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A Modern Day Nero or Hotel Hero?

By Congressman Joe Pitts

This week the State Department decided not to allow an Indian official into the United States . Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat , India , has been tied to terrible human rights abuses, specifically the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities. It is on these grounds that the State Department barred him from entering the country.

A few years ago, when the Indian Supreme Court was struggling to capture the depravity of Mr. Modi's administration it settled on calling him "a modern day Nero." In August of the year 64 A.D., Emperor Nero was looking to place blame for a fire that destroyed a large swath of Rome . Nero targeted an obscure eastern religious sect called the "Christians" and made them pay. Like his other political enemies, Nero systematically killed and humiliated them. Similarly, Chief Minister Modi has conspired to kill or humiliate his opponents.

Modi's "fire" broke out inside a train allegedly carrying a group of Hindu activists. Mr. Modi blamed the Muslims and, according to court findings, worked with government officials to incite Hindu riots. The coordinated attacks that followed left more than 2,000 Indian Muslims and non-Hindus dead. Mr. Modi commended the mobs for exercising "remarkable restraint under grave provocation."

Then-Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called the riots "madness." In January 2004, I toured the remains of this "remarkable restraint." I must say the ruins and blood-stained walls suggested more madness than restraint.

Human rights groups and governments around the world condemned the riots and released mountains of evidence linking Mr. Modi's government to the violence. The Citizens Tribunal in India , led by retired Supreme Court Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, held the state government of Gujarat responsible.

But the Gujarat riots were only the beginning. Under Mr. Modi's direction, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Dalits face daily harassment by government officials. Indian Hindus who oppose Modi's violent tactics against religious minorities are intimidated. The state's Christian community was subjected to an illegal census, the same action he took prior to the orchestrated attacks on Muslims. The *Hindustan Times*, has reported that the government asks people asked questions like, "Would you like to live as Hindus or die like Christians?"

Under his leadership, the state of Gujarat passed an anti-conversion law in direct violation of the Indian Constitution and international human rights norms to which India is a party. The law is a way to transform Indian into a purely Hindu nation.



Those familiar with Indian politics are not surprised. Mr. Modi and his political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP), are closely affiliated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council, VHP), which traces its roots to Nazi Germany. Today, the VHP advances its ideology of racial supremacy and hatred through, among other things, school textbooks in which Nazism is condoned.

One high school social studies textbook describes at length the “charismatic personality” of “Hitler the Supremo” and the “achievements” of Nazism. The textbook fails to mention extermination policies or concentration camps except for a reference to “a policy of opposition towards the Jewish people and [advocacy for] the supremacy of the German race.”

Fred Schwartz, the President of the Asian-American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA), told the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* that the group invited Mr. Modi in order to explore investment opportunities in Gujarat. “We’re a business group. We’re not a political group,” he told the paper. At the same time, the Association’s website, according to the paper, called Modi “a master political strategist, a firebrand agitator,” and “an extraordinary orator.”

This is naïve. Any business that wants to succeed knows that respect for the rule of law and for human rights are prerequisites to economic prosperity. To condemn Mr. Modi’s actions is not to get involved in politics, but to take a stand for the rule of law and human rights.

Mr. Modi openly defies India’s policy on religious freedom. India is a great friend to America. Why would we weaken its effort to strengthen its democracy by lending legitimacy to extremists who undermine its rule of law and protection of fundamental human rights? We need to assist our ally in its effort to bring these rogue officials under control. If the AAHOA will not do the right thing by dis-inviting Mr. Modi, the government should step in.

The International Religious Freedom Act gives the President the authority to delay, deny, or cancel visits by a foreign citizen who “while serving as a foreign government official, was responsible for or directly carried out, at any time, particularly severe violations of religious freedom.” President Bush should use this law to bar Mr. Modi from entering the country. If he does not, we are in violation of our commitments under the International Religious Freedom Act.

It is on the basis of this law that 21 Members of Congress and I wrote to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asking her to deny his entry to this country. This had nothing to do with India, and everything to do with Mr. Modi and his policies as a public official.

Allowing Mr. Modi to speak would violate the core of our fundamental human rights commitments and provide tacit approval of his statements, policies and actions. More importantly, it would dishonor the memory of those lost in 2002, and tell those still suffering under Mr. Modi’s rule that we approve of his actions.