

Gujarat Riots: The Top 5 Myths and Facts

On Feb 27th, Sabarmati Express, carrying *kar sevaks* from Ayodhya was torched near Godhra. The Coalition Against Communalism unequivocally condemns this act of violence. From Feb 28th on, frenzied mobs all over Gujarat started burning and butchering the Muslim population, looting their property and vandalizing their places of worship. Till date, over 2000 people have lost their lives in the post-Godhra violence and nearly 100,000 have been displaced. The Coalition Against Communalism strongly condemns the Gujarat government for its complete failure of governance during the riots, for inciting violence against minorities and for its continued failure to provide relief and aid to the victims of the carnage.

MYTH 1 : The riots in Gujarat are a spontaneous expression of Hindu anger or Hindu Sentiment.

Fact: These ‘riots’ were a pre-planned, cold-blooded, calculated, willfully executed massacre of the minority community. In other contexts such occurrences have been referred to as ‘genocide’ or ‘ethnic cleansing.’ They were carried out in connivance with civic, administrative and political bodies.

- People and homes of the Muslim community were targeted using voter lists, license and other such information that only the civic administration can provide
- In commercial districts where businesses and shops of Hindus and Muslims co-exist, the mobs burnt only the Muslim-owned shops. This shows calculation and planning, not mob ‘frenzy’.
- If ‘Hindu outrage’ is enough to explain these riots, then why did the violence only erupt in Gujarat? In Ayodhya where over 15,000 frenzied *kar sevaks* had aggregated, the civic administration performed their constitutional duty and maintained peace, while in Gujarat, the state government actively encouraged the violence.

MYTH 2: The government is doing its best to maintain peace and harmony in Gujarat, provide relief to the riot victims and apprehend those involved in rioting.

Fact: The state government is the instigator as well as the facilitator of these riots. Not only did the government deliberately delay all attempts to control the situation during the riots but is still failing in its responsibility to provide relief to the victims or ensure justice for them.

- The deployment of the army was deliberately delayed by the state and central governments.
- The state police were at best inactive, and most likely complicit, in the butchering of people and looting and destruction of property. The electronic and print media have extensively documented the collaboration of the police in providing diesel from state vehicles for burning people and property, preventing medical aid and fire brigades from reaching the victims, and in some cases, actually handing over people (who had sought police protection) to the saffron-clad butchers.
- The relief camps set up by NGOs to help the riot victims now house nearly 100,000 people, but there has been little or no Government help. What little is coming, is too little too late, for example, spoiled food and torn clothes rejected from last year’s earthquake relief efforts!

- The gov’t has shown little inclination to investigate the riots. It first set up a judicial enquiry to investigate the train burning ONLY, and agreed to extend it to cover the post-Godhra violence only when faced with widespread criticism. Even so, it has appointed a retired Gujarat High Court Judge who is notorious for his anti-minority judgements, one of which was overturned by the Supreme Court of India with the comment that “*the finding of the judge... is not based on appreciation of evidence but on imagination.*”

In such a situation, where the State is directly implicated in contributing to violence, it is necessary that a independent and impartial panel of judges be assigned to the commission.

MYTH 3: The RSS-VHP-Bajrang Dal-BJP (the Sangh Parivar) are pro-Hindus and Patriots.

Fact: The Sangh Parivar is Anti-Hindu and propagates a narrow, distorted version of Hinduism. Nor do these groups care for the country or its citizens.

- The Sangh Parivar has demolished multi-faith Dargaahs and even Hindu temples, including *Ram ka Chabutara* and *Sita ki Rasoi* in Ayodhya in 1992.
- **Mainstream Hindu religious leaders oppose the VHP and Bajrang Dal.**
 - Even among the orthodox, five of the seven *akhadas*, or religious orders (of Hinduism), in Ayodhya are against the VHP and its bloody tactics, the Shankaracharya of Goverdhanpuri has condemned the ongoing mob violence in Gujarat as “state terrorism” and demanded that VHP leaders be arrested under the National Security Act, and the Shankaracharyas of all the four main *peeths*—Dwarka, Puri, Joshimath and Sringeri—are bitterly opposed to the VHP’s temple movement.
 - The VHP-Bajrang Dal have insulted revered religious leaders and purohits who disagreed with the VHP’s narrow vision of Hinduism. The Hindu priest in charge of the idols at the Ram Janmabhoomi site, Pujari Laldas, was harassed for saying the following: “[Riots] were caused for financial and political gain.... I am the priest of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple. I can honestly say that until today VHP members never made a single offering nor even prayed in this temple... They don’t care if people are killed, all they care about is money and power. Those who speak of a Hindu Nation and create violence in the name of Ram are upper caste, they all love the good life, there’s not an iota of renunciation or sacrifice or public concern in them....” (Interview contained in the documentary, *In the Name of God*). **When the BJP came to power in Uttar Pradesh in 1992, Pujari Laldas was removed from his post as head priest of the Ram temple. A year later Pujari Laldas was murdered.**
- **Ordinary Hindus are also fed up with these groups:** The majority of Hindus have always voted against the BJP, even

when it has formed the government at the center. Recent elections in U.P. and Delhi have shown that even in BJP strongholds, the electorate has rejected them.

- *“Ram mandir ke naam par desh ki barbaadi ho rahi hai (the country is being ruined by this Ram mandir issue). It is only going to weaken the country.”* -- Rajinder Singh, a cement plant worker
- *“Aadmi khoon ka pyaasa hogaya hai (man is killing man). All this is against the Hindu sanskriti (tradition) ... There should be both a mandir and a masjid at Ayodhya”* -- Sunita Yadav, a sweetshop owner’s wife from Mathura
- **The Sangh Parivar does not believe in the Indian Constitution**, and instead of using democratic means to put forth their views, they resort to violence, openly flout the orders of the Supreme Court, oppose the very fundamental principle of equality and liberty upon which the Indian State is based, and demonize an entire community based on the actions of a few people who happen to claim the same religion.
- **The Sangh Parivar’s philosophy is anti-democratic at its core.** Despite participating in electoral politics, the Sangh Parivar has never believed in democracy. This is what Hedgewar, the founder of RSS, had to say:

“I have thought out a scheme based on Hindu Dharm Shastra, which provides for standardization of Hinduism throughout India... But the point is that this ideal cannot be brought to effect unless we have our own Swaraj with a Hindu as Dictator like Shivaji of old, or Mussolini or Hitler of the present day in Italy and Germany. But this does not mean that we have to sit with folded hands until some such dictator arises in India. We should formulate a scientific scheme and carry on propaganda for it.”
- **The VHP, Bajrang Dal, RSS have all the hallmarks of fundamentalist-terrorist groups, and their behavior is indistinguishable from the Taliban:**
 - **They are self appointed guardians of morality** which they impose, on pain of physical intimidation and destruction of property, by roving gangs of state-sponsored ruffians. They pass judgments on what can be shown on TV and cable, what movies should be allowed, what festivals or occasions people can or cannot celebrate.
 - **Ancient monuments of historical relevance are being destroyed, much like the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban.** In addition to the 16th century mosque Babri Masjid that was destroyed by these militant Hindu organizations in 1992, several dozen mosques were destroyed in the recent riots in Gujarat, including the 16th century mosque near the Jethabai stepwells which had been classified as a protected site by the Archaeological Survey of India. VHP has a stated goal of destroying India’s heritage by targeting heritage monuments such as the Taj Mahal and Qutub Minar.
 - **Gyan Das, the Hindu leader (Mahant) of the Nirvani Akhada in Ayodhya also compares the VHP to the Taliban.** “How has this man [Ashok Singhal, Working President of the VHP], who is responsible for fanning hatred and bloodshed in the entire country, been allowed to step into Ayodhya?” fumes Gyan Das. “Singhal is the head of the

country’s Taliban and, like in Afghanistan, this group here will destroy the nation.”

- **The VHP, Bajrang Dal, RSS organize and train private, armed militias for the express purpose of creating terror.**

MYTH 4: Sabarmati Express incident is terrorism while the post-Godhra carnage in Gujarat is ‘mere’ communal riots.

Fact: The post-Godhra violence was highly organized with a distinct aim of spreading terror amongst the minorities, and is most definitely terrorism—worse yet, state-sponsored terrorism.

- **Was the Sabarmati Express massacre in Godhra an act of terrorism?** While there are several conflicting stories about whether the heinous massacre at Godhra was preplanned or spontaneous, there is as yet, no evidence that points to an ISI involvement. By claiming a foreign hand, the Government is deflecting attention from its own failure to provide sufficient security to the *kar sevaks*. The BJP led government seems to have as little regard for Hindu lives as it has demonstrated for Muslim lives.
- **Is post-Godhra violence in Gujarat terrorism?** Going by the yardstick of preplanning and organization, it is clear that the post-Godhra violence was most definitely terrorism. The attacks on Muslims were well-planned, incited and carried out by identifiable groups (the VHP and Bajrang Dal), and encouraged by the state machinery—*Violence as a product of deliberate strategy*; the attacks were carried out in a dramatic way to attract publicity and create an atmosphere of alarm among Muslims far beyond the actual victims—*Violence as theater. The very definitions of terrorism.*

However provocative the Godhra massacre might have been, we must distinguish between state-sponsored terrorism and extra-state actors. If terrorists attack, you turn to the state, but if the state turns terrorist, then where do you look for help?

MYTH 5: Hindus and Muslims cannot live together in peace. Riots are the natural outcome of simmering tensions.

Fact: Hindus and Muslims for the most part live together peacefully. Communal tensions have been actively stoked by some groups leading to riots.

- **Villages hold 2/3rd of India’s population, but account for less than 4% of the communal riot related deaths.** According to Prof Ashutosh Varshney, 50% of riot deaths since 1960 have happened in eight cities which hold only 6% of India’s population. Another 45% of riot –related deaths have occurred in other urban centers.
- **Communal forces use terror and threats to actively divide the communities.** When Hindus tried to support their Muslim neighbours during the killings in Gujarat, the VHP & Bajrang Dal goons targeted them also. The case of Professor Bandoorkwala, a well known academician from Vadodara is well-documented. An organized mob attacked him in his house in a predominantly Hindu locality, and his car was set on fire. He and his daughter were sheltered by their Hindu neighbors, who in turn were attacked on the second day for protecting him. (*NDTV Interview*).