

India: Modi and his BJP government incite Hindu communalism

By Arun Kumar and Keith Jones
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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other senior leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are inciting Hindu communalism and ignoring and excusing violence perpetrated by Hindu supremacist organizations and their followers.

Rank communal appeals have been front and center in the BJP's campaign for the hotly contested Bihar state assembly election. The BJP has denounced leaders of the "Grand Alliance"—an electoral bloc of two regional caste-based parties, the JD (U) and RJD, and the Congress Party—for defending Indians' right to eat beef and otherwise failing to venerate the cow, and for conspiring to favor Muslims.

And the BJP has persisted with its promotion of Hindu chauvinism, notwithstanding a popular outcry, a spike in communal strife and mounting criticism from sections of the ruling elite who fear the socially incendiary consequences of such brazen stoking of reaction.

In the 2014 national election, Modi and the BJP promoted themselves as the party of rapid economic development. In making this pitch, they downplayed, at least to some degree, the traditional preoccupations of the Hindu right. By contrast, in stumping for votes in Bihar, Modi and the BJP have again and again played the Hindu communal card.

This shift in tactics is rooted in the failure of the BJP to make good on its promise to bring about rapid economic growth. While there was a surge in foreign investment in the months immediately following the BJP's May 2014 election victory, this has long since tapered off.

Modi has pushed through a raft of neo-liberal reforms, yet the *Economist*, *Financial Times* and *Wall Street Journal* have expressed disappointment and frustration with the BJP's performance, arguing it needs to go much further and faster in opening India to foreign capital. India's exports meanwhile have been battered by anemic growth in Europe and North America and India's banking system is sapped by non-performing loans.

Addressing an election rally in Buxar on October 26, Modi made the unfounded and inflammatory claim that the Grand Alliance plans to reduce the number of government jobs and

education places allotted to the former untouchables (Dalits) and other groups traditionally stigmatized as lower castes under India's reservation (affirmative action) policy, so as to create a similar quota for Muslims.

Declared Modi, "They are conspiring to take away five percent reservation of Dalits, Mahadalits, backwards and extremely backwards and give it to a particular community (a veiled reference to Muslims). "Nobody," continued India's prime minister, "will be allowed to take away your reservation and give it to any other community in pursuit of their vote bank politics."

Earlier in the campaign, Modi lent his support to the aggressive anti-beef-eating and anti-cow-slaughter campaign that is being mounted by various BJP state governments and by the RSS, the shadowy Hindu nationalist organization from which the BJP draws much of its leadership.

Modi has pilloried the RJD leader Lalu Prasad Yadav for his observation that Hindus also eat beef.

Even more conspicuous was the prime minister's two-week long silence on the lynching of a Muslim farm-labourer, Mohammad Akhlaq, in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh by a Hindu mob that accused him of eating beef. When Modi finally did speak, all he said was that the murder was "sad" and "not desirable."

But the lynch-mob didn't appear out of nowhere.

BJP state governments in Maharashtra and Haryana have passed "cow protection" bills with the aim of intimidating the country's minorities and asserting Hindu supremacy. Moreover, the Hindu right has been allowed to run amuck. Over the past 18 months, there have been numerous communal outrages, including attacks on churches and the assassination of three prominent opponents of religious obscurantism, one of them a leader of the Communist Party of India, Govind Pasare.

The lynching occurred not far from the Uttar Pradesh district of Muzaffarnagar, where BJP politicians were implicated in inciting anti-Muslim riots in 2013. In the aftermath of the lynching, BJP legislator Sangeet Som, himself one of those under criminal indictment for their role

in the Muzaffarnagar riots, said he would bring forward legislation to have those who kill a cow charged with murder.

Som was far from the only BJP politician to lend legitimacy to the attack on Akhlaq. On October 8, BJP legislators in Jammu and Kashmir violently assaulted an independent member of the state assembly, Sheikh Abdul Rashid, whom they accused of having hosted a party at which beef was served. The BJP Chief Minister of Haryana, Manohar Lal Khattar, told the *Indian Express* in an October 15 interview, that the killing of Akhlaq was “wrong,” but then added, “Muslims can continue to live in this country, but they will have to give up eating beef ... The cow is an article of faith here.”

As for the RSS, its Hindi-weekly newspaper *Panchjanya*, ran a cover story following Akhlaq’s savage murder in which it stated that the Vedas (the oldest scriptures of Hinduism) order killing of “sinners” who slaughter cows. “Vedas,” declared *Panchjanya*, “order killing of the sinner who kills a cow. Cow slaughter is an issue of honor for Hindus. [Akhlaq] perhaps slaughtered a cow under the influence of bad deeds.”

Not only is Modi himself a life-long RSS member, his government routinely confers with the RSS leadership. In September, the BJP cabinet held a three-day closed-door meeting with the RSS’s high command to review the government’s actions and agenda.

The BJP’s promotion of communalism, which has included the insertion of Hindu nationalist ideologues in the leadership of various cultural and scientific organizations, has provoked a growing public outcry.

In recent weeks, several dozen prominent writers, historians, film-makers and scientists have returned their Indian government awards to protest “rising intolerance,” and, in particular, Akhlaq’s lynching and the government’s failure to seriously pursue those responsible for the assassination of the three campaigners against superstition and obscurantism.

The government has cavalierly ignored these protests. But it has also come under attack from sections of Indian and international big business who fear that the whipping up of communalism will provoke widespread strife and social opposition, thereby impeding the government’s drive to push through unpopular pro-investor reforms.

Last week, Moody’s Analytics urged Modi to keep BJP members “in check or risk losing domestic and global credibility.” The report, which also criticized Modi for not implementing economic reforms fast enough, warned “the belligerent provocation of various Indian minorities has raised ethnic tensions.” An “increase in violence” and increased opposition in parliament are likely to result “as

debate turns away from economic policy.”

Cynically seeking to allay such fears, Modi’s right-hand man Amit Shah summoned Haryana Chief Minister Khattar, Union Minister Mahesh Sharma, BJP legislator Som and BJP MP Sakshi Maharaj to a meeting in New Delhi at which he supposedly ordered them to temper their communal appeals so as not to impede implementation of the BJP’s economic “reform” agenda.

Shah is himself a notorious communalist, who exploited the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots to rebuild the BJP’s base in western Uttar Pradesh. Predictably, his intervention did not prevent the BJP from continuing to make base communal appeals on the Bihar campaign trail.

Even were Modi, for his own reactionary reasons, to genuinely seek to rein in the extreme rightwing forces his government has promoted, he could not readily do so.

The BJP is a highly unstable, toxic political formation, which is intertwined with the RSS and an entire network of virulent Hindu communalist organizations.

Moreover, under conditions where the BJP is encountering increasing difficulties and popular opposition, its first instinct is to resort to communal appeals so as to divert social anger and divide the working class.

Invariably the twin Stalinist Communist parties are invoking the threat from the Hindu right to once again seek to shackle the working class to the Congress and other parties of the bourgeoisie. In reality, the Indian elite’s turn to the Hindu supremacist BJP is a devastating indictment of the failure of bourgeois rule and underscores the urgency of the working class mobilizing the rural toilers behind it on a socialist program to put an end to the malignancy that is Indian capitalism.

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