

History's Mysteries

Finding the 'Truth'

The 'truth' about Godhra appears more clouded with the partial findings of the interim Banerjee Report. Several actors, including the Election Commission, continue to debate the propriety or otherwise of the report's release, and whether citizens will be well served by the dissemination of its findings. In all this, it is 'truth', the search for it, that ultimately makes up an individual's response as to how life should be lived, becomes a casualty.

BADRI RAINA

There has always been a class of thinking people who have been wearied and disappointed by the cussed obtuseness of history to yield up transcendent truths. Nor have all of them been poseurs or charlatans, masking self-interest under an attitude of affected profundity. Through the ages, a good number – writers, artists, other caring people – have suffered (as they continue to suffer) genuine despair at the absence of final answers. Some, embracing contingent contributions to causes dear to them, have opted for often frustrating involvements to the bitter end (a Yeats, a Lukacs, a Sartre). Others have been helped by their angst to produce memorable works of literature and philosophy (a Joyce, a Hiedegger). Some others have concluded their own histories in self-slaughter (a Mayakovsky, a Camus, a Rimbaud, a Virginia Woolf). Many, jettisoning their seemingly fruitless intellectualities, have made submission to the authority of dogma (an Augustine, an Ashoka, a Kafka, an Eliot). And, posited on the other side, not a few rationalists/Marxists, violated by the rugged imperfections of praxis, have found cheerful telos in an alternate god, nature and the market (a Malthus, a Bernstein, a Gorbachev). And yet others have opted to offer learned comment from sanctuaries offered by expert distance (the names here are too many to recite) in the belief that it is worthwhile, after all, to be impartial, even if somewhat

cynical, denoters of partial truths than to sink into silence altogether, particularly if there is some remuneration at the end. Let it be understood that the names I have picked are random rather than inclusive, illustrative rather than exhaustive. (Indeed, were this line of thought pursued in some detail, the procedure could lead to a rewarding compendium of the interfaces between specific histories and individual odysseys. But this is neither the place for

such a project, nor the purpose entirely of this piece which is occasioned simply by some learned comment in sections of the media that all reports – of this committee and that commission – are worthless political tools meant to further or hinder some crass interest or the other, and the truth of things such as the Godhra occurrence can never be found). To carry on: there are, however, also those who have found it in them, wittingly or unwittingly, to internalise that text in the Bhagwad Gita which suggests that we discriminate in the momentary here-and-now, between the vile and the not-so-vile, and do our bit on behalf of the latter without seeking to reach after some ultimate consequence, or without confining the ambit of that consequence to the span of our private lifespans. In other words, learn to school our intelligence to recognise that there has been a long line of others before us, and there will be a long line of others after us. So that it were best not to preclude what consequence our honest effort may have in the course of things.

So also of the Godhra event, the Banerjee Report, and the uses to which it has been put. Succinctly, if the Godhra lies could be deployed to win one election, why may not some part of the Godhra truth be likewise pressed to win another?

It is now to be noted that the local Gujarat VHP leader has testified at the Nanavati

Commission that they had/have no direct evidence that the Godhra event was planned. Likewise, the BJP leader, Nalin Bhatt, has testified that the BJP had/had no direct evidence that any inflammable materials were thrown from the outside of the S6 coach. But, most significantly of all, the father of the slain Haren Pathak (who was a member of Narendra Modi's cabinet) has testified that the Gujarat carnage was 'ordered by Modi' as he called 'fifty-six leaders of the BJP to a meeting at 5 pm on February 27, 2002 and told them that the Godhra killings must be retaliated.

Alas, the only choice we have is to make a choice for the time-being, and the option of not making a choice is the worst of choices we can make. Nor should the 'time-being' concern us less than eternity, since as best we know in our finite consciousness, eternity may in the end be only an endless stream of 'time-beings'. As in the case of our own brains, we may never know more than a small percentage of its composition, and the little we know is all we have to go on. And it may be that pushing by best reason the little we know, more may come into our ken.

If, then, the Banerjee Report, authorised and authenticated by due processes of constitutional governance, helps us today to understand somewhat better how the tectonics of the Gujarat carnage were engineered (so as we may forestall its second coming) where is the harm in sharing those reasoned and public findings with the people of India. For, crucially, sharing those findings cannot be intended to foment communalism but to make known how coach S6 was made to function as the vehicle of communalism. Would it be our case that Darwin was wrong to publish his findings on evolution because it upsets Genesis, or that Crick was wrong to isolate the DNA because it exploded theories of human inequality? If not, how can a report that goes some way to illuminate the constructions of fascist politics in our time be deleterious to the nation?

As to the Election Commission: consider that during the long-drawn-out electoral campaign in that most 'beloved' of countries, America, how many ugly facts – partial and political – were revealed one after the other, day after day; and nobody cried 'stop'. Indeed, had not that happened, the neanderthal neoconservatives might have had the world uncontestedly

under their jackboots. As it happens, that churning has gone a long way to tell us what we are in for. It is of course a circumstance that America has no Election Commission; perhaps their founding fathers recognised that politics (the ordering of public life to the best public good) should not be an adjunct to 'management' and 'good governance' but a field of transparent contestations shared widely and repeatedly among the people in whom sovereignty rests.

If it is truly our collective desire to forge an informed and secure culture of democracy – rather than its mere trappings – let us accept that there is no other way to defeat viciating gullibilities than by a relentless exposure to available and verifiable truths. We cannot at once sing praises of the perspicacity of our electorate as well as seek to treat them with paternalistic condescension.

If in the months to come other findings surface that put Banerjee to grief then so be it. Let, as we go along, truth prevail for the 'time-being' until it is overthrown by truths even more substantiated. There is a brand of modern-day philosophers who have persuasively argued that the only certainty we possess is that nothing is certain. Let us say with equal, and equally contrary, certainty that we are not in the business of either finding the absolute or, failing that, abandoning altogether the contingent need to make sense of the world we inherit, we inhabit, and we act in. And that, therefore, we simply assume, as creatures of the here-and-now, our obligation towards furthering what Habermas called the 'project of modernity'. That assumption requires that we propagate any and all texts, including the Banerjee Report, which help to enlarge our humanity from moment to moment, month to month, year to year, generation to generation, without being deterred by the truth of that Keynesian text which reminds us of precisely what is suggested here in sardonic rebuke – 'in the end we are all dead'. That rebuke was meant to suggest to us that between birth and death falls that thing called life; and whether we acknowledge this or not, we all live it in specific ways of which the least profitable is the gesture of expert disinterest in the doings of the tainted, or lofty disdain at their claim that they may have located some part of a petty truth. ■■■

[This article was written before the interim report of the Banerjee Committee was 'made available' to a wider group on February 7, 2005.]