

Final Solution, Rakesh Sharma - Repor

This discourse into Rakesh Sharma's documentary "Final Solution" is roughly fractionated into three segments. The first is a bird's eye view of the 2002 communal riots and the movie on it. The second explores the different perspectives on the issue and objectively weighs available narratives. The last section is a deliberation of the author's reflections on the movie and the rampage it depicts.

The Gujarat Carnage, also known as the 2002 Gujarat riots and the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, was a three-day period of inter-communal violence in the state of Gujarat. The violence began on 27 February 2002, when a train carrying Hindu pilgrims, returning from the holy city of Ayodhya, was set on fire near the Godhra railway station. Fifty-nine people died in the fire. The riots that followed claimed the lives of more than 1,000 people, most of them being of the Muslim community.

In the aftermath of the fire, a series of riots and arson attacks took place in the state. The violence was supposedly perpetrated by Hindu nationalist groups against Muslims. The riots were the worst in the state since the partition of India in 1947. The violence in Gujarat has been described as a pogrom, a term usually reserved for acts of violence against Jews. The British newspaper The Observer described the events as "India's Kristallnacht", referring to that November in Nazi Germany when the Sturmabteilung forces tore through the streets destroying Jewish owned enterprises .

The movie starts by discussing the aftermath of the Gujarat genocide and how it was planned in advance. Eyewitnesses recount the attacks on Gulbarg and Naroda Patiya, as well as the violence against Muslim women in Eral and Delol/Kalol. The second half of the documentary covers the 2002 Gujarat Assembly elections. It looks at how the right-wing propaganda machinery used the Godhra incident to their advantage. The documentary also studies the situation months after the elections to show the shocking socio-economic faultlines that still exist in the state.

The movie was initially banned in India, in 2004, because the Censor Board thought that it would cause massive communalism and radicalism. However, the ruling was a violation of the Indian Supreme Court's rulings on the issue. Subsequently, the ban was lifted in October 2004.

As a director, Sharma employment of close range tête-à-tête shots to effectively capture and disseminate emotions is noteworthy. Quite powerful were the moments where victims traversed the enormity of their losses, both familial and financial. The use of relevant poetry as segues and background scores to montages was also quite efficacious. As someone who was watching a movie about the Godhra riots for the first time, I found the narrative of the little boy at school who couldn't believe that the film maker was a Hindu quite interesting. It was able to perfectly sum up the effects of the turmoil - older generations were scarred, but the younger ones were left with strong emotions and conceptions of what the other "side" stood for. The kids were left with the impression that the other community, be it from the perspective of the Hindus or the Muslims, was made of radical terrorists.

From a cursory glance at fateful events that took place, one might be motivated to point out that the heaviest causational factors might have been the rampant misinformation, centuries of resentment of the Hindus towards the Muslim community, and the questionable nature of the leadership and media. One chain of narrative establishes that the unrest and agitation was preplanned owing to the fact that many of the rioters seemed to be coordinating the attack using cell phones.

Most sources concur that it was the purported burning of a railway car occupied by Hindu pilgrims and karsevaks on their way back from Ramjanmabhumi that galvanized a portion of the populace and inspired anti-Islamic sentiment. However, there are multiple narratives on how the events unfolded. Though several investigatory bodies were set up both at the state and national level, they have been unable, so far, to arrive at an according conclusion. The official investigation by the Government of Gujarat concluded that the fire was indeed arson, and was perpetrated by a 1000 person strong mob which had assembled at the Godhra Junction. J Mahapatra, then Additional Director General of the Gujarat police, said that "miscreants had kept the petrol-soaked rags ready for use much before the train had arrived at Godhra". According to a Gujarat Forensic Science Laboratory report, the fire that killed 59 people in a train coach was started by the attackers who emptied an inflammable liquid inside. The report also states that there were very few burn marks on the outside of the coach below the windows, indicating that the fire started from inside. Many conviction were made based on these findings, a few of which were later commuted or reversed. However, this conclusion has since been disputed by several independent investigations, which have suggested that the fire was arson, and was planned and carried out by Hindu nationalist groups, or that the fire was accidental, and was started by a group of Muslim pilgrims who were traveling in the same coach. Either way, with a number of their denizens seemingly

killed by Muslims, the Hindu community vowed to avenge the injustice and took to the street.

Though evidence seems to suggest that cadres from the Bharatiya Janata Party played not unimportant roles in the organization and transaction of the massacres that followed, the government led by Narendra Modi was later acquitted by a Special Investigation Team (SIT) appointed by the Supreme Court. The commission also dismissed allegations that the state government had not done enough to prevent the violence. Several victims presented in the movie claim that the police force did nothing to prevent the attacks, while some reported that they observed police officers leading and abetting the Hindu mob.

It goes without saying that a discussion of the statements presented and upheld as facts by the interviewed stakeholders of the community has to be discussed. Sharma structured the movie in a way that presented alternating arguments from both sides of the no man's land. Throughout the narrative, the Islamic community is portrayed as being devastated and repressed by the Hindus, while the latter are shown to be unapologetic and vengeful. It doesn't help that the clips shown of the Hindu community portray an inherently violent and extremist one - that may very well have been a small portion of the populace. However, there are many instances where the latter parties are shown reporting crimes committed against them and questioning the root of the Muslim community's firepower. Both sides are shown as victim and villain in a quite unstructured *mélange*. It is quite interesting to me, as a dilettante, how the documentary was able to focus its narrative on just that series of unfortunate incidents which took place in February 2002. Shouldn't the riots of 1969 have been factored into the rendering?

Rakesh Sharma's documentary "Final Solution" is indubitably a great work of journalism, as it takes an outsider along as he probes into the decimation of a community, the pain of another, and the bureaucratic debacle it all turned into. Did Narendra Modi's BJP leverage the pain of the community to gain some sympathy votes? Undoubtedly, any politician worth their salt would commit to doing just that. However, the question remains if there is evidence or indisputable facts that Modi's posse actually committed the atrocities attributed to them. As mentioned before, the documentary fails to dive deep into the roots of the issue; the definitions of *hindutva*, radicality, and nationalism; and the lives in the communities before the unrest. It also fails to elicit from me a conviction of who was right and who was wrong.

However, I must commit to say that the movie does not openly try to proselytize. It sticks to apparently true storylines, and provides a first-hand, though shallow, account of people who were victims and supposed villains of the 2002 Gujarat riots.