

WORLD SIKH NEWS

The only force that can overcome an idea and a faith is another and better idea and faith, positively and fearlessly upheld.

— Dorothy Thompson

Sikh Protests: What next?

For the last year or more, the cultist baba from Sirsa in Haryana is having a free-run of India, in full view of the Indian population and with full co-operation and assistance of the government of Haryana and India.

Gurmeet Ram Rahim is an enigma. In a country which is professedly secular and just, he is the blue-eyed boy of politicians who want to use the caste and religion card through him to establish, expand and strengthen their support base. He is working overtime to ensure the victory of that party who bids the maximum for his protection and growth.

Turning a blind eye to court proceedings against him for rape, murder and extortion, mocking at the judiciary and the Sikhs against whom he has indulged in blasphemy, the Haryana government has provided him Z-security cover, the kind of cover provided to the prime minister of the country! The Indian media deliberately avoids learning about the genesis of the conflict or restricts itself to highlighting the fallen turban of a Sikh or the Kirpan-wielding youth.

Political leaders, uninformed mediemen and drawing room intellectuals are still calling the agitation either as a conflict between two Sikh communities or between one sect and mainstream Sikhs.

This is a typical situation which the Sikhs faced in 1978, when the pseudo-Nirankaris, with full blessings of the State murdered 13 Sikhs in broad daylight in the holy city of Amritsar.

What is different from that time is the kind of protests that Sikhs have launched all over the country. Tired of the ugly behaviour of the state, disgusted with the lackadaisical attitude of the Sikh leadership and totally annoyed at the patronage of various governments to the cultist baba, Sikh youth lost control of their balance and heavily inconvenienced the common man, in some places holding a chunk of the population to ransom, evoking unnecessary reactions from rabidly communal leaders.

The battle that was being fought with the baba was turned on the head of the Sikhs by the media due to such behavior and the established Sikh leadership, hitherto silent went on the defensive. The radical Sikh leadership had the choice to do something different — to educate the masses, to pursue the political masters and to define the contours of social ramifications of the struggle. Instead, they too joined the bandwagon and brought rail traffic to a halt in Punjab.

There is no doubt that Sikhs are angry. There is no doubt that the state is pushing Sikhs to a wall. There is also no doubt that the state agencies will continue to support the cult.

So what should the Sikhs do? Should the Sikhs convert themselves into mobs and indulge in vandalism? Should Sikhs go all around town brandishing swords and burning effigies?

Should the Sikh leadership not show sagacity and statesmanship? The Badal leadership, always ready to flaunt their Punjabi imagery, has suddenly turned Panthic on this issue. They have “used the good offices” of the Damdami Taksal to indulge in a Rail Roko stir in Punjab without being officially involved in it.

As always, they are playing with fire to further their political ends. The plight of the Sikhs, the progress of the proceedings against the baba and damage to the Sikh image has all taken a back seat. None of the leaders who visited Mumbai — Sukhbir Singh Badal and his entourage, Avtar Singh Makkar, Paramjit Singh Sarna and Baba Harnam Singh Dhumma had the time and good sense to visit the 27 boys in detention and counsel them.

The entire Sikh leadership of all hues has failed the Sikhs in this hour of crisis. It is unSikh like and uncivil to harm public property. Our fight is with a rapist-murderer and his supporters not with the common man. Let the proud Sikh community ponder over the Sikh protests so far and ask, “What next?”



Blame The Middle Class

At a time when the Indian Middle Class is being looked at as the group that will supposedly deliver the country from the inhuman value system that it is stuck in — the caste wars, the utterly inhuman treatment meted out to the lowered castes, the vice-like hold of the Brahmanic hegemonic forces — and the regime is taking little note of the moral vacuity and depoliticisation of the upcoming generations, perhaps one should look at the Middle Class phenomena without the blinkers of economic development.

Much has changed since BB Misra's 1961 classic study “India's Middle Classes: Their Growth In Modern Times”. As Misra wrote, “Both Freedom and Division were the work of Indian middle classes.” The fact remains that the new Indian middle class is marked by its social and cultural visibility, but its political role is often invisible. Its claims tend to be coded in terms of representative citizenship yet in practice they are often defined by exclusionary social and political boundaries.

This piece by Ashis Nandy, that focusses on the Middle Class in India's partisan and scarred-with-Hindutva state Gujarat, has generated some strong reactions from within some Middle Class elements nurtured on a hegemonic, homogenous idea of a nation-state. Nandy's views on Indian secularism and his ideological positioning has been very problematic and the WSN certainly has its views on that, but we produce this article as our commitment to the freedom of the media. Nandy is increasingly under attack since the publication of this article earlier this month, and the 'National Council of Civil Liberties' has filed a suit against him, clearly with a nod from Narendra Modi.

Ashis Nandy

Now that the dust has settled over the Gujarat elections, we can afford to defy the pundits and admit that, even if Narendra Modi had lost the

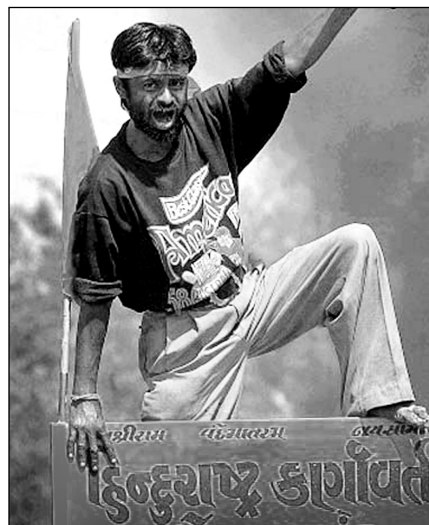


last elections, it would not have made much difference to the culture of Gujarat politics. Modi had already done his job. Most of the state's urban middle class would have remained mired in its inane versions of communalism and parochialism and the VHP and the Bajrang Dal would have continued to set the tone of state politics. Forty years of dedicated propaganda does pay dividends, electorally and socially.

The Hindus and the Muslims of the state — once bonded so conspicuously by language, culture and commerce — have met the demands of both V D Savarkar and M A Jinnah. They now face each other as two hostile nations. The handful of Gujarati social and political activists who resist the trend are seen not as dissenters but as treacherous troublemakers who should be silenced by any means, including surveillance, censorship and direct violence. As a result, Gujarati cities, particularly its educational institutions are turning cultural deserts. Gujarat

Our disrespect for history is legendary. Events that shaped the lives of millions are routinely forgotten, surfacing only occasionally like an itch in a phantom limb. For instance, this week, Amitav Ghosh's new novel *Sea of Poppies* reminds us of the role of the British opium trade in our social history. Much will now be written on this wonderful book about the voyage of the *Ibis*, so let me draw your attention to another forgotten voyage that Ghosh touched on briefly in his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*. It has not found place in any other creative work, though it is the subject of Deepa Mehta's forthcoming film. History records this dramatic event in Vancouver harbour in May 1914 as the ‘Komagata Maru incident’.

Now that Canada is a model multicultural State, we have forgotten how racist it once was. In 1914, alarmed by the influx of Indian immigrants, the government introduced an apparently even-handed law that did not explicitly bar them entry, but made it impossible for them to enter. It required immigrants to arrive by ‘continuous journey’, carrying \$200. There was no direct sea route from India and \$200 was an impossi-



The national leadership of Congress party does not have the courage to confront Narendra Modi over the anti-Muslim programs of 2002, given its own abominable record of 1984 pogroms of the Sikhs

has already disowned the Indian Constitution and the state apparatus has adjusted to the change. The Congress, the main opposition party, has no effective leader. Nor does it represent any threat to the mainstream Politics of Gujarat. The days of grassroots leaders like Jhinalbhai Darji are past and a large section of the party now consists of Hindu nationalists. The national leadership of the party does not have the courage to confront Modi over 2002, given its abominable record of 1984.

The Left is virtually non-existent in Gujarat. Whatever minor presence it once had among intellectuals and trade unionists is now a vague memory. The state has disowned Gandhi, too; Gandhian politics arouses derision in middle-class Gujarat. Except for a few valiant old-timers, Gandhians have made peace with their conscience by withdrawing from the public domain. Gandhi himself has been given a saintly, Hindu nationalist status and shelved. Even the Gujarati translations of his Complete Works have been stealthily distorted to conform to the Hindu nationalist agenda.

Gujarati Muslims too are “adjusting” to their new station. Denied justice and proper compensation, and as second-class citizens in their home state, they have to depend on voluntary efforts and donor agencies. The state's refusal to provide relief has been partly met by voluntary groups having fundamentalist sympathies. They supply aid but insist that the beneficiaries give up Gujarati and take to Urdu, adopt veil, and send their children to madrassas. Events like the desecration of

Wali Gujarati's grave have pushed one of India's culturally richest, most diverse, vernacular Islamic traditions to the wall. Future generations will as gratefully acknowledge the sangh parivar's contribution to the growth of radical Islam in India as this generation remembers with gratitude the handsome contribution of Rajiv Gandhi and his cohorts to Sikh militancy.

The secularist dogma of many fighting the sangh parivar has not helped matters. Even those who have benefited from secular lawyers and activists relate to secular ideologies instrumentally. They neither understand them nor respect them. The victims still derive solace from their religions and, when under attack, they cling more passionately to faith. Indeed, shallow ideologies of secularism have simultaneously broken the back of Gandhism and discouraged the emergence of figures like Ali Shariati, Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama — persons who can give suffering a new voice audible to the poor and the powerless and make a creative intervention possible from within world-views accessible to the people.

Finally, Gujarat's spectacular development has underwritten the de-civilising process. One of the worst-kept secrets of our times is that dramatic development almost always has an authoritarian tail. Post-World War II Asia too has had its love affair with developmental despotism and the censorship, surveillance and thought control that go with it. The East Asian tigers have all been maneaters most of the time. Gujarat has now chosen to join the pack. Development in the state now justifies amorality, abridgement of freedom, and collapse of social ethics.

Is there life after Modi? Is it possible to look beyond the 35 years of rioting that began in 1969 and ended in 2002? Prima facie, the answer is “no”. We can only wait for a new generation that will, out of sheer self-interest and tiredness, learn to live with each other. In the meanwhile, we have to wait patiently but not passively to keep values alive, hoping that at some point will come a modicum of remorse and a search for atonement and that ultimately Gujarati traditions will triumph over the culture of the state's urban middle class.

Recovering Gujarat from its urban middle class will not be easy. The class has found in militant religious nationalism a new self-respect and a new virtual identity as a martial community, the way Bengali babus, Maharashtrian Brahmins and Kashmiri Muslims at different times have sought salvation in violence. In Gujarat this class has smelt blood, for it does not have to do the killings but can plan, finance and coordinate them with impunity. The actual killers are the lowest of the low, mostly tribals and Dalits. The middle class controls the media and education, which have become hate factories in recent times. And they receive spirited support from most non-resident Indians who, at a safe distance from India, can afford to be more nationalist, bloodthirsty, and irresponsible.

KOMAGATAMARU & THE MEDIA



By Pratik Kanjilal

ble sum for most Indians.

In April 1914, Gurdit Singh, a Hong Kong Sikh, challenged the exclusionist law. He chartered the Japanese steamship *Komagata Maru* and sailed for Vancouver with 376 Punjabi immigrants, almost all Sikhs. Refused permission to land, they held out for two months in English Bay. The Ghadar Party got involved and pitched battles with the police made headlines worldwide. Finally, the ship was redirected to Calcutta but was detained at Budge Budge, where the authorities packed the protestors into a special train to Punjab. They resisted, the police opened fire and 20 were killed.

The Sikhs regard them as martyrs but other Indians have forgotten their story, a landmark in the global movement, the first challenge to White Canada, against racism. Amazing, because the incident also lit the fuse that would ignite Punjab five years later at Jallianwalla Bagh, and begin the end of the Raj.

However, it's now a hot issue in Canada. Sensitised by the award-winning documentary *Continuous Journey* by Ali Kazimi of York University, last month Canadian legislatures apologised for the shabby treatment of South Asians. Later this year, Deepa Mehta is expected to release *Exclusion*, starring Amitabh Bachchan (as Gurdit Singh), John Abraham, Manisha Koirala and Seema Biswas. But like *The Circle of Reason*, this will be an expat high culture product. Our local pop culture-wallahs seem disinterested. Curious, because a pop, post-colonial angst-ridden movie on this forgotten incident would click with the audiences that turned *Lagaan* and *Chak De India* into smash hits. (The author publishes *The Little Magazine*, a highly regarded literary magazine in India that gives pride of place to regional literature.)