

India: Modi, Master of the Pogroms

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On the night of 23 February, whilst Donald Trump and Narendra Modi were engaged in mutual admiration in Ahmedabad, the capital of Modi's home state of Gujarat, Muslims in Delhi were subjected to the first of three days of what the western media called, 'communal riots'.

In fact, what happened was a pogrom, incited by local and national politicians in Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP, and carried out by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh RSS, a fascist organisation affiliated to the BJP.

In the pogrom, mosques and small Muslim businesses were vandalised, houses were torched and their inhabitants beaten. At least 42 people were brutally killed, and 300 others seriously injured.

The incitement by BJP figures is clear enough. A few weeks before, the BJP held a rally at which Anurag Thakur, Minister for Corporate Affairs, condemned those who protested against the new Citizenship Amendment Act, declaring them, 'Traitors to the country, shoot them'. Since then, BJP rallies repeatedly saw the crowds chanting, 'Shoot the traitors!' The new citizenship law privileges non-Muslim immigrants' applications to become Indian citizens, a brazen violation of India's secular constitution.

Shortly before the February 23-25 attacks began, a BJP politician from Delhi, Kapil Mishra, smarting from defeat in the recent city elections, made a provocative speech against the citizenship protesters. Standing next to a high-ranking police official, he singled out the women protesters staging a peaceful sit-in in Shaheen Bagh, a working class district of the capital with a substantial Muslim population. 'Either the cops must clear them out', Mishra said, 'or we will take things into our own hands'. Within hours, RSS mobs, waving saffron flags and chanting Jai Shri Ram (Hail Lord Ram) hit the Shaheen Bagh area. The Delhi police, under the direction of Home Minister Amit Shah, either stood idly by or even escorted the mobs.

On Tuesday, February 25, Justice S. Muralidhar of Delhi's High Court summoned police to berate them for failing to file a complaint against Mishra and two other BJP politicians. The next day, Muralidhar was transferred from Delhi to a court in Punjab and India's Supreme Court deferred hearing petitions on the violence. Clearly, alongside the destruction of the semi-autonomous government in India's only Muslim majority state, Kashmir, Modi is deliberately moulding India in a communalist direction that can only lead to both internal and international conflict.

Modi and Trump

Modi himself has a long history of inciting racist violence. At the age of 8 he was recruited to the RSS which has generated the BJP's political ideology, Hindutva (Hindu-ness) which is virulently hostile to India's minority religions. As against the Hindu majority, who are 79.8 percent of the population, Muslims are 14.2 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, and Sikhs 1.7 percent.

Modi became infamous in February 2002 when, as Chief Minister of Gujarat, he and his party encouraged

days of ferocious communal rioting after Muslim terrorists attacked and killed passengers on a bus of Hindu pilgrims. Leaders of his BJP and its ally, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, openly urged Hindus to 'teach Muslims a lesson'. Gujarat was in flames for days and a thousand Muslims were killed. Modi himself gave incendiary speeches mocking the victims.

Clearly, Modi and Trump share the tactic of targeting minorities for violence as well as the need for lashings of egregious flattery. During his visit, Trump laid on the latter with a trowel, calling Modi 'an exceptional leader, a great champion of India, a man who works night and day for his country, and a man I am proud to call my true friend'. At the same time, he assured journalists he had not mentioned the Delhi killings. Yet, at a press conference in the city at the conclusion of his trip, as news of the pogrom filled the world's media, Trump sprang to Modi's defence. 'The prime minister said he wants people to have religious freedom,' he declared. 'They have worked really hard on it.'

Trump had sound, if cynical, reasons for this fawning, aside from his fellow feeling for an Islamophobe. He is after something. He hailed the 'Indo-US global strategic partnership', a project aimed at making the country an ally against China. Nevertheless, no concrete steps forward were taken towards the 'great' trade deal Trump has been seeking. That would open up its 1.38 bn population as a market for US corporate plunder. Clearly, 'making the US great again' while making India into a first division world power, economically and militarily, is a difficult trick to pull off.

At the same time, India is actually experiencing an economic slowdown, with unemployment recently reaching a 45-year high, and a wave of mass worker protests since 2016, including one-day general strikes. By stoking up Hindutva chauvinism, Modi and the BJP/RSS want to use their shock troops against opposition not only from the working class, but also from the movements of women and youth, plus national, religious and caste minorities. Their aim is to divert growing popular anger and frustration; undermine democratic rights and to poison the working class with reactionary hatreds.

Modi's Islamophobia and the BJP's willingness to incite and organise pogroms have an international dimension, particularly vis-à-vis Pakistan, a constitutionally Muslim state. Imran Khan condemned the Delhi pogrom, but his shaky government could also do with a diversion from its domestic problems. An Indo-Pakistan war could have untold consequences.

For all these reasons, across the subcontinent, the exploited classes and oppressed peoples need to resist the poison of 'religious' and communal conflict, not a product of 'ancient hatreds' but of politicians willing to cynically exploit religion for reactionary and inhuman ends. The foundation for this resistance must be class solidarity; international fraternity.

It should be noted that the protests against the CAA united Indian workers, students and professionals across religious-sectarian, caste and ethno-linguistic divides. Working class people from across these divides have also protested against the killings in Delhi. Indeed, there are stories from the victims of their Hindu neighbours who took them in and protected them from the thugs who came from outside the district.

Obviously, Modi realises that the country's multiple economic and political grievances could create a 'perfect storm' of resistance. They could even result in the creation of a pre-revolutionary situation, if the huge working class which came out, tens of millions strong, in a one-day general strike in early January, were to take the lead. Across the great sub-continent, socialists should advance a goal that combines self-determination and self-government for its different peoples with the unity needed to develop its huge natural and human resource, in a way that protects its environment. This would be a United Socialist States of South Asia.

Today, all the progressive struggles and resistance movements against right wing populist despots around the world demonstrate a profound 'crisis of leadership', that is, the absence or weakness of a political and organisational force to chart the way forward. All this, points towards the need for new, revolutionary, working class parties in these countries, as well as in the imperialist 'heartlands,' united in a new, a Fifth, International.

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