

India's election commission demands BJP explain its role in Lucknow tragedy

By Kranti Kumara
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India's Election Commission has issued a show-cause notice to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the dominant partner in India's ruling coalition, demanding it explain its role in an April 12 function at which 22 impoverished women and children were trampled to death. The deaths occurred during the free distribution of saris, the traditional garment of Indian women, at an event in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh—the electoral constituency of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. The event's ostensible purpose was to celebrate the 70th birthday of Lalji Tandon, a senior BJP leader and Vajpayee's prospective campaign manager.

The April 17 Election Commission order gives the BJP central leadership one week to explain why further action should not be taken against it for violating “the model code of conduct” that is in force during election campaigns. It also directs the Uttar Pradesh state authorities to charge Tandon with election bribery and to bring criminal charges against those responsible for organising the Lucknow event.

The Lucknow tragedy and subsequent EC order have shaken the pre-election self-confidence of the Hindu supremacist BJP and forced it on the political defensive. The sari distribution event was clearly organized with a view towards influencing the votes of impoverished electors in the general election that is to take place in five stages between April 20 and May 10.

But the BJP is trying to deny any responsibility. In its defence, it cites the fact that the event's official sponsor was the Nagrik Sewa Samiti (NSS). This is spurious. The NSS is a BJP-aligned “community service” organization, one of many that BJP and the fascistic Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS use to promote their noxious brand of politics. Birjendra Murari Yadav, the NSS's founder and the principal organiser of the Lucknow event, is both a BJP member and a close friend of Tandon. Moreover, Tandon, who was warding Vajpayee's constituency while the prime minister toured the country, himself attended the NSS function.

The BJP leadership is further trying to distance itself from the tragedy by saying it is false to claim that Tandon is Vajpayee's election campaign manager. Technically this is true, but only because on April 14 Vajpayee had yet to officially file his nomination papers and legally name Tandon as his election agent.

There is much evidence to show that those who organized the Lucknow event were criminally negligent. The venue, a park with a single 12-foot entrance, was packed by the organizers with close to 15,000 people, although it has a capacity for just 2500, and the temperature was over 40 degrees Celsius. The stampede was provoked when the organizers realized that they lacked the requisite number of saris and started throwing the remaining bundles at the crowd.

The Election Commission was forced to intervene as a result of the popular anger sparked by the tragedy and the patent attempt to win votes by exploiting the desperation of the poor. In fact, the type of vote-buying that led to the Lucknow tragedy is quite routine. But generally the EC looks the other way.

Significantly, the commission defended its decision to call for election bribery charges to be brought against Tandon alone among BJP leaders by parroting the BJP line that he was not Vajpayee's election agent.

The gulf separating the manipulating political elite and the impoverished Indian masses was glaringly illustrated by Tandon's puzzled reaction to press criticism of the event: “Do these incidents not happen? Train tragedies happen, people get killed by bullets, why are they picking on this?”

Instead of condemning the organisers of this tragedy, both Vajpayee and the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mulayalam Singh Yadav of the rival Samajwadi Party (SP) sprang to Tandon's defence. Mulayalam Singh cut short his electoral campaigning and rushed to meet with Tandon instead of visiting the injured in their hospital beds. The chief minister subsequently issued a statement exonerating Tandon. According to Prime Minister Vajpayee, Tandon “has been doing this for a long time. However, this time the turnout was large and it could not be managed properly.”

In what can only be termed a cruel hoax, those attending the Lucknow event were compelled to pay a 20 rupees “registration” fee to receive a Rs. 40 sari and a dinner. Women, who were bussed from the outlying slums of Lucknow, recounted to a *Times of India* reporter that despite the high cost, they nevertheless agreed to pay, since a bus ride into town with a free dinner and a sari was “a rare treat.” In a most revealing comment, one of the residents added, “It is the first time I've heard of someone charging money because parties always pay

us to attend rallies and functions.”

In one of the localities named Ram Lila Ground, from where 10 victims came, women residents cursed the local leadership of the BJP-affiliated Mahila Morcha (literally Women’s Struggle). Reflecting the mobster mentality that pervades the BJP, the victims’ relatives were reportedly threatened by local party organizers with dire consequences if they spoke to the press.

Several women’s organizations—including the Muslim Women’s Forum, All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) and the National Federation of Indian Women—held a demonstration in New Delhi condemning the BJP for its role in the Lucknow tragedy. They also demanded that the election commission debar Prime Minister Vajpayee from standing for election, accusing him of violating electoral laws against bribery. The BJP has responded by denouncing its political opponents for “politicising” the sari deaths.

Although the Indian press, in general, has been critical of the BJP over this incident, one of the country’s major newspapers, the *Hindustan Times*, blamed the victims themselves, declaring: “No woman who risks her life for a cheap sari can be feeling very good.”

The tragedy has shaken the BJP because of the electoral importance of Uttar Pradesh, the pivotal role that Vajpayee plays in the BJP’s election and post-election calculations, and because it has exposed the reality behind the BJP’s propaganda about “India Shining.”

In addition to being Vajpayee’s home constituency, Lucknow is the capital of Uttar Pradesh. The BJP has hopes of increasing its UP seat tally from the current 29 to 50, but this appear to be threatened by the backlash over the sari deaths. Should the BJP fail to at least maintain its current seat-holding in UP, the NDA’s chances of securing a parliamentary majority will be in serious jeopardy.

The BJP has sought to create a personality cult around Vajpayee, splashing his picture on party literature and political advertisements. The 80-year-old Vajpayee, whom BJP propaganda celebrates as a wise and farsighted statesman, plays a key role in maintaining the BJP’s complex system of alliances with a host of regional and caste-based political formations. In recent days, Vajpayee has said publicly that he wanted to retire before the current election campaign, but was pressed by the party leadership to remain at the helm for the “good” of the party and India.

Vajpayee is invariably contrasted with the other principal BJP leader, Home Minister L.K. Advani, so as to cast the prime minister, who is a lifelong RSS-member and rank Hindu chauvinist, as a “moderate.” Advani is seared in Indian popular consciousness as the leader of the anti-Muslim Barbi Masjid agitation which ended in the 1992 razing of the sixteenth century mosque and the worst round of communal bloodletting since the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent.

In the run-up to the elections the Indian government has been

mounting a propaganda campaign termed “India Shining.” Advertisements proclaim: “Times are exciting; Villages are progressing; Eyes are twinkling; You have never had a better time to shine brighter.”

The advertising campaign is being financed by the Indian government, but it dovetails with the BJP’s and NDA’s election claims that India is on the march to great power status. To date, the Indian government has spent Rs. 4 billion (approximately 90 million US dollars) on its India Shining campaign, an obscene sum considering the cruel cuts the BJP imposed in the public food distribution system for the poor.

The chasm between the daily reality facing the Indian masses and the dream world of this crude propaganda could not be more glaring. A few statistics illustrate the abysmal conditions that prevail across much of India. There are at least 400 million people living in poverty, 75 percent of them poor villagers. Close to 80 percent of the people in India live on less than \$2 a day; 95 out of every 1,000 children die before the age of five. At least 40 percent of the 1 billion people in India are illiterate. Close to 70 million children out of 200 million school-age children do not attend schools, either due to poverty or lack of nearby schools. Anywhere from 35 to 50 percent of people have no access to electricity. According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) statistics, in terms of human development, India ranks near the bottom, 127th out of the 175 countries ranked.

The India Shining campaign is mainly geared towards an urban minority that has economically benefited from outsourcing and globalization. It contemptuously ignores the overwhelming majority of Indian people who barely eke out a living. During its tenure, the BJP has mounted repeated assault on the Indian workers by privatizing even profit-making public enterprises, thus opening them up to rapacious exploitation by transnational enterprises.

So stark is the contrast between the sari tragedy and the claims of the BJP/NDA government, a shaken Prime Minister Vajpayee was briefly forced to shift his rhetoric. “The incident,” he said, “has jolted us and forced us to see the other side of India, which is not shining, which has areas of darkness.”

As the events of last week so tragically illustrated, no amount of propaganda and bravado can conceal the fact that the dominant reality confronting the Indian masses is one of mounting economic insecurity and physically and intellectually gnawing poverty.

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