

India's Hindu-chauvinist BJP attempts to incite communal riots ahead of pivotal state election

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18 April 2007

India's official opposition, the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has once again attempted to incite communal strife, this time in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh where state assembly elections are currently underway.

With an estimated population of 166 million (2001) and a Muslim population of 33 million, Uttar Pradesh (UP) is India's most populous state and plays a pivotal role in India's electoral politics.

The BJP has a long-history of inciting communal violence, the most prominent examples being the part it played in the 1992 razing of an historic 16th century mosque in the UP city of Ayodhya and the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in the state of Gujarat, which left more than 2000 Muslims dead and tens of thousands more homeless and jobless. (See India's ruling party abetted communal carnage in Gujarat).

As part of the BJP's propaganda for the UP Assembly elections, its state unit produced and released a communally incendiary Video Compact Disk (VCD, an inferior quality DVD) just a few days before the first-phase of voting on April 7. The VCD contains crude and vile caricatures of Muslims, depicting them as a vicious, calculating, and conniving lot who are out to destroy "Hindus" and their way of life.

In an April 5 news report, the Indo-Asian News Service observed, "Those who have heard the contents [of the VCD] were of the view that those were enough to 'spark off a communal riot'."

The VCD was released to the public with great fanfare by Lalji Tandon, the BJP Leader-of-the-Opposition in the UP Assembly, in the company of other leaders of the party's state unit. When the adverse public reaction threatened to recoil against the BJP and when India's Election Commission (EC) served a show-cause notice to the party to explain the contents of the VCD, the party's national leaders scrambled to distance themselves from the state unit. Feigning ignorance, they ordered the VCD "withdrawn."

The BJP national and state leadership then sought to make a low-level party functionary involved in the physical production of the material the scapegoat, firing him from his party job.

The BJP's rivals at the national level and in Uttar Pradesh went on the political offensive and demanded a criminal investigation by India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and de-recognition of the party by the EC.

"The BJP is trying to spread hatred" said Abhishek Manu Singhvi, a spokesperson for the Congress Party. Similarly former Prime Minister V.P. Singh, who has floated his own party in UP named the Jan Morcha (People's Front), said, "The BJP should be de-recognised. It is spreading communalism. Politics should be devoid of all this."

The other two major parties in the state, the caste-based opposition Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the ruling Samajwadi Party (SP) also joined the Congress Party and the Jan Morcha in calling for "de-

recognition" of the BJP.

On April 6, a day before the start of the first phase of the UP Assembly elections, the EC filed an FIR (First Information Report for a cognizable crime) with the UP police against BJP national party president Rajnath Singh and Lalji Tandon, charging the BJP with attempting to provoke communal tension and of trying to obtain votes by appealing to religion.

The BJP leader Lalji Tandon who was unquestionably involved in the decision to produce the VCD assumed the transparently-bogus posture of a somewhat distant observer, saying "When we previewed the CD we found certain scenes objectionable and asked for them to be removed."

Lalji Tandon acquired notoriety in 2004 when he organized a free-sari (traditional Indian women's garment) distribution as part of the BJP's national campaign, hoping to exploit the desperation of India's poor masses to garner votes. The event turned into a tragedy when 22 women and children were trampled to death as people sought to grab hold of the free saris. (See India's election commission demands BJP explain its role in Lucknow tragedy)

The BJP leadership reacted to the Election Commission's action by staging a media-spectacle. Accompanied by some 200 supporters, Rajnath Singh and Lalji Tandon walked into a UP police station and demanded that they be arrested.

The VCD was shown on several television channels and detailed excerpts have appeared in Indian newspapers. The production entitled *Bharat ki Pukar* (The Call of India), depicts a "wise" BJP campaigner, "Masterji," who goes around the state warning people of the unprecedented danger India faces from Muslims and argues that the only way to defeat this supposedly mortal threat is to vote for the BJP.

The VCD begins with a narrator issuing the following warning: "Today Mother India is screaming aloud, 'Oh my sons save me from being broken into pieces again. I no longer have the strength to be enslaved another time.' By using terrorists, spreading fear and dividing us, Pakistan wants to break India into pieces. Hyenas hungry for political power are egging them on. They have forgotten what the consequences of this will be. Now, ordinary people of India have to think, do they want slavery again or Ram Rajya (a mythical Hindu-kingdom under Lord Rama) in their independent India."

This vulgar admonition is followed by a series of crudely-scripted scenes that paint Muslims as secretly conspiring to "take-over" India and convert it into an Islamic state where Hindus will no longer be able to practice their religion.

One of the scenes shows two Muslim men masquerading as Hindus beguiling a couple of Hindu villagers to sell their cow to provide milk for a child. Later on these villagers are devastated to learn that the cow has been slaughtered for its meat and that the men whom they sold it to were Muslims.

In another loathsome scene, a Muslim man again pretending to be a Hindu lures away a young Hindu-girl and once in his house cynically reveals his Muslim identity, bans the girl from performing Puja (Hindu-worship), gives her a Muslim name, and finally forces her to marry an old Muslim man who is shown laughing in an evil manner.

The scene ends with the crying girl being dragged away and the Muslim boy exclaiming “Ha, Ha, Ha! When Hindu girls get ensnared by us, they scream and shout but sadly there is no one to listen to them and we have great fun. Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!”

These scenes are interspersed with others of the “wise BJP campaigner” Masterji going around towns and villages warning people about the danger “Hindu India” faces as a result of the purported coddling of Muslims by other political parties in the state and nationally. But no one listens. Finally Masterji dies. However after people come to know the wicked and beguiling nature of Muslims as illustrated in the VCD, the various characters gather at his funeral and vow to protect “Mother India.” The funeral crowd is shown singing patriotic songs and waving BJP and saffron flags (a BJP inspired symbol of Hindu India).

This communal filth provides a glimpse into the utterly degenerate character of the BJP. It also speaks volumes about the character of the Indian bourgeoisie and its state. After all, the BJP led India’s government from 1998 to 2004, enjoyed the support of the most powerful sections of the corporate elite in the 2004 general election, and forms the government or holds a share of power in coalition governments in some half dozen states. Moreover, the Indian legal system has proved incapable of calling the BJP and its Hindu supremacist allies to account for even their most egregious and violent crimes, like their role in inciting and directing the 2002 Gujarat pogrom.

It is an open secret that many in the police and judiciary sympathize with the BJP and its noxious politics. Indeed, just days before the BJP’s VCD release, a UP court ruled that Muslims should not be considered a minority in the state!

The social reality of Muslims in India today is the opposite of that portrayed in the VCD—far from threatening the Hindu majority, they are a minority that increasingly suffers official discrimination and must live in fear from attack by the Hindu chauvinist right.

A recent report from an Indian government-appointed committee has painted a devastating portrait of the situation facing India’s 14 percent Muslim minority. In terms of most social indicators, India’s Muslims are only slightly less deprived than the Dalits (ex-untouchables) and tribal peoples, India’s two most historically disadvantaged groups, and some Muslim groups face conditions even worse than those of Dalits. (See Government report concedes India’s Muslims are a socially deprived, victimised minority)

Successive Indian governments, especially over the past three decades, including those led by the Congress Party, have connived with the Hindu right and created an atmosphere of suspicion and hatred against Muslims by insinuating that it is a fifth column for Pakistan. In Indian-held Kashmir, security forces have murdered Muslim men in fake “encounters”—encounters that the corporate-media have dutifully reported as successful anti-terrorist operations.

In UP all the political parties, some more blatantly than others, appeal to caste and religious sentiments to garner votes and all support Indian business’ socially incendiary, neo-liberal economic agenda. The ruling SP headed by the current Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav proclaims itself to be a secular party and a protector of the Muslims. Yet it recently entered into in an alliance with Tamil Nadu’s notoriously anti-working class All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Previously the AIADMK was a long-standing ally of the BJP and has itself frequently made blatant Hindu chauvinist appeals.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which claims to represent the Dalits, has thrice formed coalition governments with the BJP in UP during the

past decade.

The pretensions of the Congress Party, the dominant partner in India’s United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, to be the standard-bearer of Indian secularism are belied not only by its own history of stoking communalism, as against Sikhs in 1984, but also by the protection it has provided to the BJP government in Gujarat despite widespread evidence that the party and especially the current Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, played pivotal roles in organizing the 2002 pogrom against Muslims.

During the current UP election campaign, Rahul Gandhi—the Congress’s principal campaigner and scion of the Gandhi-Nehru political dynasty—made a flagrant nationalist appeal, one moreover tinged with anti-Muslim sentiment, when, in reference to the 1971 secession of Bangladesh, he boasted that the Congress had “split” Pakistan.

The BJP suffered a devastating reversal in the 2004 elections, when the electorate rejected both its claims of “India Shining” and its crude attempt to flay Congress President Sonia Gandhi as an “outsider,” because she is foreign-born and a Catholic.

In the succeeding two years, the BJP was buffeted by crisis as it various attempts to attack the Congress by staging right-wing provocations and stoking communalism failed to find popular traction. But in recent months it has been revived thanks to a string of election victories, including in the Punjab and Uttarakhand state assembly and Delhi municipal elections.

The notoriously pro-business policies of the Congress-led UPA are fueling mass social discontent, but this discontent can find no positive political expression because the working class has been politically paralyzed by the politics of the Stalinist-led Left Front. While decrying the “anti-people” policies of the UPA, the Left Front is sustaining it in power in India’s parliament. Meanwhile, the Left Front government of West Bengal is using state violence to quash popular opposition to its own pro-investor program.

The communal menace posed by the BJP cannot be combated by backing calls for de-recognition of the BJP by the state. Such a move by the EC, an unelected body of bureaucrats, would be both reactionary and undemocratic. The call by various political parties for such action is motivated by their desire to gain political advantage rather than principled opposition to communalism and caste-ism.

The struggle against the BJP requires the development of an independent political movement of the working class and toilers directed against the profit system that is the root cause of the widespread poverty, underdevelopment, and communal and caste divisions that provide the political fuel for the BJP and its Hindu supremacist allies.



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