

KATHMANDU, THANE, VASHI...

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What is common between Kathmandu –the capital of Nepal ; Thane, Vashi which happen to lie in Maharashtra; Tenkasi, which is part of Tamilnadu and Indore, which lies in Madhya Pradesh? Apparently there seem to be no commonality, although a close look at stray sounding incidents in these places brings forth a pattern which has serious import for the manner in which (non-state) terrorism is viewed in this country. It is disturbing that media which calls itself 'watchdog of democracy' and which has no qualms in stigmatising the minority community on unfounded allegations of 'terrorist acts' has suddenly gone mute since the perpetrators of terrorist acts in all these cases belong to the majority community.

Kathmandu, capital of the newest Republic of Nepal, witnessed bomb explosions outside the Birendra International Centre where newly elected members of the constituent assembly had assembled for the oath taking ceremony. Although nobody was killed and only few faced minor injuries, it was a clear signal that elements opposed to the momentous changes in the Nepalese polity were involved in the attack. The local police immediately blamed Hindu fanatics for this cowardly attack.

Close watchers of the Nepal situation did not lose sight of the fact that pro-monarchy Hindutva forces had even resolved to take up arms for the restoration of Hindu Rashtra. This meeting was held in the immediate aftermath of elections to the constituent assembly and was attended by sympathetic elements from both India and Nepal. It had been organised under the aegis of Vishwa Hindu Mahasangh, an international organisation of Hindus, in Balrampur (India) which was presided over by the 'firebrand' BJP MP Yogi Adityanath.

If Kathmandu witnessed bomb explosions as a violent reaction to the victory of the Republican forces in Nepal, Indore—the erstwhile capital of the Holkars—witnessed firing by activists of Hindu organisations in full public view. They had assembled there after a rally as a part of celebrations to commemorate the coronation of Chhatrapati Shivaji. Shivaji Maharaj as he is popularly known was a great secular ruler of 17th century in Western India who fought with the Mughals. The firing incident which was covered by the media took place under the watchful eyes of the local police itself which remained a mute spectator and did not even deem it necessary to file a report on this thoroughly unlawful act. The brazenness of the participants in this celebrations was evident also from the fact that they even handed over the guns to the kids present there who also fired in the air.

Of, course it was not for the first time that such firing incidents had taken place. Few months ago marches (*Path Sanchalan*) were organised in different parts of MP under the aegis of different Hindu organisations which owe their allegiance to RSS. These path sanchalans were also marked by firings at the culmination of the rallies. And as expected there were no police complaints. Nobody questioned how the lathi wielding swayamsevaks have suddenly metamorphosed into gun wielding Machos out to silence 'anti-nationals.' Looking at the fact that many areas in MP especially Malwa have always

maintained a strong presence of Hindutva forces, one can understand the rationale behind such 'spontaneous sounding' firing incidents.

A press conference held in Indore city itself (23rd April 2008) which was addressed by the former chief minister of MP and Congress general secretary Digvijay Singh himself had rightly underlined the precarious communal harmony situation in the state. He had even demanded that '..[l]ike SIMI, Bajrang Dal should also be banned because this RSS outfit, alongwith some other allied organisations, indulges in bomb making and giving training in making of bombs. He said that he still sticks to his earlier accusation of making of bombs by Bajrang Dal. He said that RSS has retreated after they accused him of slander." (*The Milli Gazette*, 1-15 June 2008).

Perhaps the former Chief Minister was alluding to the discovery of a bomb making factory in Nanded (Maharashtra) at the house of an old RSS activist which saw deaths of two Bajrang Dal / RSS workers (April 2006). Five other members of the terrorist group were also arrested by the police. The most disturbing part of the whole episode revealed how a well-thought out plan to start a communal riot was on the anvil. Apart from maps of mosques in the area police had discovered fake beards or dresses normally worn by Muslims in the area. Further interrogation of the other accused in the case had also made it clear that the same group was also responsible for a few other incidents—namely Parbhani, Jalna, Purna—in Maharashtra where Muslims had come under mysterious attack at the time of Friday prayers.

It is a different matter that despite a formally secular government in power in the state, the police did not deem it necessary to unearth the wider gameplan hatched by the top echelons of the Hindutva brigade. It is common knowledge that the 80-plus-year-old 'cultural organisation' and its affiliated outfits maintain strict hierarchy and any such violent action plan on part of its local activists would not have been possible without the involvement of the top bosses of the 'Parivar'. Neither police used any strong law to apprehend the real culprits nor it tried to oppose the bail applications moved by the other members of the Hindu terrorist module.

And today according to informed sources the whole issue of bomb making factory and bursting of a Hindu terrorist module lies buried under the hubris of government apathy and connivance of a section of the bureaucracy.

The arrest of sevaks of the Sanatan Sanstha, a religious group that is behind the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti for planting bombs in theatres at Thane and Vashi brings a new dimension to terrorism. Seven people were injured when one of the bombs the sevaks planted exploded in the parking lot of Thane's Gadkari Rangayatan theatre on 4 June.

Ramesh Hanumant Gadkari, Mangesh Nikam, Santosh Angre and Vikram Bhawe, the four bombers, are all allegedly full-time activists of the Sanatan Sanstha, living in ashrams run by the organisation...

Police say that they had planted a bomb outside a mosque or dargah on the Pen highway last Diwali, to check its intensity, but it did not explode. Nikam had earlier set off a bomb in the house of a family in Ratnagiri that had converted to Christianity, and was on bail awaiting trial.

(Terror's new face, *Herald*, Panjim, 19 June 2008)

Whether western India—especially Maharashtra, Goa—has slowly and silently emerged as a epicentre of a different sort of terrorism? Bomb explosion in Nanded in April 2006 at the house of a prominent RSS activist and busting of a

Hindutva terrorist module and a repeat of similar explosion in Feb 2007 in the same city which also witnessed two deaths could be said to be two major incidents to mark the emergence of homegrown Hindutva terrorism. It is no mere coincidence that three major stalwarts of the idea of Hindutva –Savarkar, Hedgewar-Golwalkar and Bal Thackeray–hail from this area only. And the dilly-dallying adopted by the powers that be vis-a-vis these explosions in Nanded was a clear signal to these forces that they can move ahead with impunity.

And recent events in Thane, Panvel and Vashi rather demonstrate that hardline Hindutva groups which have secretly and surreptitiously built a wide network of active and sleeper cells, are ready to go to any extent to make their voice heard. Far away from the scrutiny of the police and the intelligence establishment, many such new outfits have sprung up which are indoctrinating a gullible citizenry about their agenda of hate and exclusion under the cover of 'spiritual gatherings' and distribution of spiritual literature. ('Quitey, hardline Hindu outfits build a network across Maharashtra, Goa' (*Indian Express*, June 23, 2008)' Terrorist acts committed by these groups in the above mentioned places and their capacity to indulge in similar acts elsewhere are an indicator that unless they are dealt with firmly they would be able to spread their tentacles elsewhere as well. And the day would not be far away when Hindutva terrorist network can reach every nook and corner of the country rivalling the Jihadi terrorists.

Date 31st May 2008. Venue : Vishnudas Bhave auditorium, Vashi, Maharashtra.

The show of the much debated drama 'Amhi Pachpute' was already on. Little could the organisers of the drama had imagined that show of another kind was unfolding outside the hall.

Thanks to the alertness and presence of mind shown by people present there, a bomb placed by some miscreants was spotted. A bomb squad immediately rushed in which neutralised the bomb and a major disaster could be averted. Of course, the police neither felt the need to interrogate leaders of 'Hindu Janjagruti Samity' which had organised spate of protests against the drama supposedly for 'hurting religious sentiments of Hindus' nor ventured to move beyond its idea of 'usual suspects.' Left to itself it would have preferred to close the file after some time citing 'lack of any clues'. But it had no idea that what lied in store for them.

Within next four days a similar feat was repeated. Of course the venue had shifted to Thane, another city in Maharashtra and the location was the basement of the 'Gadkari Rangayatan Auditorium' where another show of the same drama was on. Unlike Vashi, here bomb explosion could not be averted leading to injuries to few people.

It was clear to even a layperson that an organised group of miscreants was behind these incidents. Looking at the gravity of the situation the 'Anti Terrorism Squad' of the Bombay police was given the responsibility of investigating the case and finding the culprits.

The ATS was successful in nabbing Ramesh Hanumant Gadkari (Age 50 years) and Mangesh Dinkar Nikam (Age 34 Years)–fulltime activists of 'Hindu Janjagruti Samity' and 'Sanathan Sanstha'–from Panvel (15th June 2008) and the very next day it caught Vikram Bhave and Santosh Sitaram Angre and charged the four with masterminding the bomb explosions in Vashi and Thane.

Police also revealed that these terrorists were also involved in another bomb explosion around four months back when the film show of 'Jodha Akbar' was going on in Panvel (20th February 2008).

The Sanstha denied any knowledge of their activities and said that they did it on their own. It is clear that protestations of innocence cannot be taken at face value and the police needs to thoroughly investigate the affairs of the Sanatan Sanstha as well as Hindu Janjagruti Samity which have been registered as charitable organisations in Goa. Definitely they cannot evade responsibility in the act as their literature talks of 'elimination' of 'evildoers' and claims that it is a 'religious duty' to combat and counter 'enemies of Hinduism'.

The editorial in 'Herald' further adds that :

"..[S]anatan Sanstha and the Bajrang Dal, two Hindu fundamentalist organisations that are both linked to bomb blasts, are the main constituents of the broad joint front called the Hindu Janajagriti Samiti, which has been holding public meetings all over Goa claiming Hinduism is in danger, and making provocative speeches."

According to a writeup in *Indian Express* (June 18, 2008) : "..the arrests were enough for Deshmukh to point fingers at the possibility of Hindu groups being involved in subversive activities too". "Normally, when such incidents take place a particular community is suspected," the Chief minister said in a statement late on Monday. "But the arrest of two people belonging to a Hindu organisation proves that such suspicions are baseless. Criminals do not belong to any religion."

Investigations into the antecedents of these arrested activists have revealed that they have had tryst with bombs and violence in the past. The Chief of the Maharashtra's Anti-Terrorism Squad told media persons that "Various members of these organisations are being questioned. If their role is found in the planning or execution of these incidents, we will certainly write to the centre and seek that they are banned." (*Indian Express*, 23rd June 2008).

As of now it is difficult to predict how things would unfold but a notable fallout of these explosions and consequent arrests is that at least there is broader awareness about these Hindu extremist groups which work like wheels within wheels, and are quietly mobilising Hindus on a cocktail of Ramrajya, Hindu Dharma and "dharmakranti" - religious revolution. Hindu Janjagruti Samity and Sanatan Sanstha are both registered in Goa as a charitable organisation, a new outfit Dharmashakti Sena was also floated by them in 16 Maharashtra towns and cities on Gudi Padwa day this April. Pictures of its inaugural rally in April show young men dressed in military fatigues.

Herald further adds that (Panjim, 22 June 2008)—

Defence of Hinduism is one of the biggest themes in the literature and meetings of the HJS and the SS. The massive 44-volume compilation titled 'Science of Spirituality', published by the Sanatan Bharatiya Sanskruti Sanstha and 'compiled' by Dr Jayant Athavale, founder of the Sanatan Sanstha, Hinduism is consistently portrayed as being under threat from the forces of Christianity and Islam, aided and abetted by the 'so-called secularists', who are seen as traitors to Hinduism. The volumes have titles like 'Protecting Seekers and Destroying Evildoers' and 'Reinstatement of the Divine Kingdom'. Defending the faith against the various purported threats by allegedly anti-Hindu forces is stated to be the primary duty of all true believers.

The nature of this 'defence' is spelt out in great detail. It involves identifying those who work against 'dharma', making lists of such people, and then moving to 'eliminate' them. It is claimed that all this is part of 'spiritual practice'.

Interestingly all talk of Hindu Unity in the worldview of HJS falls at the altar of caste and other regressive practices in Indian society.

Believers are exhorted to guide offenders away from the path of incorrect practice. The volumes in the series support the regressive and obscurantist practices of the past, including the caste system, talking repeatedly about the proper role of various castes in society.

While curbing the activities of these organisations or banning them would demand extra efforts on part of the government, as of now there are very many things which can be done to stop their vicious, hatefilled ideas reach a wider cross-section of society. It's literature itself provides many clues.

For an organisation which is so ultra-sensitive about the slightest imagined insult to Hinduism—imagined or real—the literature of the Sanatan Sanstha is rife with attacks on other religions. Priests are depicted with horns, indicating that they are devils. There are frequent references to the Bible, alleging that it promotes incest and other immoral practices. In September 2004, 'Sanatan Prabhat' carried a statement saying that the body of St. Francis Xavier should be destroyed. It has also carried other scurrilous articles about Goa's patron saint. In November 2005, 'Sanatan Prabhat' published an article, 'Mohd Paigambar : An incarnation of Tripurasur [an 'asur' or demon]', which led to rioting in Miraj town of Maharashtra, and the imprisonment of the editor of 'Sanatan Prabhat'.

After having created an ideological framework which creates a fundamentalist mindset and makes it the 'duty' of the true seeker to defend the faith against all those who are projected as attacking it, it is disingenuous of the HJS and the SS to disclaim responsibility for the acts engaged in by their members. Ex-members of these organisations talk about the cult-like atmosphere that is created, with unquestioning obedience being stressed. Members are then brainwashed into believing that Hinduism is under siege. Against this background, and with all the talk about 'defence' and 'elimination of evildoers', it is hardly surprising that adherents begin to explore ways of taking direct action to defend the faith. In this regard, the philosophy of the HJS and the SS is not all that different from the philosophy of terrorists, whom they claim to oppose.

(Herald, Panjim, 22 June 2008)

Of course, if the government is serious about curbing these extremist organisations, it can start with filing criminal proceedings against the 'bible' of the HJS itself—namely the 'Science of Spirituality' under section 153(a) and (b) and related clauses on the basis that it promotes disaffection and disharmony between different communities.

But it would not be proper to say that only Western India is witness to the silent emergence of Hindu terrorism or the phenomenon is slowly acquiring a national identity.

Any peace and justice loving person would admit that the question of (non-state) terrorism needs to be revisited urgently. While the main concern about the growing network of Jihadi terrorism is welcome and people should not slacken their struggle against its criminal, anti-people activities/manifestations, it should be conceded that the official approach

towards the whole question of terrorism has remained imbalanced or at best partial. One can cite incidents after incidents where the involvement of RSS, Shiv Sena or one of their affiliated organisations can be clearly demonstrated in acts which are considered 'terrorist actions' in today's parlance. It is a different matter that 'Islamic Terrorists' or 'Maoists' seem to be the usual whipping boys for the media or the intelligence people. □□□