked the police to remain mute spectators in case Hindus wanted to vent anger. Senior BJP leader Haren Pandya testified about this to a commission, and was murdered later under mysterious circumstances. Those police officers who followed the rule book were transferred or denied permission, whereas those who sided with the mobsters were rewarded.

Following the violence, the Muslim survivors were discriminated against, in terms of compensation lower than amounts given to the victims of the train tragedy. Those arrested for the burning of the train were treated as terrorists, whereas the police and the courts in Gujarat remained lenient toward the perpetrators of anti-Muslim violence.

Then the witnesses were manipulated and coerced to turn hostile, instead accusing Setalvad of trying to tutor them. She became a victim of a witch hunt as the police tried to detain her on one pretext or

another. A case of embezzlement of funds raised to construct a memorial for the victims was slapped against her and her husband. If this was not enough she was branded as "anti-national" and "a danger to the nation". This was apart from a few attacks on her.

It is pertinent to mention that Setalvad's great-grandfather Chimanlal Setalvad was part of the committee that investigated the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in British India. About 1,000 people died when troops opened fire on peaceful demonstrators at Jallianwala Bagh garden in Amritsar in 1919. The gathering was in response to the arrests of leaders of the freedom movement and repressive laws. Chimanlal Setalvad had cross examined General R.E.H. Dyer, the officer who was court martialled for the crime. The text of the cross examination is given in the memoir. In sharp contrast to the patriotic credentials of Setalvad, the founders of the BJP had no role in the freedom struggle.

A Gujarati herself, she had noticed much before 2002 how the state was being used as a Hindutva laboratory by the BJP government. The process had begun even before Modi became Chief Minister. In 1998 Gujarat witnessed well-orchestrated violence against Christians. Ever since the BJP came to power in the state in 1995, preparations had started to Hinduize the society. Cow

vigilantism, which has now grown across India under Modi, existed in Gujarat back then. Since Hindus consider the cow as a sacred animal, Muslims and Christians were frequently harassed after being accused of consuming beef. Muslims were also harassed at schools, where a curriculum created with a lens of Hindu supremacy was introduced. It is not surprising to see that these experiments are being implemented all over India.

After all, the BJP is a political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), a right wing cultural organization that desires to transform India into a Hindu theocracy in the name of Hindutva, a political brand of Hindu philosophy that considers minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, as second class citizens. Modi himself is an RSS man. With Modi coming to power in New Delhi, the RSS and other Hindutva forces feel emboldened. That is one reason behind the spike in sectarian incidents under this government.

Setalvad has been following the politics of the RSS-BJP family for years. She reminds us that the Hindu supremacists do not believe in the Indian constitution that is based on the principles of secularism and equality. Under their regime, the space for a free society envisioned in the national text is constantly shrinking, and as the title of the memoir indicates, she has dedicated herself to fight to reclaim that space.

As she rightly points out in her

book, Modi's ascendancy to power should not be seen in isolation. This is the culmination of years of legitimacy being given to violence against minorities in India. She thinks that had justice been delivered to victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence, the Bombay massacre or Gujarat violence wouldn't have happened. The Sikhs were targeted by goons of the so-called secular Congress party in India, following the assassination of then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. That year, Gandhi had ordered an army attack on the Golden Temple Complex, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, to flush out religious fundamentalists who had fortified the place of worship. The invasion had left many devotees dead and the buildings inside the shrine damaged. The victims of the anti-Sikh violence continue to fight for justice.

The book must be read by those who really want to understand what India is going through, and how toxic the social and political environment of society becomes in a majoritarian democracy that stifles any voice of dissent and marginalises the weak. Above all, for those who think that Modi is completely off the hook, this book is an eye opener.

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Quebec mosque attack shows Canada is not free from racism

In the wake of the murder of six men at a Quebec City mosque on Jan. 29, people in all parts of Canada are holding rallies, vigils and other actions to condemn this terrible crime. Many of these events have linked the mass murder to the political climate created by the new US government's first steps, especially the executive order banning entry of travellers from seven Muslim-majority countries. (But not from Saudi Arabia, where the new President has significant business interests!)

The full details of the Quebec City accused killer's background are already coming into focus. The timing of his actions seems likely to be connected with events in the United States, especially considering his expressions of support for anti-immigrant politicians like Trump and France's Marine Le Pen. But much remains to be discovered about the shooter, who faces six charges of murder and other charges as well.

Many people in Canada have expressed shock and disbelief that such a tragedy could take place in this country. There is a common view that Canadians are less inclined to gun

violence and racist hatred than residents of the United States. But a quick glance at our country's history shows that Canada is not immune from these problems. Indeed,

Canada was founded largely through the imposition of colonial violence against its original peoples, some of whom (the Beothuks of Newfoundland, for example) were literally exterminated by colonizers. From the 1600s onward, most of the lands which comprise the modern Canadian state were forcibly seized from the First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples, often through the imposition of unfair treaties, but sometimes by the simple tactic of occupation. Most of present day British Columbia, in particular, was never ceded by First Nations to the British or to post-Confederation Canada; it was simply occupied by squatters, as First Nations people were jammed into small pieces of land. It took over a century of legal, political and moral resistance struggles for the First Nations of British Columbia to begin to overturn this illegal occupation, a de-colonization process which is just beginning to take effect. One does not have to look far to discover other racist threads running through the carpet of Canadian history: the anti-Asian exclusion laws of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; the internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War Two; the terrible living and social conditions under which indigenous peoples live to this very day; the racist treatment of Afro-

Canadian immigrants over the past two centuries; the virulent Islamophobia campaigns of recent years; the hate-mongering that is whipped up from time to time against new groups of immigrants. Common to all of these outbreaks of racism and xenophobia is the underlying ideology that Canada is "a white Christian country."

This is not surprising, on one level. The Canadian state was mainly the creation of settler-capitalists from the present day British Isles and France, almost exclusively Christian in their religious faith. With some important exceptions, these settlers shared the view that this country was theirs for the taking, and that the original occupants were inconvenient hindrances to the pursuit of wealth and power. The idea of a "white man's country" was built into the DNA of the Canadian state, even if the concept was flexible enough to accommodate later waves of European migrants. Similarly, Christianity (in its multiple forms) was considered the only "real" religion acceptable in Canada, with other faiths relegated to the status of curiosities or sometimes threats.

This is a long and complex story, which would be incomplete without reference to the growing understanding that such racist and exclusionist concepts run counter to the idea of human

rights and equality for all, and to the fact that indigenous peoples have traditional and inherent rights which cannot simply be wiped out by government edicts. Over time, especially as the ethnic and cultural composition of the population shifted, the majority of Canadians came to reject the view that Canada is a "white Christian country." Similarly, the majority view has become that women are not the property of men, and should have full legal and social equality, including reproductive rights, pay equity, etc.

But far from all. There are still large numbers of Canadians who believe that non-white immigrants are "stealing our jobs", or that indigenous peoples should just "be like everyone else." Without making over-generalizations, such ideas are often widespread in geographic areas where most of the population are of European descent. In central Alberta, where I grew up in the 1950s and '60s, it was exceedingly rare to meet non-Europeans, with the exception of some First Nations people. (I still remember vividly the experience of going to high school, where my chemistry teacher was the only South Asian resident in a town of 5,000. She loaned me books on history and politics which helped to open my eyes to the outside world.)

CURRENT AFFAIRS

Racism and white supremacy are also common in urban centres as well, of course. The distribution of KKK leaflets in cities such as Richmond or Abbotsford, or the occasional upsurge in “white power” groups in Calgary or parts of Toronto, is well documented. Quebec City is often considered one such city. With its demographic changing from almost exclusively white Francophone Catholics, to a mix of national and ethnic origins, languages and religious faiths, Quebec City has seen a rise of anti-immigrant and especially anti-Muslim incidents, sometimes linked to similar developments in France.

This is part of the background to the Quebec City mosque killings. Add to this toxic mix the element of Donald Trump’s vicious anti-immigrant rhetoric which encourages racist forces, and the result is a higher probability that bigotry will take the ugliest possible form: mass murder. It is not a coincidence that such killers often also hold deeply misogynist views, blaming women for allegedly depriving men of good jobs and

educations.

There is no easy solution to this trend of white supremacist and misogynist violence, but it doesn’t help to make bewildered claims that Canadians are somehow

Trump speeches or internet sites. When any of us are attacked - racialized communities, LGBTQ people, trade unionists, women, Muslims, indigenous peoples, environmentalists, social

justice activists - we need to unite and reject every effort to sow divisions. When we are told that Canadian troops must be sent overseas to “liberate” people in other countries, we need to ask hard questions: what about oppressed and marginalized peoples here in Canada? Why are we waging wars in other countries for the benefit of big energy and resource corporations?

The tragedy in Quebec City was not the first mass murder in Canadian history, and sadly, it may not be the last.

Our responsibility is to do everything possible to turn back the tide of racist violence, and to make our own government speak out against the actions of the new US administration, which is deliberately fanning the flames of hatred.

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Remembering Ajit Singh

This month marks 136 years of the birth anniversary of a towering leader of the anti-colonial movement.

Ajit Singh was born on February 23, 1881 in Punjab under British-occupied India.

His family was dedicated to the cause of the liberation struggle. Under the influence of their father Arjan Singh, who desired to see India free, Ajit Singh and his brothers Kishan Singh and Swaran Singh started participating in dissident activities when they grew up.

Swaran Singh died in jail after being interned for his involvement in the freedom movement in 1910.

As the years progressed, Ajit Singh began organizing farmers against the British government, which introduced heavy taxation forcing farmers to either join the army or migrate abroad for better livelihood.

The year 1907 saw the biggest farmers' agitation in Punjab. This coincided with the 50th anniversary of the rebellion of 1857, which was the first organized uprising against British rule. However, the British government was able to suppress it.

The British government feared that the dissidents were trying to revive another uprising under the garb of farmers' agitation. Their worst

apprehension was that the Sikh soldiers of Punjab, who mainly came from the farming community, might join ranks with the organizers of the agitation.

The 1857 uprising was partly triggered by the fact that the Indian soldiers working for the British were discriminated against. Moreover, there was

a general environment of animosity against the repressive policies of the British government. As a result, Hindu and Muslim kings of different princely states participated in the revolt.

The British anxiety was not completely unfounded. Ajit Singh had been trying to mobilize princely states

RADICAL HISTORY OF THE MONTH

against the foreign occupation, and his agitation was having an impact on the Indian soldiers working for the British armies.

Ajit Singh and other leaders of the movement were sent to exile, after which he escaped to Iran, and then travelled to different parts of the world to continue his struggle for freedom of India in the Indian Diaspora.

In the meantime, Kishan Singh's family was blessed with a son born in 1907, during the year of farmers' agitation. Named Bhagat Singh, the child was greatly inspired by his uncle, and often heard the stories about his bravery and dedication from Ajit Singh's wife. Bhagat Singh grew up as a revolutionary, and was executed in 1931 for assassinating a British police officer and waging war against the empire. All this happened while Ajit Singh was still outside India. He finally returned in 1947, the year India gained official independence. But he could not relish the fruits of freedom. Ironically, Ajit Singh came back several months before independence, and died on August 15, 1947 - the day power was transferred to the Indian leadership. It is believed that he was deeply hurt by the partition of India on religious lines. With freedom came separation of Muslim Pakistan from India. The division

resulted into sectarian violence. While the Hindu and Sikh fanatics targeted Muslims on the Indian side of the border, Muslim fundamentalists killed Hindus and Sikhs on the other side. Dedicated to an egalitarian and secular India, Ajit Singh could not bear the shock.

As the Indian leadership gears up to celebrate 70 years of the independence, Ajit Singh's legacy remains relevant. In a country whose economy is mainly based on agriculture,

the farmers continue to suffer because of neoliberal economic policies. The suicides by farmers and landless tillers continue due to growing rural indebtedness. Also, the country is facing a challenge of growing religious sectarianism under a right-wing Hindu nationalist government. Those in power who often give symbolic tributes to heroes like Ajit Singh should rather be made accountable for this mess.

-RDNB

Speak out!

Your words are free.

Speak up!

Your tongue is still your own.

Your body remains yours

ramrod, erect.

Speak out!

Your life is still your own.

Look!

How in your smithy's forge
flames soar;

iron glows red.

How the locks
have opened yawns
and every chain
spreads out, unlinked.

The short time left to you
Is still enough. Speak up!

Before the body
and its tongue give out.

Speak out!

For truth still survives

Speak out!

Say whatever you have to say!

Faiz Ahmad Faiz was a progressive Pakistani poet. Originally written in Urdu, this poem was translated by Mustansir Dalvi. It is reproduced here to mark Faiz's birth anniversary that falls on February 13.

