

of Hindutva and Terrorism

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In the wake of startling media revelations about the role of Hindutva forces in acts of terror across the country, several well-known human rights groups, including ANHAD, Foundation for Civil Liberties, INSAF, and the Jamia Teachers' Solidarity Association, held a one-day national-level conference in New Delhi recently under the banner 'Tracing Sangh Terror Links and Stories of Innocent Muslim Boys'. A number of top political leaders, including AB Bardhan of the CPI, Sitaram Yechury of the CPI (M), Ram Vilas Paswan of the Lok Janshakti Party, and senior Congress leader Digvijay Singh, as well as noted journalists and human rights activists from across India testified to the alarming phenomenon of Hindutva terrorism. They bemoaned the fact that the media had all along remained a mute spectator to this development and to the targeting of innocent Muslims in the name of combating terrorism, even in cases where, as is now being proven, acts of terror were the handiwork of Hindutva groups. Speaker after speaker spoke of how anti-Muslim bias has entered every sector of the state apparatus, besides being deeply-rooted in society at large, this being further stoked by Hindutva terrorism that aims at blaming Muslims for terrorism and promoting the demonization of the community. They recounted how security agencies routinely employed extra-judicial confessions extracted under torture from Muslims wrongly accused of terrorism as the basis of their claims and chargesheets for various blasts cases, including those which have been now shown to be the work of Hindutva forces. A number of Muslims, among them some wrongly accused of masterminding terror attacks, including those engineered by Hindutva activists, testified at the meeting.

Abu Zafar from Azamgarh spoke of how extra-judicial arrests of innocent Muslims had become something of a pattern, and of how they were subjected to brutal torture and forced to sign fake confessions. 'Muslims have become second-class citizens. We are made to feel guilty being Muslim,' he said. 'We have no complaint against those who are openly anti-Muslim', he stressed, 'because that is only what is expected of them. Our complaint is against those who call themselves secular, like the Congress. It is in all these decades of Congress rule since 1947 that the conditions of the Muslims have so rapidly deteriorated.' He added that persecution of innocent Muslims in the name of combating terror was reported not just in BJP-ruled states but even in states ruled by the Congress. 'We Muslims are not begging for anything. All we want is justice. No country can survive without justice,' he said.

Qutb Jahan Shaikh from Gujarat spoke about her nephew, Mohammad Parvez, who was picked up by the police in 2003. He was first implicated in the Tiffin Bomb case and then in the Haren Pandya murder case, along with several other Muslim boys. She insisted that her nephew was innocent and was wrongly framed, accusing Modi of being behind Pandya's death.

According to recent media revelations, 18-year-old Mumbai college girl Ishrat Jahan, slain in 2004, might well have been yet another victim of numerous fake encounters in which Muslims have been killed. Rauf, who has been consistently highlighting her case, spoke about how Ishrat was, so he said, falsely accused of being involved in a plot to kill Modi, and how sections of the media continue to parrot that claim. 'I've heard advocates in the Gujarat High Court openly say that no judge there can give any judgment against Modi', he said. He spoke of several innocent Muslims who have been killed or arrested, falsely accused of being terrorists, being denied justice in the courts and continuously being reviled by the media. In the few cases of such arrested persons being released, their lives have been

completely destroyed, and they find it virtually impossible to find any sort of employment. The media remains studiously silent on them even after they have been proven innocent, and rarely, if ever, apologises for having denounced them, repeating the claims of biased, anti-Muslim investigative agencies, as terrorists.

Another victim from Gujarat, Khatoon Bi, a resident of Godhra, spoke of her three sons who are languishing in jail on terror charges for nine years. Insisting that they are innocent and have been wrongly framed, she said she simply could not afford the cost of meeting them and that she and her daughters-in-law are forced to survive by begging.

The well-known journalist Iftikhar Gilani, who had to spend months in jail on trumped-up terror-related charges, spoke of how, when he was finally released, on being found innocent, he had hoped that his case would serve as a lesson for the government, the judiciary, the media and the investigative agencies. Lamentably, no such lesson had been learnt, he said, and the targeting of innocent Muslims continues unabated. If justice could not be secured from the courts, and judges were indifferent to the plight of innocent people wrongly accused of being terrorists and subjected to torture on this account, he said it was a very dangerous phenomenon.

Abdur Rahim, an auto-rickshaw driver was picked up, along with dozens of other Muslims, in the wake of the Mecca Masjid blast in Hyderabad. He was kept in illegal custody for almost five months, and subjected to brutal torture, including electric shocks. 'I could smell my flesh burning, like a kabab,' he related. While he was in jail, his family had to undergo no less severe punishment. His brothers lost their jobs, and his sister was sent back by her in-laws, who were fearful of being branded for relations with an alleged terrorist. 'Today, it is far easier to pounce on and catch a Muslim in India, than a goat or a chicken', he remarked. Now that it had been proven that Hindutva groups were behind the Mecca Masjid blast, he insisted that the Government of Andhra Pradesh apologise to all the Muslims of India because it had 'forced them to lower their heads in shame.'

Rais, another innocent Muslim man picked up in the wake of the Mecca Masjid blast, spoke of how, after six months in jail, where he was badly tortured, he was released, but because he had been tainted as an alleged terrorist by the police and the media, it was impossible for him to find employment. 'People began calling me Bomb Blast Rais, and now the police still harass me and warn me against speaking to the media.' Revealing the motive behind his illegal detention, he said that when the Gujarat police came to Hyderabad to arrest a certain Maulana Nasiruddin, he had asked them why they were taking the Maulana. The policemen answered back threatening that they would 'repeat Gujarat' in Hyderabad—in other words, ensure a replay of the horrific anti-Muslim violence that rocked Gujarat in 2002. Thereupon, they shot dead a friend of Rais' who was present on the occasion. Later, Rais was falsely implicated by the police in the Mecca Masjid blast case.

Mufti Ismail, MLA from Malegaon, a town where terror attacks have now been traced to Hindutva groups, spoke of how scores of innocent Muslims in and around Malegaon have been thrown into jail, where they continue to languish, for crimes that they did not commit. 'Apparently, being a Muslim in India is itself becoming a crime,' he said. 'The Muslims' condition has been made such that we cannot even voice our hurt to others because they will construe this as rebellion. Our future is deliberately being made dark. We are being forced to become second-class citizens, so that leave alone struggle for our rights and justice, we cannot even talk of them.'

A resolution was unanimously passed at the meeting, which demanded the reinvestigation of all terror cases in the last two decades, including the Hindutva terror nexus straddling groups such as Abhinav Bharat, RSS, VHP, BJP and Bajrang Dal leaders, together with sections of the Indian intelligence and security agencies, who, it said, have

'deliberately subverted the probes as well as the due process of law'. The government should seriously investigate, it added, 'the openly expressed sympathies' towards Hindutva ideology of certain retired policemen and bureaucrats as this, it said, was 'an indication of such sympathy within serving officials of the police, army and bureaucracy.' It also demanded that the issue of the possibility of the Hindutva terror network having possibly been provided not just political but also financial and logistical support by various governments be also investigated. It called on the Government of India to immediately release a White Paper on the exact number of Muslim youths falsely arrested on charges of carrying out bomb blasts at the Mecca Masjid, in Malegaon and Ajmer and on the Samjhauta Express. These youths should be released without any further delay. All those who were accused, arrested or tortured in these cases must, it demanded, be provided with compensation and rehabilitation.

Alongside this, the resolution called for a thorough investigation into the foreign sources of funding of Hindutva organizations. All police officers who have engaged in torture, illegal detentions, forced custodial confessions and fabricated evidence should, it insisted, be suspended, booked and tried under the law of the land, and any promotions or awards they may have received for their role in these investigations should be taken back. It called on the Andhra Pradesh government to immediately stop contesting the claims in the Hyderabad Civil Court for compensation of innocent Muslim youth arrested and tortured in the aftermath of the Mecca Masjid blasts. The Home Minister and the state governments, it added, must issue an apology 'for the grievous loss of dignity and livelihood that innocents have suffered on account of the false charges foisted upon them.'

The resolution roundly condemned the 'edicts' issued by various Bar Associations against lawyers who had taken up the cases against the terror accused, even in face of threats of physical violence. It called for lawyers who have engaged in such attacks against fellow lawyers handling these cases to be tried under the law. Given that investigative agencies probing into terror attacks have, in several cases, used torture to extract fake confessions, the resolution called for investigations into all terror attacks in the past two decades (which, it said, 'have been brought under suspicion') to be investigated 'afresh and objectively' by a judicial commission 'without negating the possibility of the Hindutva involvement in such instances.' The resolution also critiqued the role of the media in demonizing the Muslims, appealing to it to 'remain true to journalistic ethics in critically examining the so-called evidence placed by the investigators.' The publication of custodial confessions and 'dubious results' of 'suspect pseudo-scientific' narco-analysis tests should not be published by the media, it also stressed.□