

Godhra and the Banerjee Report

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THE Sangh Parivar is understandably upset at the U.C. Banerjee inquiry committee Report on the Godhra train burning incident. The subsequent Gujarat carnage was justified by the Sangh Parivar solely on the basis of this incident, describing it as a conspiracy by Muslims of Godhra with involvement of ISI of Pakistan. Even the BJP Prime Minister Shri

several loopholes. How did the conspirators know that there were Karsevaks on the Sabarmati Express. The train was also running more than four hours late. And as for Karsevaks being on the train, inquiries show that even RAW, LB, and Railway Police did not know anything about it. In fact, Karsevaks were scheduled to return a day earlier, but were delayed by a day. How could then conspirators know that Karsevaks were on the train

officer from Ahmedabad who was travelling in S-6 with his wife said he saw only smoke and no fire. His wife died and he crawled out of the compartment. Though he crawled on the floor he had no burn injuries. If petrol had been thrown on the floor to set fire, Mr. Joshi could not have crawled on the floor. His wife was sitting near the window and did not come out in time and died of asphyxiation. In fact all those who died do not

compartment as some traces of grains were found inside. It was an incidental spark which fell on rubber fittings causing dense smoke which later at a higher temperature turned into fire.

It has been testified by witnesses that smoke was noticed before fire. Also, looking at the other aspect of the matter, the train stopped hardly for five minutes after pulling of chain and it was physically impossible to carry out such in operation in such a short time. To carry several cans of

The Deputy SP, Railway also said in his statement that he did not see petrol or any other liquid being carried by anyone inside the compartment. The survivors had superficial injuries on upper part of their bodies. Had petrol been thrown on the floor and set to fire, they would have had injuries on lower parts of the body.

A.B.Vajpayee justified the Gujarat carnage saying that the Muslims of India did not "condemn it enough" and hence this carnage took place. Mr. L.K.Advani had similarly justified the Bombay riots of 1992-93 saying that "Hindus were anguished" by the burning of few Hindus at Jogeshwari. Subsequently, the Supreme Court discharged all the accused in the Jogeshwari incident. But the Sangh Parivar took the law into its own hand and perpetrated communal violence in Mumbai in 1992-93.

In the case of Godhra too, before the truth was out, within 24 hours communal carnage started in other parts of Gujarat, in which more than two thousand citizens were butchered or burnt alive most brutally. Without any preliminary inquiry, Narendra Modi and his cohorts drew definite conclusions, and before anyone could know what had happened, started the butchery. Narendra Modi propounded a theory of action and reaction referring to Newton's theory.

Now that the Banerjee Committee appointed by Lulu Prasad Yadav as Railway Minister has come to the conclusion that the fire probably started by cooking from inside, the Sangh Parivar is denouncing it as a "political act" as if their theory of conspiracy was established beyond any ken of doubt. More than one hundred persons (135) were accused of pre-planned terrorist attack by one community. Ten charge sheets have already been filed.

The conspiracy theory has

that day? They could not know more than government intelligence agencies. Even if they did, delay of more than four hours could have upset their plans. In such matters, even minutes matter, let alone hours.

Even pulling the chain, cross examination in the court clearly brings out, was not the handiwork of Muslims, the chain was pulled by Karsevaks themselves as some Karsevaks chasing the vendors on Godhra railway platform were left out when the train moved. They pulled the chain twice. The conspiracy theory maintains that the accused had pulled the chain, stopped the train to carry petrol or inflammable liquid into S-6, and set the fire. The forensic report also clearly states that no traces of hydrocarbon were found on the floor of S-6 compartment. That clearly means no petrol was spread on the floor of S-6 to set fire to it. However, Modi maintained that Muslims had used 140 litres of petrol. He never said what was his source of information. With so much petrol the whole compartment would have exploded and charred completely.

The Deputy SP, Railway also said in his statement that he did not see petrol or any other liquid being carried by anyone inside the compartment. The survivors had superficial injuries on upper part of their bodies. Had petrol been thrown on the floor and set to fire, they would have had injuries on lower parts of the body. Also, no Karsevak has admitted petrol being smuggled in and poured out on the floor.

Haribhai Joshi, an income tax

seem to have died of burns, but of asphyxiation.

The post-mortem reports, the less said the better. Unfortunately, much has not come out in the press about it. Mr. Mukul Sinha, the defence lawyer rolled out startling information in a talk recently. His information was based on cross-examination and examination of relevant documents. There are several flaws in the report. Post-mortem was done before the inquest report. Inquest was done at 6.45 PM whereas post-mortem began at 4.30 PM Post-mortem is always followed by inquest.

What is more important is to note that the post-mortem was done at railway station itself and one doctor has signed it on March 14 though it was done on February 27. This doctor was perhaps very honest and put the date when he signed the report. Mr. Mukul Sinha concluded that perhaps post-mortem was never done as there were no signs of severe burns on the bodies of the deceased. Also very few bodies actually had been identified. Most others could not be identified at all.

The then Railway Minister Mr. Nitish Kumar obliged the BJP-led government by not holding any inquiry as long as NDA was in power. Actually, the inquiry should have been immediately held following the incident. It was Lulu Yadav of the UPA government who ordered an inquiry headed by U.C. Banerjee, a retired Supreme Court Judge. Justice Banerjee has concluded that the fire was the result of cooking inside the

petrol (about 60 litres as estimated by forensic experts) inside S-6 through the vestibule cutting its canvas is almost impossible. In, fact they entered through S-7 and the rubber cover of that S-7 vestibule was not cut. That evidence was also sought to be destroyed. S-7 was not preserved as an evidence and was used for 7 days after the incident. In fact if the culprits had entered through S-7, cutting its canvas, how could it be used for seven days before it was grounded.

Also, the terrain was such as to make such an operation impossible. There was a deep drain between the Signal Faliah and the track and thick shrubs making it impossible for the miscreants to cross it and enter the train. The Karsevaks were also carrying trishuls and how could they allow outsiders to enter the compartment with petrol to set fire to the compartment without resistance.

All these factors have to be taken into account if the conspiracy theory is to be substantiated. It is unfortunate that Justice Nanavati inquiring into Gujarat communal carnage and Godhra incident has hurriedly debunked Justice Banerjee report without having any concrete evidence to support conspiracy theory. It is not becoming of a Judge inquiring into these incidents to dismiss other judge's inquiry report. He should have waited for completion of his own inquiry before making such statement. Remember he had given a statement absolving the police from its role in Gujarat riots before he started the inquiry. It was only after public hue and cry that he took back his statement.

This clearly shows that Narendra Modi has appointed a judge with careful consideration to obtain the result he wants. For the Sangh Parivar, minorities are always to be blamed and for this there is no need for any judicial inquiry. It is a forgone conclusion for them that Muslims are violent and any violent incident should be blamed on them. That also gives them opportunity to seek revenge and kill them ruthlessly. Even the person of the stature of the Prime Minister also could not refrain from making provocative statement like who set fire to the train in Goa in 2002. When he said this and that Muslims did not condemn the Godhra incident enough he clearly took it for granted that Muslims from Signal Faliah were real culprits and had hatched the conspiracy to set S-6 ablaze. It is highly regretted that the Prime Minister of the country could become so blatantly partisan for his party totally forgetting his constitutional duties.

Of course the Banerjee Committee's report is still not final as many police officials avoided appearing before it, perhaps to conceal the real truth. It is being said that the government is thinking of giving it the status of a commission under the Inquiry Commission's Act so that Justice Banerjee could summon the police officials and other witnesses. If that happens, it would be possible to know the truth, which was sought to be suppressed so far by those who were waiting for an opportunity to fan fires of communal violence. It is highly necessary that truth be known, not for seeking revenge but to avoid such incidents in future and keeping the communal zealots under check.

As for the charge that Lulu Prasad Yadav is using it for election purposes, let those who are making this charge against him not forget that Narendra Modi exploited the Godhra incident blatantly for his election campaign in December 2002 and that he had not hesitated to carry dead bodies of unfortunate victims of Godhra incident in procession in Ahmedabad to ignite communal fires. Now the Chief Election Commissioner is objecting to such use of the Banerjee Committee Report, but why did the Election Commission allowed Narendra Modi to exploit the Godhra incident for his election purposes? It is for the Election Commission to clarify this issue. Of course, ideally, no one should exploit such issues for electoral purposes. But then who will throw the first stone?

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World Economic Forum

From Mumbai to Davos

ZAFAR SOBHAN

THIS time last year I was covering the World Social Forum in Mumbai for The Daily Star. This year, as the WSF returned to its original home in Porto Allegre, Brazil, I found myself, instead, at the Swiss mountain village that has become a by-word for the global power elite.

Reflecting back on a week of high-powered seminars and panel discussions, rubbing shoulders with CEOs and world leaders, and the highly-charged dinner and cocktail party circuit, the one thing that I could not help but take away from the experience was how it was so similar to the WSF in so many ways.

On the surface, the two events could not have been more dissimilar, and the WSF touts itself as the counterpart to the World Economic Forum (the official title of the annual gathering at Davos. The WEF is an invitation-only exclusive club of roughly 2,000 of the most powerful and influential men and women on the planet, mostly politicians and CEOs with a smattering of "cultural leaders" and media personalities thrown in to round things off. Security is stratospheric and the luminaries present this year included Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, Thabo Mbeki, and Bill Gates.

This all seems a far cry from the WSF which was a riotous assembly of close to 200,000 activists and radicals of every shade and stripe. The participants there ranged from trade unionists to indigenous rights groups to street activists from as far away as New York and Sao Paulo to social workers and educators and anyone else with a pulse and a conscience.

But apart from the demographic make-up of the participants and the contrast between the dusty squalor of the Mumbai suburb of Goregaon where the WSF was held and the manicured five-star luxury of the beautiful Alpine village of Davos, the similarities between the two events were striking.

I wouldn't say that I had come to Davos fully buying into the WSF critique of the WEF: that it was an exclusive club who's function was to manipulate control of the levers of political and economic power in an attempt to maintain the privileges of the elite, but I certainly came with a fair degree of scepticism and ironic detachment. Last year when I interviewed the Bangladeshi head of Amnesty International Irene Khan at the WSF, she looked a little abashed when I asked her where she was heading to next, before whispering confidentially that she was on her way to Davos, but please not to tell anyone at Mumbai that! This time we greeted each other in Davos less conspiratorially, but there was still a small sense of amusement and embarrassment that we were both part of this festival of privilege.

However, as soon as I arrived

Rickshaws in Dhaka

SYED SHAMIM FARUK

THE gradual banning of rickshaws from the major roads of metropolin Dhaka has severely affected the city dwellers. Take the example of Mrs Jahangir, a resident of north Shahjahanpur. A mother of three school-going children, she had got her kids admitted to a good school in the Dhanmondi area. She has sacrificed a lot of her other household expenses with the desire to give her children a better schooling. She used to use rickshaws as the only means of transport to ferry her children up and down. Each trip cost her thirty taka. However with the banning of rickshaws, she finds no other alternative but to admit her children to the schools in the nearby locality. This is just one of many unfortunate tales of city dwellers in recent times.

Rickshaws were probably introduced to the city of Dhaka in the early part of the previous century. Those of us who have been brought up in Dhaka have seen its existence since childhood and it has become a part and parcel of our everyday life. It is by far the most common mode of public transport used by people of all walks of life.

To a certain extent, the existence of rickshaws may reflect the true nature of our socio-economic condition. Those who are involved in pulling rickshaws do mostly belong to the deprived class of the society. For a large section of these people, their poverty is the direct consequence of economic mismanagement and ill distribution of wealth in our society. Some of them have lost farms and land, others have lost their homestead devoured by river erosion. They have flocked to the capital in search of livelihood and more often than not end up pulling rickshaws because of scarcity of work in other avenues.

In many cases, self declared organisations like rickshaw league, rickshaws dal, rickshaw association,

Globalization has made it clear that the fundamental problems faced by the developing world such as poverty, Aids, safe drinking water, malaria, etc are everyone's concern. It is not only markets and labour -- what is being globalized is the concept of responsibility -- and it was this sentiment that found expression at Davos.

In Davos, I found my pre-conceived notions of the forum and its functions being challenged.

The first major event on the opening day of the forum was billed as a Global Town Hall, and as I had been roped in as something called a Table Facilitator, I had a ring-side seat to see how it unfolded.

Almost half of all participants -- approximately 800 at final count -- took part in the programme (simulcast to millions around the world) which consisted of eighty tables of ten participants each discussing and answering questions about the focus of that year's forum, entering their answers via a touch-pad, and having the information processed, summarized, and distributed in real time. The idea was to get a snapshot of how the 800 participants thought about the issues that confronted the world community.

The table I was running included the Pakistani head of Habib Bank, an American partner from Bain & Co., a Slovenian banker (and her husband), an Indian CEO, a Japanese social entrepreneur, and two ministers from Jordan.

At the end of the programme it seemed that the conclusions we had reached at our table were fairly representative of discussions that had been going on elsewhere in the room. The most important issue that the world needed to address, according to the participants, by quite a significant margin, turned out to be poverty. Poverty was followed by equitable globalization, global governance, climate change, health, and the Middle East.

This from a crowd that was roughly 50 percent businessmen and women and mostly from Europe and North America.

Not bad I thought. But this was merely the beginning.

The next day there was the much-written about panel discussion on Africa and the G-8 featuring Bill Clinton and Bono (as well as lesser luminaries such as Tony Blair and Bill Gates). This was followed in the coming days by high-profile panel discussions on the subject of debt relief and health and absolute poverty alleviation.

To be sure, the dispossessed and the marginalized were not in evidence at Davos, but their issues were front and centre. I know many people will argue that that is precisely the problem, and that issues such as poverty and health cannot be solved in Davos because any such solution will continue to shut out the voices of those most deeply affected, and that the real problem is the fact that power will remain concen-

trated in the hands of people like those who get invited to Davos in the first place.

Perhaps. But perhaps not. In the first place, the fact that those at Davos wield actual power should be an argument for the effectiveness of the forum, not an argument against it. The one drawback of the WSF from my perspective was that very few of the participants were in a position to bring about the fundamental reform that all felt was so necessary. I am sure that they went home and implemented a great deal of micro-level change for the better, but the macro-level situation in their countries most likely stayed the same.

But it was more than that. At Davos with the global elite I had a strong feeling that the world has turned a corner. It is possible that the catalytic agent for this was the recent tsunami that killed close to 200,000 people and brought graphic images of death and destruction into the living room.

The sense I get is that globalization -- for all its good and ill -- has certainly had one indisputable benefit. It is now simply no longer possible for those in the first world to shrug off issues that do not directly affect them as not being their concern. Globalization has made it clear that the fundamental problems faced by the developing world such as poverty, Aids, safe drinking water, malaria, etc are

everyone's concern. It is not only markets and labour -- what is being globalized is the concept of responsibility -- and it was this sentiment that found expression at Davos.

It is possible that I have fallen for a smart confidence game and that the big words and bold visions on display at Davos will never see the light of day. It is possible that the commitment of world leaders and CEOs to tackling the real issues of disempowerment and inequality will last only so long as the cameras are on them.

But I sense something different. I heard US Senators and European ministers and captains of industry use language I had never heard before from people like them. I heard them use words such as "moral obscenity" to describe the fact that a billion people live on less than a dollar day and that malnutrition and disease stalk the developing world like a predator. I got the sense that we are on the edge of a global shift in terms of consciousness and that the world is finally waking up to the fact that when it comes to the fundamental problems of our troubled times that we are all in this together.

The World Economic Forum developing a social conscience? Who knows -- maybe another world is possible after all.

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