

## BBC DOCUMENTARY: A NEW CONTROVERSY HITS INDIA

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



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**A storm of controversy has engulfed India as BBC aired its two-part series, entitled “India: The Modi Question.” Part one of this documentary, broadcast on 17 January 2023, digs out certain facts that indicate that the 2002 Gujarat killings, in which around 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, lost their lives, were systematic and politically motivated. The current Indian Prime Minister was the Chief Minister of the State of Gujarat at that time. The documentary explores the then Chief Minister’s direct involvement in what it calls the ‘pogrom’ of Muslims under the nose of the entire state machinery.**

Most of the facts stated in the documentary are not new. The fate of Congress leader Ehsan Jafri and the desperate appeals for help he made to the state authorities before being hacked and burned to death; former Gujarat Home Minister Haren Pandya’s claims of the Chief Minister’s direct involvement in the killings and his murder under mysterious circumstances a year later;<sup>1</sup> and testimonies of two senior police officers<sup>2</sup> implicating the Gujarat Chief Minister and the repercussions they faced have been widely known in India. Similarly, claims by two Vishwa Hindu

<sup>1</sup> “The many questions still unanswered 15 years after Haren Pandya’s Killing”, The Wire, November 5, 2018, <https://thewire.in/rights/haren-pandya-killing-gujarat>

<sup>2</sup> Sanjiv Bhatt, an Indian Police Service (IPS) was the deputy commissioner in charge of Internal Security at the State Intelligence Bureau in 2002. He had claimed that the then Chief Minister Modi had told senior police officials to allow people to vent their anger against Muslims for 72 hours. Similarly, Sreekumar who was serving as ADGP in charge of the armed unit in Gujarat had also testified against the then Chief minister Mr. Modi. Both these officers have been facing the wrath of BJP government for past many years on account of various cases filed against them.

Parishad (VHP) activists on a hidden camera that the then Chief Minister had allowed them to maim and burn Muslim women and children and run riot for three days are also no secret.<sup>3</sup>

However, what was not known, or little known prior to the airing of this documentary, was the existence of a classified report prepared by the British Government after a detailed probe. This disclosure was perhaps the most significant takeaway of the first episode. The BBC documentary notes that this report, with the headline “Subject: Gujarat Pogrom,” revealed that the riots were planned months before the violence took place. The report claimed that besides 2,000 deaths, some 138,000 people were internally displaced and widespread rape of Muslim women took place. The report, which contained testimonies of top sources that the British government decided against revealing, concluded that then Chief Minister Modi had a direct role in the killings of Muslims. Tellingly, the documentary quotes from the official report that, “It had all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing.” In an interview with Indian journalist Karan Thapar, former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw had confirmed that the report indeed implicated Chief Minister Modi for violence against Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

Besides the investigation by the British Government, the European Union too had conducted its own inquiry which found active participation of ministers of the state government in violence against Muslims while police officers were instructed not to intervene. This also explains why the UK and the US had imposed a travel ban on Gujarat Chief Minister, which was lifted only after he became Prime Minister of India.<sup>5</sup>

The second part of the documentary, aired a week later on 25 January 2023, extensively covered the plight of Indian Muslims. The episode started with disturbing visuals of a Muslim man being lynched in 2017 by a mob for a suspicion that he was trading beef – something that has become a norm in India following the Indian Prime Minister’s speech where he referred to India participating in “Pink revolution” (export and production of meat). During the next three and a half years, 44 people lost their lives and 280 people were injured by vigilantes in cow-related violence. The episode then goes

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<sup>3</sup> “Gujarat riots 2002: Why the Tehelka sting of Babu Bajrangi was not admissible as evidence. All you need to know,” OpIndia, June 27, 2022, <https://www.opindia.com/2022/06/babu-bajrangi-tehelka-tapes-sting-ashish-khetan-gujarat-riots/>

<sup>4</sup> “Full text of Jack Straw interview: UK probe into 2002 riots spurred by ‘concerns of constituents’, The Wire, January 24, 2023, <https://thewire.in/world/full-text-karan-thapar-jack-straw-2002-riots>

<sup>5</sup> “10 years later, Britain ends boycott of Modi,” Mumbai Mirror, October 12, 2012, <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/news/india/10-years-later-britain-ends-boycott-of-modi/articleshow/16969319.cms> & “US lifts visa ban on Modi, Obama invites him to Washington,” Dawn 18 May, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1107011>

on to describe how various laws like National Register of Citizens (NRC)<sup>6</sup> were introduced which left 1.9 million Indians stateless. The renowned Indian writer and human rights activist Arundhati Roy has aptly explained this situation saying this is not a country trying to solve the refugee problem but is trying to create more internal refugees.

As it turned out, a sizeable number of these stateless Indians was Hindus, the BJP government was quick to introduce Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019 which envisaged granting Indian citizenship to all non-Muslims from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. CAA was not only discriminatory and exclusionary but also against the secular principles clearly enshrined in the constitution of India like Article 15 (1), which states: “The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, people who believed in secular idea of India were compelled to raise their voice against CAA. The documentary contained a number of disturbing visuals of the Delhi police attacking students in universities, throwing stones at Muslims alongside Hindu extremists, and a Muslim youth losing his life after being thrashed by the Police during riots. A total of 38 Muslims and 15 Hindus lost their lives in Delhi in 2020.<sup>8</sup>

The documentary also focused on the BJP Government’s blatant and controversial policies in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). For over seventy years, the people of Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir were allowed to run their affairs. The BJP had always sought revocation of Article 370 which also found a place in its manifestoes over the years. Nine weeks into his second term, the Indian Prime Minister sent additional troops to IIOJK on the pretext of countering ‘terrorism.’ All leading politicians were placed under house arrest and an unprecedented communication blackout was imposed as New Delhi decided to take direct control of the disputed territory and to change its demographic structure (through revocation of Article 35A as well). In order to silence the dissent, India arbitrarily arrested thousands of Kashmiris - many of whom were severely tortured.

Though it was not aired in India, soon after its telecast on BBC Two, the social media in India was flooded with short clips of the documentary forcing the Indian government to condemn the documentary terming it as “a propaganda piece designed to push a particular discredited narrative.

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<sup>6</sup> NRC was introduced to identify illegal migrants, particularly from Bangladesh. The final list was released on August 31, 2019 leaving 1.9 million people stateless. Many of those not included in final list insisted on being Indian but due to poverty and illiteracy, they were unable to bring documentary prove of their citizenship. Many of them landed in detention centers.

<sup>7</sup> “Indian Kanon”, <https://indiankanon.org/doc/1942013/>

<sup>8</sup> “Delhi riots death toll at 53, Here are the names of the victims,” The Wire, March 6, 2020, <https://thewire.in/communalism/delhi-riots-identities-deceased-confirmed>

The bias, the lack of objectivity, and a continuing colonial mind-set, is blatantly visible.”<sup>9</sup> Within days, the Indian government banned any clips from the episode being shared on social media by invoking IT Rules of 2021 that allow blocking of information in case of emergency. Twitter and YouTube were also asked to remove all content taken from the documentary on the pretext that it was undermining the sovereignty and integrity of India.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, BBC offices in Delhi and Mumbai were raided by Indian Income Tax authorities where employees’ laptops and mobile phones were reportedly seized. The move was condemned by both the opposition parties as well as the Editors Guild of India – a non-partisan association of editorial leaders.<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch, too, was critical of the Government's attempts to ban the documentary as it observed that instead of engaging the world around development and strategic partnerships, India’s image would be better served if it protected the rights of all Indians.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Amnesty International termed India’s response to the documentary and raid on BBC offices as an affront to free speech.<sup>13</sup>

This situation led many in the West to express concern. The New York Times in its editorial categorised Prime Minister Modi as a populist and authoritarian leader. The editorial observed that the Indian Government’s actions to suppress freedom of press had undermined India's status as “world’s largest democracy”.<sup>14</sup> The editorial went on to point out that in its annual Press Freedom Index in 2022, the organisation “Reporters without Borders” has placed India at 150 which is its lowest ever rank out of 180 countries.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, despite the ban, attempts were made especially by the students on various campuses like Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Jamia Millia Islamia, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University to air the documentary. Nonetheless, several students who had come to watch the documentary were detained by police, whereas in Ambedkar University, students complained of

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<sup>9</sup> “India government criticises BBC's Modi documentary,” BBC News, January 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-64342679>

<sup>10</sup> “Explained: The 'Emergency' rules invoked by the govt to ban the BBC film on Gujarat riots”, The Wire, January 24, 2023, <https://thewire.in/media/explainer-the-emergency-rules-invoked-by-the-govt-to-ban-the-bbc-film-on-gujarat-riots>

<sup>11</sup> “Indian tax agents raid BBC office in wake of Modi documentary,” Aljazeera, February 14, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/14/india-tax-agents-raid-bbc-office-in-wake-of-modi-documentary>

<sup>12</sup> Meenakshi Ganguli, “India’s blocking of BBC documentary reflects broader crackdown,” Human Rights Watch, January 23, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/23/indias-blocking-bbc-documentary-reflects-broader-crackdown>

<sup>13</sup> “India: Tax raids on the BBC are an ‘affront to free speech’, Amnesty International, February 14, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/india-tax-raids-on-the-bbc-are-an-affront-to-free-speech/>

<sup>14</sup> The Editorial Board “India's proud tradition of a free press is at risk,” New York Times, February 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/12/opinion/modi-bbc-documentary-india.html>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

power cut.<sup>16</sup>

Lending further credibility to the claims made since 2002, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had recently claimed that as Chief Minister of Gujarat, Mr. Narendra Modi had taught a “lesson” to anti-social elements.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the BBC documentary has raised international awareness about the 2002 Gujarat pogrom and the Indian government’s reaction to its release has further dented India’s image as well as its professed commitment to democratic principles. Will this documentary have any negative impact on the Indian Prime Minister’s political career, especially as 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections are hardly 15 months away? To answer this question, it would be pertinent to recall that following the Gujarat killings, he won three consecutive state elections (2002, 2007 and 2012) before becoming Prime Minister. He was also able to convincingly win the 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections in 2019 despite Balakot’s fiasco and the events that followed. It seems, therefore, more likely that the BJP will continue to portray this documentary as an “attack” on India and Hindus. There would evidently be continued attempts to play on Hindu sentiment and use this to create further polarization in society in order to garner Hindu votes, which, in turn, would help in advancing the goal of creating a ‘Hindu Rashtra.’ Meanwhile, secular voices would continue to lose relevance amid growing noise against Muslims and other minorities.

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<sup>16</sup> “BBC documentary row: Ambedkar University students claim power cut during screening, police on campus,” ABP Live, 27 January, 2023, <https://news.abplive.com/news/india/bbc-documentary-row-ambedkar-university-students-claim-power-cut-during-screening-police-on-campus-1578413>

<sup>17</sup> “In 2002, Narendra Modi taught a lesson to ‘anti-social elements’ in Gujarat, says Amit Shah,” Dawn, November 25, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1723053/in-2002-narendra-modi-taught-a-lesson-to-anti-social-elements-in-gujarat-says-amit-shah>