

## India's Kristallnacht: Hindu Attacks on Muslims in Gujarat

By Nick Gier

*These Muslims do not allow the Rāma temple at Ayodhya. They should be killed.*

—A Hindu Nationalist Official

In early 2002 the Indian state of Gujarat experienced extensive sectarian violence in which upwards of 2,000—mostly Muslims—suffered deaths by burning, hacking, and occasional gun fire. Many of the Hindu nationalists who instigated these attacks admire Hitler and Mussolini, so a comparison to a Nazi anti-Jewish pogrom is relevant here.

On November 9, 2013 the world acknowledged the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, the “Night of Broken Glass” in 1938 Germany. While police and citizens stood by passively, Nazi Storm Troopers destroyed over 1,000 synagogues and about 7,000 Jewish businesses. An estimated 91 Jews were killed and over 30,000 were sent to concentration camps.

There is now solid evidence that as early as November 2001 various Hindu nationalist organizations, mainly from the BJP political party, distributed weapons (mainly swords and spears) to thousands of people for a campaign to protect Hindus from Muslim “terrorists.”

On February 26 the Sabarmati Express departed for Gujarat from the north, and it contained Hindu returning pilgrims from Ayodhya. A temporary temple to the Hindu God Rāma had been set up there after the Babri Mosque was destroyed on December 6, 1992. Witnesses on the train reported that the armed militants shouted nationalist slogans all along the way and threatened the other passengers.

The next morning the train arrived at the Godhra station in Gujarat's Dahod district. A press report relates that at the station, “a Muslim girl was molested and an attempt made to pull her into the train. A Muslim tea vendor. . . was insulted and sent out of the coach by the rowdy elements, some of whom climbed onto the roof of the train and made obscene gestures at Muslim women.”

Fights broke out and there was stone throwing by both Muslims and Hindus. As the train pulled out, it stopped as an intense fire broke out in one of the coaches. The corpses were essentially incinerated, but the assumption is that most the 94 people burned alive were Hindu pilgrims.

Hindu nationalists claimed that Muslims set the fire, but every single investigation, except one done by the state BJP government, concluded that the fire was an accident caused by a stove on one of the coaches. A Gujarat police report stated that Muslims threw fire bombs at the train, but there was no evidence of burning from the outside of the coaches. Such an alleged attack would have been general, not specific to one coach. Nevertheless, in February 2013, 31 Muslims were convicted in a Gujarati court for setting the fire and 11 of them are due to be executed. Indian capital cases are automatically appealed and it will be a long time before the legal process is over.

After the train fire, the Hindu nationalist plan was executed all over Gujarat; and Chief Minister Narendra Modi, according to one of his own cabinet members, told his police force to allow the pogrom against Muslims to run its course. Hindu-instigated violence was state-wide, comprising 21 cities and 68 provinces, and even extended into rural areas where there had never been any sectarian conflict.

The pogrom continued for several months and the official death count was 822 (mostly Muslims), although unofficial sources put the final toll at over 2,000 killed. About 250 mosques were destroyed along with hundreds of Muslim homes. Damage to Muslim businesses was estimated at \$152 million.

The Indian Commission on Human Rights found that there was “premeditation in the killing of non-Hindus [and] complicity by Gujarati state government officials.” In 2004 the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom investigated the Gujarat violence and concluded that Prime Minister Modi was guilty of failing to stop the pogrom. As a result the U.S. State Department decided to ban Modi from traveling to the U.S.

Large numbers in the Indian community abroad support the Hindu nationalists, and Indian Americans protested when they learned that Modi was denied entry to the U.S. They and others around the world are source of huge sums of money that are used to support Hindu nationalist activities in India.

In a chapter entitled “Genocide in Gujarat” Martha Nussbaum, a careful scholar not known for rhetorical excess, examines, drawing on books such as *Fascism in India*, the background of Narendra Modi and his nationalist credentials. A chilling reminder is that the main inspiration for one of the main BJP groups was Mussolini’s Brown Shirts.

Gujarat is Gandhi's home state, and in 1917 he established an ashram on Sabarmati River. He and his disciples called it home until the British confiscated it in 1933. It is, therefore, sadly ironic that Hindu nationalist leader Lal Krishna Advani, who was BJP's prime minister candidate in the 2009 election, represents the Sabarmati area in the Indian Parliament.

Modi is now being touted as the prime minister candidate in federal elections late this year. The fact that Modi may well be facing criminal charges for his role in the pogrom against Muslims does not appear to deter his supporters. Modi's BJP party once led a conservative coalition government from 1998-2004, and I hope that Indira Gandhi's current fragile left-center coalition can continue to rule this sometimes politically unruly nation.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Material in this column is from his forthcoming book "The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective (Lexington Books, 2015).