

A cloud over India's Muslims

By **MARTHA NUSSBAUM**

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If, as now seems likely, last week's terrible events in Mumbai were the work of Islamic terrorists, that's more bad news for India's minority Muslim population. Never mind that the perpetrators were probably funded from outside India, in connection with the ongoing conflict over Kashmir. The attacks will feed a powerful stereotype of the violent and untrustworthy Muslim, bent on religious conquest, who can never be a good democratic citizen. Such stereotypes already shadow the lives of Indian Muslims, who make up 13.5% of the population.

But it's important to consider Indian terrorism in a broader context.

Terrorism in India is by no means peculiar to Muslims. A string of recent incidents has been linked to Islamic groups, most of these with foreign ties and pertaining to Kashmir. However, the most bloody recent example of terrorism in India was the slaughter of as many as 2,000 Muslim civilians by Hindu right-wing mobs in the state of Gujarat over several months in 2002.

This horrendous pogrom was portrayed at the time as retaliation for an alleged Muslim torching of a train car carrying mostly Hindu passengers. Two independent inquiries have since concluded that the fire was, instead, a tragic accident caused by passengers' kerosene stoves.

But even if that was not known at the time, most of those killed -- or raped or beaten -- lived long distances from the original incident and could have had no connection to it. Moreover, there was copious evidence of pre-planning: Hindu right-wing groups had kept lists of Muslim dwellings and businesses.

Evidence that Gujarat's state government egged-on the perpetrators was also overwhelming and led to the U.S. State Department in 2005 denying a visa to Narendra Modi, Gujarat's chief minister. Recently, the Indian investigative journal

Tehelka uncovered even more proof of government complicity in the murderous, anti-Muslim attacks. A Tehelka reporter using a hidden camera interviewed participants in the Gujarat violence, who described how bombs were manufactured in factories owned by members of the Hindu right; how arms were smuggled from other states; how the police were instructed to look the other way.

One leader of the Bajrang Dal (a paramilitary Hindu right-wing group) described his own role with pride: "There was this pregnant woman, I slit her open. ...They shouldn't even be allowed to breed. I say that even today. Whoever they are, women, children, whoever, nothing to be done with them but cut them down. Thrash them, slash them, burn the bastards. ... The idea is, don't keep them alive at all; after that, everything is ours."

The revelation that members of the Hindu right have embraced ethno-religious cleansing should amaze nobody. Since the 1930s, their movement has insisted that India is for Hindus, and that both Muslims and Christians are foreigners who should have second-class status in the nation.

This year, in the eastern state of Orissa, members of the Bajrang Dal have murdered scores of Christians who refused to reconvert to Hinduism. (Most Indian Christians are descendants of converts, often from the lowest Hindu castes.) Peaceful villages have been reduced to ashes; a church-run orphanage was torched; dozens of churches have been destroyed; missionaries and priests have been murdered in cold blood. Thousands have been forced to flee their homes, and at least 30,000 are homeless. The rallying cry: "Kill Christians and destroy their institutions."

In August, the Catholic bishops of India closed Catholic schools across the country "as a protest against the atrocities on the Christian community and other innocent people." Such actions, aimed at transforming India's pluralistic democracy into an ethnocentric regime, pose a grave threat to India's future.

All of this is terrorism, but most of it doesn't reach the world's front pages. When it does make it into newspapers outside India, the word "terrorism" is rarely used. The result is a perception, in India and abroad, that Muslims are the bad guys in every incident of terrorist violence.

Such stereotypes are so prevalent that many state bar associations in India refuse to defend Muslims accused of complicity

in terrorism -- despite the fact that India's constitution guarantees all accused a cost-free defense.

Meanwhile, Muslim youths are often rounded up on suspicion of terrorism with little or no evidence, an analogue to the current ugly phenomenon of racial profiling in the United States.

Some Muslims are criminals. However, this does not justify demonizing Muslims, any more than the violent acts of the Hindu right justify stereotyping all Hindus as rapists and murderers. Let's go after criminals with determination, good evidence and fair trials, and let's stop targeting people based on their religious affiliation.

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