

Indian police and BJP government extend witch-hunt against anti-CAA protesters to filmmaker Rahul Roy

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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Delhi police, acting on the orders of India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, subjected well-known documentary filmmakers Rahul Roy and his wife Saba Dewan to lengthy interrogations Monday on the spurious claim that they were involved in communal violence in India's capital in February. The move marks a further escalation of the Narendra Modi-led BJP government's vicious campaign of slander, repression and state violence against political opponents.

The three days of communal violence that rocked northeast Delhi in late February and killed more than 50 people, most of them poor Muslims, were instigated by the BJP and its Hindu right allies. Yet in a transparent frame-up, the police, acting at the Modi government's behest, have blamed the communal riots on student leaders and, increasingly, on prominent cultural and political figures associated with opposition to the government's anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

In this, the Modi government has multiple reactionary aims: to whip up anti-Muslim communalism so as to channel mass anger over India's ruinous response to the COVID-19 pandemic along reactionary lines; to justify state suppression of the mass opposition to the CAA; and to intimidate all those opposed to the government's neoliberal economic agenda and bellicose Indian nationalism.

Among Roy's notable works is *The Factory*, which exposes the brutal slave labour conditions confronting workers in India's rapidly expanding, globally integrated auto industry and workers' growing and explosive resistance to them. Indicating his deep concerns over democratic rights, he has publicly denounced the government-police-company vendetta against workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar assembly plant—13 of whom are currently jailed for life on bogus murder charges (see: *The Factory*: Documentary brings Indian auto workers' struggle to an international audience).

When contacted by the WSWS, internationally acclaimed Sri Lankan film director Prasanna Vithanage, who is a friend and professional colleague of Roy, denounced the police action against him and his wife as "a clear witch-hunt." Vithanage added, "Roy and his wife, in their whole lives have dedicated themselves to exposing the truth through their art works and their actions themselves. They always come forward against anti-democratic attacks, racism, caste-based discrimination and ethnic violence. They often raise their voices for the rights of working people and

other oppressed. This witch-hunt only indicates that the government is heading towards a dangerous, fascistic rule of governance."

According to Indian media reports, Roy and Dewan were questioned by police for around eight hours. The *Indian Express* has reported that they were "summoned as the Special Cell (New Delhi Range) claims to have found their links with some students' outfit, and with a WhatsApp group called the 'Delhi Protests Support Group (DPSG).'"

The *Express* also quoted unnamed official sources, who claimed that 15-20 members of the WhatsApp group have been questioned by the police so far. Two members of the women's activist group Pinjra Tod's, Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal, who are also part of the WhatsApp group, were already arrested at the end of May by Delhi police for their alleged involvement in the northeast Delhi riots.

There can be no doubt that the Delhi Police's targeting of Roy was carried out in close consultation with the Modi government. Unlike the police in India's states, which are under the jurisdiction of state governments, the police in India's Capital Territory is directly answerable to Home Minister Amit Shah. Notorious for his role as Modi's chief henchmen, Shah himself engaged in anti-Muslim agitation and vehemently denounced the anti-CAA protesters prior to the outbreak of the riots.

Roy's name was mentioned in the supplementary charge sheet filed by the Delhi Police in connection with the alleged role of Pinjra Tod's activists and other students in the Delhi riots. Alongside Roy, the police also named Communist Party of India (Marxist) General Secretary Sitaram Yechury, prominent economist Jayati Ghosh, and Delhi University professor and public intellectual Apoorvanand Swaraj Abhiyan. These prominent personalities, along with several others, are accused of encouraging anti-CAA protesters to commit violence as part of a "plan" or "deep-rooted conspiracy."

According to the Wire, "the charge sheet annexed two entirely identical 'disclosed statements,' in which the Delhi police claimed that Kalita and Nawal admitted to not just their complicity in the Delhi riots but also named Ghosh, Apoorvanand and Roy as their mentors to carry on the anti-CAA protests, even if it leads to violence at some stage."

On the same day Roy was interrogated, Delhi police arrested

former Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) student leader Umar Khalid under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), a draconian “anti-terrorism” law. The charges against him stem from his participation in the anti-CAA protests. However, according to attorney Trideep Pais, who appeared on behalf of Khalid, police have stated no specific reason for the remand, the *Express* reported Tuesday.

A webinar organized by the Delhi Police Gazetted Officers Association and attended by Commissioner S.N. Shrivastava on Monday clearly indicated that the police action against Roy and others is part of a massive witch-hunt against critics and opponents of the Modi government. In the webinar, senior Delhi Police officers said they were set to file a conspiracy charge sheet related to last February’s northeast Delhi riots.

Contrary to the vile claims of the BJP government and the police about a “conspiracy” involving anti-CAA protesters, the real conspiracy is that being orchestrated by the government and the police to turn the victims of the Delhi violence into culprits. BJP officials who instigated and organized the violence, as well as police officers implicated in them, have been protected, while protesters and political opponents are detained.

The role played by BJP leaders in fomenting the anti-Muslim violence and the police in abetting it is well documented. Taken aback by the scope of the anti-CAA protests, which swept across India between December 2019 and February 2020, Modi and his BJP lashed out aggressively. They denounced the anti-CAA protests as “violent,” and in numerous instances ordered police to savagely attack them. Several BJP leaders explicitly called for anti-nationals—a term Modi and Shah used to refer to opponents of the CAA—to be shot down.

A report issued by the Delhi Minority Commission (DMC), an agency of the Delhi Capital Territory government, following its investigation into the Delhi riots named some of the BJP leaders who made provocative remarks against anti-CAA protesters in the weeks and days preceding the eruption of communal violence. They include Home Minister Amit Shah and “the incendiary threats and ultimatum of one Kapil Mishra.” The report also charges the Delhi police with “supporting the rioters, hitting people and damaging properties and CCTV cameras,” and for subsequently conspiring to “shield the planners, instigators, leaders and perpetrators of the violence and turn the victims into culprits.”

Local BJP leader Kapil Mishra played a leading role in instigating the riots. Before a mob of his supporters, he issued an “ultimatum” to the Delhi police, vowing they would clear Delhi’s streets of anti-CAA protesters, if the police failed to do so within “three days.” He then led hundreds of his Hindu communal supporters into a direct confrontation with those protesting against the CAA. Mass communal violence erupted in the ensuing hours.

During the violence, Hindu mobs, with the direct backing of police and security forces, went on the rampage. They killed at least 53 people, the vast majority of whom were Muslims, and injured several hundred with shootings, beatings, and fires. The mobs also destroyed the homes and businesses of thousands of Muslims, as well as four mosques. Despite repeated appeals, hundreds of victims have not been properly compensated and

continue to live in misery.

While the police registered 690 first information reports (FIRs) and arrested around 2,200 individuals as of March 7, most of these were victimized Muslims who were themselves targeted by rioters. They have never questioned, let alone taken legal action, against any of the BJP instigators, including Mishra.

Facing massive public criticism over the government’s direct role in the violence, the BJP encouraged the police to cook up a story claiming the violence was a “premeditated conspiracy” of government opponents. This claim appeared in an FIR registered on March 6, allegedly based on information provided by an informer to Sub-Inspector Arvind Kumar. At the previously mentioned webinar, police officers embellished this story by claiming that they interpreted the blocking of traffic by anti-CAA protesters on the day the communal violence broke out as the “first indicator that there was a conspiracy due to which it all started.”

Making it crystal clear that the subsequent police investigation targeted merely anti-CAA protesters, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Special Cell) Pramod Singh Kushwaha said they had found no proof yet of the involvement of pro-CAA-NRC (National Register of Citizens) protesters in the “conspiracy.” This conclusion comes as no surprise, given that the police operates under Shah’s direction, and is itself steeped in communal bigotry.

The BJP’s ruthless repression of its political opponents, which has been intensified with the interrogation and targeting of Roy and other prominent intellectuals and political figures, is closely bound up with Indian capitalism’s deepening economic and political crisis. The coronavirus pandemic is raging out of control across the country. With more than 5 million official cases and close to 90,000 deaths, India is behind only the United States in total COVID-19 infections. The social impact of the pandemic has been no less devastating, with tens of millions losing their jobs and tens of millions more thrust into dire poverty.

Modi intends to intensify the onslaught on the working class by imposing a “quantum jump” in pro-investor reforms, including the gutting of labour regulations and large-scale privatizations. At the same time, Modi and the entire ruling elite are whipping up a bellicose Indian nationalism as they, with Washington’s encouragement, lurch towards a possible war with China over their disputed border.

The police action against Roy and others is a clear signal that the crisis-ridden Modi regime and the Indian ruling elite as a whole are preparing to meet a mounting wave of opposition from the working class to the catastrophic social conditions with authoritarianism and savage state violence at home and the growing danger of war.

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