

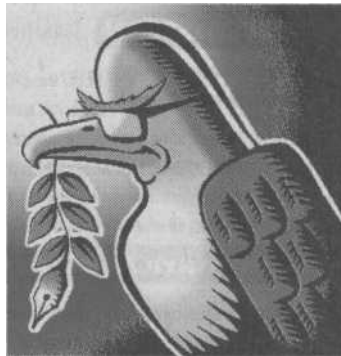
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Memoir maladies

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Was it just an ironic coincidence that the very day L K Advani released his autobiography *My Country, My Life, Gujarat 2002* was on the front page of national newspapers? 'Special team to probe Gujarat riots again: Supreme Court', read the headline in this paper. Advani's book has a chapter on 'Communal Violence in Gujarat', subtitled 'Propaganda versus Reality'.

The Godhra and the post-Godhra violence, Advani says, is "an event — rather, two interrelated events — that has figured most prominently in the sustained campaign, conducted both nationally and internationally to malign my party, its ideology and the Vajpayee government's six years in office". Those lines and chapter headings tell you what kind of book it is: not the reflective and objective memoir of a senior statesman looking back at his life, but the cut and thrust of a practising politician, preparing for the battles ahead.



Was it Goebbels who said that if you repeat a lie often enough it begins to sound like the truth? To prove that the Gujarat violence was not state-sponsored, the BJP has generally quoted these official figures: Muslims killed — 790, Hindus killed — 254, Missing — 223. Advani does so too and predictably adds, "Can a tragic episode of this kind, in which the number of Hindus killed was by no means insignificant, be termed 'genocide' of Muslims?"

If you wanted to get to the truth, here is what you would see. The figure for Hindus killed includes 59 in the Sabarmati Express fire at Godhra on February 27, 2002. It also includes 25 people killed in sporadic stabbing incidents in April and May. Since most of the "missing" were actually Muslims, the death toll figures during the horrific violence on February 28 and March 1 to 4 would be more like Muslims killed — 1,013, Hindus killed — 170.

Advani also makes the point that his government acted quickly and sent the army in. But he masks the vital fact that

when the army did come in, it was refused the permission it needs from civilian authorities to move into civilian areas. It didn't get that during the crucial days in which the worst mayhem occurred

But why carp on this sleight of words when the book fails to mention important, and well-established facts which would show that the Gujarat carnage, if not state-sponsored, was at least state-encouraged? The officially approved bandh the day after the Godhra train fire and the procession displaying the dead bodies, the presence of government ministers in police control rooms asking the police to go soft on Hindu rioters were

all reported daily in national newspapers. Yet the only media report Advani quotes is from a website which approvingly says, 'Advani Reviews Gujarat Situation: Asks Government to be Tough'.

He does not mention the date of the report. Is that because it would have shown that the home minister of India went to review the damage in his

home state when the worst of the violence was over? And that even after personally visiting the horrors, he uses expressions like "Both Godhra and post-Godhra violence is condemnable and shameful", and "Godhra may explain what happened after that...".

Perhaps it's unrealistic to expect Advani to do anything else. After all, it was he who backed Narendra Modi to the hilt. In a sub-section of the Gujarat chapter unambiguously titled, 'Narendra Modi: A victim of vilification campaign', he says he "stoutly" rejected demands for Modi's resignation.

Finally, if the events of 2002 were just an excuse for a vilification campaign against the BJP, why did the Supreme Court transfer the Best Bakery Case and Bilkis Bano case out of Gujarat? Or why has the Supreme Court now set up a special investigation team to look into as many as 14 cases again? Unless, of course, L K Advani wants to make the case that the highest judiciary in the land is also party to "the vilification campaign".

The writer is a political commentator.