

## **Thackeray's Passing, Redemption or Irreparable Loss?**

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Bal Thackeray, who founded the Shiv Sena, was himself said to be a creation of Vasant Rao Naik, former Chief Minister of Maharashtra. It is said that a counter was needed to Datta Samant, a fiery trade union leader whose favourite tactics consisted of using intimidation and force against those who did not do what he wanted. An exact parallel can be found in Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a creation of Darbara Singh, then Chief Minister of the Punjab, allegedly at the behest of Indira Gandhi, to counter the Akalis. Thus was born a monster. In the case of Frankenstein who created a legendary, monster, the latter is forgotten and Frankenstein is remembered as the really guilty person. Unfortunately in the case of Thackeray and Bhindranwale we do not lay the blame where it really belongs, that is, on V.P. Naik and Darbara Singh.

The State of Bombay, originally Bombay Presidency, had two main linguistic components, Marathi and Gujarati. Bombay city was always cosmopolitan because it was an artificial creation from nothing. Where the island city now exists around the magnificent bay was just a stretch of sand with, perhaps, a small fishing village at Colaba. The real settlement lay towards the north at Vasai, which the Portuguese renamed as Bassein when they established the first European settlement on the coast. The bay was a part of Portuguese territory, which the Portuguese princess, Catharine of Braganza, brought with her as a dowry when she married King Charles II of England. This stretch of land was called Bom Bahia, or the beautiful bay and this was the name adopted by the British, with some modification, as Bombay. The Shiv Sena forced change of nomenclature from Bombay to Mumbai, despite the fact that no such a settlement existed on this coast before the Portuguese and the British established trading posts there. The infliction of an artificial name on Bombay, therefore, is the first atrocity committed by Shiv Sena.

The city of Bombay became a major industrial hub, centre of commerce, education, health care, and the core from which railway lines radiated to join together the whole of India and to help make Bombay the busiest seaport in India. The great business houses from Gujarat, the Parsee entrepreneurship, labour from all over India and the administrative acumen of the Maharashtrians built Bombay. This city is geographically located in the State of Maharashtra or, as it then was Bombay Presidency, but it does not belong to one race or clan. It was and is a city belonging to all Indians. Two examples of what non-Maharashtrians have contributed to the city are Mangalore-Udupi restaurants which brought excellent South Indian food at affordable prices to the citizens and thereby influenced the cuisine of the city and the State. The other is the Shri Ville Parle Kelavni Mandal, a Gujarati institution, which started with a primary school and has grown into the Narsee Monjee University whose business school is considered one of the best in India. Are these not significant contributions to the city and the State? Despite this the first target of the Shiv Sena, which was ostensibly building up Maharashtrian pride, was the Udupi restaurants in order to cause the owners to flee the city. From this grew an expanding concentric circle of hate against other non-Maharashtrian groups, especially from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

The manner in which the Shiv Sena functions makes intimidation, threat of violence and actual violence central to its operations. Maharashtra has had a series of communal riots in the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Bombay and Pune, the two major cities of the State, have witnessed large scale sectarian violence in which hundreds of people have been killed, with equally deadly retaliatory strikes by extremist groups. Because everything in Shiv Sena has always been centred around Bal Thackeray, who was virtually the Fuehrer, much of the turmoil, arson, loot and killing can be attributed to him and the Shiv Sena, both of whom have been openly contemptuous of and inimical to the Muslims. This is the man who said that he admires Hitler, has no respect for the Constitution and who wanted virtual ethnic cleansing of the city of Bombay. The tragedy is that our political class has become so pusillanimous, so self-seeking that one and all (with the honorable exception of the Left) have come out with eulogies for a man who is the very antithesis of wise political leadership. At best Bal Thackeray can be accused of parochialism and divisiveness: at worst he can be called a xenophobic megalomaniac. What room can there be for such a person in the polity of a democratic, secular republic?

Let us consider Thackeray's slogans of "amchi Mumbai" and "Marathi manush". Not one scheme to bring prosperity or improve living standards can be attributed to Shiv Sena. In fact the infrastructure and civic services in the city of Bombay, long ruled by the Shiv Sena, are in shambles. Industry prefers Gujarat to Maharashtra, the power situation is grim in much of Maharashtra, law and order is unsatisfactory and government dithers, almost to the point of paralysis. Even the worst detractors of Narendra Modi acknowledge that he has restored order and has launched Gujarat on the fast track of development. What is the positive achievement that one can attribute to Thackeray? This man was no true friend of Maharashtra.

I was brought up in an environment in which empty rituals and superstition had no place. However, I have no quarrel with the Hindu philosophy that evil does come on earth in the form of Ravan, Mahishasur or Bal Thackeray, to name just a few and I also accept the Hindu cosmic world view that a redeemer is also born from time to time to rid the world of evil. In the case of Mahishasur it was Durga in the form of Mahishasura Mardini. In the case of Ravan it was Ram, but both manifestly slew the symbol of evil so that triumph of good over evil could be demonstrated to mankind. In the case of Bal Thackeray it was left to Yamaraj to remove him in the normal course of things and there was no triumph of good over evil. This is a denial of justice to every one of the victims of Shiv Sena violence. There is now a proposal to build a monument for Bal Thackeray. This would be acceptable only if three other monuments are built, one for Hitler whom Bal Thackeray admired and one each for the victims of the holocaust and of the Shiv Sena violence.

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