

REIGN OF TERROR

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There is no need to speculate about who was responsible for the carnage in Bombay which began in the second week of January: Bal Thackeray proudly claimed responsibility for the organisation he leads, the Shiv Sena (i.e. the Army of Shivaji, a Maratha leader who successfully fought the Moghals in the seventeenth century and established his own kingdom).

The violence was sparked off by a number of stabbings of Hindus on the 6th and a gruesome case of arson on the evening of the 7th in which a Hindu Maharashtrian family's home was set alight, killing five people and seriously injuring eight others. It has not been established who exactly was responsible for these crimes, but two observations can be made. Firstly, it was more than unlikely that ordinary Muslim residents of Bombay, only too aware of their vulnerability after the recent attacks on them in December, would have made such a suicidal move. Secondly, the highly organised and systematic character of the retaliatory onslaught completely belies any claim that it was spontaneous and suggests, on the contrary, meticulous planning. In a city where different communities are closely intermixed, Urdu journals and newspapers, Muslim-owned shops, restaurants, timber marts, industrial units, homes and vehicles were targeted. *The Times of India* (January 13th) echoed the sentiments of many observers and residents when it noted that 'Bombay is currently witness to the ruthless implementation of a carefully crafted strategy to intimidate, with fear and violence, the city's Muslim community... The pattern of killing, arson and looting suggests that the objective of the perpetrators is to strike so much terror in the hearts of the minority community that its members have no choice other than to flee... Bombay has not seen such barbaric behaviour during its 300-year-old history as a metropolis.'

Jeeploads and gangs of Shiv Sena cadre attacked Muslim residents in all parts of the city—from the poorest shanty-towns to the most upper-class areas—shouting 'Jala do, jala do!' ('Burn them, burn them!') Men and boys were forcibly stripped, and killed if they were found to be circumcised; a teenage girl was raped and hacked to death before her mother's eyes and a youth who went to their rescue was burned to death; gangs invaded hospitals and killed patients in them, whole families were slaughtered. By January 12th, a *Times of India* correspondent counted 650 bodies of victims in Bombay hospitals. There must have been even greater if some Hindus had not sheltered Muslims neighbours and helped

them to escape. Hundreds of thousands of terror-stricken Muslims fled Bombay by train while others, unable to leave, flocked for safety to public halls and railway stations converting them into vast refugee camps.

This was not a 'riot' in any meaningful sense of the term: it was a genocidal pogrom. Asghar Ali Engineer, a Muslim scholar who has consistently and courageously opposed Islamic fundamentalism, remarked, 'Muslims in India now feel exactly the same way Jews felt in Nazi Germany'. Bal Thackeray, asked for his response to this remark, said, 'Have they behaved like the Jews in Nazi Germany? If so, there is nothing wrong if they are treated as Jews were in Nazi Germany'. There is nothing wrong, in other words, with exterminating people for the "crime" of belonging to a religious or ethnic minority.

There is another parallel with Nazi Germany: the complete impunity with which the gangs committed every conceivable atrocity. The police, which in December had been so quick to fire on Muslim demonstrators, killing hundreds, watched passively while the looting, burning and killing went on in front of their eyes. Where they did swing into action, their intervention took a bizarre form. Residents, both Hindu and Muslim, complained that when they called the police because their building was threatened by thugs, the police arrived only after the thugs had gone away...and then proceeded to confiscate whatever the residents had got together for self-defence, and arrest and take away all the able-bodied young Muslim men! Even when the army was called in, they were not given power to act against law-breakers except under the orders of a police officer; on one occasion when they arrested some culprits, the police promptly released them.

While the police have been completely compromised by these events, it is also notable that Chief Minister Sudhakarrao Naik, Defence Minister Sharad Pawar and Home Minister S.B. Chavan, all of whom were in Bombay during the pogrom, did nothing to halt the violence. The tragic irony of the whole situation was underlined by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's brief visit to the city on the 15th. On the one hand he received a delegation from the BJP (Bharathiya Janatha Party) calling on him to throw out Pakistanis and Bangladeshis illegally resident in Bombay. Every Bombay resident knows there are no such people: the Muslim residents of Bombay are bona fide Indian citizens. But if called upon to provide documentary proof of citizenship, most of them — like the vast



majority of Hindu citizens— would be unable to do so, thus, becoming vulnerable to deportation out of their own country!. On the other hand, a delegation from the Ekta (Unity) Forum suggested that minorities should be protected — a suggestion which may sound obvious and banal, and yet one which the Prime Minister showed no signs of acting on. The BAI (Bar Association of India) subsequently passed a resolution saying, 'The BAI views with alarm and despair the complete lack of will on the part of those responsible for maintaining law and order to prevent willful killings of innocent people.'

How did this situation arise? Maharashtra, the state which has Bombay as its capital, has a long tradition of militant Hindu chauvinism ('Hindu chauvinism' being defined in this instance as the attempt to turn India into a 'Hindu Rashtra', i.e. and exclusively Hindu nation). Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) in 1925 and its leader Golwalkar were Maharashtrians, as was Savarkar, the founder of the Hindu Mahasabha; to this day, the headquarters of the RSS is in the Maharashtrian town of Nagpur. Golwalkar was arrested and the RSS banned in 1948 after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by one of its members, Godse; but these measures were reversed in the summer of 1949. In late 1951 the RSS formed a parliamentary front, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, which later became the BJP. Their brand of Hinduism was seen as the crucial ideology for combatting communism; as K.R. Malkani, editor of the RSS paper the *Organiser* wrote, 'Communism can be combatted and conquered in Hindustan by the hindus only through Hindutva.'

When the Shiv Sena was formed by Bal Thackeray in 1966, it added an element of regional ethnic supremacism to anti-communist hindu chauvinism: not just 'Hindu Rashtra', but 'Maharashtra for the Maharashtrians' and 'Mumbai Amcha Ahe' (Bombay is Ours) — a 'sons of the soil' slogan which boded ill for the non-Maharashtrians who formed 58 percent of the city's population. (Apparently he didn't stop to consider what would happen to all the Maharashtrians in other parts of the country if a 'sons of the soil' policy were strictly followed!) In fact the first campaign launched by Thackeray was against South Indians, and the general elections of 1967 provided him with a perfect target: the 'crypto-communist' 'lunghiwala' ('lunghi-wearer' — i.e. South Indian) V.K. Krishna Menon, who stood as an independent to retain a seat he had won in the previous two elections as a Congress nominee. The Shiv Sena succeeded in defeating him, with the support not only of the Jan Sangh but also of the Congress, thus setting a pattern for the future. In the 1958 local elections, Congress abstained from contesting seats in predominantly Maharashtrian areas in order to help

Shiv Sena candidates defeat Communist Party rivals— which they did, getting 42 seats and becoming the second largest group in the Town Hall; subsequently they have moved up to first place, thus gaining control over the city's administration.

A few months after the 1968 local elections, the Shiv Sena set up the BKS (Bharathiya Kamgar Sena, or Indian Workers Army), its own 'union'. Among its exploits was the killing of a prominent Communist Party trade union leader, and the burning of the office of the CP-affiliated Girni Kamgar Union (Textile Workers' Union), after which Thackeray announced, 'I am proud of the Shiv Sainiks who fought the Reds'. Summing up BKS ideology, he said 'I am against strikes and go-slow tactics. The most important thing is production. Management and labour are two wheels of industry, and they must move smoothly. A trade union should work as a lubricant. Actually, there is non need for a trade union if management behaves sensibly.' Not surprisingly, many employers turned to the BKS for help with breaking strikes and smashing militant unions, and reciprocated by funding the Shiv Sena. While the majority of Bombay workers remained justifiably skeptical of its ability to represent their interests as workers, it is undeniable that the aggressive presence of the BKS has divided workforces and weakened the labour movement in a city renowned for its strong unions and industrial militancy.

The campaign against South Indians resulted in a major violence in 1969; Thackeray was arrested, but was unrepentant: 'Yes, I am a dictator, why should we have so many rules?' he asked. 'Why should India want democracy? It is a Hitler that is needed in India today'. Understandably, South Indian Hindus have been among those fleeing Bombay in the current bout of ethnic cleansing.

While there has always been an ideological affinity between the Shiv Sena and BJP, they have organisationally moved much closer together in the course of the 'Ram Janmabhoomi' (Ram's birthplace) campaign, forming electoral alliances and campaigning jointly for a 'Hindu Rashtra'. Jaibhagwan Goyal, president of the North Indian branch of the Shiv Sena, claimed in an interview that Shiv Sainiks had carried out the entire planning for the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya, trained for it and led the assault on it. While this may be an exaggeration, it is certainly true that they were central to the operation. On the other hand, BJP-related organisations have participated in the violence in Bombay; for example, an attempt by the Bombay University and College Teachers' Union to screen the award-winning anti-communist film *Ram ke Naam* (In the Name of



God) was disrupted by the ABVP (Akhil Bharathiya Vidyarthi Parishad), the student front of the RSS; and journalists of the Marathi newspaper *Hamara Mahanagar* who protested against their strong-arm tactics were stabbed and assaulted so brutally by the ABVP that several had to be hospitalised and one nearly died.

Clearly, the issue in Bombay is not antagonism between 'Hindus and 'Muslims', but a clear attempt by totalitarian organisations to control the whole life of the city. Many Bombay residents of all communities, proud of its cosmopolitan character and the ability of its diverse

communities to live together peacefully and harmoniously, have been horrified and shattered by recent events; they have made attempts to restore peace and provide relief to the surviving victims of the pogrom. But the grim truth is that they are simply not equipped to deal with the armed, organised violence of the Shiv Sena. The situation in Bombay is that those who have the will to restore peace lack the power to do so, while those who have the power to restore peace lack the will to do so. As long as this situation lasts, Bombay will remain in the grip of a lumpen fascist reign of terror.

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