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COMMENTARY

India's Holocaust

Belgium scholar analyzes the "the bloodiest story in history"

The great genocides of history are rarely taught in school. Only the Jews have succeeded in publicizing what happened to their people--Amazon.com lists 2,856 books devoted to the Holocaust of World War II. But just in this century Tutsis, Tibetans, Cambodians, Bangladeshis, Gypsies, Ukrainians and Armenians have all suffered more than a million deaths in deliberate actions. Before them died possibly a hundred million natives in North and South America, tens of millions in the slave trade--and unknown millions of Hindus in India as a result of the invasions beginning in the 7th century. In this thought-provoking article, Belgium scholar Koenraad Elst attempts to shed light on the horrific and historically neglected Hindu experience.

By Koenraad Elst, Belgium

Genocide is the intentional attempt to destroy an ethnic community, or by extension any community constituted by bonds of kinship, of common religion or ideology, of common socio-economic position or of common race. The pure form is the complete extermination of every man, woman and child of

the group. Examples include the native Tasmanians and many Amerindian nations, from Patagonia to Canada, by European settlers in the 16th-19th century. The most notorious attempt was the Nazi "final solution of the Jewish question" in 1941 to 45. In April 1994, Hutu militias in Rwanda went about slaughtering the Tutsi minority, killing ca 800,000, in anticipation of the conquest of their country by an Uganda-based Tutsi army.

Hindus suffered such attempted extermination in East Bengal in 1971, when the Pakistani Army killed one to three million people, with Hindus as their most common target. It is significant that no serious count or religion-wise breakdown of the death toll has been attempted. The Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ruling classes all agree that this would feed Hindu grievances against Muslims. While India-watchers get indignant about communal riots in India killing up to 20,000 people since 1948, allegedly in a proportion of three Muslims to one Hindu, the best-kept secret of the post-Independence Hindu-Muslim conflict is that in the subcontinent as a whole, the overwhelming majority of the victims have been Hindus. Even apart from the 1971 genocide, "ordinary" pogroms in East Pakistan in 1950 alone killed more Hindus than the total number of riot victims in India since 1948.

"Selective genocide" may be defined as killing a sufficient number who form the backbone of the group's collective identity, and assimilating the leaderless masses into the dominant community. This has been the Chinese policy in Tibet, killing over a million Tibetans. It was also Stalin's policy in eastern Poland and the Baltic states after they fell into his hands under the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact, exemplified by the

massacre of thousands of Polish army officers in Katyn. During the Islamic conquests in India, there was a policy to murder the brahmin priests after the Hindu warrior class had been dispatched on the battlefield. The Portuguese in Malabar and Goa also followed this policy in the 16th century. In antiquity, such partial genocide typically targeted the men for slaughter and the women and children for slavery or concubinage. That is how the Athenians depopulated the isle of Melos in 416 bce to punish the Melians for their reluctance to join the war against Sparta. Likewise, in 626 ce, Islamic forces destroyed the Jewish tribe of the Banu Quraiza by having its 700 men beheaded and its women and children sold into slavery. Hindus too experienced this treatment at the hands of Islamic conquerors, e.g., when Mohammed bin Qasim conquered the lower Indus basin in 712 ce. The Chach-Nama reports how in Multan "six thousand warriors were put to death, and all their relations and dependents were taken as slaves." This is why Rajput women committed mass suicide, to save their honor in the face of the imminent entry of victorious Muslim armies, e.g., 8,000 women immolated themselves during Akbar's capture of Chittorgarh in 1568 (where this most enlightened ruler also killed 30,000 non-combatants).

A third type of genocide is when mass killing takes place unintentionally, as collateral damage of other forms of oppression. The death of millions of natives in Central America after the first Spanish conquests was mostly the unintended side effect of the hardships of forced labor and the contact with new diseases brought by the Europeans. In contrast with Nazi and Soviet work camps, where forced labor had the dual purpose of economic profit and a slow but sure death of the inmates, there is no evidence that the Spanish wanted their Native laborers to die--eventually replacing them with African

slaves required a large extra investment. These invader's religious missionaries wished to convert the unbelievers, and preferred not to kill them.

The mass killing of Hindus by Muslims typically took place in the fervor immediately following military victories, e.g., a general massacre and arson followed the fall of the South Indian metropolis of Vijayanagar in 1565. Genocide in peacetime, perhaps the most perverse kind, is extremely rare; one example was Stalin's organized famine in Ukraine in 1931-33, which killed some ten million people.

In India, once Muslim power was established, Muslim rulers sought to exploit and humiliate rather than kill the Hindus, and discouraged rebellion either by military action or by making some sort of compromise. One constraint was the endemic intra-Muslim warfare and intrigue, another the prevalence of the Hanifite school of Islamic law in India. This is the only school which allows Pagans to subsist as zimmi, disempowered third-class citizens paying a special tax for the favor of being tolerated; the other three legal schools ruled that Pagans, as opposed to Christians and Jews, had to convert. Sometimes, though, Muslim rulers resorted to forms of oppression comparable to Stalin's famine. A policy of deliberate impoverishment by rulers like Alauddin Khilji and Jahangir were described as follows by Fernand Braudel in *A History of Civilizations* (1963): "The levies [the Hindus] had to pay were so crushing that one catastrophic harvest was enough to unleash famines and epidemics capable of killing a million people at a time. Appalling poverty was the constant counterpart of the conquerors' opulence."

Apart from actual killing, millions of Hindus disappeared by way of enslavement. After every conquest by a Muslim invader, slave markets in Baghdad and Samarkand were flooded with Hindus. Timur Lenk, who conquered Delhi from another Muslim ruler in 1398, recorded in his journal that he made sure his pillaging soldiers spared the Muslim quarter, while in the Hindu areas, they took "twenty slaves each." Hindu slaves were converted to Islam, and when their descendants gained their freedom, they swelled the numbers of the Muslim community. It is a cruel twist of history that the Muslims who forced Partition on India were partly the progeny of those Hindus.

For its sheer magnitude in scope and death toll, coupled with its occasional intention to exterminate entire Hindu communities, the Islamic campaign against Hinduism, which was never fully called off since the first naval invasion in 636 ce, was famously evaluated by Will Durant as follows: "The Islamic conquest of India is probably the bloodiest story in history. It is a discouraging tale, for its evident moral is that civilization is a precious good, whose delicate complex of order and freedom, culture and peace, can at any moment be overthrown by barbarians invading from without or multiplying within."

A first glance at important testimonies by Muslim chroniclers indicates that, over 13 centuries and a territory as vast as the subcontinent, Muslim warriors easily killed more Hindus than the six million of the Jewish Holocaust. Ferishtha lists several occasions when the Bahmani sultans in central India (1347-1528) killed a hundred thousand Hindus, which they had set as a minimum goal for "punishing" the Hindus; and they

were only a third-rank provincial dynasty. The biggest slaughters took place during the raids of Mahmud Ghaznavi (ca. 1000 ce); during the actual conquest of North India by Mohammed Ghoris and his lieutenants (1192 ff.); and under the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526). The Moghuls (1526- 1857), even Babar and Aurangzeb, were fairly restrained tyrants by comparison. Prof. K.S. Lal once estimated that the Indian population declined by 50 million under the Sultanate, but that would be hard to substantiate; research into the magnitude of the damage Islam did to India is yet to start in earnest.

In Indian schoolbooks and the media, an idyllic picture of Hindu-Muslim harmony in the pre-British period is propagated in outright contradiction with the testimony of the primary sources. Like Holocaust denial, this propaganda can be called "negationism." The really daring negationists don't just deny the crimes against Hindus, they invert the picture and blame the Hindus themselves. Thus, it is alleged that Hindus persecuted and destroyed Buddhism; in reality, Buddhist monasteries and universities flourished under Hindu rule, but their thousands of monks were killed by Ghoris and his lieutenants.

Hindu philosophy holds that God pervades everything and everyone in the universe and that nothing and no one is intrinsically evil. How then to understand these great slaughters? Did the Ukrainians starve ten million people to death at some point in their past? Did the American Indians annihilate a race? Who did we Hindus conquer and oppress? History doesn't record such events, and they certainly could not have been on the scale of the modern events, for there simply were not that many people in the world in prehistory.

But perhaps these catastrophic events are matters of national or racial karma, necessary occurrences related to the overall evolution of the people. In this down-to-earth sense, suffering genocide is the karmic reward of weakness. Even Hindu scriptures on government advise a king to invade and conquer his weaker neighbor, least another king do the same first and then threaten him.

The Jews concluded their genocide was a result of weakness, and since World War II have sought to create a strong nation-state out of a fragmented and stateless community. Even more importantly, they helped foster an awareness of the history of their persecution among their former persecutors, the Christians, which makes it unlikely that Christians will target them again. At the Global Forum in Moscow in 1993, the Jewish representatives said their oppressors have not repented and reconciled for their actions, and therefore, the representative said, "Given the chance, they will do it again." In this respect, the Hindus have so far failed completely. With numerous Holocaust memorials already functioning, one more memorial is being built in Berlin by the heirs of the perpetrators of the Holocaust; but there is not even one memorial to the Hindu genocide, because even the victims don't seem to care.

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Dr. Koenraad Elst, 40, of Roman Catholic upbringing, studied philosophy, Sinology and Indology in Leuven, Belgium and Varanasi, India. Now a full-time writer, he has published works on comparative philosophy, the Aryan invasion debate, Islam and contemporary Indian politics.

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