

REVISITING BOMBAY RIOT

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[With the TADA court sentencing the last accused in the Bombay bomb blast case, the demand for justice to the Bombay riot victims has started gaining momentum. And people are revisiting the historic Srikrishna Commission report which has aptly stated : One common link (between the riots and the bomb blasts) appears to be that the former appear to have been a causative factor for the latter. The serial bomb blasts were a reaction to the totality of events at Ayodhya and Bombay in December 1992 and January 1993]

It is difficult to say how many journos or politicians managed to have a look at the recent meeting between Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh, Chief Minister of Maharashtra; his deputy Mr R.R. Patil, who also handles the home ministry and Bal Thackeray, the octogenarian leader of the Shiv Sena, at Matoshree, the house of the Thackerays.

It was reported that the Congress high command had specifically asked Mr Deshmukh to visit the Sena Supremo to thank him for his support to Ms Pratibha Patil in the Presidential election. As was expected the meeting went well. While the two sides formally maintained that not much should be read into their convergence of views over the Marathi Manushi's candidature for the august post, it was evident that a new chemistry was unfolding itself between the long time adversaries. At least one could gather it from the exchanges they had or the body language of the leaders. "You have a big heart." Vilasrao Deshmukh is learnt to have told Balasaheb Thackeray. The Sena chief's prompt reply was worth noting: "I have a big heart indeed, but people fail to understand this." (*Indian Express*, July 19, 2007)

One can understand the lack of interest or the indifference shown by the media towards this meeting, as one presumes that it was engaged in covering the Advani and Co's high decible tirade against Ms Patil or the meekish response by the Congress towards the attacks.

It could be said to be a sheer coincidence that the day when the said meeting between the Sena Supremo and Mr Deshmukh took place, also happened to be the day when the designated TADA court looking into the Bombay bomb blasts in 1993 announced death sentence for two accused. It was the first death sentence in the Bomb blasts case. And as expected the media in B'bay was rather euphoric in reporting the judgement.

It would be height of naivette to even think that the Deshmukh-Patil duo would have brooded over the observations of the SriKrishna Commission then—which looked into the infamous 92-93 riots after the demolition of Babri Mosque—to remind themselves about the role played by the 'man with a big heart' in aggravating the situation in those days or the manner in which it looked at the Bomb blasts :

In fact, Justice Srikrishna had said in his report: "One common link (between the riots and the bomb blasts) appears to be that the former appear to have been a causative factor for the latter. The serial bomb blasts were a reaction to the totality of events at Ayodhya and Bombay in December 1992 and January 1993. The resentment against the government and police among a large body of Muslim youth was exploited by Pakistan-aided anti-national elements. They were brainwashed into taking revenge and a conspiracy was hatched and implemented at the instance of Dawood Ibrahim."

But the most damning indictment was rather reserved for the Sena Supremo himself who according to Justice Srikrishna "...[l]ike a veteran General, commanded his loyal Shiv Sainiks to retaliate by organised attacks against Muslims". The report of the commission plainly tells us :

From 8th January 1993 at least there is no doubt that the Shiv Sena and Shiv Sainiks took the lead in organising attacks on Muslims and their properties under the guidance of several leaders of the Shiv Sena from the level of Shakha Pramukh to the Shiv Sena Pramukh Bal Thackeray who, like a veteran General, commanded his loyal Shiv Sainiks to retaliate by organised attacks against Muslims. The communal violence and rioting triggered off by the Shiv Sena was hijacked by local criminal elements who saw in it an opportunity to make quick gains. By the time the Shiv Sena realised that enough had been done by way of "retaliation", the violence and rioting was beyond the control of its leaders who had to issue an appeal to put an end to it."

It does not forget to add "Even after it became apparent that the leaders of the Shiv Sena were active in stoking the fire of the communal riots, the police dragged their feet on the facile and exaggerated assumption that if such leaders were arrested the communal situation would further flare up, or to put it in the words of then Chief Minister, Sudhakarrao Naik, 'Bombay would burn'; not that Bombay did not even burn otherwise."

There is no doubt that neither Mr Deshmukh or Mr Patil - as custodians of law and order in the state - would like to revisit the not so recent period in the history of the city when 'the city that never sleeps' burnt for days together at the instigation of the 'veteran General' and the callous manner in which Deshmukh's predecessors reacted. As loyal soldiers of their respective parties who had been deputed to thank the 'man with the big heart' for his gesture, in future also they would see to it that the bond gets further strengthened, at least he is not put to any inconvenience. But will it be so easy to obliterate the fact that officially close to 1,000 people were killed in those riots and 1,00,000 displaced during the organised mayhem which visited the city during December 2002 and January 2003. The continuous denial of justice to the riot victims was brought forth in an editorial in 'Outlook' (26 September 2006) last year. It had tried to counterpose the euphoria present among a section of the middle class over the verdict of the designated TADA court in the bomb blasts case and the conspiracy of silence about the Bombay riots. It said : "In all the euphoria of "getting the guilty" in each of the staggered verdicts in the '93 Bombay blasts case, the city's overlooked one thing: that the judgement, however just and overdue, addresses only one side of the violence attending the Babri Masjid demolition and leading to the blasts.

Even as the CBI, Mumbai police and governments pat themselves on the back, and citizens demand death penalty for all the Memons-four of the family have been convicted, three acquitted--there has been no conviction in any of the thousands of cases registered during and after the post-Babri riots from December 7, 1992, to January 21, 1993.

Ironically, some riot victims are fighting cases fabricated against them by the police while perpetrators of the violence whether men in uniform or in saffron, are walking free....

Few months back the 'Combat Law' team had looked into the (Combat Law June-July 2007) manner in which Srikrishna Commission report was ultimately dumped. It looked at the way in which no significant action had been taken against 31 police officers -right from the rank of the deputy commissioner of police to constables - indicted for their role by the commission. Accusing the police officers of being 'communally biased against Muslims' and demanding action against them it had even observed that the 'lapses in the investigations were not merely cases of negligence but deliberate attempts to suppress material evidence and sabotage the probe into violent incidents.'

The petitioner Shakeel Ahmad (and Jyoti Punwani) who had filed a PIL in the Supreme Court to look into the actions taken against police officers found to their dismay that 'most of the officers against whom Justice Srikrishna passed severe

strictures were in fact promoted. Many were granted anticipatory bail. All were released on bail with the public prosecutor often not arguing for their detention.' RD Tyagi, a joint-commissioner of police at the time of the riots, was, according to Srikrishna Commission, not at all justified in killing unarmed and innocent nine bakery workers on January 9, 1993; he 'merrily continued in service and retired as DIG. He has also been discharged from a case that was initiated against him. He was appointed to this high post by the Shiv Sena-BJP government at the instance of Bal Thackeray.'

If anything the conspiracy of silence over the Bombay riot victims is nothing new. They can present a number of examples from the history of post-independent India to buttress their point. At one level it would be difficult to disagree with their observations.

But at another level one would agree to differ and would like to underline that things have deteriorated further. Perhaps the situation as it is, is a marker of the growing rightward shift in Indian polity where one witnesses a lack of remorse after the communal frenzy is over. Gujarat has become a prime example where even five years after the genocide in 2002 at the hands of the Hindutva brigade, one rarely finds a sense of repentance among the civil society. In fact, it would not be incorrect to state that today the whole debate around 'secular' versus 'communal' has started culminating in the debate around 'soft Hindutva' versus 'hard hindutva' only. One can say that the state of Maharashtra is today a new symbol of the synergy between 'soft' as well as 'hard' Hindutva. Few months back the elections to the municipal corporations and city councils in Maharashtra witnessed ex/old activists/leaders of Shiv Sena leading the campaigns of different parties— may it be the case of Narayan Rane, Chhagan Bhujbal or Raj Thakre, underlining this fact in a stark manner.

It is the same state where one witnessed participation of activists belonging to RSS/VHP/Bajrang Dal in the bomb blasts in Nanded, Parbhani, Jalna and many other places. But despite having a secular coalition at the helm of affairs the civil society itself saw to that the all such acts by Hindutva brigade people are underreported or cleverly silenced.

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