

India: BJP coalition partner indicted for organizing communal riots

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A judicial commission of inquiry has found that the Shiv Sena--a member party of India's governing coalition and the dominant partner in the two-party alliance that rules the state of Maharashtra--fomented and organized communal riots in Bombay in January 1993 that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Muslims.

According to the final report of commissioner Justice B.N. Srikrishna, Shiv Sena cadres led attacks on Muslims and Muslim-owned properties at the instigation of the Shiv Sena's top leaders. Bal Thackeray, the Shiv Sena's supremo, acted, writes Justice Srikrishna, 'like a veteran [military] commander.' He ordered Shiv Sena cadres 'to retaliate' for Muslim protests against the December 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya with 'organized attacks against the Muslims.'

Srikrishna's report also lays most of the blame for the Bombay riot of December 1992 on the Shiv Sena. It goaded Bombay's Muslim minority into taking to the streets with provocative 'celebrations' of the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque by Hindu chauvinists.

There is no evidence, concluded Justice Srikrishna, that the December riot 'was anything other than a spontaneous reaction of leaderless and incensed Muslim mobs, which commenced as peaceful, but soon degenerated ...' The January disturbances, on the other hand, were preceded by weeks of propaganda by the Shiv Sena leadership on the virtue of 'retaliation,' and exaggerated reports in its newspaper of Hindu casualties in the December riots.

The Shiv Sena (literally, the army of Shivaji, a 17th century Marathi warrior-king) is a Marathi- and Hindu-chauvinist organization patterned after the fascist Rashtra Swayamsewak Sangh. Founded in the 1960s out of a campaign against the growing influence of non-

Marathi-speakers in Bombay, it became a major political force in the early 1980s, when it organized scabs, with the support of local Congress Party leaders, to break a strike by more than a 100,000 textile workers.

For both ideological and political reasons, the Shiv Sena is a close ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Hindu-chauvinist party which dominates India's ruling coalition. Through its alliance with the Shiv Sena, the BJP also has a share in Maharashtra's state government--an important nexus to the Indian bourgeoisie, as Bombay is India's financial center.

The Srikrishna report indicts the Shiv Sena for what is in effect mass homicide--some 900 people (at least 575 of them Muslims) were killed in the 1992-93 Bombay riots. The commission report also condemns, although in less harsh terms, the BJP and the Congress, India's other major political party, and finds that the Bombay police systematically discriminated against Muslims.

During the Bombay riots, Maharashtra's government, then controlled by the Congress Party, provided 'effete political leadership,' charges Srikrishna. For four days in January 1993, it failed to take determined action to stop Shiv Sena-led mobs from rampaging through Muslim areas.

The BJP spearheaded, nationally, the agitation for a Hindu temple to replace the Babri Masjid mosque, then joined with the Shiv Sena in Bombay in celebrating its razing. The police used excessive force against Muslims and systematically refused to register their complaints against Hindu assailants.

Justice Srikrishna's findings confirm what has long been general knowledge. Much of the political elite and security forces in Maharashtra--India's third largest and most industrialized state--were complicit in the riots

that rocked India's largest city in December 1992 and January 1993.

Five years on, that complicity continues. The Shiv Sena and BJP, now coalition partners in both the all-India and Maharashtra governments, are working to bury the Srikrishna report. The Congress Party leadership, meanwhile, continues to place all blame for the rise of Hindu chauvinism on the BJP and its allies, though the Congress has repeatedly connived with the communalists and fanned Hindu chauvinism.

Maharashtra's Shiv Sena-BJP government has sought to derail Justice Srikrishna's inquiry, which was set up by its Congress predecessor. Shortly after taking office, Maharashtra Chief Minister Manohar Joshi canceled the inquiry, but under pressure from the BJP's national leadership later revived it.

In tabling the inquiry's report in the State Assembly August 6, Joshi rejected its findings and announced that only a handful of its recommendations, pertaining to police management, would be implemented. Apparently to the surprise even of his BJP allies, Joshi choose to attack the report in communal terms, castigating it as 'pro-Muslim' and 'anti-Hindu.'

Virtually the entire opposition in India's parliament, including the Stalinist-led Left Front, are calling on the BJP-led central government to respond to the Srikrishna report by invoking its special constitutional powers and sacking Maharashtra's state government. To no one's surprise, the BJP has ruled out such action. After all, the Shiv Sena could not have buried the Srikrishna report without the BJP's support in the Maharashtra legislature. Moreover, were the BJP to be deprived of the votes of the four Shiv Sena MPs in the lower house of India's Parliament, the Vajpayee government in Delhi would almost certainly fall.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi has been in the forefront of those calling for the dismissal of Joshi's government, but she has rejected taking any action against the former Congress Chief Minister of Maharashtra, who is currently a Congress MP.

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