

On the Muslim Minority in India

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ABSTRACT

Western media usually describe India as ‘the largest democracy in the world’, paying little attention to the various dark corners surrounding this rosy picture, especially if one takes into consideration the difficulties its neighbours have had in their roads to democracy. It is true that the country has historically benefitted from generally good press in the West due to concerns about the increasing assertiveness of another demographic giant – the People’s Republic of China. As the centre of global gravity moves inexorably towards Asia, Western Europe and North America, with their ageing populations, seek to keep on board allies with whom they believe they share a similar system of values. Above all, western powers have their gaze fixed on the Indian market, assuming that its annual economic growth of 7% can offer rich dividends.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has acquired almost rock star status in recent years: November 2015 saw him address crowds packed inside London’s Wembley Stadium, while in June 2016, American Congressmen and women applauded him as he made an extended comparison of the virtues of American and Indian democracy. Incidentally, he boasted that the ‘biggest democracy in the world’ guarantees equal rights to all its citizens, whatever their religious beliefs. Indeed, he declared himself in favour of stronger Indo-American linkages, especially, he added, when it came to the fight against terrorism (Kelly 2016).

Some observers may recall a remark made by Modi as the Chief Minister of Gujarat in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks during The Big Fight, a Star News Channel debate programme, on 14 September 2001. He stated that, ‘All Muslims are not terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims’ (Engineer 2015). During political debates, especially televised

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ones, politicians often make use of such rhetorical devices to nurture or boost their popularity.

Even limiting oneself to India itself, such a declaration was factually incorrect. According to figures for the year 2014 cited by Aakar Patel in a revealingly titled article, *Most extremists in India are not Muslim – they are Hindu*, published on 8 June 2015, the country had:

Some 976 deaths from terrorism (or extremism, whatever name one wants to use for it) in India. Of these, the most (465) came in the North East. The second most (314) came from left-wing extremism, by a group of people called Maoists. Deaths in Jammu & Kashmir, assuming one wants to attribute the whole lot to terrorism, stood at 193. Outside of these conflict theatres, Islamist extremism claimed four lives (Patel 2015).

India is home to a very significant Muslim population that is scarcely reassured by the absolute majority enjoyed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (India People's Party, Hindu nationalist in outlook) in the Lok Sabha (House of the People, the lower house of India's bicameral parliament).

Before looking at the fragile position of the Muslim community and the campaigns it believes are conducted at its expense, the author would first like to see how India has projected its power across the New World Order that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. India rightly seeks recognition as a great power, but is inclined to forget that in a sense, it remains a colossus with feet of clay – top end scientific research juxtaposed with aching poverty. It is made up of a mix of different religious communities, harmony between which has been key to the successful construction of the nation. More extreme sections of the Sangh Parivar (a group of Hindu nationalist organisations) who play up – without always sticking close to the facts – the threat of rapid population growth of the Muslim community. This seems to neglect one of the attributes that has the potential to increase India's global influence: its 180 million Muslim inhabitants that have the potential to project India's power in the Islamic world.

This work, therefore, seeks to first of all look at India's position internationally, and how this has enabled the most extreme Hindu nationalist components to adopt policies and political positions of concern with regard to minorities in general and Muslims in particular. Narendra Modi was formally cleared of all the various accusations made against him pertaining to his role in Gujarat in 2002. However, some schools of thought continue to cast doubt as to his innocence.

Given the difficult relations between India and Pakistan in recent times, the author will abstain from any recommendations as to what the Indian government should or should not do. However, the author would encourage India's civil society to undertake a greater role in reinforcing inter-communal harmony so necessary to the construction of a country that remains uniquely diverse in a world characterised by a worrying level of polarisation.

Key words: India, Gujarat, Muslim minority, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), communalism, demography, population.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. A New Political Order at the National Level

On the eve of the sixteenth Indian general elections (7 April - 12 May 2014), observers of all political complexions were in agreement that a grouping going by the questionable name of ‘Hindu nationalists’¹ would be victorious. The population did little to conceal its disenchantment with the lengthy Congress administration that had appeared so full of promise. The Indian National Congress (INC), that led the United Progressive Alliance (UPA-I) and then the UPA-II², had once seduced the electorate. Voters looking for a

¹The term ‘Sangh Parivar’ designates the Hindu nationalist ‘family’, that includes political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the *Shiv Sena* (Army of Shiva), as well as associative groups like the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS, National Union of Volunteers) and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP, International Hindu Federation).

One might question the use of the adjective ‘nationalist’ since following the 11 September 2001 attacks, media observers often prefer the term ‘fundamentalist’ when referring to Islamist grouping that defend theories that bear comparison to some promoted by the *Sangh Parivar*. It is true that the leader of the *Sangh Parivar*, the BJP, has sought, controversially, to acquire the respectability that has brought it to the position of governing the country.

A majority of Indians today give him great credit, looking upon Narendra Modi as a symbol of hope. “*Khushwant Singh observes that part of the Sangh Parivar’s success can be attributed to the charm and charisma of many of its leaders. They were men of polite manner, obvious sophistication and intelligence who cloaked their fascist ideas in sweet reasonableness and impeccable etiquette*” (Singh 2003, p.58).

²Of the 61 representatives of leftist parties who sat in lower house of parliament (the Lok Sabha), 44 were members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). The Left Front came to an agreement with the Congress that lacked an overall majority (217 seats out of a total of 543). In a press communiqué dated 13 May 2004, the Politburo of the CPI(M) lauded what it termed the ‘historic victory’ of the Indian people in the fourteenth general elections (People’s Democracy, 12 September 2004). The popular verdict, according to this account of events, was a clear rejection of the communalist policies pursued by the BJP-led administration, of its economic policy in favour of the wealthy, as well as of its pro-imperialist foreign policy (ibid). It was on this last issue that there had been disagreement. The Left, which describes itself as supporting the government ‘from outside’, withdrew its support on 8 July 2008, as it opposed the Indo-US agreement under the terms of which Washington was to contribute to Indian nuclear energy production for civilian ends. The UPA-II was, however, formed on 18 May 2009.

Note that the term ‘communalism’ pertains to inter-communal confrontations between different religious groups, most often Hindus and Muslims. Particularly following the coming to power in 1998 of the Hindu nationalists, it has tended to have a further connotation: that of a partisan – Hindu – vision more and more widely pushed in political and social spheres.

Hindu nationalists, for their part, reject such a view. They believe they seek to build Indian power that will permit rapid improvement in the economic situation of the majority. Such discourse is scarcely new, but Hindu nationalists, for long stuck on the margins of political life, have taken it up during a period when many Indians have genuine concerns about the future.

government that would define a genuine social programme had disavowed the earlier National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after it, over-confident as to the future, had called snap elections (20 April - 10 May 2004)³.

Indians had turned once again to the Congress, main architect of the country's independence, that claiming the heritage of the Nehru-Gandhi⁴ dynasty, had sought, it claimed, to build a socially equitable India. They had counted on Congress Prime Minister Manmohan Singh being the promoter of a programme that would address growing inequality. This renowned academic and economist took pride in the second mandate the electorate conferred on the Congress in the fifteenth general elections (16 April - 13 May 2009). Was the Congress-dominated government itself seduced by the Shining India slogan? With the exception of the leftist groups, the rest of the political class believed that it was its duty to work to project India regionally and globally. The population, no doubt disillusioned by such a discourse, punished Congress and an administration it perceived as riddled with corruption and nepotism. Above all, the worst-off were tired of their living conditions that had deteriorated following the economic liberalisation initiated in the 1990s. The repeated statistical manipulation of poverty rates⁵ carried out by various political actors helped present an India that was progressing more than in reality. The elite that consulted the figures had in any case little intention of permitting a significantly fairer division of wealth. Without the creation of a 'welfare state', the social ills undermining the country will never be eradicated.

One analysis is worth noting here; D.P. Singh, in a book revealingly titled *Narendra Modi. Yes he can*, writes "*Combining the worst aspects of caste, kefirhood, class and colonialism and transcending them all, 'Perpetrator/Victim' is the new great schism that our polity and the 'System' has succeeded in creating, dividing entire land into two distinct and great classes drifting apart from each other all the time like the continental landmasses. If allowed to deepen and broaden unchecked as it is being now, the schism is likely to bring the whole project in democracy, liberalism, secularism, and nation and society building crashing down, swaddling the land in unending gore and blood*" (Singh 2012, p.2). The author emphasizes the existence of "two distinct and increasingly disconnected classes of perpetrators and victims. *Thus, in the democratic socialist state that India is supposed to be, anyone failing to attain a "position" (i.e., getting to be a government officer, police inspector, elected 'representative', certified mafia, high class dalal or prostitute, and the like) in life loses his/hr citizenship right too* (ibid).

³Hindu nationalists had not emphasized a particular vision of the future, but rather the healthy economic state of the nation, boasting of their positive, unequalled record in office. Some commentators rejected the slogan of Shining India, noting that while things were bright for a minority of some 10% of the billion-plus population, fully 44% were living below the poverty line.

⁴Jawaharlal Nehru was Prime Minister from 15 August 1947 until 27 May 1964, and his daughter Indira Gandhi between 24 January 1966 and 24 March 1977 and again from 14 January 1980 until 31 October 1984. His grandson Rajiv Gandhi held the post from 31 October 1984 until 2 December 1989.

⁵In 2011, the World Bank estimated that 21.9% of the Indian population was living on less than \$1.25 per day; a further 19% earned between that and \$2 per day (World Bank, 2011a and 2011b).

Seemingly in a state of exasperation, Manmohan Singh's former press attaché, Sanjaya Baru, published a revealing titled account on 11 April 2014, *The Accidental Prime Minister: The Making and Unmaking of Manmohan Singh* (Baru 2014). In it, he sought to underscore the omnipotence of Sonia Gandhi. He implied that the Congress President had prioritised those loyal to her – even her 'vassals', rather than the political, economic and social advancement of the country. Was the work written for the Hindu nationalists who, since Gandhi's entry onto the political stage in 1998, had sought to draw attention to her foreign origin, which prevented her from abiding fully by national customs? Whatever the case, Baru painted a grim picture of Manmohan Singh. He also criticised the dynastic power that the widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (20 August 1944 – 21 May 1991) was seeking to restore⁶.

1.2. Outline of this Article

The Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, his reputation put into question by the communalist events in Gujarat in 2002, seized the opportunity to assert himself. He boasted of his status as a pracharak (the RSS employs this word for those of its volunteers that undertake a vow of celibacy). Narendra Modi, so this account goes, was free from influence, since he was unbound by family ties⁷. He could thus dedicate himself to promoting the national interest. He certainly declared his attachment to the traditional Indian, or even Hindu, values of which the Sangh Parivar argued it was the guarantor. Last but not least, the new Prime Minister of India prided himself for his administrative prowess that had allowed Gujarat⁸ – at least on a 'glass-half-full' reading – to make both economic and social progress.

India, in entrusting its fate to an individual rather than the political party to which he belonged, sought to attain two objectives: to achieve regional and global power status, a will inculcated by successive previous governments; and, to address the alarming levels of poverty. There remained the fragile communal balance of the country. The Hindu

⁶The former Minister of External Affairs, Kunwar Natwar Singh (2014), in his work *One life is not enough* published three months after a Congress defeat he described as humiliating, stated that Sonia Gandhi, Italian by birth, was scarcely able to bend in obeisance to significant Indian traditions. He meant, in particular, the lack of respect that the 'Iron Lady' displayed towards elders. While he did not say so, he presumably included himself in this regard.

⁷When putting himself forward as a candidate for the Lok Sabha elections, he finally acknowledged the existence of a spouse he had left thirty years earlier. He added that tradition had demanded an early marriage, but that he had rapidly left the conjugal home.

⁸Coming to power in Gujarat in 2001, Modi inherited a healthy economic situation. The state's growth rate was 4.8% in the 1990s, compared to 3.7% in the country as a whole. In the following decade, the corresponding figures were 6.9% and 5.6% respectively. The human development index for Gujarat was below the national average in the 1980s and 1990s, but moved slightly above average after 2000. There remained the issue of poverty. States such as Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Kerala, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka had rates below the national average, while it was Tamil Nadu that saw a particularly sharp reduction in levels (Ghatak and Roy 2014).

nationalists, it is true, had already governed the country. Yet they lacked an overall majority in the parliament. Moreover, the National Democratic Alliance had entrusted the leadership of government to the moderate BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Narendra Modi had a more controversial past. The country is home to a very large Muslim population that is worried by the BJP's dominance of the Lok Sabha⁹. Before looking at the sensitive position of this community, the author will begin with the emergence of India as a world power. The country seems sometimes to ignore one aspect of its potential in this respect: projecting itself as a Muslim power. It is true that the agenda of the Sangh Parivar, at least of its more extreme components, is very different. With the BJP holding an overall parliamentary majority and governing in a number of states, these groups enjoy considerable margin of manoeuvre; the Hindu nationalist 'family' has, for example, felt it necessary to engage in struggles such as cow protection, the animal being sacred in Hinduism. Their opponents feel that the group is in a position to allow the RSS or VHP to take the fight to minorities, especially Muslims. They add that it feels itself in a position to allow groups like the RSS or VHP to go after minorities, especially Muslims. It rightly reckons that the 'international community'¹⁰ will abstain from sharp criticism. The western powers, faced with an unprecedented economic crisis, are looking eagerly at the Indian market. Another aspect is the populism to which the West seems to be in thrall: the phenomenon is nourished by the stereotypical images that turn Islam into an easy scapegoat.

In conclusion, when sketching possible recommendations, the author will focus on Indian civil society. Indo-Pakistani relations are once again tense. For researchers, especially those from overseas, suspicion about their work can become a constraint. The author will nonetheless look at the Muslim community, notably from the perspective of the work, *Le Bouc émissaire (The Scapegoat)*, of the French philosopher and historian, René Girard (1982).

2. A GIANT WITH FEET OF CLAY

2.1. Towards Great Power Recognition

The Indian Union managed, quite easily, to redefine its foreign policy in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The new international agenda set by leading world powers gave room for the emergence of states that had hitherto – their greater aspirations notwithstanding – been limited to a 'status' of regional power. In addition, India cashed the dividends of a non-aligned policy that it had practised skilfully. This doctrine had

⁹The BJP won 282 of the 336 held by members of the NDA.

¹⁰The use of inverted commas draws attention to this geopolitical construct, common after the collapse of the Soviet Union that subtly suggests that the positions of the West should be considered somehow self-evident truths.

allowed it to set its external policy in an independent manner. The country had opposed the threat of an intrusion of the Cold War into its territory¹¹, even while managing gradually to glean support from both the Soviet Union and the United States – the latter’s favours remaining discreet. After the short Sino-Indian frontier conflict in late October 1962, New Delhi, in fact, taking advantage of the West’s¹² concern of the Chinese threat, benefitted from the West’s military assistance that was only too readily offered to India¹³. This kick-started a concerted effort to arm itself that was a key part of its quest for regional and global influence.

The second line of assertion of Indian power was the success the country achieved once it was under pressure to liberalise its economy. Anxious to play a major role in the new world order, India came more and more to neglect mention of past achievements which had come about as a result of earlier political choices, including those made in the face of stern western censure. Even the legacy of the successive mandates of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was called into question. Governing his country from 1947 to 1964, Nehru had been the ‘high priest’ of a non-aligned foreign policy. The governments he led chose a form of economic autarchy favouring the expansion of national production.

India is in any case moving towards recognition of its world power status – something that was tacitly already accepted. Refusing to sign the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), it worked gradually towards imposing itself as a nuclear power¹⁴. On 10 October 2008, the country celebrated the prospect, following the signature of Accord 123, of American assistance in increasing nuclear energy production for peaceful purposes. In fact, the worrying developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan have contributed even more to boosting India’s regional and international role. The

¹¹It should perhaps be recalled here that the two power blocs implicitly agreed that armed confrontations between them, while an expression of their opposition to one another, would remain limited in scale and spare the territories of North America and Europe.

¹²In geopolitical terms, the phrase aims to emphasize the existence of a set of common values as well as interests that coalesced following the Second World War.

¹³Pakistan, for its part, underlined that once it had achieved its objective, China withdrew behind what it termed the Line of Actual Control. Islamabad was thus concerned by its neighbour’s rearmament, believing the arsenal to be first and foremost aimed towards Pakistan.

¹⁴India for long contented itself with a first nuclear test carried out on 18 May 1974. It ‘crossed the Rubicon’ (Indians used the phrase frequently) with nuclear tests on 11 and 13 May 1998, that provoked a parallel response from Pakistan (28 and 30 May). New Delhi, like Islamabad, faced lively criticism and sanctions, but the objective was achieved: India, many believed, suffered in its quest for recognition as a global power since it remained a non-member of the ‘nuclear club’. Furthermore, it aspired to a veto-bearing permanent seat on the Security Council. It also sought to assert its status within the Asian continent, particularly vis-à-vis China, while confirming its predominance over South Asia, always with the Kashmir question in mind.

Note that since the end of the 1980s, the state of Jammu and Kashmir has been the stage for a separatist movement that Pakistan claims to support only morally and diplomatically. India denounces the ‘proxy war’ that its neighbour conducts on its territory, continuing to dispatch militants there.

demographic giant, still, however, has feet of clay, even if successive rulers have managed to increase the country's influence both within Asia and globally. All the more promising is the fact that India has not only consolidated its existing links with the United States, but has also initiated a new era of cooperation with Russia, the successor to the Soviet Union.

2.2. A Demographic Giant

In 1950, the population of Asia accounted for 55% of that of the planet; Europe made up 22% and Africa only 9% (Geohive 2016). Today, 8% of the world's 7.2 billion people live in Europe, 14% in Africa and 60% in Asia (On World Nations Online 2015; United Nations 2013). Chinese and Indians together comprise 37% of human beings; the latter are likely to overtake the former in number around 2028 (United Nations 2013). In presenting this summary, it should also be recalled that the population of the world increased by 267% during the Twentieth Century, with a doubling "in less than two generations, from 2.5 to 5 billion, between 1950 and 1987" (Buhler 2004, p.3). As the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat of the United Nations Organisation underlined in the introduction to its report titled *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision Analytical Report*, a "variety of demographic dynamics" continue to prevail around the world. "The demographic winter", an expression used by demographer Gérard-François Dumont (2008), is now hitting developed countries, with the notable exception of the United States¹⁵. The United Nations (2004) noted that in that year 89 states, of which 45 were not particularly developed, would be affected by ageing of their populations by the middle of the Twenty-First Century. As for "the youngest populations", they are found in the "least advanced countries", such as Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Guinea-Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Chad (Dumont 2008). India and China, clearly, will remain the largest countries, far ahead of the United States, but also of supra-national entities such as the European Union¹⁶, whether or not this maintains its existing borders or expands eastwards (Turkey, Ukraine or even Russia) (Dumont 2006). Evidently, following Brexit, a shrinking seems more likely in the short-term.

Indeed, "if it were not for the partition" of the Sub-continent in August 1947, and then the split of Pakistan in December 1971, the pre-eminence of India in its colonial borders

¹⁵"The United States, the most populated country in the developed world, is also the one that maintains its position in the demographic hierarchy the best. Thanks to a favourable age pyramid and fertility rates that recovered after a drop between 1960 and 1985 to a level close to inter-generational replacement levels (2.1 children per woman). This has no equivalent in advanced nations" (Buhler 2004, p.14). The birth rate is 12.5 per 1000 inhabitants (CIA 2016d).

¹⁶The European Union numbers 507.4 million inhabitants (Eurostat 2015). The figure includes about 60 million UK citizens who may soon leave the European Union.

would have been uncontested, since “India, Pakistan and Bangladesh¹⁷ together count more inhabitants than China, even if Taiwan is added to the latter’s total” (Ibid). South Asia, with the exception of Sri Lanka, is a reservoir of people of global importance.

One should recall the postulate of the American demographer Frank Wallace Notestein, who was alarmed that the “dominant powers” would “become smaller and smaller minorities”, possessing a “smaller and smaller proportion of the world’s wealth and power” (cited in Buhler 2004, p.8). India, meanwhile, benefits from concern provoked by the other demographic giant, namely the People’s Republic of China. The West, with its ageing population, seeks to build alliances with those seemingly sharing similar value systems, even as the centre of world gravity shifts inexorably towards Asia. Is western reserve, a legacy of Cold War antagonism, not also motivated by the across-the-board development pursued by Beijing? Seduced by the market competitiveness of the People’s Republic, western countries have omitted to safeguard their own national industries, giving rise to a dangerous dependency and a vulnerability to an attempt to instrumentalise by China. In such a context, the alliance with India, albeit one that struggles to reach the same lofty heights as China, is of significance, even though Indo-Chinese relations remain sensitive. Nonetheless India’s future remains uncertain however much it is currently a haven of peace.

2.3. ‘The Biggest Democracy in the World’

India “has always been an enormous population centre” (Dumont 2006). It enjoys, it is true, “essential natural resources allowing for prosperous civilisation – cultivable land, water and sunlight” (ibid). It is rather, however, the remarkable historical path taken by the country that the author would like to look at here. Western media are quick to describe it as ‘the biggest democracy in the world’ whenever its citizens are called to vote. Such an expression reflects various dimensions. The first is geographical: India’s surface area of almost 3 million km² may be much less than the United States or China (both a little over 9 million km²), yet the country is home to 1.26 billion people (CIA 2016b.), fully one-sixth of the world’s population. This figure is slightly below the Chinese number, but the Indian population is younger: 27.71% are under fourteen years of age (ibid). The second dimension is political: the secularism that constitutes the founding doctrine of the Republic of India persists to this day. A simplistic view of the Sub-continent’s history tended to place the entire responsibility for the bloody partition on Pakistan’s shoulders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru battling in vain to oppose it. Whatever the case, Indian secularism was rapidly promoted as a model enjoying global renown. Such a reading was not shared by all the country’s closest neighbours, certainly Pakistan and Bangladesh. The third dimension underpinning the use of the term is the ethno-religious, cultural mosaic to which the country is home. The Hindu community of course forms the

¹⁷According to the CIA Factbook (CIA 2016c and CIA 2016a), Pakistan is home to 202 million people and Bangladesh to 156 million.

majority (80.5%) (GoI 2011a). Muslims, however, are the largest minority, with 138 million people making up 13.4% of the total population (Ibid). There are also numerically large numbers of Christians (2.3%) and Sikhs (1.9%) (Ibid).

Table 1: Distribution of Population by Religion

Religion	Number	Percentage %
Population	1,028,610,328	100.0
Hindus	827,578,868	80.5
Muslims	138,188,240	13.4
Christians	24,080,016	2.3
Sikhs	19,215,730	1.9
Buddhists	7,955,207	0.8
Jains	4,225,053	0.4
Others	6,639,626	0.6
Without religious affiliation	727,588	0.1

Source: (GoI 2011a)

The demographer Frank Morgenthau emphasizes that one cannot “consider a country as very powerful because its population is bigger than that of most other countries, but it is still true that no country can become or remain a power of the first rank if it is not one of the most populous countries of the world” (cited in Buhler 2004, p.4). The overwhelming majority of the Indian political class makes free use of the same liberal economic language employed by the dominant discourse on world economic affairs. In looking at how to best project the country’s power, they tend to deliberately neglect the demographic and social aspects, preferring to argue that strong economic growth will somehow magically close up the immense inequalities. Both Indian and international observers laud India’s economic growth rates: from 6% during the period 1980-2002, it was 7.4% in 2014, a performance that seems to have been sustained up to this day (Asian Development Bank 2015 and 2016).

Official serenity disguises a concern that is far from new. Had it not been for the excesses of the National Population Policy of 16 April 1976 during emergency rule (June 1975-January 1977) introduced by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the country would have dared to bring in rigorous population planning. The dominant collective mentality remains marked by one component of the National Population Policy of that period: the massive sterilisation campaign. ‘The biggest democracy in the world’ has never attempted through an official inquiry to determine responsibilities for the policy. Over and above such a

sensitive task, India should doubtless have initiated the economic and social reforms for which the founding fathers had advocated. Arguing as to the ‘red menace’ – the actual threat this represented is difficult to gauge – the leaders of the new-born state worked to keep the social structure intact, putting forward measures that were far too timid to bring about much change.

3. A HAVEN OF PEACE BUT WITH AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

3.1. The Consequences of the Tragedy of Godhra

Compared to its Pakistani or Bangladeshi neighbours, India looks a haven of political stability. It is, however, the stage for social malaise that could, in time, represent a threat to the parliamentary democracy to which the country is attached. An indication of this is the resurgence of ‘naxalism’, a Maoist armed movement¹⁸. In addition to the consequences of economic liberalisation, the policy of promoting the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ), areas within which national and multinational enterprises can benefit from fiscally advantageous status, denies farmers access to fertile areas. Land speculation has become rife. The Naxalite phenomenon has affected rural areas of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Odhisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

In a tense social context, the political instrumentalisation of the fragile harmony between religious communities is also a tactic to which political parties can choose to make recourse. Indeed, the history of the country has been marked by what are euphemistically described as ‘communalist incidents’. One should mention here the communalist carnage that targeted the Sikh community after the assassination on 31 October 1984 of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi¹⁹, and the anti-Muslim pogroms²⁰ in Gujarat that followed the tragedy of Godhra on 27 February 2002²¹. These events led the Indian intelligentsia,

¹⁸The word ‘Naxalite’ refers to the peasants’ revolt that broke out in the district of Naxalbari (West Bengal) in spring 1967.

¹⁹To this day, figures are the subject of controversy. Some suggest that those killed numbered 8,000, with some 3,000 dying in the capital (Pillalamarri 2014). The families of those who survived the violence are still waiting for justice, despite the establishment of various commissions of inquiry.

²⁰The Sikh community also uses the term ‘pogrom’ to describe the communal riots that targeted it in October 1984.

²¹Another target of Hindu nationalist communalism is the Christian community. The *Sangh Parivar*, growing in confidence, seeks to bring these ‘lost sheep’ back into the fold of Hinduism, deemed the original religion of the Sub-continent. One may look briefly at events in Odisha (formerly Orissa) in this regard. On 23 August 2008, the Christian community of the district of Kandhamal, already living in precarious conditions, was the target of attacks by the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* and the *Bajrang Dal* (party of Hanuman, a god in the Hindu pantheon) (DanChurchAid 2008). The latter organisation, with its origins in the former, focused on youth membership. Six weeks later, the dead numbered 50; 5,000

hardly unused to communalist violence, to wonder out loud as to the dangers of Hindu nationalism²². The author will focus here on the tragedy of Godhra (Gujarat).

On 27 February 2002, about 7.50a.m., the Sabarmati Express train was the target of attack by a group of Muslims as it was leaving the town of Godhra (about 40% of the population of which is Muslim); one carriage caught fire. During the following days, several hundred Muslims were killed across much of Gujarat state with if not approval then at least indifference on the part of the Hindu nationalist administration of Gujarat led by Narendra Modi. New Delhi, where Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was in power, abstained from intervening, refusing to invoke use of Article 356 of the Constitution, otherwise known as ‘President’s Rule’, that allows for the central authorities, in the event of troubles threatening public order, to dismiss the state government and assume temporary charge.

That morning, the atmosphere on the train was tense. There was a large number of activists and supporters of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad among the passengers, returning home after participating in a ‘politico-cultural demonstration’ in Ayodhya²³ (Uttar Pradesh). The aim of these Hindu nationalists was to win over a public opinion that appeared lukewarm on the theme of the (re)construction of a temple, to replace the temporary place of worship that had been erected on the ruins of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. They hoped to push the Vajpayee government into taking such a decision without waiting for the verdict of the court²⁴.

improvised homes had been destroyed; 13,000 people displaced, with many more sheltering in the forest (Kumar and Kumara 2008).

The political scientist, Janet M. Powers, draws an interesting comparison. She writes: “*British attempts to legislate against Hindu practices such as sati, widow abuse, and devadasis were compounded by activities of Christian missionaries who regarded Hindus as heathens whose benighted souls should be saved. It is not surprising that Hindu nationalists act in a similar way in their attempts to reconvert Muslim and Christians, whom they believe were unfairly, either by force or poverty, drawn to “alien” religions*” (Powers 2009, p.69).

²²One should certainly not put the blame on the Hindu community alone: South Asia has seen communalist violence instigated and fed by Hindu, Muslims and Sikhs.

²³The Ayodhya Mosque (Babri Masjid) had been reopened to the public only a few years prior to its destruction. In 1858, the British authorities had decided to erect a barrier separating the two religious sites. The internal court was Muslim and the external one Hindu (The Hindu 2010). At dawn on 23 December 1949, idols had been placed under the mosque’s dome, thereby – according to Hindu practice – turning it into a Hindu place of worship. Even when it was closed to the public, Hindu prayers (‘pooja’) were intoned once a week in this ‘mosque-temple’. The *kar sevaks* (Hindu nationalist volunteers), in destroying the Sixteenth Century monument, demanded the reconstruction of a temple that had, the *Sangh Parivar* argued, existed on the site prior to the construction of the mosque, and celebrated the birth of the god Ram.

²⁴On 30 September 2010, the Allahabad High Court (Uttar Pradesh), basing its decision on sources including the archaeological digs that had been carried out on the site of Ayodhya after the destruction of the Babri mosque, stated that the latter had indeed been built on the ruins of temples. On the site of 1.12 hectares, a tiny part was that commemorating the coming of the god Ram. The High Court opted for a division of the site into three. The first would go to the Sunni Central Wakf Board of Uttar Pradesh, the

The kar sevaks, whose route had been carefully traced out, were travelling by train. In Godhra, however, the information had come to the railway authorities a day late. On 27 February, the train pulled in at platform 1, the only one with small traders in what was a Muslim majority area. Incidents could be expected. Hindu nationalist activists armed with sticks set about provoking the sellers, especially those with beards, insisting that they chant 'Jai Sri Ram' (victory to the god Ram). With the driver of the Sabarmati Express signalling the train was ready to leave, the Railway Protection Force was struggling to get the activists back on the train, which ground to a halt once again. Some passengers had sounded the 'emergency stop', presumably to allow their fellow voyagers still on the platform to get back on board. A group of Muslims that had in the meantime gathered started throwing stones. It was in these circumstances that carriage number 6 caught fire, killing 59 persons.

3.2. The Political Instrumentalisation of a Communalist Tragedy

Rather than trying to elucidate the exact circumstances behind the fire in carriage number 6²⁵, the Government of Gujarat preferred political instrumentalisation, while the Centre adopted a waiting posture. The State of Gujarat accused Pakistan of responsibility for events in Godhra. It argued that pro-Pakistan militants had already tried to attack parliament in New Delhi (13 December 2001), the consequences of which could have been much worse, given that key members of government had been present.

In June 2002, however, the Union Home Minister, Lal Krishna Advani, who had backed the theory of a plot fomented by Pakistan's intelligence services, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), distanced himself from this: inquiries carried out had not brought the expected results. In the months that had passed, one theory favoured by Hindu nationalists had however taken root: Muslims living in India were unpatriotic²⁶.

organ responsible, as its name suggests, for the administration of Sunni Muslim places of worship in the state. The second, which included the area over which the destroyed dome had stood, would be given to the *Ram Lala Virajman* (seated Baby Ram) to build a temple there. The last plot would go to the *Nirmohi Akhara* (Group without Attachment, in a loose translation, a group of Hindu ascetics). This was the site of the earlier structures dedicated to Ram Chabutra and Sita Rasoi (Times of India 2010; Pokharel and Lahiri 2010). The Sunni Central Wakf Board, the *Nirmohi Akhara*, the All-India Hindu Mahasabha (All-India Hindu Assembly) and the Bhagwan [god] Shri Ram Virajman all appealed the court's decision. On 31 May 2015, the Supreme Court suspended the verdict of the Allahabad High Court, restoring the status quo ante, that is to say the banning of all religious activities on the site (Venkatesan 2015).

²⁵Many questions remain unanswered. A forensic laboratory in Ahmedabad, the former capital of Gujarat, demonstrated that the fire could not have been caused solely by at least a 60-litre volume of inflammable liquid being poured around the interior of the carriage. With the possible exception of the toilets, the windows of the carriage were closed. The VHP, meanwhile, argued that the conclusion of the forensic laboratory was proof of a conspiracy: Muslims had travelled inside the train, in order to set fire to it. There are two remaining hypotheses: were the Hindu nationalist activists transporting kerosene to cook food? It would have been unlikely they had 60 litres in their luggage. The second hypothesis is that a Muslim vendor, plying his trade or trying to get paid for goods sold, climbed on board the train.

²⁶And here, Hindu nationalists were only too happy to lump together Muslim insurgents in Jammu and Kashmir deemed terrorists by the state, and Muslims in the whole of the Sub-continent.

Evoking the 2002 episode “Former Commissioner of Police, Ahmedabad, Shri P.C. Pande (he was CP when the carnage took place)” is of a different opinion. He told the journalist Rana Ayyub²⁷ :

“Yes, it was one of the most horrific times of my life. I had already seen 30 years of service. But look at this: there were riots in 85, 87, 89, 92 and most of the times the Hindus got a beating. And the Muslims got the upper hand. So this time in 2002, it had to happen, it was the retaliation of Hindus. Also post-1995, people felt that the government was theirs, especially because it was a BJP government. (...)

“They say the riots of 2002 are because of him [Narendra Modi]. He says I didn’t go and burn the train at Godhra. (...). See, this was a reaction of what happened there. I mean you see it logically, here is a group of Muslims going and setting fire on a train, so what will be your reaction ? « (Question) You hit them back ?

« (Answer) Yes, yes, you hit them back, now this hitting back, you must have already done research that they [the Hindus] got a beating in 85, 86, 92 and so, what happens, here is a chance, give it back to them... Why should anybody mind ?” (Ayyub 2016, p.105,106).

Pande added that:

“Once people get passionated about it, you can’t stop them...” (ibid).

IPS [India Police Service] officer Girish Singhal, for his part, stated:

“I have served in Gujarat during the riots and I have been here since 1991, So I have seen many riots. We have seen riots in 82, 83, 85,87, and in 92 post Ayodhya.

“Muslims were more dominant. In 2002, more Muslims were killed. See with Muslims it’s like this. Especially in 2002 it was like this, Muslims were killings Hindus all these years so whatever happened in 2002 was a retaliation of all these years of being beaten by Muslims. And everybody across the world created havoc. They did not see the situation in which the Hindus were killed” (Ayyub 2016, p.37).

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, during a televised debate, Narendra Modi had declared that “Not all Muslims are terrorists, but all the terrorists are Muslims” (Engineer 2015)²⁸. Did the Gujarat government, even as it officially called for calm, try to

²⁷Ayyub, a Tehelka journalist, took the false identity of Maithili Tyagi, a US-based film-maker and student of American Film Institute whose family adhered to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's ideology.

²⁸Such an assertion, at least in relation to India, was false. Looking at recent figures (2014), India suffered 976 victims of terrorism or extremism (depending on the choice of adjective): 465 persons were killed in the North-East, the scene of secessionist movements; 314 persons died in Naxalite attacks or the efforts to tackle these groups; 193 persons were killed in violence in Jammu and Kashmir (Patel 2015).

identify targets upon whom a 'reaction' (to use a term frequent in the Sub-continent) to the tragedy of Godhra could be visited? Publications of Sangh Parivar groups, such as Sandesh (Message) and Gujrat Samachar (Gujarat News), were disseminated widely to the most remote rural areas. The front page invariably had pictures of burnt bodies. Rumours that young Hindu girls had been raped by Muslims were spread. Local media close to the Hindu nationalists built up such propaganda. The barbarism of Muslims was highlighted by insisting that girls had been raped on multiple occasions, and that their assailants had even forced themselves on two dying bodies.

The 72 hours that followed Godhra illustrated what the Sangh Parivar intended by way of 'punishment' for 'the guilty' and 'lesson' for the Muslim community. The curfew declared seemed to apply only to the Muslim community, thus rendering them sitting targets, while activists of the BJP, RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal were free to act as they pleased. The State of Gujarat claimed it had struggled to restore order from 28 February to 2 March. Indian troops began to arrive in Gujarat on 1 March, but lacked the necessary logistical support from the Gujarat government²⁹. They were therefore not operational before 3 March. By that date, 790 Muslims had lost their life (the official total for the year was around 2,000, while more than 200,000 had had to flee to improvised camps, their belongings pillaged and/or burned).

The *Sangh Parivar* wanted to get rid of as many Muslims as possible, making use of methods that would not be quickly forgotten. It had lists of the numbers of Muslims by residential area, including addresses and residential or commercial property belonging to them. Information collected through the electoral register also proved invaluable: hardly any Hindu properties were damaged, but establishments co-owned by Hindu and Muslim associates were not spared.

Those who had imagined such atrocities also sought the elimination of Muslim religious and cultural objects³⁰. In total, 230 mosques and dargahs³¹ were, it appears, profaned or destroyed during the first 72 hours after the Godhra catastrophe. It is difficult to compile a list of the areas affected, but the majority of attacks took place in central Gujarat, especially in Ahmedabad and Vadodara. Bajrang Dal leaders in Ahmedabad, referring to the case of the district of Panchmahal (near Vadodara), rejoiced at the outcome of 800 villages 'cleansed' of Muslim presence. The Modi government, for its part, argued that everything was the result of spontaneous riots that broke out as Hindus spilled out into the streets.

²⁹The police had already been through a process of a kind of 'ethnic purification': Muslims holding posts with important responsibilities were transferred to solely administrative positions. Others who expressed opposition to such a move themselves risked 'punishment transfer'.

³⁰In Ahmedabad and Baroda, notably, mosques that were inscribed on the list of national monuments were knocked down with cranes and bulldozers, and roads quickly built in their place.

³¹These are tombs or mausoleums of Muslim saints.

“In a speech delivered in Gujarat, [Dr Pravin] Togadia [a cancer surgeon who joined the VHP in 1983] said:

“Terror was unleashed at Godhra station because this country follows Gandhi. We locked Gandhi away on February 28. Reform yourselves (Muslims) or we forget Gandhi forever. Till we follow Gandhi’s policy of non-violence, till we continue the practice of kneeling before Muslims, terrorism cannot be elevated. My brothers we have to abandon Gandhi” (Ayyub 2016, p.72).

The Chief Minister, projecting an image of the great defender of Hindu middle-class, called early elections for August 2002. Following opposition from the Election Commission, these were eventually held in September³². Since then, the Sangh Parivar has continued to determine the destiny of Gujarat. Rana Ayyub for her part tries to be impartial, writing, for example:

« There was an atmosphere of hostility that prevailed post-riots. It was clear that the not-so-amicable relationship between the two communities had taken a turn for the worse. Narendra Modi was being seen as the Hindu leader who saved the Gujarati Asmita from invasion. Both communities had suffered with the Godhra train burning and the carnage right after. Those who had come in the line of fire were bureaucrats and officers but nothing could be proved against them. Commissions of enquiry over the years have used the harshest words of criticism for the authorities and their actions, or inaction, at that time, but barring a few footsoldiers, most remained in position of power” (Ayyub 2016, p.30).

3.3. Hindu Nationalism and the Muslim ‘Threat’: Some Statistics

Hindu nationalists continue, in recurrent manner, to raise the spectre of the ‘Muslim threat’. They play on the issue of terrorism, but also – and since much longer – on a birth rate of the Muslim minority that might turn it into a majority in the long-run.

“Demographic statistics... suggest no threat from Muslims... What may alarm Hindu nationalists is the fact that there are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan; India has the second-highest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia. As a result, Sangh Parivar organizations decry high Muslim birth rates and imply a demographic threat. They also work politically at breaking up vote-getting collaboration among Muslims, Christians, and Dalits (untouchables)” (Powers 2009, p.69).

The natural increase of the Muslim community, 32.9% in the period 1981-1991, fell to 29.3% for the following decade. As for Hindus, their natural increase over the same periods dropped from 22.8% to 20%. Indeed, India is happy to boast of being a ‘great

³²During the carnage, Hindu nationalists focused on the Congress bastions of northern and central Gujarat. Some 47 of the 61 Congress-held constituencies were the scenes of violence, compared to only 57 out of 121 BJP-held ones. The Congress itself conducted an electoral campaign that was far from courageous, often declining to refer to the ‘communalist incidents’ and concentrating on the economy.

kaleidoscope' welcoming religions born in the Sub-continent or that come from elsewhere (GoI 2011a). The cradle of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism, the country has, moreover, seen the blossoming of various tribal belief systems that have resisted the influence of the 'great religions' (Ibid). Analysing the results of the 2011 census, the team leading this task reported that Hindus formed a majority in 27 states and union territories³³, with the exceptions being Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Lakshwadeep, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab. Muslims made up a majority in the tiny Lakshwadeep archipelago (just 32 km²), and in Jammu and Kashmir (222 236 km²). There is a non-negligible Muslim population in Assam (30.9%), West Bengal (25.2%), Kerala (24.7%), Uttar Pradesh (18.5%) and Bihar (16.5%) (Ibid)³⁴.

The most recent census of 2011 does not publish data allowing one to judge the natural increase by community, perhaps to avoid the tensions that such a presentation might provoke³⁵. Data are instead presented by age group. Some 18.7% of Muslims are in the 0-6 years age-group, whereas nationally, 15.9% of Indians are in that age-range. It is higher than five other religious communities (Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains). The lowest rate is for Jains (10.6%) and Sikhs (12.8%) (GoI 2011b).

Table 2: Child Population 0-6 Age Group

Religion	0-6 Age Group %
Hindus	15.6
Muslims	18.7
Christians	13.5
Sikhs	12.8
Buddhists	14.4
Jains	10.6
Others	18.0
India	15.9

Source: GoI (2011b)

Those who nonetheless might wish to try to influence the birth rate amongst the Muslim population must examine the dialectical relationship between social status and fertility.

³³India's federation includes 29 states and 7 union territories (Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu, Lakshadweep, Delhi and Pondicherry). These territories are directly administered by the Centre.

³⁴One needs also to take into account the illegal immigration of Bangladeshi into the bordering Indian states, especially Assam and West Bengal.

³⁵The census website is not very user-friendly in the view of this user.

The author may quote a document published in November 2006, the Sachar Committee Report³⁶ on Social, Economic and Education Status of the Muslim Community in India (Ministry of Minority Affairs 2006). This emphasised that the difficulty of social promotion of Muslims stemmed less from their unwillingness to improve themselves than from a scarcely concealed rejection by the dominant community.

Two further indicators should be mentioned here: firstly, the level of literacy of the Muslim community given below of most other religious groups.

Table 3: Literacy of major religious community in India

Religion	Overall Literacy rate %	Males %	Females %
Hindus	65.1	76.2	53.2
Muslims	59.1	67.6	50.1
Christians	80.3	84.4	76.2
Sikhs	69.4	75.2	63.1
Buddhists	72.7	83.1	61.7
Jains	94.1	97.4	90.6
Other religions	47.0	60.8	33.2
India	64.8	75.3	53.7

Source: GoI (2011b)

The second indicator is the extent to which members of the Muslim community are economically active. It is true that in both cases, the issue of social integration overlaps with that of religious conservatism. The importance of the informal sector to the Indian economy, and which is perhaps not fully accounted for, should also not be underestimated.

³⁶Established in 2005, as is customary, this commission took the name of its president, Rajinder Sachar, a lawyer who had already assumed important official positions.

Table 4: Work participation rate by religion

Religion	Total %	Males %	Females %
Hindus	40.4	52.4	27.5
Muslims	31.3	47.5	14.1
Christians	39.7	50.7	28.7
Sikhs	37.7	53.3	20.2
Buddhists	40.6	49.2	31.7
Jains	32.9	55.2	9.2
Other religions	48.4	52.5	44.2
India	39.1	51.7	25.6

Source: GoI (2011b)

It is clear that the Muslim community struggles to profit from the “law of the group” (Dumont 2006) in such a way as to protect its rights. This concept draws on the idea that “within a population living in a given territory, specific groups can use, directly or indirectly, their numeric weight to modify their situation, obtain political advantages or influence the foreign policy of the territory”. Outside the Kashmir Valley, Muslims are, it is true, dispersed across a vast area, comprising a minority within a Hindu mass.

Another burden weighs on the Muslim community: the events that have shaken Kashmir since the end of the 1980s, and which doubtless push one latent suspicion to the front of the minds of many non-Muslim Indians. How can one be sure of the loyalty of Muslims to age-old India, when they were responsible (according to this reading) for the partition of the country? It should be noted, however, that the Centre, in the messaging that it deploys to justify the tough repression meted out in Jammu and Kashmir, avoids any lumping together of the Muslim population of that state and their co-religionists in the rest of the country. With the exception of the attacks and violence that continue to mark life in that state, the beginnings of the phenomenon of terrorism that has come to affect India are perhaps to be found in the aftermath of the destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya. The intercommunal harmony, which India could boast of having gradually installed (more than forty years after the partition), was lastingly damaged. Bloody communalist riots broke out across the country following the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque. In March 1993, thirteen booby-trapped vehicles exploded in Mumbai (Bombay), putting the capital of the state of Maharashtra into shock. New Delhi pointed the finger of accusation at Islamabad and the ISI. Since then, India has been troubled by attacks only too frequently. The hair-raising attack on the city of Mumbai in late November 2008 underlined the dangers which citizens of all religious colours must risk facing.

According to the recent analyses carried out by the Indian intelligence services, the most radical Muslims in the country are building an internal terrorist movement, with the

blessing of the ISI (The Hindustan Times, 14 October 2016). The Muslim community, for its part, is worried by police methods at a time when the country is seeking to rid itself of the terrorist phenomenon. Whatever the case, the ‘biggest democracy in the world’ is the stage on which a political life undermined by demagoguery and corruption plays out, as human rights get a battering. All this, in spite of a Constitution that in Articles 15 and 16 of Part III (National Portal of India 2016, pp 8-10), defends fundamental human rights and proclaims the equality of all and before the law.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a document titled 300 Days. Documenting Hate and Communal Violence Under the Modi Regime published on 20 May 2015, John Dayal is alarmed about the slogan Ghar Wapsiand (the spiritual return home of lost souls to the Hindu faith) or cries of Love Jihad (accusing Muslim men of marrying, and converting by force, Hindu women). Dayal is deeply concerned by the sorry communalist record of the Modi government after one year in power.

“Mr. Modi calls for a ten-year moratorium on communal and caste violence. His government soon declared Christmas to be a “Good Governance Day” in honour of the BJP leader and former Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee. There are fears at a severe whittling down of the 15 Point Programme for many severely economic backward communities and specially their youth seeking higher education and professional training” (Dayal 2015).

The author examined one conclusion of the National United Christian forum, “representing the Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical groups of the Church in India”, which said,

“The cultural DNA of India of pluralism and diversity is being threatened. We are anxious about the implications of the fundamentalist political thesis that India is “one nation, one people and one culture”. A nation of cultural homogeneity is impossibility and any effort to impose it is fraught with grave ramifications for the country” (Ibid).

The victims of the events in Gujarat alluded to above wait in vain for impartial justice to be rendered to them, declaring forcefully that the then Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, was in the driving seat. An emblematic case was the carnage in the Gulberg Housing Society, almost exclusively occupied by Muslims, on 28 February 2002 where 69 persons were killed. Indeed, the terrifying character of the events of Gujarat of early 2002 will forever mark the memory of the Indian Muslim community, even if ‘communalist incidents’, as they are sometimes euphemistically described, are no stranger to the Sub-continent.

A number of Muslims had taken refuge on 28 February 2002 in Chamanpura, an area of central Ahmedabad (at the time the capital of Gujarat), where the Gulberg Housing

Society was located. There were two reasons for this: Chamanpura was close to a Police Commissioner's Office, and they believed that the presence of Ehsan Jafri, a former Congress parliamentarian, would offer a reasonable guarantee of security. Indeed, the 73-year-old had received a visit from the Commissioner of Police, P.C. Pandey, who had told him that police reinforcements would be dispatched. No help was sent, despite repeated calls made by Jafri and Congress political notables who spoke on several occasions to the Director General of Police, the Commissioner of Police, the mayor and various other members of the Government of Gujarat. Ehsan Jafri died in horrible circumstances as the locality came under attack from a crowd of rioters numbering around 3,000. Jafri made one last throw of the dice, telephoning Modi, who is said to have replied:

"Are you still alive? Don't worry, they will take care of you!" (Mahmoud 2014).

New Delhi, the country's capital, is today sprinkled with posters boasting of the exalted rank India now occupies in international relations. Beneath a photograph of Modi, a tagline proclaims that 'India is becoming the world's fascination'³⁷. It is a discourse that flatters a nationalism of worrying dimensions. The centrality of its Hindu element is asserted forcefully, provoking the 'excesses' that the more extreme in the Sangh Parivar are only too pleased to boast about.

By way of example, one can mention recent events in the village of Bishada (Gautam Budh Nagar district in Uttar Pradesh) that took place on 28 September 2015. Villagers forced their way into the home of a Muslim family suspected of storing beef in their fridge, lynching the 50-year old father, Mohammed Akhlaq, and seriously wounding one of his sons, a 22-year old. The consumption of beef is illegal in Uttar Pradesh, as well as many other states of India, since Hinduism venerates cows. One of the outcomes of the inquiry should be noted here: the meat found in the Akhlaq family fridge was sent for testing and the laboratory found it to be beef rather than mutton, as had been claimed the day after the drama. The 19 murderers, seeking to bring an end to judicial proceedings against them, are thus demanding the arrest of the family for violation of the Penal Code that outlaws the eating of beef.

This is one example amongst many others of the atmosphere prevailing in the country, as many including journalists do not hesitate to state that they are afraid to express themselves freely. In such circumstances, the reader will appreciate that researchers, especially those from overseas, are reluctant to formulate recommendations. There is no doubt that Indian civil society has a crucial role to play in reinforcing inter-communal harmony, in what is an ethno-religiously diverse country. One can only encourage the Indian intelligentsia to increase awareness, particularly amongst the Hindu majority, of

³⁷It is true that compared to the previous administration, the Modi government spends significantly more on publicity. According to figures given by the CPI(M), the annual budget for such activities increased in 2016 by 20% to reach Indian Rs. 1,200 crores (Yechury 2016) or about 170 million euros.

the need to continue building the nation along the lines set out by the ‘founding fathers’³⁸. This would also highlight how diversity is a source of strength rather than, as seems to be the case for certain currents of Hindu nationalist opinion, a weakness to be denied. One should take to mention the important role Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) has been playing.

“In addition to opportunity, self-confidence, personality development, and networks, JNU also gave a student perspective about the nature of the world, not just in terms of the global order, but also in terms of the structures of power, dynamics of society, drivers of change, and aspirations of citizens. We learnt how peasants became citizens. We learnt how elite capture was a problem for democracy. These ideas enriched our public discourse. At JNU we produced and reproduced the idea of an India that was inclusive, anti-discriminatory, gender-just, environmentally sustainable, artistically creative, cosmopolitan and socially redistributive.” (de Souza, 2016).

Peter Ronald de Souza emphasizes that:

“In addition to being an incubator of personnel to the state and civil society, JNU has also been an incubator of dissenting ideas. For a nation to cope with the pressures of modernity and the challenges of globalisation it needs to have an army of intellectuals who can prepare the nation for this new world that is upon us. It needs to engage with these new ideas. Go to a seminar in JNU, and you will be delighted by the intensity of the questions and the earnestness of the search for answers. It is one of the few places in the country where interdisciplinarity is a habit and where conversations between aestheticians and political scientists do not raise an eyebrow. Nor do dialogues between the cosmologies of the East and of the West” (ibid)³⁹.

“Contrary to what is repeated around us, it is never difference that is the obsession of the persecutor, but rather its opposite, that is to say lack of differentiation” (Girard 1982, p.29).

³⁸“The President of India, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, noted the rise of communalism and the targeting of religious minorities in his address to the nation on 25 January 2015, the Eve of Republic Day. President Mukherjee said: “In an international environment where so many countries are sinking into the morass of theocratic violence... We have always reposed our trust in faith-equality where every faith is equal before the law and every culture blends into another to create a positive dynamic. The violence of the tongue cuts and wounds people’s hearts. The Indian Constitution is the holy book of democracy. It is a lodestar for the socio-economic transformation of an India whose civilization has celebrated pluralism, advocated tolerance and promoted good will between diverse communities. These values, however, need to be preserved with utmost care and vigilance” (Dayal 2015).

³⁹The journalist writes: “There were many things wrong with JNU. For example, the liberal persuasion was not allowed the space it should have been given by the Stalinist Left. The political spectrum was wide but it could have been wider. Analytical thinking was feeble, and ideological camps gave protection to the less capable. But it was possible to question these ideological hegemonies. To dissent, experiment, collaborate, this is the signature of JNU. Debate was polemical but it was peaceful. There was no violence. By providing personnel to the civil services, academic institutions, civil society organisations, and media, JNU has been a significant incubator for the task of nation-building” (ibid).

The French philosopher, René Girard, ponders the dialectics of scapegoating and the stereotypes that underlie a desire, in periods of crisis, to stigmatise particular communities. He writes that:

“Victims are selected not on the basis of the crimes that are attributed to them, but rather on the basis of their indicators of victimhood, on everything that is inferred as to their guilty affinity with crisis” (Ibid).

The writer goes on to say that:

“The aim is to place the blame for the crisis on the victims and to mitigate the effects of the former by destroying the victims or at least expelling them from the community that they ‘pollute’” (Ibid. p.30).

René Girard looks at the founding myths about scapegoats in traditional societies. Are we thus heirs of this way of thinking that reasserts itself in times of crisis? It is true that many nations today seem dominated by politicians who seek to underline their personal charisma and the ascendancy of their political party. They no longer seek to defend, as their predecessors once did, the ideals that permit the development of a society based on justice and respect for difference. By way of example, one can note how the assertion of racism is no longer so widely and unequivocally condemned. Similarly, these leaders undermine the common interest, stoking socio-economic or religious rivalries to render the atmosphere day-by-day more toxic.

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