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ISSUES

The Karma of Revenge

A deadly Muslim massacre incites cruel and murderous Hindu retaliation

This article is the first of five in this issue discussing the recent riots in India. They include a commentary by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami on retaliation, an interview with Morari Bapu, an overview of Lord Rama and His worship, and opinion pieces by Swami Veda Bharati and by Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi.

Radio reports confirmed the rumors of the shocking massacre of members of the majority community. Angry crowds gathered in the city streets. The mood turned ugly. The first, then the second, minority shop was trashed. Local police were nowhere in sight. A few politicians and activists abetted the budding riot. Rioters proceeded through the streets with property tax roles in hand, pointing out minority-owned businesses for destruction by fire. By day's end, businesses were destroyed, houses burned and innocent people killed.

Is it in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, February 28, 2002? No, Colombo, Sri Lanka, July 23, 1983. Tamil militants killed thirteen soldiers in northern Sri Lanka. In the days that followed, Singhalese

mobs ransacked Tamil homes and businesses and killed hundreds of people. Today, 19 years later, 65,000 people have died in the resulting ethnic war, hundreds of thousands have fled into permanent exile, and the Tamil areas are laid waste. As we go to press, peace talks are about to commence, to discuss the same solutions to that ethnic divide that were possible in 1983. The outcome is "uncertain."

Or consider "Bloody Sunday," January 30, 1972, when British soldiers killed 13 Catholic civil rights protestors in Ireland. The soldiers claimed they were shot at, but none was injured. The Irish Republican Army was revived to defend the rights of the minority Catholic community. They fought a guerrilla war against the British for the next 26 years, killing 3,600 people and injuring 36,000. Finally, in April, 1998, a peace accord was reached, implementing reforms which could have been made decades ago. Chief negotiators were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

It is now several months since the horrific massacre of 54 Hindus—mostly women and children—in the town of Godhra on February 27. They died at the hands of a waiting mob of armed Muslims, as their train, the Sabarmati Express, was forced to a stop in an area of Godhra that local Hindus call "Pakistan." Retaliatory riots started across Gujarat almost immediately, leaving nearly a 1,000 dead and 100,000 Muslims in refugee camps. India's National Human Rights Commission investigated and criticized public servants "who failed to act appropriately to control the violence in its

incipient stages or to prevent its escalation thereafter." The Commission said some groups had roamed about with cellphones and address books, singling out homes and businesses for attack.

There was still daily violence occurring when Prime Minister Vajpayee visited the area a month after the train killings. In Ahmedabad he said, "Godhra's incident was shameful, but what happened in Gujarat after that is even more condemnable. Madness cannot be answered with madness."

But answering madness with madness is just what some Hindus demanded, for example in this widely circulated Internet message. "We Hindus are peace loving and view all humans as equal, as we come from the most tolerant religion in the world. But our survival is at risk. This incident must be avenged. I am proud that our Hindu youth in Gujarat have taken matters into their own hands. But I am not happy that some Hindu youths are at home safe behind a secure door while they should be out teaching these murderers a lesson they will never forget."

The national and international press did not carry many reports of Hindu religious leaders condemning the violence, with notable exceptions such as Morari Bapu

[see page 33] and Swami Agnivesh [sidebar]. Hinduism Today's Delhi correspondent, Rajiv Malik, said that the situation was "extremely sensitive" and even religious leaders were hesitant to speak out, lest they appear to be minimizing the Godhra carnage.

While the riots were called "religious," there was no Hindu swami nor Muslim cleric, for that matter among those arrested. Who was among the arrested or implicated were local politicians, Muslims in Godhra and Hindus in Gujarat, and lay Hindu activists.

The involvement of politicians is directly related to a topic the press harped on repeatedly: India's supposed secularism. The BBC, for example, said, "Sectarian tensions call into question the essential nature of India as a secular state." True, India is a democracy, and it has no state religion unlike Britain. But does India follow secularism? "the view that religious considerations should be excluded from civil affairs or public education" (Webster).

India's constitution guarantees special rights to minority religions not enjoyed by Hindus, such as the right to teach their faith in schools paid for with government money and to manage their own places of worship, while Hindus cannot teach religion in their schools and,

for the most part, their temples are government-managed. There are separate civil codes, according to one's religion, governing marriage, divorce and inheritance. Then there is the Hindu-only policy of "reservations," a form of affirmative action guaranteeing school slots, jobs and out-of-turn promotions to "scheduled-caste" Hindus (i.e., Dalits, or untouchables) and others. All these nonsecular policies emphasize the country's religious divisions and are exploited by political parties.

The Shankaracharya of Puri, Swami Nischalanand, addressed the political nexus, "I firmly believe that until Ayodhya is detached from politics and power, it will not be resolved. What we need today is a leader of the stature of Sardar Patel, who got the Somnath temple [which was destroyed in 1024 ce by Mahmud of Ghazna] resurrected with the consent of Muslims and without galis [abuses] or golis [bullets]. I do not see any possibility of an amicable settlement with the kind of people currently involved from either side. The birthplace of Ram should not be allowed to turn into a center for power and for undesirable conflict. My endeavor would be to convert it into a center for world peace, which was the essence of Ram Rajya [government according to the principles of Lord Rama, see page 35]." More Hindu religious leaders need to step forward and offer their advice on how to deal with this situation according to dharma. Justice for the tragic

attack on the train should be gained through a considered, lawful and national response against those responsible, not through personal reaction.

Swami Agnivesh On the Riots

Following his visit to Gujarat in April, Swami Agnivesh, a prominent leader of the Arya Samaj, sent the following report to Hinduism Today.

Having gone on a mission of peace and compassion to the troubled and tortured state of Gujarat, we wish to share with the rest of our countrymen the following findings and conclusions. We unanimously condemn the perpetrators of the despicable violence at Godhra Railway Station and call for the speedy trial and exemplary punishment for those responsible.

It is beyond any doubt that the state government failed to protect the Muslim community in Gujarat from the fury of the rioters. The confidence of the people, particularly that of minority communities,

in the state dispensation is all but gone. We found desperation at its fever-pitch in the refugee camps, and we are deeply worried about its long-term consequences for the integrity and unity of India.

"While fine words and sentiments are warranted, nothing can take the place of concrete relief and rehabilitation measures, which need to be initiated and accomplished on a war-footing. Spiritual leaders with credibility from all religious communities need to be involved in this and all confidence-building endeavors. We call upon the religious leaders of Gujarat and the rest of the country to denounce the misuse and corruption of religion as a handmaiden of communal politics. True religion is a resource for unity and national integration, and not an instrument for division and oppression.

"Madness cannot be answered with madness."

-Atal Behari Vajpayee