

India: Hindu supremacist terror network had ties to military

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The police investigation into the synchronised September 29 bombing attacks in Malegaon, a city in the west Indian state of Maharashtra, and Madosa, in the neighbouring state of Gujarat, has rattled India's political establishment.

The police have thus far arrested 11 people, while indicating that others, potentially many others, may yet be implicated in what they have termed an "extensive" Hindu-extremist terror network.

The arrested include a lieutenant colonel attached to the Indian Army's Military Intelligence Corps and a retired army major. Two of the suspects, a Hindu *sadhu* (holy man) and a *sadhvi* (holy woman), have long-standing and extensive contacts with prominent politicians and businessmen. All of the alleged principals in the bombing plot have ties to one or more of India's major "Hindu-nationalist" organisations: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the official opposition in India's parliament, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), and the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh or RSS.

The police have said that they are investigating whether those arrested, or their as-yet-unidentified associates, are responsible for other terrorist atrocities, including the 2007 Samjhauta train bombing, which killed 68 people, most of them Pakistanis, travelling to Pakistan from India.

The Malegaon bombing killed 5 Muslims and injured more than 80 others, while the Madosa bombing resulted in one death.

Although the September 29 bombings clearly targeted Muslims—they were set off near mosques—the police and press immediately blamed them on Islamicist terrorists, and a number of Muslims were subsequently caught up in a police dragnet.

But less than two weeks later, the Maharashtra state Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) said it had uncovered evidence that the bombing attacks were carried out by Hindu extremists and made the first in a series of arrests. Initially, the ATS named the *sadhvi* Pragya Singh Thakur, who was long active in the BJP's student movement, as the mastermind of the plot.

Later, the ATS arrested Lieutenant Colonel Srikant Purohit. He is now said to have led the terrorist cell that carried out the Malegaon bombing. He is alleged to have given military training to the other suspects and, even more importantly, to have provided them with the

military-grade explosive RDX.

Purohit and retired army Major Samir Kulkarni, who also helped train the alleged bombers, are reputed to be the co-founders of Abhinav Bharat (AB, Young India Society)—a fanatical Hindu-supremacist organisation established in 2006 ostensibly to defend Hindus and fight against their "oppression."

RDX was used in the Malegaon bombings and several other recent terrorist atrocities in India. Since RDX is very difficult to obtain, its use has been cited by Indian authorities, until now, as proof that those perpetrating the bombings must be from Islamicist organisations with ties to Pakistani or Bangladeshi military-intelligence agencies.

Purohit's arrest has shaken India's military high command. It has rushed to dismiss him as a single rogue officer. But there have been repeated media reports suggesting several other current army officers have been implicated in the terrorist plot.

Monday's *Indian Express* reported that Purohit has implicated a serving Indian Army colonel, and a television broadcast, later that same day, claimed five army officers are being investigated for their links with the Abhinav Bharat.

The November 12 arrest of a self-styled Hindu *sadhu* named Dayanand Pandey has also caused considerable disquiet in the Indian establishment.

In pleading yesterday for a Mumbai court to authorise the continued detention and interrogation of Pandey, a government lawyer said that police have recovered evidence from Pandey's laptop showing he had several meetings with *Sadhvi* Thakur and Lt. Col. Purohit shortly before the September 29 bombings. Special Prosecutor Rohini Salian claimed that in a video clip on Pandey's computer, he, "Sadhvi, Purohit and other persons, whose name cannot be disclosed, are seen talking about RDX, chemicals, hand grenades and training."

The head of a shrine in Kashmir, Pandey was, according to news reports, frequently visited by high-profile politicians and businessmen.

The exposure of a Hindu-supremacist terrorist network has thrown the BJP and its allies in the *Sangh Parivar*, a "family" of organisations historically led by the RSS, into crisis.

Initially, the BJP tried to distance itself from the *sadhvi* Thakur, but very quickly this gave way to a campaign aimed at discrediting and derailing the police investigation.

The BJP has long hailed the ATS, denouncing as traitors anyone

who questioned, let alone criticised, its actions, including its frequent use of mass arrests. India's official opposition has also repeatedly attacked India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government for rescinding the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), which among other things placed the burden of proof in terrorist cases on the accused.

But in recent weeks, the BJP has suddenly found much wrong with the ATS. The BJP has suggested that, under pressure from the government, it is targeting Hindu holy people and other Hindus, demanded that it immediately provide proof against the accused or let them go, and trumpeted claims by Purohit and his associates that the police have tortured them.

Bal Thackeray, the supremo of the Shiv Sena, a longtime ally of the BJP, has forthrightly accused the ATS of framing the Malegaon bombing accused. But he also said that if they did orchestrate the bombings, they should be defended because such murderous attacks on Muslims are justified.

Campaigning yesterday in Delhi, where state elections are soon to be held, the BJP chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, accused the Congress of maligning the military by imputing that it is involved in terrorist activities. "What Pakistan was not able to do in the last 20 years," declared Modi, "the Manmohan Singh government has achieved in just 20 days. They have succeeded in branding our soldiers as terrorists."

The exposure of a Hindu-supremacist terror network is extremely damaging for the BJP not just because some of the accused have long-standing ties to the BJP and/or its sister Hindu-supremacist organisations.

The BJP has long made clear that it intends to place at the centre of its campaign in the next national election, which must be held in the first half of 2009, the spurious charge that the Congress is "soft" on terrorism. For years, the BJP has claimed that the UPA government will not "crack down" on terrorism because of "vote bank politics"—that is, its alleged fear of alienating Muslim voters.

Nor can it be ruled out that prominent cadres of one or more of the major Hindu supremacist organisations could themselves be implicated in the Hindu terrorist network. The VHP, RSS, and BJP all have a long and bloody record of inciting violence against India's religious minorities.

The *Indian Express* claimed earlier this week that Lt. Col. Purohit told India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) that VHP General Secretary Pravin Togadia was instrumental in founding the Abhinav Bharat.

The government has responded to the Hindu right's vehement campaign in defence of the accused in the Malegaon bombing with a series of conciliatory gestures. After BJP prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani charged that the *sadhvi* Thakur had been "physically and psychologically tortured" by police, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh arranged for Advani to receive a briefing from National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan.

In a further attempt to get the BJP-RSS leader "on side," police have reportedly revealed to them that Purohit's group had plans to assassinate one or more senior RSS leaders.

This could well be true. The Hindu right is a toxic and highly unstable political movement. In recent years, the RSS and BJP, many of whose senior leaders, Advani included, are lifelong RSS activists, have been criticised, with increasing vehemence, by fellow Hindu supremacists, including the VHP leadership. The BJP, for example, has been chastised for not more aggressively pursuing key *Hindutva*

causes, including the building of a Hindu temple at the site of the razed *Babri Masjid* mosque in Ayodhya and eliminating Kashmir's special constitutional status, when it led a national coalition government from 1998 to 2004.

If the Malegaon bombers did plot to assassinate RSS leaders it would have been with a double purpose, with the aim of eliminating "traitors" to *Hindutva* and providing a pretext for inciting violence against Muslims, since such an attack would invariably have been blamed on "Muslim extremists."

India's corporate media and political and military-security establishments have expressed shock at the phenomenon of Hindu-supremacist terrorism.

But this is only because they have been willfully blind.

Willfully blind because it has served their ends to present the problem of terrorism in India as exclusively "foreign-born" and blind because they do not want to acknowledge the extent to which the "world's largest democracy" has given rise to an aggressive Hindu communalism, in which fascist elements flourish, and their own complicity in this process.

Evidence of the existence of Hindu-supremacist terrorists significantly predates the events of September 29.

In April 2006, two leaders of the VHP's youth movement, the Bajrang Dal, were killed when a bomb they were building exploded in Nanded, a city in southeastern Maharashtra. Four others injured in that explosion later told authorities that the dead had been responsible for a series of bomb blasts in 2003 and 2004.

In 2007, a further explosion in Nanded killed two people including a Shiv Sena activist.

The *Times of India*, in a report published November 8, said that at the time of the first Nanded explosion, police were provided evidence of the extensive involvement of retired military and Intelligence Bureau personnel in training Hindu extremists, but these ties were not aggressively investigated.

Even more importantly, there is the long record of *Hindutva*-led and inspired mass violence against religious minorities—violence that has repeatedly demonstrated the Hindu supremacists' willingness and ability to perpetrate murder and terror. To mention only the two most notorious examples: the 1992 razing of the *Babri Masjid* mosque, which led to the worst communal rioting since the 1947 partition of India, and the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, which killed some 2,000 and left a further 100,000 homeless.



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