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India: Combating Communalism

Saturday 15 April 2017, by [ANAND Javed](#), [BANAJI Jairus](#), [SESHU Geeta](#) (Date first published: 30 December 2015).

An interview with one of India's staunchest opponents of religious nationalism.

When India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept to power in last year's elections [1], there was an abundance of media hype about the party's purportedly huge mandate. Yet its 31 percent vote share was the lowest ever for a winning party in Indian elections. The true significance of the victory instead lies in the trajectory of its leader, now-prime minister Narendra Modi.

In 2002, Modi was presiding over Gujarat when anti-Muslim riots in the western state claimed over a thousand lives and hundreds of places of worship. Twelve years later, he emerged as the prime minister of the world's largest democracy. This speaks to the ways in which Indian politics has evolved under the pressure of groups like the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a self-styled cultural organization that controls much of the BJP and a host of affiliates, and the violent communal mobilizations to which they contribute.

This type of religious-nationalist violence and political outlook has come to be known in the country as "communalism." Two of its most formidable opponents are journalists Teesta Setalvad and Javed Anand, who started *Communalism Combat* [2] in 1993 after witnessing a decade of violence.

In the years since, Combat has become a major platform for the struggle against communalism in all forms. Working with Citizens for Justice and Peace, Combat did more to expose the scale and horror of the Gujarat violence than any mainstream publication. Their vigilance has made them many powerful enemies, including Modi himself.

In the following interview, conducted by Jairus Banaji and Geeta Seshu, Anand discusses the principles behind the magazine, the violence that communalism has produced, and the significance of the Zakia Jafri case, which could result in criminal charges against Modi for the killing of Jafri's late husband in the 2002 riots.

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Jairus Banaji and Geeta Seshu - How did *Communalism Combat* get started?

Javed Anand - Teesta and I had been working with the mainstream media since the 1980s. Starting in 1983 we found ourselves confronted by one communal riot after another. There was also the Shah Bano case judgement, where Muslims went on a warpath demanding a separate family law for Muslims.

Then the mobilization of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization, around the demand for a Ram temple at Ayodhya brought things to a boil from 1986 to 1992. That led to the demolition of the Babri Mosque on December 6, 1992 [3]. It was Bombay that saw the worst of the violence in the aftermath, with pogroms against Muslims.

Throughout that period we found ourselves covering much of the communal violence that was

happening, and by way of response we formed a group called Journalists Against Communalism.

When was that?

This would be sometime around 1988-89. A whole lot of people were asking, "What should be done?" We decided that maybe we should use our professional skills as journalists. So we left our jobs and started *Communalism Combat* in 1993.

Many of our friends both within journalism and outside said, "You're crazy! You're working in the mainstream media, which means you have a much wider reach. You're going to give that up to start a magazine which will sell a few thousand copies." We said, "It's not just a magazine — it's also a platform which gives us the opportunity to intervene in ways which we can't otherwise."

The Srikrishna Commission, which was set up to examine the Bombay riots, in which around nine hundred people died, had actually named people from the Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena who were complicit in the 1992 violence and named police officers guilty of dereliction of duty, so our demand was that the Maharashtra government act on the findings and recommendations of the commission. There was an attempt to not release the report.

The Shiv Sena/BJP government came to power in 1995. The Srikrishna Commission needed an extension of term because their work hadn't finished. But the government announced they were scrapping the commission. Atul Setalvad went to the Supreme Court and the extension had to be granted.

When the report came out [4], they didn't want it to be too widely publicized, so they made just enough copies for the members of the state legislative assembly. So we, virtually overnight, published the Srikrishna Commission report ourselves. We organized public meetings and *dharnas* calling for "justice for all and punishment for the guilty." We couldn't have done any of that had we remained in the mainstream media.

More importantly, between 1998 and 2002, we did five cover stories that were like alarm bells that said, "Look where Gujarat is headed!" The mainstream media, even at its secular best, is basically limited to a kind of episodic journalism. What mattered for us was the focus on the problem of communalism, which we see as the greatest threat to Indian democracy, the outer face of fascism in India. Since the media's own freedom is contingent on the health of Indian democracy, this business of "objective" journalism doesn't really address the issue of secularism at all.

When the genocidal targeting of Muslims in 2002 actually happened [5] Teesta spent two to three weeks, from the first days onwards, going into remote areas where the media had still not reached. We brought out the *Gujarat Genocide 2002 report*. That was flashed around both the houses of parliament and MPs said, "Is this true what's written here?" The home minister, Advani, promised, "We'll inquire, investigate, etc., etc."

So we were a watchdog, even though we were always limited in circulation. We were able to do this because we weren't just preaching to the converted.

In the early 1980s, India regressed from the era of communal riots to one of state-condoned, at times even state-sponsored communal pogroms. You now had full-blown, state-sponsored, state-condoned pogroms. People still talk of riots, but 1984 was not a riot, 1992-93 in Bombay was not a riot, nor was Gujarat 2002. At the heart of the new era was a pattern where the state watched while Hindutva mobs unleashed a reign of terror. It was mob terror plain and simple, though it was still called a "communal riot."

In Bombay in 1992-93 we had the pogroms directed against Muslims, led by the Shiv Sena, and three months later we had the serial bomb blasts targeting the stock exchange and various iconic buildings in the city, and in those Muslims were involved. It began to look to us like, if a majority community uses the logic of numbers and the state watches as it engages in mob terror, then some elements within the community that's being pushed to the wall, however tiny a percentage, might start thinking of retaliating.

In fact, you may remember a Dr Jalees Ansari from Bombay [6], who's now serving time for his role in a series of bomb blasts in trains. In his investigation he told the investigators that "we wanted to send a message to the Indian parliament that if you will not protect Muslims as per the constitution, we will find ways of protecting ourselves." So a response to mob terror that was equally dangerous and seriously problematic for the country also began to surface at that time.

And then in the 2000s you had the Nanded blasts, the Malegaon blasts, and an investigation by impartial police officers from the Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) [7] unearthed the rise of Hindu terrorist groups.

The media wouldn't touch this subject, neither the print media nor the electronic media. Teesta got hold of the ATS charge sheet in the Nanded blast case, where they clearly talk about a whole "web" (that's the exact word used) of Hindu extremists forming a network, creating bomb blasts in Parbhani, in Nanded, and elsewhere.

The culprits were Bajrang Dal and VHP guys dressed up as Muslims to make it look as if Muslims were on a rampage all over the place. Justice Sawant, Teesta and others traveled to Delhi to publicize these findings, and they held a press conference attended by some sixty to eighty persons from the media.

When was this?

This was in 2009. It was very well-attended by the electronic media. We said, "This isn't a *Communalism Combat* opinion — this is the charge sheet of the ATS. Please look at this new phenomenon of Hindu terror groups." No reportage the next day except in *The Hindu*! So that was the role that *Communalism Combat* played at the time.

Secondly, from the beginning we were quite clear that while it is true that majority communalism is what poses the real danger to democracy and democratic institutions, minority communalism and majority communalism feed off each other. Therefore you can't be gentle in your dealings with the issue of minority communalism because then you're supporting this mutually reinforcing relation. So we were as sharply critical of minority communalism.

On the issue of Muslim personal law, we argued that *all* personal laws are grossly unjust to women and that this needs to be reformed, so we pitted ourselves against the Muslim orthodoxy and Muslim fundamentalists. Similarly on the issue of caste. We saw caste, communalism, and the issue of gender injustice as a kind of tripod at the very base of *Communalism Combat*.

And we also felt that communalism is not just an Indian issue but an issue concerning the subcontinent. What happens to Hindus and Christians and Ahmadiyyas in Pakistan has serious implications for the Muslim minority in India and vice versa. We were the first magazine in India to do a cover story on the Taliban when the Americans still saw them as allies.

Our stand has been that we aren't fighting religion as such, we are fighting the manipulation of religion for political ends. And we are not questioning faith, but we do maintain that all faiths and beliefs and practices are subject to universally accepted fundamental rights and freedoms.

The last issue of *Combat* came out in November 2012 because we ran out of funds, but I'm happy to say that we have just relaunched an online edition. And we believe the need for it today is even greater than when we first started it.

Could you say something about the attack you're facing from the state? What has prompted that?

They have never liked *Communalism Combat*.

Did you face any kind of censorship?

We used to get abusive calls, threatening calls. Within the RSS network [8] and their propaganda machine, we were dubbed "anti-Hindu." If we had simply stuck to *Combat*, then perhaps we would have been bracketed with everyone else. What really got their goat and enraged them against us (and by "them" I mean not just the Sangh Parivar — the whole family of Hindu nationalist organizations — but Narendra Modi in particular) is that in response to the Gujarat carnage we started this organization Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP).

Since 1993 we had done advocacy and media. What we hadn't done until 2002 was to take the legal route, to go knocking on the doors of the courts and ask, "Where's the constitution? Where's the rule of law?" CJP decided to focus on that.

As in cases of genocidal targeting across the world perhaps, at one level there's a silent rejoicing at having taught some group of people a lesson, but simultaneously there's a public denial of it. So on the one hand, Narendra Modi became the "emperor of Hindu hearts" in 2002, yet at the same time there was denial: "My government did all it could possibly do" and so on.

It's a long story, but basically India is known, unfortunately, for judicial delays. Mr Narendra Modi thought of an alternative course altogether — to *fast-track* the justice process. And how did he go about doing that? The police was already part of his set-up, he had his compliant officers. Not all of them were compliant, there were some outstanding people there, but he had enough compliant police officers who were willing to act as his private army.

Those who were appointed as the public prosecutors were VHP, RSS, Bajrang Dal people — some of them even office-bearers of those organizations. So the public prosecutor acted as defense counsel in these cases. Cases of murder and mass murder got bail without any objection from the prosecutor.

When the trial happened, for example, in the Best Bakery case, the first major carnage case to go to trial, the court was packed with these virulent Hindutva guys. They created such an atmosphere of terror for the witnesses that they could not speak the truth there. And the case was tried, and all the accused were acquitted for lack of evidence, etc.

As it happened, a week later the star witnesses, especially one young girl, Zahira Sheikh — who was from the family that owned the bakery that was burned down, killing some fourteen people — approached CJP. We provided her a platform before the national and international media, and she publicly said that it was an atmosphere in which, for fear of their lives, they had to lie.

So we took her to CJP, and then she went to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), where she made the same statement. The NHRC filed a special leave petition in the Supreme Court, and we filed a second petition on behalf of Zahira Sheikh, as well as one on behalf of CJP, asking for a retrial of this case once it was transferred out of the state on the grounds that the conditions simply do not prevail for justice and a fair trial to happen in Gujarat. The Supreme Court upheld our case, so the

same people who had been acquitted, most of them were convicted here, to life imprisonment, etc.

So first, we not only exposed what had happened and Modi's role in that through *Communalism Combat*, but second, when CJP was started its first action was to form a citizens' tribunal headed by three retired judges, two of them from the Supreme Court of India. Their three-volume report was titled **Crime Against Humanity** [9]. The gist of those three volumes was that the killings in Gujarat in 2002 were genocidal in nature and the author and architect of that was none other than the chief minister of Gujarat.

CJP then followed up. A culture of impunity is the norm in India. Those who murder a single person will be convicted and get life sentences, but mass murderers are never touched. It is unprecedented that 120-odd people are serving life sentences now — those who were responsible for perpetrating violence in Gujarat, including a minister in Mr Modi's cabinet and the Bajrang Dal chief of Gujarat.

So how would you describe CJP's role?

It has successfully challenged the culture of impunity that has prevailed in India. And this is what makes Modi and the Sangh Parivar very unhappy with us. On top of everything, Narendra Modi himself, who had become the "emperor of Hindu hearts" — the only case in which *he* has been named is a case filed by Zakia Jafri [10]. Zakia Jafri is the widow of Ehsan Jafri, the former member of parliament who was killed in a brutal, barbaric fashion — he and sixty-four others from the Gulbarg Society (a Muslim neighborhood) — in 2002. Zakia Jafri was a witness to that and is a survivor of the pogrom.

In 2006, with the help of CJP, she wanted to file an FIR (First Information Report) with the Gujarat police, saying that with the kind of evidence that even serving police officers have now placed on record before the Nanavati Commission, it is clear that these were not isolated incidents that happened in various localities — there was a conspiracy for mass crimes and the following are implicated. She had a list of sixty-two people, accused number one being Narendra Modi himself, then several ministers, the chief secretary, the director general of police, the police commissioner, etc., etc., which of course the local police refused to accept.

She went with CJP's help right up to the DGP (Director General of Police). He refused to register an FIR. They went to the sessions court in Gujarat; the sessions court turned down their appeal for directions to the police. They went to the high court in Gujarat, nothing happened. And then finally they went to the Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court first issued a notice to the Gujarat state and police seeking a reply, asking, if a citizen has credible prima facie evidence of a crime and if the police refuse to register that crime, where should that citizen go?

The Supreme Court, which, in the context of the petition filed by CJP, had directed reinvestigation by an independent investigating agency from outside Gujarat into the eight to nine major carnage cases of 2002, then asked the same special investigation team to probe the role of Modi in the context of Zakia Jafri's petition.

To make a long story short, though the Special Investigation Team (SIT) gave a "clean chit" to Modi, the *amicus curiae* appointed by the Supreme Court, Raju Ramachandran, has taken a different view — that there is prosecutable evidence against him and two senior police officers of the Ahmedabad police. Because the SIT filed a closure report before the sessions court in Gujarat, Zakia Jafri, with the help of CJP, challenged that closure report. The sessions court did not side with her, so she has appealed in the high court, where the matter is pending.

I think this should give you the context for the attack on us, for why they don't like us one little bit

and why they need to go after us. Even before the current round of attacks on us started in January 2014, Teesta had had three to four criminal offenses lodged against us — e.g., for allegedly tutoring witnesses, faking evidence, which two separate trial courts have rejected in Gujarat itself.

The Gujarat government seems to have instigated a former employee of CJP to concoct charges of embezzlement against Sabrang Trust. The investigation has been going on for a year. They're asking for all kinds of documents. To date we have submitted well over twenty thousand documents in hard copy and soft copy, answering every allegation they've made — they've not been able to find anything.

The FIR against us has several objectives: to mount a media trial against us, throw mud at us in the hope that some of it will stick, to frighten donors from supporting CJP or Sabrang Trust (therefore to financially cripple us), to send a message to their own constituency to say, "This is what we do to those who go after us," and to make an example of us to send a message to all groups and individuals like us that "if you speak out, we'll put the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) on you, the police on to you."

Are your accounts still frozen?

Yes, they've been frozen since January 2014.

Is there a chance the CBI will take you into custody?

Our case for anticipatory bail is very strong — the Bombay high court has granted that.

Finally, how do you see events like the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* and the Paris attacks?

One point of some consolation in the face of heinous crimes like that is that at least a significant section of the Muslim community is finally breaking out of its denial mode. When 9/11 happened, the story spreading across the Muslim world was that it was a false flag operation launched by Mossad to implicate Muslims; Osama bin Laden wasn't behind it. In India it was said no Muslim could have done that because Islam is against terrorism.

Since 2008 we've been seeing the Jamiat Ulema-e-hind, which is an offshoot of the Deoband school, declaring public opposition to terror. In February 2008 the Darul Uloom (a well-known madrassa for Islamic teaching based in Deoband) held a meeting of several hundred prominent clerics where they passed a resolution condemning terrorist activities.

In 2003, I along with a few other Muslims in Mumbai formed an organization called Muslims for Secular Democracy, basically because we felt that extremism in the name of Islam, intolerance in the name of Islam, gender oppression in the name of Islam, the terrorism that was beginning to swamp Pakistan in a big way, the issue of apostasy, of freedom of expression, in short a whole range of issues was something that the Muslim community was not addressing.

We felt that the community as a whole still doesn't feel at home with the modern world. And that these issues were not being raised through secular forums within India, which is part of the reason why we sometimes find ourselves on the defensive, we lose credibility. We started something we called a "jihad against terrorism." The point is, are we simply against Hindu communalism, or are we against communalism as such? Obviously, the danger to India's democracy will be from the Hindu majority, as it will be from the Muslim majority in Pakistan. But we can't make compromises.

Across the globe many on the Left are being asked this question, and they need to reflect on where they stand. In the "fight against imperialism," to see all kinds of Muslims who have a gun or a bomb

in their hand as potential allies on the principle that the enemy of my enemy is my friend is not going to get us anywhere.

Maulana Mahmood Madani, who's the de facto head of one of the two factions in the Jamiat Ulema, was very receptive when I contacted him, and there was a huge rally at Ramlila Maidan in Delhi in February 2008. They got a fatwa endorsed by three muftis from Deoband, one of them being the head of their fatwa department. It said nothing can ever justify terrorism, whatever the cause and wherever it happens. So it was very sharply formulated.

Nothing fuels Islamophobia more than terrorism. If the media were to project this opposition properly, it would help a lot to clarify this, at least in India. So the denial that was widespread in 2001 and earlier is much less evident today.

P.S.

* Jacobin. 12.30.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/modi-hindutva-gujarat-riots-rss-bjp-communalism-combat/>

* Javed Anand is a cofounder of Communalism Combat.

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 40772), [Indian: Springtime for Modi – Neoliberalism, violent Hindu nationalism and the issue of fascism.](#)

[2] <https://www.sabrangindia.in/>

[3] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11436552>

[4] <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl1517/15170200.htm>

[5] <https://news.vice.com/article/narendra-modis-shame-muslim-survivors-of-the-gujarat-riots-are-still-suffering>

[6] <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/Jalees-Ansari-convicted-for-Jaipur-serial-blasts/articleshow/12859366.cms>

[7] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7739541.stm

[8] <https://global.britannica.com/topic/Rashtriya-Swayamsevak-Sangh>

[9] <http://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/crime-against-humanity/217985>

[10] <http://in.reuters.com/article/narendramodi-zakia-ehsan-teesta-riots-idINKCN0RL2G72015092>