

Seven Letters To My RSS Friend: Letter #4

My Dear Judge Sahab,

Having shared with you my basic perspective on the human situation and my interpretation of medieval Indian history it is now time that I share with you my honest response to the incident at the Godhra railway station on February 26, 2002, and the subsequent course of events in Gujrat.

If an ordinary citizen be honestly concerned to know the full truth he will have to turn to such journalists, newspaper editors, and analysts who possess the virtues and practice the method of the good historian. These virtues are universal sympathy, intellectual honesty, impartiality, and access to reliable information on different viewpoints of the concerned parties. These virtues are rather rare in the vast majority of our politicians and a considerable section of the media. However, these virtues do exist in fair abundance in the higher Indian judiciary and the press, at its best. While every political establishment and interest group has its own mouthpiece or compliant medium of publicity, Indian society can rightly be proud of the active functioning of a conscientious apex judiciary and press. Thus, no matter what ministers, political party chiefs and spokesmen or other apologists might solemnly claim or proclaim the objective truth eventually trickles out despite the quite common practice of concealment or rationalization by interested quarters.

This is true not only in India but also on the international scene. I recall my deep shock and disillusionment several years ago when I first came across the writings of some eminent Western liberal humanists who had 'dutifully exposed' the deeds or misdeeds of their own governments and leaders in, say, Vietnam, Korea, Iraq, Bosnia and other places. I need hardly mention how in the last century Communist and Fascist establishments, with a good conscience, had resorted to deceit and distortion of truth as legitimate tools for promoting their own idea of the just cause.

Coming to Godhra and Gujrat, a large number of eminent persons comprising central Ministers, leaders of all political parties, Indian and foreign journalists, analysts, social activists, members of human rights bodies and of apex statutory commissions have made on the spot investigations in Gujrat. A Niagra of panel discussions on TV and of editorials and articles have flowed. Several world powers have conducted independent investigations to get at the real truth in view of the impact of the Gujrat situation on the global economy and the politics of the entire region. The BBC, widely respected for its tradition of independent judgment and principled neutrality, as well as several other reputable TV channels have given intensive coverage to news and views relating to Gujrat. This vast media environment is marked by a near total discrepancy in the perceptions of the 'sociologically oriented' observers, on the one side and the 'ideologically oriented' (in the present case the Sangh pariwar) observers, on the other.

The version of the first side on the Gujrat situation is as follows:

(a) The Godhra incident was bound to trigger off intense rage and feelings of revenge among the majority community; **(b)** the state government should have alerted the districts authorities to the danger, and taken all possible measures to prevent any large scale disturbance of civil peace, **(c)** once large scale violence did break out the administration, for some reason or other, looked the other way round, as if, the horrendous post-Godhra events in several parts of Gujrat were 'a

natural reaction' beyond all control, and, in the final analysis, a salutary lesson for the minority community, **(d)** the violent reprisals after the Godhra incident were orchestrated to such an extent that suggests elaborate pre-planning and a well calculated strategy of destabilizing civil society and destroying the economic backbone of the minority community, **(e)** it was only when the Centre deputed the Union Defense Minister to oversee and control an alarming situation that the Chief Minister reluctantly called in the military for restoring civil peace, **(f)** those civil and police authorities who, out of a sense of duty, on their own, had taken prompt and proper action against those engaged in murder, arson and loot, were suddenly shifted to remote areas, for having earned government's displeasure, **(g)** the state government original decision to award a compensation of two lacs each to the victims of the Godhra tragedy while the half of this amount to post-Godhra victims in Gujrat was misconceived and violative of natural justice, **(h)** the conditions at the state relief camps for victims rendered homeless and totally destitute were appalling and shocking, **(i)** there appeared to be little or no cooperation between relief workers/ helping agencies and the police personnel for lodging FIR's (First Information Reports) and rectifying other grievances.

The version of the state government and the Sangh pariwar totally differs from the above. The crux of their version is as follows:

The entire press (barring, of course, the organs of the BJP), all private TV channels, social activists, human rights organizations, statutory and voluntary, national and international, the anti-Hindu pseudo-secular opposition parties are all conspiring to falsify or exaggerate the truth. Their sole objective is to spite and malign the efforts of the forces of Hindutva and Hindu resurgence, which, after all, means national resurgence. The Muslim minority in Gujrat got what they deserved after Godhra. All the hue and cry in Parliament, the press and the international community that Gujrat was burning was because the enemies of Hindutva had and still have a one-point program – destabilizing the forces of Hindu resurgence in Gujrat. In short, there was and is no cause for alarm or any need for intervention by the Centre.

I feel deeply concerned at the divergent factual versions as well as interpretations and views aired by top leaders of the Sangh pariwar, on the one hand, and other eminent observers and analysts, on the other. What intrigues and pains me, even more than this discrepancy, as such, is the spectacle that the Sangh pariwar appears to be totally indifferent to this glaring discrepancy, and unconcerned to discern its reasons and its implications for the nation as a whole. This, I submit, in all humility, is a tragic situation.

My concern in this letter is, precisely, to draw the attention of your good self and all true patriots to the above crucial matter, rather than defending, praising or denigrating anybody. It will just not do to blame the media, the opposition parties or the Sangh pariwar in a supercilious fashion. Nor will it be wise or patriotic to play political games in an adversarial fashion. True patriotism cries out for sober and honest self-analysis by us all.

I do not know fully the working of the mind of the Gujrat Chief Minister. But I was shocked when, quite early in the crisis period, he announced different scales of compensation to be paid by the state to Hindu and Muslim victims. Subsequently, several other things he has said have shocked me. However, I have always held Advani Sahab in considerable regard for his clarity of mind, a prima facie clean and consistent political record and a no-nonsense honest approach to men

and matters, though, perhaps, lacking in empathy and generosity towards the minorities. I wish he ponders over the intriguing issue of why this enormous discrepancy between the perceptions of the 'humanist family', on the one hand, and the 'Sangh family', on the other. I am sincerely concerned that all Indians, irrespective of religion or politics, try to determine the real cause of an amazing discrepancy in our perceptions. It would, indeed, be tragic if Advani Sahab were to get sucked, without any pangs of intellectual conscience, into the bottomless pit of realpolitik. His effusive public praise for Modi Sahab intrigues me quite a bit, coming as it does from a person of his intelligence and caliber. Judge Sahab, I say this without any grudge or grouse against anybody.

The Prime Minister did exhort the Chief Minister of Gujrat to follow his 'rajdharm'. But was the exhortation translated into effective action? Poets and sages exhort, ministers act and implement. A Prime Minister may be a poet as well, but action must come first. Despite all the formidable weight of informed analysis in the press and authentic portrayals and panel discussions on TV, national as well as foreign, and its presumable impact on Indian public opinion, the Central government thought it fit to take the least line of resistance and to opt for the strategy of drift and a deaf ear, instead of effectively intervening in order to correct the course of the ship of Gujrat whose captain is a redoubtable Hindutva star.

What intrigues and perplexes me most is when some members of the BJP or Sangh pariwar allege that the rehabilitation and normalization process in Gujrat has suffered, precisely, because of the activities of the media. Is it not the duty and function of the media to report and inform objectively and impartially what happens in society? I, for my part, stand totally bewildered, when what I deem a virtue appears as a vice in the eyes of the Sangh pariwar. When what I deem as the silver lining behind the dark clouds over Gujrat is seen by the Sangh pariwar as the source of all evil I begin to doubt whether this glaring discrepancy in perceptions is the result of a political strategy or a deeper crisis of values.

The majority of the allies of the BJP in the NDA coalition at the Centre also highlighted the sober findings of informed and impartial observers. The opposition were, naturally, most vocal of all in Parliament and the press. Together they gave abundant expression to their anguish at the unwillingness or inability of the Gujrat Chief Minister and his government to restore normalcy in the state as quickly as humanly possible. The country passed through a long period of suspense as to how the highly charged drama of public disagreement between the BJP and its allies will end. Well, it all proved to be a storm in a teacup. The net result, now, is the resignation of the Modi government and a call for midterm polls. There is hardly any doubt in any quarter about the real motives of this denouement.

The Goa conclave of the BJP held after the Gujrat carnage was a suitable occasion to prove the bona fides of the party and make suitable amends for the mistakes of commission and omission by the ruling party and government in Gujrat. A section of the party (including the Prime Minister himself) was, reportedly, so inclined. According to knowledgeable circles, his maturity and moderation could not match the vigor and ambitions of his younger comrades. Perhaps, the poet in him yielded, once again, to his political flesh. May I, in all humility, point out that the strategy, which emerged after the Goa conclave had its roots in the short-term goal of retaining power and ignoring ethical considerations? According to Parliamentary ethics, at its best, the Chief Minister

should have offered to resign, in earnest, soon after the government's failure to control the drift into anarchy. Either a new leader should have stepped in or Governor's rule should have been proclaimed. What actually happened was that the state, traumatized, as it were, by the 'perceived terrorism' at Godhra overnight regressed into an 'agency of Shiv Sena/Bajrang Dal/Vishwa Hindu Parishad hawks' hell bent on avenging Godhra. The state should have practiced its 'rajdharmā' of initiating effective steps to identify the real culprits and to prosecute them for their crime. Instead, it overlooked, if not abetted, programs of burning revenge and reprisal in the days immediately following the Godhra episode. This seems to be the crux of the matter.

Much worse reprisals and acts of brutality have been committed elsewhere in the course of history. Yet, this is hardly any justification for remaining complacent on the part of the state. I am compelled to say that the Gujrat government's inability or unwillingness to perform its 'rajdharmā' should have had a denouement very different from the strategic and politically motivated dissolution of the Assembly without the government having wiped out the tears and healed the hurts of thousands of innocent victims of the politics of hatred and fanaticism. The allies of the BJP too were more concerned with gaining political mileage and remaining in the good books of their mixed constituency than in honestly serving their proclaimed ideals. The opposition parties desperately tried to wean away some of the BJP allies and create a crisis, but interests prevailed over ideals as usually happens in the game of politics. The Congress and Communist parties have also succumbed, in the past, to the lure of political gains at the expense of principles. However, political adversity and loss of power at the Centre has had a salutary effect upon the Congress leadership.

The most blatant exhibition of opportunist politics is, perhaps, the marriage of convenience in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly between 'Manuvadis' and 'counter-Manuvadis'. It is yet too early to judge whether it is a marriage, or only an affair to remember. I dare think this union of opposites has created waves of disillusionment in the larger support base of the BJP. Perhaps, due to a variety of reasons a fair chunk of its supporters no longer view it as 'a party with a difference'. A large number of its new adherents and supporters, perhaps, had come to accept its critique of Congress culture on several counts—appeasement of minorities and Dalits, aggressive patronage, overlooking of corruption, judicial delays, red tape etc. Such disillusioned sections, after the Bofors uproar, understandably, pinned their hopes on the high sounding rhetoric of the BJP. Perhaps, these very circles stand disillusioned once again on finding that their image of the BJP was just a mirage. I dare say the patently aberrant behavior of the sister organizations of the BJP: the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal and the Shiv Sena has greatly tarnished the image of the BJP flagship.

Another crucial factor in the declining fortunes and image of the BJP is the Ram Mandir issue. The romance of Advani Sahab's Rath yatra, floating on the waves of religious sentiments has given way to a pedestrian bus laboring on a rough and bumpy road, greeted by tired and, possibly, hired cheers that lead nowhere. The sober elements in the RSS are none too happy at the clumsy behavior and rather indecent political hunger at the lower rungs of the organization. This political hunger has prompted some youth wings of the RSS in Gujrat to tutor Adivasi quarters to fish in troubled waters and turn against the minorities.

A section of the RSS, BJP and the Sangh parivar honestly thinks that the BJP has lost ground precisely because of the dilution of its core program of Ayodhya, uniform civil code and Kashmir. In all humility, I dare say the real cause lies elsewhere. Before it came to power it cried hoarse against Bofors, but has it not itself spawned several mega Bofors? It had decried pseudo-secularism, but is its nationalism in Gujrat not 'pseudo' itself? Is it not patronizing those who practice 'pseudo' reasoning or 'pseudo' scholarship in the pursuit of truth? How and why alterations have been made in textbooks without informing their authors? If the Communists had done similar things in Bengal earlier; so much the worse for them.

Judge Sahab, you must have noticed that I have said almost nothing about the Godhra incident as such. I shall do so in my next letter.

With best wishes,
Very sincerely yours,
Jamal Khwaja