

Today's Martyrs

Father Cedric Prakash SJ



Fr. Cedric Prakash SJ is the director of the Prashant Jesuit Center for Human Rights in Ahmedabad, Gujarat state, in the Republic of India. In this position he has worked tirelessly to prevent people both within India and without from forgetting about the 2002 Gujarat pogrom in which over 1,100, and perhaps as many as

2,000, people died. Most were Muslims. Fr. Prakash is thus not a martyr in the sense that he has suffered for the Christian faith – that is, not yet – but he is a witness to Christian ideals of justice and charity.

Narendra Damodardas Modi was Chief Minister (Governor) of Gujarat state during the 2002 pogrom, and has been accused by Fr. Prakash of fomenting and allowing the killings to proceed without hindrance. Ten years later Mr. Modi stated in an interview that the killings made him feel sad "as when you run over a puppy". Fr. Prakash responded to this devaluation of human life with denunciations that Modi was "unstable" and "a threat to democracy in India".

During the 2014 general elections Modi became the Prime Ministerial candidate of his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). On April 30, 2014 Fr. Prakash countered with a written historical perspective to India's current situation:

"From his youth, Narendra Modi has been a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh: RSS. The core ideology of this extremist organization, born in the 1930s and having its inspiration from Hitler and the Nazis, was the formation of a Hindu nation state. In this ideology, minorities - particularly the Muslims and the Christians - were meant to be treated as second-class citizens. However, India's freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Babasaheb Ambedkar, worked and ensured that India becomes a secular and democratic State where every citizen is treated equally with rights and freedom guaranteed in the Constitution...The RSS was never satisfied with this. One of their men Godse assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. Over the years, they spawned many other groups including their political wing Bhartiya Janata Party BJP; together they are all known as the 'Sangh Parivar'...Modi has proved to be an extremely divisive person; he is a skilful orator able to spin myths and to take credit for achievements which are not his. With a well-oiled campaign, backed by a large section of India's corporate sector and by media houses owned by them, many feel that his party will be the largest single party when the results are announced and he may also be India's next Prime Minister"

Earlier on March 27, 2014 Fr. Prakash received the Human Life Award from the Archdiocese of Mumbai. During his acceptance speech he said:

"In many ways, the 2002 carnage ushered in a culture of death, not only in Gujarat but in the entire country. Nowadays many in India seem to legitimize it. A section of society backs someone as a candidate for prime minister who presided over this bloody chapter in the country's history...there can be no greater tragedy than

what happens to 'the other' [when] it does not matter if we burn and loot, rape and kill, if we destroy life in all its sanctity"

Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India on May 26, 2014 at the head of a BJP majority government.

Father Cedric Prakash has been a witness to these events. He is not an infallible witness. He may be wrong concerning the future of India under BJP governance. If he is correct, however, the implications are immense.

We have in the person of Narendra Modi a man who has shown a disregard for the lives of Christians and Muslims and who has winked at those who have or who would harm them. This self-professed Hindu nationalist has reached the pinnacle of political power in a nation with a nuclear arsenal, and which faces an adversary dominated by Islam and who is similarly armed. He has already called for the creation of armed militias on the disputed border with China and for large increases in the defense budget. Christian leaders throughout India now report increased persecution from organizations under the Sangh Parivar umbrella, especially RSS paramilitaries and their Bajrang Dal youth wing. Fr. Prakash himself criticized the Gujarat state government on August 22, 2014 for publishing school textbooks “full of myths and falsehoods, superstitions and prejudices” that teach hatred and prejudice toward Westerners, accuse the English language "of having polluted the Indian culture", and define Islam and Christianity as "non-Indian religions"; he also noted that Narendra Modi had praised the books but delayed their release until after the national elections. Fr. Prakash added on October 29, 2014 that “India indeed faces hard times ahead...for the secular and pluralistic fabric of India, which, given the ideology of the RSS, is bound to be destroyed”.

During the last serious Indo-Pakistani confrontation – which occurred under a BJP coalition government in 2001 - leaders of both nations were given a U.S. Air Force study that showed how a war between the two would lead to 150 million dead and economies wrecked for generations to come, and an economic depression for the rest of the world. That was many years ago. Both nations have only increased their arsenals since. Perhaps these facts will lead Mr. Modi and his colleagues and supporters to sobriety and humanity. Perhaps not.

All we can do is to pray, and to listen to men and women such as Fr. Cedric Prakash, so that we can know for what and for whom we pray.

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2490 Black Rock Turnpike #455
Fairfield CT 06825-2400
<http://todaysmartyrs.org/index.php/people/>

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