

Indian establishment mourns founder-leader of fascist Shiv Sena

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15 December 2012

The fawning send-off India's political and business establishments accorded Bal Thackeray, the founder-leader of the fascist Shiv Sena (SS), following his death last month at the age of 86 is highly significant. It sheds light on the intimate ties that for decades have bound the Indian ruling class to the Hindu supremacist right and it constitutes a warning to working people of the preparations India's rulers are making to use violence and dictatorial methods of rule to suppress mounting social discontent.

For the past two decades, the SS—a Marathi and Hindu chauvinist party based in the western Indian state of Maharashtra—has been closely allied with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which like it espouses the noxious *Hindutva* communalist ideology. But at its founding and for many years thereafter, the SS was patronized by the Congress Party leadership. The Congress used it to mount violent attacks on worker and left-wing organizations, especially in Mumbai, the country's financial and commercial hub and a traditional bastion of worker militancy.

The parliamentary condolences, the state funeral at Shivaji Park in central Mumbai, and the numerous laudatory remarks from leaders of India Inc., government officials, and politicians, including the high command of the Congress Party—all underlined the importance of this parochial, Hindu chauvinist politician to bourgeois rule. Thackeray's funeral was attended by the Congress chief minister of Maharashtra, Prithviraj Chavan; Sharad Pawar, the head of the Maharashtra-based Nationalist Congress Party and the agriculture minister in India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government; the top brass of the BJP; prominent actors and other celebrities; and corporate chieftains, including billionaire business magnate Anil Ambani.

In his condolence message, Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, until recently the number two man in the UPA government, lamented that Thackeray's death "is a loss for the people of Maharashtra and India." Justifying Thackeray's virulent regional chauvinism, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said of the SS strongman, "For him the interests of Maharashtra were particularly important and he always strived to inculcate a sense of pride in the people of the State."

It is not the multitude of confused and disoriented poor that flocked to Shivaji Park that were the beneficiaries of Thackeray's virulent campaigns, but the rich and the privileged. Hence the lavish praise for Thackeray from India's corporate leaders, many of whom recalled not just the services he had rendered them, but also their own fond memories of this demagogue and thug.

Bajaj Auto Chairman Rahul Bajaj recalled how the SS leader had helped end an industrial dispute at a Bajaj plant, adding that he "thoroughly enjoyed and learned a lot from the multiple dinners and a few lunches I have had with him." Another major auto company boss, Mahindra Chairman Ananda Mahindra, said, "Thackeray was both revered and feared."

In a clear mark of appreciation for Thackeray's services to the Indian bourgeoisie, the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party coalition government in Maharashtra ordered police to arrest two young women who in Facebook comments had questioned the observing of a *bandh* (total shutdown) in Mumbai on the day of Thackeray's state funeral. Subsequently, a 2,000 strong SS mob attacked and ransacked a clinic owned by an uncle of one of the women.

The ideological roots of the Shiv Sena—which literally means the Army of Shivaji, a Seventeenth Century Maratha warrior—can be traced back to the Samyuktha Maharashtra (United Maharashtra) movement, which campaigned for a separate Maharashtra state based on the Marathi language and with Mumbai (then known as Bombay) as its capital. Founded in 1956, the Samyuktha Maharashtra Committee united ostensibly left-and right-wing forces, including the rabid communalists of the Hindu Mahasabha, under the banner of unifying the majority Marathi-speaking areas within the Indian state created by the communal partition of 1947 and the suppression of the democratic revolution. Thackeray's father, Prabodhankar Thackeray, was one of the leaders of the Samyuktha Maharashtra Committee.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), which then included the founding leaders of the present Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, played a major role in this movement, thus helping legitimize and promote reactionary Marathi linguistic provincialism.

Just three months after the formation of the state of

Maharashtra in May 1960, a top Congress leader, Y.B. Chavan, was the chief guest at the inaugural ceremony for *Marmik*, the Marathi weekly newspaper Bal Thackeray launched to promote his extreme right-wing views. From the outset, Thackeray railed against the purported dominance of the Mumbai economy by Gujaratis and South Indians.

Founded in 1966, Thackeray's SS served to divert the anger among urban petty-bourgeois layers in Maharashtra over the deterioration of their social conditions away from its real source, capitalist rule, towards communal and religious hatred against the Muslim minority, oppressed castes, and migrants from other states.

Initially, the SS did not contest elections and instead focussed on establishing its authority in Mumbai through the organization of gangs of thugs drawn from economically frustrated youth. Shiv Sena cadres targeted South Indian migrants for attack, vandalized South Indian owned-restaurants and other businesses, and tried to force employers to hire Marathis. They also organized attacks on Communist Party members, rallies, and offices.

In May 1970, Thackeray instigated anti-Muslim riots in Mumbai that killed 82 and caused massive property damage. Again in May 1984 in Bhiwandhi, a similar racist campaign resulted in 278 deaths and injured thousands.

Thackeray was a brazen fan of Adolf Hitler and an avowed opponent of democracy. He used Marathi parochialism and anti-Muslim chauvinism to whip up mobs against the working class and it was on account of this that he was able to secure the patronage of business houses and the Congress bosses who dominated the state's politics

The SS set up its own trade union, the Kamgar Sena (KS), with its membership restricted to Marathi speakers, which pressed for hiring preference for Marathi speakers. The Congress administration and the business elite who wanted to break the Stalinist-led trade unions supported the KS. As open physical confrontations developed between the workers and the SS thugs, Thackeray and his minions were guaranteed immunity from criminal prosecution by the Congress.

The SS supported Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975 when she proclaimed an Emergency, suppressing basic civil liberties and arresting tens of thousands of trade unionists, leftists and other political opponents. It backed the Congress in the 1977 and 1980 national elections.

In January 1982, when over 250,000 workers in more than 50 textile mills in Mumbai struck work for higher pay, the SS publicly opposed the strike and engaged in strike-breaking and blacklegging. Ultimately, the strike was defeated and in the ensuing years tens of thousands of workers lost their jobs.

In the early 1990s under conditions where the Narasimha Rao Congress government, with the support of the Stalinists, abandoned the Indian bourgeoisie's state-led development strategy in favour of a neo-liberal program of privatization, deregulation and social spending cuts, the SS joined with other

Hindu chauvinist forces, including the BJP, to launch an intensified communal campaign aimed at promoting reaction and splitting the working class. In December 1992, this campaign culminated in the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, which provoked the greatest wave of communal violence since Partition. The SS organized a series of anti-Muslim pogroms in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra that went on until March 1993 and left 900 dead.

The SS formed a state government in Maharashtra in March 1995 with Manohar Joshi as chief minister and Gopinath Munde of the BJP as deputy chief minister. From 1998 to 2004, the SS was a partner of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in Delhi, that took forward the pro-market economic reforms initiated by the Rao government.

The Stalinist CPI and CPM played a crucial role in facilitating the emergence of SS as a leading party in Maharashtra, through their systematic subordination of the working class to the parties of the bourgeoisie. For decades they justified such alliances in the name of supporting the "progressive" section of the national bourgeoisie against feudalism and imperialism. Now they justify support for the Congress Party and all manner of regionalist and caste-ist parties in the name of preventing the Hindu supremacist BJP and Shiv Sena from taking power.

The CPI participated in Indira Gandhi's government as it broke the 1974 rail strike and imposed the Emergency. During the same period, the CPM subordinated the working class to the Janata Party, an ad hoc coalition of non-Congress bourgeois parties in which the Jana Sangh, the forerunner of the BJP, played a prominent role.

Both parties refused to mobilize the working class against the thug violence of the Shiv Sena for that would have brought them into conflict with the entire political establishment, the courts and police.

By preventing the working class from politically challenging the parties of the bourgeoisie at the national and regional level and advancing its own solution to the failure of bourgeois rule, the Stalinists opened the door for right-wing and fascist parties like the SS to exploit the desperation of sections of the petty-bourgeoisie.

Thackeray's political career graphically demonstrates how communalism and ethnic politics have been cultivated by the Indian bourgeoisie as a means of suppressing the working class. It also exemplifies the role of the Congress. Far from being a secular bulwark, it has connived with and given succour to the Hindu right.



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