**Modi in London: ‘Two great nations, one glorious future’ – just don’t mention the past**

On Friday November 13th Wembley Stadium will witness what has been referred to as an “Olympics style welcome” for Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India. The reception – touted as the “largest reception of any foreign head of government in the United Kingdom” – is anticipated to draw a crowd of 700,000 people, and will be followed by one of the largest fireworks displays the UK has ever seen. It will, of course, be attended by politicians, business leaders and personalities from various social and cultural spheres. And all this for a man who, from 2002 to 2012, was barred from the United Kingdom for human rights abuses – for, specifically, his role in an anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat that left over a thousand people dead. How do we explain such a turn-around?

The official explanation for lifting the boycott against Modi in 2012 was that he had been legally exonerated from any wrong-doing in the pogrom. But with Modi already tagged as the future Prime Minister of India, and boasting of the economic development of Gujarat under his leadership (boasts which have, however, been stringently challenged by critics), there were clearly other considerations. As one unnamed British official in Delhi informed *The Guardian*, lifting the ban would “broaden and advance commercial interests”. There were, he warned, “opportunity costs to not engaging”. But as the theme of the reception – “Two Great Nations. One Glorious Future” – implies, Modi has clearly been completely rehabilitated in Britain. For the rhetoric “Two Great Nations. One Glorious Future” erases the violence with which Modi’s career has been and continues to be enmeshed, as testified by the horrific acts of violence that have been perpetrated against Muslims and other marginal groups in India by supporters of Modi’s party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), since its assumption of political power last year – and which Modi has done nothing to halt or condemn.

But in order to truly understand the reason for Modi’s rehabilitation in the UK we need to consider not only Modi’s inglorious past, but Britain’s. Framing India and Britain simply as “two great nations” with a “glorious future” conveniently elides the fact that Britain conquered and then colonized the Indian subcontinent – colonization that was dependent on violence. The exoneration of Modi, and his celebratory visit to the UK, therefore reveal less about the ways in which Modi has managed to reinvent his past, than they do about the way Britain has. They are simply emblematic of the ways in which rhetoric continues to be skilfully employed to silence the violence of Britain’s colonial past – in particular, through displacing endemic, systemic violence onto what English professor Purnima Bose refers to as “rogue colonial individuals”.

A rogue colonial individual is a colonial official who is essentially criminalized for engaging in excessive brutality against ‘natives’ as a means of distancing colonial regimes from their constitutive violence. Bose uses the example of General Reginald Dyer and the Amritsar massacre to illustrate how this process works. On April 13th, 1919, Dyer ordered his soldiers to fire on an unarmed crowd of between 10-20,000 unarmed people who had gathered in an enclosed compound known as Jallianwala Bagh, in the Punjabi city of Amritsar, to hold a protest meeting against the Rowlatt Act, which allowed for detention without trial. Dyer gave no warning before his troops began firing a hail of bullets that lasted ten minutes, and that only ceased when they ran out of ammunition. Such carnage resulted, according to one official estimate, in a death toll of over a thousand people, with more than 1,200 others wounded.

In India Dyer rapidly acquired the epithet “the Butcher of Amritsar”, with the main political organ of anti-colonial opposition, the Indian National Congress, referring to him in its report on the massacre as “depraved” and his actions a “crime against humanity”. In Britain reaction to Dyer’s actions were mixed. For supporters such as Rudyard Kipling, Dyer was “the man who saved India” (for, apparently, staving off a rebellion that, as even the official investigation into the massacre observed, showed no signs of erupting). Opponents, on the other hand, regarded Dyer’s behaviour as barbaric, exceptional and aberrant, with the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, even accusing Dyer of operating under a “doctrine of terrorism”. But in rendering colonial violence as something anomalous, perpetrated by a rogue individual in a random act, rather than a constitutive element of colonial rule, such rhetoric served ultimately to erase the endemic nature of colonial violence – as well as the reality, as one critic observed in the Parliamentary debates on Dyer, that Britain held India “by force – undoubtedly by force”.

Modi, like Dyer, is a “rogue individual” – or, significantly, a “rogue postcolonial individual”, whose behaviour was formerly singled out in Britain for its violation of civilized norms. Such a focus on Modi, rather than on the systematic nature of violence against minorities and underprivileged groups in India, served to erase such violence – not to mention the role of British colonialism in institutionalizing such forms of state violence in India. Modi’s rehabilitation is simply, therefore, another act of silencing.