

India army officers linked to Hindu supremacist terrorism

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In an extraordinary development, the Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) of the west Indian state of Maharashtra has arrested a retired Indian army major and a serving lieutenant colonel as part of its investigation of September 29 terrorist bombings—bombings the ATS now says were carried out by Hindu supremacists.

Bombs exploded in Malegaon, a city of about one million people in north-west Maharashtra, and in Modasa, a town to the north in the bordering state of Gujarat, within minutes of each other last Sept. 29. The Malegaon bombing killed 5 people, while a 15-year old died as a result of the Modasa bombing. The bombs also injured some one hundred people, many of them seriously.

On October 24, police arrested Pragma Singh Thakur, a 38 year-old former activist of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad—a student group allied with the Hindu supremacist BJP and RSS—and two associates, 36-year old Shivnarayan Gopal Singh Kalsangra and 42-year old Shyam Bhanwarlal Sahu. They have been accused, but not yet charged by the courts, with murder, attempt to murder, and voluntarily causing grievous hurt for their alleged role in the Sept. 29 bombings.

Pragma, who fancies herself a *sadhvi* or Hindu sage, is said to be the leader of the group.

Five days later the Maharashtra state ATS arrested retired army Major Ramesh Upadhyay and Sameer Kulkarni, a leading member of a small, fanatical *Hindutva*-ite organization, the Abhinav Bharat. The ATS also had Lt. Colonel Srikant Prasad Purohit brought to Mumbai from his army unit in Madhya Pradesh for questioning. Yesterday, the police sought and obtained Defence Ministry permission to lay charges against Purohit.

These developments are all the more remarkable as the immediate response of the police and the corporate media to the Sept. 29 bombings was to blame them on Islamic terrorists--and this even though the bombs' targets were clearly Muslims. The bombs exploded outside mosques around 9:30 PM on the eve of Eid, the popular celebration marking the end of Ramadan.

The ATS is now describing the bombings as part of a "larger conspiracy," but has refused to elaborate.

Lt. Colonel Purohit is reputed to be a founding member of the Abhinav Bharat (AB), and retired Major Upadhyay its "working president." The AB was "revived" in 2006, ostensibly to counter "anti-Hindu" activities. It claims to be the successor organization to a secret group founded by the principal ideologue of *Hindutva* or Hindu nationalism in pre-independence India, the communalist zealot V.D. Savarkar. M.K. Gandhi, the principal leader of the

Indian National Congress, was assassinated in January 1948 by disciples of Savarkar.

According to the police, Lt. Col. Purohit had several meetings with Pragma and her associates. Their connection is said to have been first revealed by SMS messages that Purohit exchanged with one or more members of the bombing conspiracy.

The ATS has also questioned the Commandant (a retired Indian Army Colonel) of the Bhonsle Military School in Maharashtra. The military school has close links with Hindu extremists. It was founded by one of Savarkar's close associates, B.S. Moonje, who drew inspiration from the military training organized by Italy's government under the fascist Mussolini. The Hindu-communist Bajrang Dal (BD), whose activists have been mounting a terror campaign against Christians in Orissa's Kandamahal district since August, reportedly hold military drill on the school's grounds free of charge. (See: India: Hindu communalists target Christian minority in Orissa and other states)

The Indian state and Hindu supremacism

This is the first time Indian army personnel have been directly implicated in Hindu extremist bombings.

The military, along with other Indian security forces, has been party to a "dirty" war, involving summary executions and disappearances, against anti-Indian Kashmiri nationalists, and is fiercely hostile to Pakistan. But like other key state institutions, the military has always portrayed itself as a bulwark of India's secular constitution.

The military high command has publicly dismissed the danger of Hindu extremism within the officer corps, characterizing any army personnel implicated in the Sept. 29 bombing as a few "bad eggs."

The military's claims notwithstanding, there is a wealth of information pointing to the Hindu extremist sympathies of Indian state personnel, including sections of the police and judiciary.

How could it be otherwise under conditions where India's ruling elite has for decades promoted communalism and casteism, making the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) its alternate party of government?

The Malegaon-Modasa bombing conspiracy is not the first time Hindu extremists have been implicated in terrorist bombings.

In April 2006, two Bajrang Dal activists in Malegaon were killed when a bomb they were assembling exploded. Police later said that the two had been the key figures in a bombing at a mosque in Parbhani that injured 25, and that in April 2003 their associates had bombed mosques in two other Maharashtra towns, Purna and Jalna.

But the government and corporate media have systematically sought to suppress any discussion of Hindu supremacist terrorism and, without any evidence, rushed to blame virtually every bombing atrocity (not carried out by secessionist groups) on “Islamic terrorists.”

That Muslim communalists and Islamicists have perpetrated atrocities is incontrovertible. But the failure of Indian authorities to take seriously the phenomenon of “Hindu terrorism” speaks to the bias, complicity, and cowardice of the personnel, or at least significant sections of it, of the Indian state.

Moreover, the corporate media and Congress Party-led government have promoted a reactionary definition of terrorism that abets the Hindu extremist right. Bombings and acts by anti-government insurgents are labeled terrorism, but not the atrocities perpetrated by the Hindu supremacist right. Yet the riots provoked by the 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya and the BJP state government-incited pogrom in Gujarat in 2002 claimed several times more victims than have all the bombings attributed to Islamic terrorists.

The BJP's response to Thakur's arrest

Whilst the exposure of Hindu extremist involvement in terror bombings is only in its initial stages, it has already thrown the BJP and its allies into crisis.

Following Pragya Singh Thakur's arrest, pictures surfaced in the media that showed her sitting with BJP President Rajnath Singh and the BJP Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Shivraj Singh, at a condolence ceremony.

Embarrassed, the BJP, the official opposition in India's parliament, hastened to distance itself from the saffron-clothed *sadhvi*, insisting that she was no longer involved with the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad and had no other connection with the BJP.

Pragya's father contradicted these statements, telling the press that his daughter has been “very active” in BJP circles and was “mostly in touch [with] the chief ministers and the party heads.” He continued, “In fact, she shared family-like relations with them.”

When the BJP lie was exposed Rajnath Singh made a quick about face, suggesting the ATS is framing Pragya. “If there is evidence,” said the BJP president, “then it should be revealed to the public by the government and investigating agencies so that people can judge whether the God woman is guilty or not.”

Till now the BJP has had nothing but praise for the ATS and the often aggressive tactics that it has used in pursuing alleged Islamic extremists. Police claims against Muslim suspects have been

accepted without question and amplified.

On November 4, the *Times of India* reported that Rajnath Singh had vehemently defended the *sadhvi* Pragya Thakur. “Whoever is connected with cultural nationalism and Bharatiyata cannot be a terrorist,” Singh told the *Times*. While he did not accuse the police of a frameup, the BJP leader said the “Hindu terrorism” investigation was a “political conspiracy by the ruling party.”

“Singh,” added the *Times*, “... parried the question whether [the] BJP will drop its objections if the investigation agencies file charges against Pragya Thakur, terming it “hypothetical.”

The BJP's ally in Maharashtra, the fascistic Shiv Sena, has gone even further. In the Shiv Sena newspaper, party supremo Bal Thackeray thundered last week, “The entire Hindu community should support the *Sadhvi*, retired Major Ramesh Upadhyay and Samir Kulkarni who are being framed by the ATS.”

Thackeray's claim that the three self-proclaimed “defenders of the Hindus” are being framed notwithstanding, the Shiv Sena leader went on to argue that if they did orchestrate the bombings they should be defended because such murderous actions are justified.

Wrote Thackeray: “[I]f the pseudo secularists in the country are supportive of Afzal Guru [who has been sentenced to hang for his alleged role in assisting the 2001 attack on India's parliament], why should we not love and be proud of *Sadhvi* Pragya, Ramesh Upadhyay and Samir Kulkarni?”

“Every day Islamic terrorists are planting bombs to kill Hindus in India. The latest blasts in Assam too were engineered by Bangladeshi migrants. If a *Sadhvi* Pragya or a Ramesh Upadhyay or a Samir Kulkarni is born in the present milieu, they cannot be blamed.”

The Shiv Sena and other Hindu supremacist organizations are providing legal and financial assistance to the accused in the Malegaon bombing. The BJP has, at the very least, defended such “solidarity” action. “We have no objection to the Sena announcing legal aid to the Malegaon blast suspects,” said BJP spokesman Prakash Javadekar. “For that matter, even the RSS has promised help. It is not wrong to use private funds for helping someone. It is everyone's right.”



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