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"Recent Communal Violence in Gujarat, India, and the U.S. Response": Teesta Setalvad Testimony

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It is a matter of deep significance for me, a journalist and an educationist committed to democratic and plural values, representing an organisation that is independent of government to submit this representation to a significant and influential body such as this -the Commission on Religious Freedom and I thank you for this opportunity.

It is at a critical juncture for the world, and for South Asia in particular with two of our countries, India and Pakistan, in the midst of strains and tensions -made impossibly dangerous by their access to nuclear weaponry that these discussions are taking place. India, a large, and until recently a stable democracy has been experiencing dangerous schisms carefully implanted by political forces committed to manipulating religion in the pursuit of power.

Guided and inspired by the politics of the party in power, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) inspired by it's political mentor the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and it's outfits like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal (BD), have been through public statements and actual action leading successful pogroms and attacks against the countries religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, who in their ideological construct of a Hindu nation are 'outsiders.' The recent state-sponsored Genocide of the Muslim Community in Gujarat is the most brutal expression of this ideology of an exclusivist Hindu State that has no place and accords no equal citizenship to 'others.' It is an ideology that militates against basic principles of democracy itself.

However, Gujarat did not happen overnight. Since 1998, when the parliamentary wing of the RSS, the BJP came to power in that western state, there have been systematic attempts through policy and violent action, to divest minorities of their democratic rights and terrorise them into silence. The groups involved in this are the RSS, VHP and the BD that openly flout their close connections (ideological and structural/organisational) with the party in power. I refer to the selective census against Christians and Muslims in that state, the brutal attacks on Christian religious persons and their institutions from February 1998 onwards, the directive by the government for all schools to subscribe to a copy of the RSS journal, Sadhana (January 2001), the selective disbursement of relief and rehabilitation packages

after the ghastly earthquake (Jan 2001), the ostracisation and ghettoisation of Muslim children in schools in the state, the similar ghettoisation of the community into residential areas; and finally similarly hate-filled and violent attacks against the Muslim community in Gujarat in August 2000 when-following the attack on Hindu pilgrims to the Amarnath shrine in Kashmir valley, the Lashkar-e-Toyeba (a terrorist outfit that is reportedly supported by some wings of the Pakistani military/intelligence establishment) killed 33 innocent Hindus and, in the crossfire, 100 persons died. In the words of the international general secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Praveen Togadia, who frequents this country often, then "the reply for the deaths in Kashmir would be given (avenged), here, in Gujarat". Then as now, the Indian Muslim community is demonised by these groups, accused of having extra-national loyalties, after which brutal violence including quartering and rape of innocent victims of that community is justified.

Our journal, Communalism Combat has closely documented Gujarat including its hate-filled textbooks since 1998 onwards. (Welcome to a Hindu Rashtra, August 1998, How Textbooks Teach Prejudice-October 1999, Face to Face with Facism-April 2000, Great Divides-February 2001 and finally Genocide Gujarat 2002).

What happened after the ghastly Godhra carnage on February 27, between February 28 until March 15, 02 in the first round; then continued through April and May until the 16th of that month and thereafter and has again resumed this week is nothing short of genocide as defined by the United Nations Convention on Genocide, Article 2 (to destroy in whole or in part ... any ethnic, racial or religious group); 2(c) adds "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part".

Brutal destruction of life, through rape, quartering of bodies, urinating on them and incarcerating them so that there is no trace or evidence of their remains; attempting and partially succeeding in economically annihilating the community (the primary loss through systematic targeting of businesses and properties that the community estimates is at Rs 4,500 crores) and desecrating over 270 religious and cultural shrines belonging to the community---all this took place through systematic planning and targeted action by armed militias ideologically driven by the vision of a supreme and exclusive Hindu rashtra (state). Over 2,000 lost their lives, 500 are missing and 250-300 girls and women were gang-raped before being quartered, burned and killed.

The extent of planning and preparation and therefore state complicity cannot be over-emphasised. The Chief Minister Narendra Modi is himself culpable of sanctioning mass murder, in fact in the case of the quartering and brutal murder of former member of Parliament Ahsan Jaffrey who's family members appear here today, there is a case of personal vengeance and vendetta. Mr. Jaffrey had campaigned against Narendra Modi in the recently concluded bye-elections in the third week

of February and even spoke publicly against him. Among the 100 calls made by a desperate man for help that day, one was made by Mr Jaffrey to the chief minister. His reply was callous-look after yourself if you can.

Four other ministers of the Modi cabinet in Gujarat are indicted by over 35 witnesses to their crime-the home minister, Gordhan Zadaphiya, the health minister Ashok Bhatt, the revenue minister, Haren Pandya, and Narayan Laloo Patel and Niteen Patel. These men elected to power through a democratic election, who have abused their positions and their deeds need to be condemned nationally and internationally to any group wedded to democracy, secularism and basic values of toleration.

The conduct of the police and civil administration-- bound as they are by their employment rules to uphold the basic tenets of the Indian Constitution and Indian law that are immutably committed to equity and non-discrimination--- in not simply failing to prevent rape, quartering, burning alive of human beings and the mass destruction of property actually joined hands with the well-trained and armed mobs requires the most urgent attention. It is not the first time that the Indian police have been exposed for anti-minority biases; in fact as the Rodney king case in the USA and the Stephen Lawrence incident in the UK reveal other democracies are not immune to prejudice in the agencies of government -redressal and reform is where we in India lag behind and it is time that the issue of Institutional Police Reform and Greater Representation within the services and the force receive long term political attention. It is the institutions of democratic governance within India that need revitalizing, decentralization and greater responsiveness to people's needs and human rights issues.

The hate speech through pamphlets and propaganda, reproduced by some mainline newspapers in the state of Gujarat reveals a methodology that uses hatred and violence in words and actually translates it into action (see page 132 of Communalism Combat-Genocide 2002 issue). The arming of cadres of the RSS/VHP and BD, the fact that they are paid cadres, the fact that much or most of the finances of these organizations comes from expatriate Indians in the US, the fact that three state governments within India-that includes Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have recommended a ban against the VHP and the BD on grounds that they create terror and are armed are issues that need to be considered while responding to the genocide in Gujarat.

Today, in Gujarat, we face a refugee crisis of momentous and tragic proportions. Over 1,50,000 persons are in relief camps even now and with the rains on their way, epidemics will join hunger, pain and suffering that they have been undergoing for over 100 days. Last Friday (June 7, 02) the chief minister Modi at a meeting with Muslim businessman flatly refused to rehabilitate the victims. "I will not buy land nor build houses for those dishoused" he is quoted by The Times of India, June 8 as saying. After being complicit in the violence the chief executive of the state is brazen in owning no responsibility for life, liberty, shelter and dignity of refugee victims.

Having said this, I would wish to raise a broader issue of communalism within South Asia that the western world responds to extremely selectively. Until the Taliban harmed US national interests what it did to its own women and children did not concern the most influential country in the world, the US (in fact it supported the Taliban), similarly the US and the west have not been articulate on the issue of the treatment of rights and minorities in Pakistan and Bangladesh (Hindus to a larger degree and Christians in smaller measure have been targeted in that country since elections last September), blasphemy laws single out Hindus and Christians in Pakistan for discriminatory treatment, over 200,000 Hindu Kashmiri pandits are also refugees in their own country (having been driven out of the valley by militants in the name of Islam) and the schisms between the Tamil Hindu majority and the Sinhala Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka are deep and discriminatory to the minority. Unfortunately the west has not been too concerned by either a consistency of response nor a holistic policy on South Asia around these issues. Narrow commercial and strategic interests alone have governed responses cloaked in the garb of human rights and hence the skeptical response. Even today we fear, looking at the US silence on Gujarat that other interests lie behind the silence.

While internally within India these shocking and condemnable state sponsored pogroms and genocides have taken place, Indian public opinion has risen sharply and condemned them. However the crude and brutal attacks inspired in large or some measure by Pakistan's Inter service Intelligence Services (ISI) and its Army through armed fanatics on innocent civilians within India is constant factor that complicates and dilutes this public opinion and its efficacy. Gujarat has gone off the front pages in India following the brutal massacre of women and children in Jammu in mid May; not only that the hype of war has successfully sidelines the sharp and vocal movement for justice in Gujarat.

Western powers need to study and understand the rise of the politics of manipulating religion in the pursuit of power with the seriousness that this tendency deserves. It is this politics that brutally took the life of the father of the Indian Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, an apostle of non-violence who has not received the distinction of being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize when Martin Luther King Junior who was inspired by Gandhi's commitment to this path fortunately received the honour. It was this politics that isolated Frontier Gandhi (Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan) in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) when India was Partitioned in August 1947. This politics has today come unto its own in many countries of the region: within India, a democracy, large sections of its religious minorities are isolated by rhetoric that guides mob furies and even policy where the BJP rules; in Bangladesh where the violent and brutal attacks on Hindus that began with the new government being elected to power on a jingoist anti-minority sentiment last October, continues; within Pakistan where Hindu and Christian minorities and Ahmadis are discriminated against; in Sri Lanka where the Tamil Hindu minority is discriminated and before the US' 'war against terrorism', in Afghanistan where the Taliban (then supported by the US and west) had made life a living hell for its own, especially women.

The South Asian term communalism, evolved historically in the decades preceding Independence and Partition means just this. The region and its people have been victim to this politics that resulted in the partitioning of the country on religious lines; brutal violence including barbaric killings, rapes and mutilation of women belonging to the 'other' community (be it Hindu, Muslim or Sikh) took place; moreover over 10 million persons were forcibly made refugees and had to leave home and hearth.

Western powers whether it is the British who played some role at the time of Partition or more significantly, now, need to respond to the rise in religion based chauvinism in many countries within South Asia with this wider historical perspective in place. The issue needs to be dealt with in the context of State responsibility, Governance and the Rule of Law-in the context of India within a democratic framework. The crisis raises serious questions of the ethics of democratic co-existence and religious pluralism vis a vis the state.

I trust and hope that this opportunity offered following the genocide in Gujarat opens possibilities such an approach in the future.