

Democracy - Who's she when she's at home?

Last night a friend from Baroda called. Weeping. It took her fifteen minutes to tell me what the matter was. It wasn't very complicated. Only that Sayeeda, a friend of hers, had been caught by a mob. Only that her stomach had been ripped open and stuffed with burning rags. Only that after she died, someone carved 'OM' on her forehead. Precisely which Hindu scripture preaches this?

Our Prime Minister justified this as part of the retaliation by outraged Hindus against Muslim 'terrorists' who burned alive 58 Hindu passengers on the Sabarmati Express in Godhra. Each of those who died that hideous death was someone's brother, someone's mother, someone's child. Of course they were.

Which particular verse in the Quran required that they be roasted alive? The more the two sides try and call attention to their religious differences by slaughtering each other, the less there is to distinguish them from one another. They worship at the same altar. They're both apostles of the same murderous god, whoever he is. In an atmosphere so vitiated, for anybody, and in particular the Prime Minister, to arbitrarily decree exactly where the cycle started is malevolent and irresponsible.

Right now we're sipping from a poisoned chalice - a flawed democracy laced with religious fascism. Pure arsenic.

What shall we do? What can we do? We have a ruling party that's haemorrhaging. Its rhetoric against Terrorism, the passing of pota, the sabre - rattling against Pakistan (with the underlying nuclear threat), the massing of almost a million soldiers on the border on hair-trigger alert, and most dangerous of all, the attempt to communalise and falsify school history text-books - none of this has prevented it from being humiliated in election after election. Even its old party trick - the revival of the Ram mandir plans in Ayodhya - didn't quite work out. Desperate now, it has turned for

succour to the state of Gujarat. Gujarat, the only major state in India to have a BJP government has, for some years, been the petri dish in which Hindu fascism has been fomenting an elaborate political experiment. Last month, the initial results were put on public display. Within hours of the Godhra outrage, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal put into motion a meticulously planned program against the Muslim community. Officially the number of dead is 800. Independent reports put the figure at well over 2,000. More than a hundred and fifty thousand people, driven from their homes, now live in refugee camps. Women were stripped, gang-raped, parents were bludgeoned to death in front of their children. Two hundred and forty dargahs and 180 Masjids were destroyed - in Ahmedabad the tomb of Wali Gujarati, the founder of the modern Urdu poem, was demolished and paved over in the course of a night. The tomb of the musician Ustad Faiyaz Ali Khan was desecrated and wreathed in burning tyres. Arsonists burned and looted shops, homes, hotels, textiles mills, buses and private cars. Hundreds of thousands have lost their jobs. A mob surrounded the house of former Congress MP Iqbal Ehsan Jaffri. His phone calls to the Director General of Police, the Police Commissioner, the Chief Secretary, the Additional Chief Secretary (Home) were ignored. The mobile police vans around his house did not intervene. The mob broke into the house. They stripped his daughters and burned them alive. Then they beheaded Ehsan Jaffri and dismembered him. Of course it's only a coincidence that Jaffri was a trenchant critic of Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, during his campaign for the Rajkot Assembly by-election in February. Across Gujarat, thousands of people made up the mobs. They were armed with petrol bombs, guns, knives, swords and tridents. Apart from the VHP and Bajrang Dal's usual lumpen constituency, Dalits and Adivasis took part in the orgy. Middle-class people participated in the looting. (On one memorable occasion a family arrived in a Mitsubishi Lancer.) The leaders of the mob had computer generated cadastral lists marking out Muslim homes, shops, businesses and even partnerships. They had mobile phones to coordinate the action. They had trucks loaded with thousands of gas cylinders, hoarded weeks in advance, which they used to blow up Muslim commercial establishments. They had not just police protection and police connivance, but also

covering fire. While Gujarat burned, our Prime Minister was on MTV promoting his new poems. (Reports say cassettes have sold a hundred thousand copies.) It took him more than a month - and two vacations in the hills - to make it to Gujarat. When he did, shadowed by the chilling Mr Modi, he gave a speech at the Shah Alam refugee camp. His mouth moved, he tried to express concern, but no real sound emerged except the mocking of the wind whistling through a burned, bloodied, broken world. Next we knew, he was bobbing around in a golf-cart, striking business deals in Singapore.

The killers still stalk Gujarat's streets. The lynch mob continues to be the arbiter of the routine affairs of daily life: who can live where, who can say what, who can meet who, and where and when. Its mandate is expanding quickly. From religious affairs, it now extends to property disputes, family altercations, the planning and allocation of water resources... (which is why Medha Patkar of the NBA was assaulted). Muslim businesses have been shut down. Muslim people are not served in restaurants. Muslim children are not welcome in schools. Muslim students are too terrified to sit for their exams. Muslim parents live in dread that their infants might forget what they've been told and give themselves away by saying 'Ammi!' or 'Abba!' in public and invite sudden and violent death. Notice has been given: this is just the beginning. There have been hundreds of outraged letters to journals and newspapers asking why the "pseudo-secularists" do not condemn the burning of the Sabarmati Express in Godhra with the same degree of outrage with which they condemn the killings in the rest of Gujarat. What they don't seem to understand is that there is a fundamental difference between a pogrom such as the one taking place in Gujarat now, and the burning of the Sabarmati Express in Godhra. We still don't know who exactly was responsible for the carnage in Godhra. The government says (without a shred of evidence) it was an ISI plot. Independent reports say the train was set on fire by an enraged mob. Either way, it was a criminal act. But every independent report says the program against the Muslim community in Gujarat - billed by the government as spontaneous 'retaliation' - has at best been conducted under the benign gaze of the State and, at worst, with active State collusion. Either way the State is criminally

culpable. And the State acts in the name of its citizens. So as a citizen, I am forced to acknowledge that I am somehow made complicit in the Gujarat pogrom. It is this that outrages me. And it is this that puts a completely different complexion on the two massacres. After the Gujarat Massacres, at its convention in Bangalore, the RSS, the moral and cultural guild of the BJP, of which the Prime Minister, the Home Minister and Chief Minister Modi himself are all members, called upon Muslims to earn the 'goodwill' of the majority community. At the meeting of the national executive of the BJP in Goa, Narendra Modi was greeted as a hero. His smirking offer to resign from the chief minister's post was unanimously turned down. In a recent public speech he compared the events of the last few weeks in Gujarat to Gandhi's Dandi March - both, according to him, significant moments in the Struggle for Freedom.

While the parallels between contemporary India and pre-war Germany are chilling, they're not surprising. (The founders of the RSS have, in their writings, been frank in their admiration for Hitler and his methods.) One difference is that here in India we don't have a Hitler. We have instead, a travelling extravaganza, a mobile symphonic orchestra. The hydra-headed, many-armed Sangh Parivar - with the BJP, the RSS, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, each playing a different instrument. Its utter genius lies in its apparent ability to be all things to all people at all times. The Parivar has an appropriate head for every occasion. An old versifier with rhetoric for every season. A rabble-rousing hardliner for Home Affairs, a suave one for Foreign Affairs, a smooth, English speaking lawyer to handle TV debates, a cold blooded creature for a Chief Minister and the Bajrang Dal and the VHP, grassroots workers in charge of the physical labour that goes into the business of genocide. Finally, this many-headed extravaganza has a lizard's tail which drops off when it's in trouble, and grows back again: a specious socialist dressed up as Defence Minister, who it sends on its damage-limitation missions-wars, cyclones, genocides. They trust him to press the right buttons, hit the right note. The Sangh Parivar speaks in as many tongues as a whole corsage of trishuls. Is this the Hindu rashtra that we've all been asked to look forward to? Once the Muslims have been "shown their place", will milk and Coca-Cola flow across the land?

Once the Ram mandir is built, will there be a shirt on every back and a roti in every belly? Will every tear be wiped from every eye? Can we expect an anniversary celebration next year? Or will there be someone else to hate by then? Alphabetically - Adivasis, Buddhists, Christians, Dalits, Parsis, Sikhs? Those who wear jeans, or speak English, or those who have thick lips, or curly hair? We won't have to wait long. It's started already. Will the established rituals continue? Will people be beheaded, dismembered and urinated upon? Will foetuses be ripped from their mothers' wombs and slaughtered? (What kind of depraved vision can even imagine India without the range and beauty and spectacular anarchy of all these cultures? India would become a tomb and smell like a crematorium.)

No matter who they were, or how they were killed, each person who died in Gujarat in the weeks gone by deserves to be mourned. It can say several contradictory things simultaneously. While one of its heads (the VHP) exhorts millions of its cadres to prepare for the Final Solution, its titular head (the Prime Minister) assures the nation that all citizens, regardless of their religion, will be treated equally. It can ban books and films and burn paintings for 'insulting Indian culture'. Simultaneously, it can mortgage the equivalent of 60 per cent of the entire country's rural development budget as profit to Enron. It contains within itself the full spectrum of political opinion, so what would normally be a public fight between two adversarial political parties, is now just a Family Matter. However acrimonious the quarrel, it's always conducted in public, always resolved amicably, and the audience always goes away satisfied it's got value for money - anger, action, revenge, intrigue, remorse, poetry and plenty of gore. It's our own vernacular version of Full Spectrum Dominance. But when the chips are down, really down, the squabbling heads quieten, and it becomes chillingly apparent that underneath all the clamour and the noise, a single heart beats. And an unforgiving mind with saffron-saturated tunnel vision works overtime. There have been pogroms in India before, every kind of program - directed at particular castes, tribes, religious faiths. In 1984, following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the Congress Party presided over the massacre of three thousand Sikhs in Delhi, every bit as macabre as the one in Gujarat. At the time,

Rajiv Gandhi, never known for an elegant turn of phrase, said, "When a big tree falls, the ground shakes". In 1985 the Congress swept the polls. On a sympathy wave! Eighteen years have gone by. Nobody has been punished. Take any politically volatile issue - the nuclear tests, the Babri Masjid, the Tehelka scam, the stirring of the communal cauldron for electoral advantage - and you'll see the Congress Party has been there before. In every case, the Congress sowed the seed and the BJP has swept in to reap the hideous harvest. So in the event that we're called upon to vote, is there a difference between the two? The answer is a faltering but distinct 'yes'. Here's why: It's true that the Congress Party has sinned, and grievously, and for decades together. But it has done by night what the BJP does by day. It has done covertly, stealthily, hypocritically, shamefacedly, what the BJP does with pride. And this is an important difference.

Whipping up communal hatred is part of the mandate of the Sangh Parivar. It has been planned for years. It has been injecting a slow-release poison directly into civil society's bloodstream. Hundreds of RSS shakhas and Saraswati shishu mandirs across the country have been indoctrinating thousands of children and young people, stunting their minds with religious hatred and falsified history. They're no different from, and no less dangerous than, the madrassas all over Pakistan and Afghanistan which spawned the Taliban. In states like Gujarat, the police, the administration, and the political cadres at every level have been systematically penetrated. It has huge popular appeal, which it would be foolish to underestimate or misunderstand. The whole enterprise has a formidable religious, ideological, political, and administrative underpinning. This kind of power, this kind of reach, can only be achieved with State backing. Madrassas, the Muslim equivalent of hothouses cultivating religious hatred, try and make up in frenzy and foreign funding, what they lack in State support. They provide the perfect foil for Hindu communalists to dance their dance of mass paranoia and hatred. (In fact they serve that purpose so perfectly, they might just as well be working as a team.) Under this relentless pressure, what will most likely happen is that the majority of the Muslim community will resign itself to living in ghettos as second-class citizens, in constant fear, with no civil rights and no recourse to justice. What will daily

life be like for them? Any little thing, an altercation in a cinema queue or a fracas at a traffic light, could turn lethal. So they will learn to keep very quiet, to accept their lot, to creep around the edges of the society in which they live. Their fear will transmit itself to other minorities. Many, particularly the young, will probably turn to militancy. They will do terrible things. Civil society will be called upon to condemn them. Then President Bush's canon will come back to us: "Either you're with us or with the terrorists." Those words hang frozen in time like icicles. For years to come, butchers and genocidists will fit their grisly mouths around them ('lip-synch', filmmakers call it) in order to justify their butchery. Mr Bal Thackeray of the Shiv Sena, who has lately been feeling a little upstaged by Mr Modi, has the lasting solution. He's called for civil war. Isn't that just perfect? Then Pakistan won't need to bomb us, we can bomb ourselves. Let's turn all of India into Kashmir. Or Bosnia. Or Palestine. Or Rwanda. Let's all suffer forever. Let's buy expensive guns and explosives to kill each other with. Let the British arms dealers and the American weapons manufacturers grow fat on our spilled blood. We could ask the Carlyle group - of which the Bush and Bin Laden families are both shareholders - for a bulk discount. Maybe if things go really well, we'll become like Afghanistan. (And look at the publicity they've gone and got themselves.) When all our farm lands are mined, our buildings destroyed, our infrastructure reduced to rubble, our children physically maimed and mentally wrecked, when we've nearly wiped ourselves out with self-manufactured hatred, maybe we can appeal to the Americans to help us out. Airdropped airline meals, anyone? How close we have come to self-destruction. Another step and we'll be in free-fall. And yet the government presses on. At the Goa meeting of the BJP's national executive, the Prime Minister of Secular, Democratic India, Mr A. B. Vajpayee, made history. He became the first Indian Prime Minister to cross the threshold and publicly unveil an unconscionable bigotry against Muslims, which even George Bush, and Donald Rumsfeld would be embarrassed to own up to. "Wherever Muslims are," he said, "they do not want to live peacefully." Shame on him. But if only it were just him: in the immediate aftermath of the Gujarat holocaust, confident of the success of its 'experiment', the BJP wants a snap poll. "The gentlest of

people," my friend from Baroda said to me, "the gentlest of people, in the gentlest of voices, says 'Modi is our hero.' Some of us nurtured the naive hope that the magnitude of the horror of the last few weeks would make the Secular Parties, however self-serving, unite in sheer outrage. On its own, the BJP does not have the mandate of the people of India. It does not have the mandate to push through the Hindutva project. We hoped that the 27 allies that make up the BJP-led coalition at the Centre would withdraw their support. We thought, quite stupidly, that they would see that there could be no bigger test of their moral fibre, of their commitment to their avowed principles of secularism. It's a sign of the times that not a single one of the BJP's allies has withdrawn support. In every shifty eye you see that faraway look of someone doing mental maths to calculate which constituencies and portfolios they'll retain and which ones they'll lose if they pull out. Except for Deepak Parekh of HDFC, not a single CEO of India's Corporate Community has condemned what happened. Farooq Abdullah, Chief Minister of Kashmir and the only prominent Muslim politician left in India, is currying favour with the government by supporting Modi because he's nursing the dim hope that he may become Vice-President of India very soon. And worst of all - Mayawati, leader of the BSP - the great hope of the lower castes, is on the verge of forging an alliance with the BJP in UP. The Congress and the Left parties have launched a public agitation asking for Modi's resignation. Resignation? Have we lost all sense of proportion? Criminals are not meant to resign. They're meant to be charged, tried and convicted. As those who burned the train in Godhra should be. As the mobs, and those members of the police force and the administration who planned and participated in the pogrom in the rest of Gujarat should be. As those responsible for raising the pitch of the frenzy to boiling point must be.

The Supreme Court has the option of acting against Modi and the Bajrang Dal and the VHP suo motu (when the Court itself files charges). There are hundreds of testimonies. There's masses of evidence. But in India if you are a butcher or a genocidist who happens to be a politician, you have every reason to be optimistic. No one even expects politicians to be prosecuted. To demand that Modi and his henchmen be arrested and put away, would make other politicians

vulnerable to their own unsavoury pasts-so instead they disrupt Parliament, shout a lot, eventually those in power set up commissions of inquiry, ignore the findings and between themselves make sure the juggernaut chugs on. Already the issue has begun to morph. Should elections be allowed or not? Should the Election Commission decide that? Or the Supreme Court? Either way, whether elections are held or deferred, by allowing Modi to walk free, by allowing him to continue with his career as a politician, the fundamental, governing principles of democracy are not just being subverted, but deliberately sabotaged. This kind of democracy is the problem, not the solution. Our society's greatest strength is being turned into her deadliest enemy. What's the point of us all going on about 'deepening democracy', when it's being bent and twisted into something unrecognisable?

What if the BJP does win the elections? (The buzz is that engineering a war against Pakistan is going to be the BJP's strategy to swing the vote.) After all, George Bush had an 80 per cent rating in his War Against Terror, and Ariel Sharon has a similar mandate for his bestial invasion of Palestine.

Does that make everything all right? Why not dispense with the legal system, the Constitution, the press - the whole shebang - morality itself, why not chuck it and put everything up for a vote? Genocides can become the subject of opinion polls and massacres can have marketing campaigns. Fascism's firm footprint has appeared in India. Let's mark the date: Spring, 2002. While we can thank the American President and the Coalition Against Terror for creating a congenial international atmosphere for its ghastly debut, we cannot credit them for the years it has been brewing in our public and private lives. It breezed in in the wake of the Pokhran nuclear tests in 1998. From then onwards, the massed energy of bloodthirsty patriotism became openly acceptable political currency. The 'weapons of peace' trapped India and Pakistan in a spiral of brinkmanship - threat and counter-threat, taunt and counter-taunt. And now, one war and hundreds of dead later, more than a million soldiers from both armies are massed at the border, eyeball to eyeball, locked in a pointless nuclear standoff. The escalating belligerence against Pakistan has ricocheted off the border and entered our own body politic, like a sharp blade slicing

through the vestiges of communal harmony and tolerance between the Hindu and Muslim communities. In no time at all, the godsquadders from hell have colonised the public imagination. And we allowed them in. Each time the hostility between India and Pakistan is cranked up, within India there's a corresponding increase in the hostility towards the Muslims. With each battle cry against Pakistan, we inflict a wound on ourselves, on our way of life, on our spectacularly diverse and ancient civilisation, on everything that makes India different from Pakistan. Increasingly, Indian Nationalism has come to mean Hindu Nationalism, which defines itself not through a respect or regard for itself, but through a hatred of the Other. And the Other, for the moment, is not just Pakistan, it's Muslim. It's disturbing to see how neatly nationalism dovetails into fascism. While we must not allow the fascists to define what the nation is, or who it belongs to, it's worth keeping in mind that nationalism, in all its many avatars - socialist, capitalist and fascist - has been at the root of almost all the genocides of the twentieth century. On the issue of nationalism, it's wise to proceed with caution.

And there will not always be spectacular carnage to report on. Fascism is also about the slow, steady infiltration of all the instruments of State power. It's about the slow erosion of civil liberties, about unspectacular day-to-day injustices. Fighting it means fighting to win back the minds and hearts of people. Fighting it does not mean asking for RSS shakhas and the madrassas to be banned, it means working towards the day when they're voluntarily abandoned as bad ideas. It means keeping an eagle eye on public institutions and demanding accountability. It means putting your ear to the ground and listening to the whispering of the truly powerless. It means giving a forum to the myriad voices from the hundreds of resistance movements across the country who are speaking about real things - about bonded labour, marital rape, sexual preferences, women's wages, uranium dumping, unsustainable mining, weavers' woes, farmers' worries. It means fighting displacement and dispossession and the relentless, everyday violence of abject poverty. Fighting it also means not allowing your newspaper columns and prime-time TV spots to be hijacked by their spurious passions and their staged theatrics, which are designed to divert attention from everything else. While most

people in India have been horrified by what happened in Gujarat, many thousands of the indoctrinated are preparing to journey deeper into the heart of the horror. Look around you and you'll see in little parks, in big maidans, in empty lots, in village commons, the RSS is marching, hoisting its saffron flag. Suddenly they're everywhere, grown men in khaki shorts marching, marching, marching. To where? For what? Their disregard for history shields them from the knowledge that fascism will thrive for a short while and then self-annihilate because of its inherent stupidity. But unfortunately, like the radioactive fallout of a nuclear strike, it has a half-life that will cripple generations to come. These levels of rage and hatred cannot be contained, cannot be expected to subside, with public censure and denunciation. Hymns of brotherhood and love are great, but not enough. Historically, fascist movements have been fuelled by feelings of national disillusionment. Fascism has come to India after the dreams that fuelled the Freedom Struggle have been frittered away like so much loose change.

Independence itself came to us as what Gandhi famously called a 'wooden loaf' - a notional freedom tainted by the blood of the thousands who died during Partition. For more than half a century now, the hatred and mutual distrust has been exacerbated, toyed with and never allowed to heal by politicians, led from the front by Mrs Indira Gandhi. Every political party has tilled the marrow of our secular parliamentary democracy, mining it for electoral advantage. Like termites excavating a mound, they've made tunnels and underground passages, undermining the meaning of 'secular', until it has just become an empty shell that's about to implode. Their tilling has weakened the foundations of the structure that connects the Constitution, Parliament and the courts of law - the configuration of checks and balances that forms the backbone of a parliamentary democracy. Under the circumstances, it's futile to go on blaming politicians and demanding from them a morality they're incapable of. There's something pitiable about a people that constantly bemoans its leaders. If they've let us down, it's only because we've allowed them to. It could be argued that civil society has failed its leaders as much as leaders have failed civil society. We have to accept that there is a dangerous, systemic flaw in our parliamentary democracy that politicians will exploit.

And that's what results in the kind of conflagration that we have witnessed in Gujarat. There's fire in the ducts. We have to address this issue and come up with a systemic solution. Can we not find it in ourselves to belong to an ancient civilisation instead of to just a recent nation? To love a land instead of just patrolling a territory? The Sangh Parivar understands nothing of what civilisation means. It seeks to limit, reduce, define, dismember and desecrate the memory of what we were, our understanding of what we are, and our dreams of who we want to be. What kind of India do they want? A limbless, headless, soulless torso, left bleeding under the butchers' cleaver with a flag driven deep into her mutilated heart? Can we let that happen? Have we let it happen? The incipient, creeping fascism of the past few years has been groomed by many of our 'democratic' institutions. Everyone has flirted with it - Parliament, the press, the police, the administration, the public. Even 'secularists' have been guilty of helping to create the right climate. Each time you defend the right of an institution, any institution (including the Supreme Court), to exercise unfettered, unaccountable powers that must never be challenged, you move towards fascism. To be fair, perhaps not everyone recognised the early signs for what they were. The national press has been startlingly courageous in its denunciation of the events of the last few weeks. Many of the BJP's fellow travellers who have journeyed with it to the brink are now looking down the abyss into the hell that was once Gujarat, and turning away in genuine dismay. But how hard and for how long will they fight? This is not going to be like a publicity campaign for an upcoming cricket season. But politicians' exploitation of communal divides is by no means the only reason that fascism has arrived on our shores. Over the past fifty years, ordinary citizens' modest hopes for lives of dignity, security and relief from abject poverty have been systematically snuffed out. Every 'democratic' institution in this country has shown itself to be unaccountable, inaccessible to the ordinary citizen, and either unwilling, or incapable of acting, in the interests of genuine social justice. Every strategy for real social change - land reform, education, public health, the equitable distribution of natural resources, the implementation of positive discrimination - has been cleverly, cunningly and

consistently scuttled and rendered ineffectual by those castes and that class of people who have a stranglehold on the political process. And now corporate globalisation is being relentlessly and arbitrarily imposed on an essentially feudal society, tearing through its complex, tiered, social fabric, ripping it apart culturally and economically. There is very real grievance here. And the fascists didn't create it. But they have seized upon it, upturned it and forged from it a hideous, bogus sense of pride. They have mobilised human beings using the lowest common denominator - religion. People who have lost control over their lives, people who have been uprooted from their homes and communities who have lost their culture and their language, are being made to feel proud of something. Not something they have striven for and achieved, not something they can count as a personal accomplishment, but something they just happen to be. Or, more accurately, something they happen not to be. And the falseness, the emptiness of that pride, is fuelling a gladiatorial anger that is then directed towards a simulated target that has been wheeled into the amphitheatre.

How else can you explain the project of trying to disenfranchise, drive out or exterminate the second poorest community in this country, using as your footsoldiers the very poorest (Dalits and Adivasis)? How else can you explain why Dalits in Gujarat, who have been despised, oppressed and treated worse than refuse by the upper castes for thousands of years, have joined hands with their oppressors to turn on those who are only marginally less unfortunate than they themselves? Are they just wage slaves, mercenaries for hire? Is it all right to patronise them and absolve them of responsibility for their own actions? Or am I being obtuse? Perhaps it's common practice for the unfortunate to vent their rage and hatred on the next most unfortunate, because their real adversaries are inaccessible, seemingly invincible and completely out of range? Because their own leaders have cut loose and are feasting at the high table, leaving them to wander rudderless in the wilderness, spouting nonsense about returning to the Hindu fold. (The first step, presumably, towards founding a Global Hindu Empire, as realistic a goal as Fascism's previously failed projects - the restoration of Roman Glory, the purification of the German race or the establishment of an Islamic Sultanate.) One hundred and

thirty million Muslims live in India. Hindu fascists regard them as legitimate prey. Do people like Modi and Bal Thackeray think that the world will stand by and watch while they're liquidated in a 'civil war?' Press reports say that the European Union and several other countries have condemned what happened in Gujarat and likened it to Nazi rule. The Indian government's portentous response is that foreigners should not use the Indian media to comment on what is an 'internal matter' (like the chilling goings-on in Kashmir?). What next? Censorship? Closing down the Internet? Blocking international calls? Killing the wrong 'terrorists' and fudging the dna samples? There is no terrorism like State terrorism.

But who will take them on? Their fascist cant can perhaps be dented by some blood and thunder from the Opposition. So far only Laloo Yadav of Bihar has shown himself to be truly passionate: "Kaun mai ka lal kehta hai ki yeh Hindu rashtra hai? Usko yahan bhej do, chhati phad doonga!" (Which mother's son says this is a Hindu Nation? Send him here, I'll tear his chest open.) Unfortunately there's no quick fix. Fascism itself can only be turned away if all those who are outraged by it show a commitment to social justice that equals the intensity of their indignation. Are we ready to get off our starting blocks? Are we ready, many millions of us, to rally not just on the streets, but at work and in schools and in our homes, in every decision we take, and every choice we make?

Or not just yet... If not, then years from now, when the rest of the world has shunned us (as it should), like the ordinary citizens of Hitler's Germany, we too will learn to recognise revulsion in the gaze of our fellow human beings. We too will find ourselves unable to look our own children in the eye, for the shame of what we did and did not do. For the shame of what we allowed to happen.

This is us. In India. Heaven help us make it through the night.

The author is.

