

## MAOISTS AGAINST SAFFRON FASCISTS?

**Sumanta Banerjee**

Have the Maoists finally plucked up courage to take on the Sangh Parivar—the sovereign bastion of Hindutva that enjoys immunity from prosecution for all its crimes, is mollicoddled by a secular Congress party and is welcomed as a strange bedfellow even by the Indian Left in its strategy of ‘floor-coordination’ in parliament to corner the UPA government? In a press statement, the Maoists have owned up to killing the VHP leader Lakshmanananda Saraswati (an important icon of the Sangh Parivar) in Kandhamal in Orissa on August 23, and have warned of similar attacks on VHP and Bajrang Dal goons and their leaders (*The Indian Express*, September 2, 2008). Does this indicate a shift of stress in their identification of the main ‘class enemy’ (from the hitherto branded Congress, CPI-M, and other parliamentary parties to the fascist Sangh Parivar) and the recognition that the various outfits of the Parivar (like the VHP and Bajrang Dal) pose the biggest threat to the country?

After their abortive attempt to attack a copter carrying the BJP leader L K Advani some years ago, the Maoists appeared to have given up efforts to confront the powerful and well-protected leaders of the Sangh Parivar, and chose to concentrate instead on soft political targets like BJP panchayat pradhans or petty RSS activists. Their recent action in Orissa seems to signify a major departure. Justifying the action, the Central Committee of the CPI(Maoist), in the press statement alleged that Lakshmanananda was a “rabid anti-Christian ideologue and persecutor of innocent Christians, who was responsible for the burning down of over 400 churches in Kandhamal district alone.” In a significant political gesture, the party appealed to secular and democratic forces to condemn the Sangh Parivar, and reminded them that while the Congress-led governments “order the arrest, torture and harassment of ordinary Muslims and outlaw cultural organizations like SIMI”, they do not see any threat to the country from “overtly communal, criminal acts of the VHP and Sangh Parivar.” The CPI(Maoist) said in its statement: “It is not SIMI that is to be outlawed, but Hindu fanatical gangs like the VHP, Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena, BJP and Hindu Munnani....”

It may seem ironical that the CPI (Maoist)—itself treated as an outlaw —is demanding the ‘outlawing’ of these fascist gangs. But then, it is addressing the Indian state in the latter’s own terms. If the state believes in the efficacy of its laws and bans organizations that resort to violence (like the Maoists or the Islamist terrorist groups), it should follow that principle by extending the ban to the Hindu terrorist organizations also. No doubt this is a fair argument. That the Sangh Parivar nurses terrorist groups is well-known, and has been proved by a series of recent incidents —the accidental explosion of a bomb stored in the house of an RSS activist in Nanded in Maharashtra in April, 2006; planting of bombs in cinema and theatre halls of Mumbai in February, May and June, 2008 by Hindu extremists belonging to *Sanatan Sanstha* and *Hindu Janajagruti Samiti*; and the latest incident in Kanpur where two Bajrang Dal activists were killed while making bombs. Frankly speaking, the more they blow themselves up in this process the better for the future of the country. But the brains behind them are bent on training them into efficient terrorists. Bal Thackeray, the Shiv Sena supremo is one of the brains. In his journal *Saamna*

dated June 19, 2008, the editorial exhorted his followers to “think big” and added: “The need of the hour is to plant a strong bomb in Bangladeshi bastis that have mushroomed in Thane and elsewhere in Maharashtra.”

Despite this incendiary writing, Bal Thackeray has been let off by the Maharashtra government (which is run by the secular Congress-NCP coalition). The RSS leaders, and their accomplices in the police and bureaucracy, who are held responsible for the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the genocide in Gujarat are still moving around and are allowed to spew communal hatred—thanks to a supine UPA government at the Centre, an abetting administration in the states, and an ambivalent and irresolute judiciary at the top.

Given the state’s abdication of responsibility to punish the Sangh Parivar terrorists, it is not surprising that non-state groups would step into the vacuum created by the absence of the state machinery, to mete out the retribution that is demanded by the victims. Till now, the Islamic fanatic groups have been occupying the vacuum. Out of a mad sense of revenge against Hindu terrorism, they had been indulging in indiscriminate acts of mass destruction (bomb blasts killing mostly innocent people, including members of their own community)—claiming such acts as just deserved for the misdeeds of the Hindu terrorists. Curiously enough, these various Islamic groups had never targeted the main sources of Hindu terrorism—the RSS-VHP headquarters and their national leaders. At times, one wonders whether these Islamic fundamentalist groups are in league with their Hindu counterparts in an unwritten alliance to subvert democracy and establish the hegemony of feudal values over their respective communities.

In such a situation, if the Maoists take over the role of executing penal measures that the Indian administration and judiciary have failed to carry out, by punishing the goons of the saffron brotherhood, they can emerge as a secular non-state agency—an alternative to the Islamic terrorist groups. In the case of Kandhamal in Orissa, the Maoists have come out in defence of the persecuted poor Christian villagers who had been facing assaults by the Sangh Parivar since the Christmas eve of 2007 when the VHP in a series of pre-planned and well organized onslaughts, attacked churches and burnt down Christian bastis killing people. This was preceded by a sustained incendiary campaign by Lakshma-nananda Saraswati against Christian missionaries whom he accused of converting people to Christianity. The killing of a person who had been responsible for the destruction of their homes (and who should have been persecuted by the state for inciting his followers) may appear as retributive justice to many among the homeless Christians of Kandhamal. The carnage carried out by the VHP following the killing of their leader will further antagonize members of this essentially non-violent religious community, and one wonders how long the restless young victims of the VHP attacks will continue to pay heed to the last words of their Saviour : “Father forgive them—for they know not what they are doing.”

But the Maoists should also be taken to task for their utter lack of foresight and sense of irresponsibility, when deciding to carry out the operation on Saraswati’s ashram on August 23. They should have anticipated that the VHP would pick upon the incident as an opportunity to renew their assault on the Christians. (Despite police statements that the Maoists had killed their leader, the VHP from day one, disputed that and blamed instead the Christian

community, and launched a carnage for weeks together leading to the killing of priests, raping of nuns, murder of even Hindu employees of Christian institutions, destruction of churches and orphanages). Since the CPI (Maoist) professes to be a party that looks after the interests of the poor and protects them from persecution, they should have taken steps to defend the Christian villagers of Kandhamal from the Sangh Parivar reprisals. Where were their much-touted guerilla squads or 'people's liberation army' (which claimed credit for killing Saraswati) when the VHP unleashed a dance of death and destruction in Orissa for weeks ? They retreated into the jungles, leaving the poor – who were being made scapegoats by the VHP for their action – to face the consequences. Sad to say, the CPI(Maoist) despite its rhetoric, seems to be no better than its parliamentary counterparts, who leave the poor in the lurch at times of crisis. □□□