

# IN DEFENCE OF DEMOCRACY

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## Introduction

On Saturday, 15 July 2000, Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra Chhagan Bhujbal—also the state Home Minister—announced that the state government was giving the police the go-ahead to proceed with their case against Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray for his role in instigating the 1992-93 anti-Muslim pogroms in Bombay. In addition to this, cases launched by concerned citizens as well as the Justice Sri Krishna Commission Report had named the Shiv Sena in general and Thackeray in particular as being responsible for the communal violence which left almost a thousand dead, many more injured, women raped, and Bombay burning. Far from denying the charges, Thackeray had proudly claimed responsibility for the destruction of lives and property, citing Hitler's treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany with approval. But the previous Shiv Sena/Bharatiya Janata Party government in Maharashtra had refused to take any action against him, for obvious reasons. Ever since the current Congress-led state government came to power in the 1999 elections, it had been under pressure from the same concerned citizens and human rights groups to reopen these cases, and it finally lived up to its election promise to do so.

The Shiv Sena responded with their usual terror tactics. Thackeray threatened that not just Bombay but the whole of India would burn if he were arrested. On Saturday evening, the whole of Sunday, and sporadically over the following ten days, shops were forcibly closed down and transport workers injured by stone-throwing SS *goondas* if they tried to run buses or trains. But when the state government, their hand strengthened by a Supreme Court statement, refused to back down, saying that any violence would lead to more arrests, Thackeray was forced to withdraw. For the first time in his political career, he admitted he was subject to the rule of law, and on Tuesday, 25 July, he was finally arrested. Bhujbal justified the arrest by saying that no individual is above the law, everyone is equal before the law.

## Challenging Impunity

The action taken against Thackeray is crucially important because it challenges the culture of impunity which has prevailed so far: the implicit assumption that right-wing groups can go on the rampage, terrorizing and slaughtering minority communities, *without any action being taken against them*, which is precisely what continues to happen in the neighbouring BJP-ruled state of Gujarat, and the ethos that prevailed under the previous Shiv Sena/BJP government in Maharashtra. Challenging impunity is, of course, important for those minority communities themselves, who are otherwise in the position of being vulnerable to all forms of attack—from demolition of mosques and churches and burning of homes to assault, rape and murder—without being able to rely on the

protection of the police or the law. But just as Shiv Sena extortion and bullying was not confined to minorities, so the trauma of the 1992-93 pogroms affected a much larger section of the population. The majority of Bombay's residents, proud of their city's secular, cosmopolitan culture, suffered a deep sense of loss. When a significant part of your identity is linked to the place where you belong, you can be displaced in two ways: either by being driven out of the place, or by the place being transformed so drastically that you no longer feel you belong there. While many Muslim families suffered displacement in the former sense during the riots, other sections of the population suffered it in the latter sense, as the city changed beyond recognition in those terrible days. The prosecution of Bal Thackeray for his leading role in carrying out that transformation is thus an important aspect of restoring the city to its former identity and ending the sense of displacement suffered by the majority of its inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> A poll carried out by the *Times of India* revealed that 70 per cent of respondents wanted Thackeray arrested and convicted.

The metropolitan magistrate, who was only being asked to rule on whether Thackeray should be remanded in custody, dismissed the whole case on the grounds that too much time had elapsed. The state government, of course, decided to appeal against this decision, while human rights and citizens' groups continued to agitate for the punishment of the guilty named in the Sri Krishna Commission Report. This continuing drama was, in many ways, a vindication of those sections of the left—including, on this occasion, the CPI and CPI(M)—who had campaigned against the BJP-led coalition (the so-called National Democratic Alliance) in the previous elections, seeing it as a struggle against fascism. Non-party left campaigners called on the electorate to vote for those non-NDA candidates who were most likely to win, and to press for these parties to form an alliance in opposition to the NDA. They appealed to left parties and their supporters not to put up or vote for left candidates who had little or no chance of winning, thereby splitting the anti-NDA vote and objectively helping the right-wing coalition to come to power.

This was not an easy position to take, given that the largest non-NDA party was the Congress, whose record is far from clean. To name just a few of the black marks against it: it was Congress which declared the Emergency of 1975-77, involving a wholesale suspension and violation of democratic rights; Congress goons led the anti-Sikh Delhi pogrom of 1984, whose main perpetrators have never been punished, and some of whom were even candidates in the 1999 elections; and Congress governments were in power both in Maharashtra and at the Centre during the 1992-93 riots, and could certainly have done more to prevent the demolition of the Babri Mosque and the subsequent carnage. In Maharashtra, the situation was even worse. It was Congress politicians who first sponsored the Shiv Sena, and some of them continued to have a cordial relationship with this Frankenstein's monster even after it escaped their

control. And just a few months before the elections, Congress split, one of the main leaders of the breakaway Nationalist Congress Party being Maharashtra leader Sharad Pawar, who took a significant section of the state's candidates with him. One reason given for the split was their objection to foreign-born Sonia Gandhi becoming a potential candidate for the post of Prime Minister: an objection also made by the BJP, leading to speculations that Sharad Pawar might join forces with them after the elections, although he denied any such intention. Under such circumstances, calling on people to vote for the non-NDA candidate most likely to win, whether Congress, NCP or other, in the expectation that they would come together to form a government, seemed a forlorn hope indeed.

In the event, post-election analyses showed that if not for the split in Congress, they would have swept the elections in Maharashtra. The split was one reason (though by no means the only one) for the NDA victory at the Centre, and in Maharashtra it resulted in a hung Assembly. It took more than two weeks of haggling before the Congress, NCP and other parties cobbled together a state government, but they finally succeeded. So although the anti-right-wing campaign failed so far as the central government was concerned, in Maharashtra, against all the odds, it worked out.

Of course, there were also sections of the left who did not endorse this strategy, and who argued either for a boycott of the elections or voting only for their own candidates, which in most constituencies would in practice mean a boycott, and in others could result in dividing the anti-right-wing vote; both strategies could help the NDA candidate to get in. How can the left be so sharply divided on an issue of such practical importance? The question needs to be debated thoroughly and the implications of each position drawn out, because the very survival of the Left may depend on clarity on this issue. We can look at it from two angles: (1) a theoretical one: what is the relationship between socialism and democracy? And (2) a practical one: what should socialists/communists do when parties of the left are not in a position to form a government of their own, and the contest is between a Right-wing party or coalition and a Centre or slightly left-of-centre party or coalition?

Perhaps the reason why there is so much confusion on the first question is that there has always been a certain degree of ambiguity among Marxists on the question of democracy, usually referred to as 'bourgeois democracy.' The critique, to put it crudely, is that this so-called democracy is merely a facade for bourgeois rule. How valid is this argument?

## State as a Site of Struggle

It is, of course, undeniable that any democracy under bourgeois rule will necessarily be limited and circumscribed. However, the bourgeois state itself is a site of struggle. The rights to freedom of expression and association, to equality of treatment and opportunity, and to elect representatives to a government in free and fair elections, are not rights that the bourgeoisie has bestowed out of the generosity of its heart. They are rights that the mass of working people have fought for and defended, sometimes at immense cost, and with good reason. Although Stalinists have

confused the issue further by putting forward the view that democracy and socialism are *opposed* to each other, thereby justifying their own authoritarian practice, Marx's view in *The Civil War in France* is, rather, that socialism is an *extension* of democracy beyond the limits dictated by bourgeois power. And anyone who has been involved in a struggle against oppression knows from experience that democracy is a *necessary condition* for socialism. The opposite view comes from a conception of revolution as a seizure of power by the vanguard party, which will then proceed to abolish capitalism and 'liberate' oppressed sections like workers, women, minorities, and so on. For these sections to struggle for their own emancipation is seen as pointless, since they cannot achieve anything under capitalism. So they are supposed to wait passively for the vanguard to liberate them from capitalism and oppression. Unfortunately, as the experience of the Soviet Union showed, the 'vanguard' is as easily corrupted by power as anyone else. Having captured it, they are likely to use it not to liberate but to crush the oppressed.

The only guarantee against this happening is for the mass of the people to hold power in their own hands, and this means that they need to organize themselves and work out their own strategies. If people can be arrested, jailed, persecuted or killed for reporting news or expressing an opinion, for forming a union or other non-violent organization, how can there be any progress towards a society which requires experience and knowledge of self-organization, self-government and free debate? If people can be discriminated against, persecuted or killed simply for belonging to the 'wrong' ethnic or religious group, how can they be equal partners in creating a society based on equality, cooperation and solidarity? The only reason why these questions need to be asked at all is that what has for years passed as 'socialism' and 'communism' are such a travesty of the society that was envisaged as going beyond capitalism.

It is true that democratic rights are compatible with capitalism, but equally true that they are necessary for the struggle *against* capitalism. And this, in turn, means that they are constantly in danger of being undermined. The threat of fascism lurks in the background of every bourgeois state. What this means is not that there is no difference between social democracy and fascism, but that democratic rights can never be taken for granted. Constant vigilance and prompt action are required to protect them. And sometimes, the choices before us in an election may leave much to be desired. Given the nature of bourgeois parties (and this includes parties of the left, which are also, in their own way, involved in bourgeois politics), there are times when there is no party which we can support wholeheartedly. In some cases the difference between the parties or blocs that have a chance of winning is so small that we are forced to choose the lesser of two evils. But it is very rare for a situation to arise where there is *no* difference. To say that they are all bourgeois parties and therefore it makes no difference who wins or loses is a dangerous and irresponsible delusion. That was the attitude which helped the Nazis to come to power in Germany. Where the threat of fascism arises, the left needs to form a United Front with the centre, supporting it from within or outside the government. To some extent, this restricts their freedom of action. They may be able to

criticize certain policies and exert pressure for the implementation of others, but they will not be free to withdraw support for fear that the right will come to power. That is the price they pay for not being sufficiently popular to form a government on their own. If they make clear their criticisms of the centre or centre-left government they support, they cannot be held responsible for policies they disagree with, because they have no better alternative. If, however, they directly or indirectly help or allow an extreme right-wing government to come to power—and here we have to judge them not by their stated intentions but by the objective outcome of their actions—they *can* be held responsible for the consequences, because they *did* have a better alternative.

### Lessons

**T**his is a lesson that is relevant for Sri Lanka too. It is undeniable that the PA government has been responsible for human and democratic rights violations during its period in power, and it is important to criticize these and campaign for a greater degree of justice and democracy. But the crimes of the UNP

are of a different order altogether: the abrogation of practically all democratic rights, tens of thousands of Tamil as well as Sinhalese civilians killed without any attempt to punish the guilty—there is no need to labour the point. If the goal is to ensure the victory of the most democratic government possible under the given circumstances, the strategy should be obvious. It may be true that democracy in Sri Lanka is sick, but curing the disease surely does not mean killing the patient! So far as Tamil people are concerned, exactly the same criteria apply: they are human beings, just like everyone else, and therefore deserve a government which, under the given circumstances, assures them the maximum degree of protection for their democratic rights: the rights to freedom of expression and association, to equality of treatment and opportunity, and to elect their own representatives in free and fair elections. The fact that there may not be any political party or coalition that guarantees these rights one hundred per cent does not absolve the Left of the responsibility for providing critical support to the *most* democratic option, rather than directly or indirectly supporting a fascist alternative and thereby becoming party to its crimes.

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