

Revolt In The Shiv Sena: death-knell for a fascist party?

Saturday 10 December 2005, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 5 November 2005).

The banner of revolt raised by Mr Raj Thackeray against his cousin and Mr Bal Thackeray's heir-apparent Uddhav signifies the gravest-ever crisis in the Shiv Sena's 39 year-long history. Raj decided to resign from all Sena posts within a few days of a crushing defeat inflicted on the Sena candidate by former Chief Minister Narayan Rane in the Malvan Assembly by-election. This isn't a mere coincidence. Until he joined the Congress in July, Mr Rane was the Sena's most-rooted leader, with a solid base in the Konkan coast. Nor is it trivial that the Sena's candidate lost his deposit. Like Mr Raj Thackeray, Mr Rane too saw his battle inside the Sena as one primarily directed against Uddhav.

Although Mr Raj Thackeray has not directly criticised his uncle-and says he remains his "God"-the logic of his position pits him against Sena leaders, including the Senapati himself. After all, it's Mr Bal Thackeray who anointed his son as the Sena's "executive president" four years ago-a never-before-heard-of post. He did this despite the fact that Raj is senior to Uddhav as a Sainik and was always considered a more able, hands-on organisation man. It's the Sena's founder-Fuehrer who allowed Uddhav to marginalise Mr Rane, and later, Raj. Given this, it's hard to see how there can be a patch-up with Raj.

In all probability, Mr Raj Thackeray will quit and set up some kind of "parallel Sena" amidst the raucous celebrations typical of such outfits. He will be the fifth major leader to quit the Sena-after former Bombay mayor Hemchandra Gupte and senior leader Datta Pradhan (1977), Chhagan Bhujbal (1991) and Rane (2005). The pattern is well-established. You might be talented and fiercely loyal to the Sena. But if you don't get on with the Fuehrer (or his son), you don't count.

However, there's a big difference between the quiet individual-centric departures of Gupte and Pradhan from the Sena and the last three leaders' public-political alienation. These three fomented revolts and splits-of rising magnitude. The fact that Raj comes from the Thackeray family can only magnify the most recent blow to the Sena. Soon, the two groups will tend to clash and undermine each other. And it's probably only a matter of time before the Shiv Sena ceases to exist as a significant political force. This is likely to happen in Mr Bal Thackeray's own life-time.

We must all rejoice in the Sena's political demise-unabashedly and without feeling in any way embarrassed. The Sena was the nearest thing to the European fascism of the first half of the 20th century which

India produced in the second half. For four decades, its goons played havoc with politics, the law, culture, sports, and the courts. They ruled India's largest-and wealthiest-city through manipulation, blackmailing, coercion, fear and violence.

The Sena consciously fomented religious hatred and communalised Maharashtra politics. It manufactured chauvinist prejudice against non-Maharashtrians and instigated or committed hate-crimes. The Sena, with its disgusting demagoguery, represents pure, unadulterated evil, a political force that concentrates much that's negative and deplorable in Indian society, including hierarchical authoritarianism, repression and addiction to the use of force and bullying. The Sena's disintegration will deprive the BJP of its sole ideological (Hindutva) ally. That warrants a minor celebration, as does the BJP's own crisis, aggravated by Ms Uma Bharati. Parties that reject India's multicultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic heritage and the bedrock Constitutional value of secularism can only cause social retrogression and disarray. The Shiv Sena was created in 1966 as an explicitly Marathi-chauvinist party by some of Bombay's topmost industrialists. They used it as a counterweight to the Communists, who were gaining political weight especially through growing trade unionism in "sunrise" industries like engineering, electricals, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. Sena goons would regularly break strikes, disrupt union meetings and beat up worker-activists.

They especially targeted educated, skilled militant workers who had newly migrated from the Southern states and had Left-wing sympathies. These contemptuously termed "lungiwallahs" were the Sena's earliest targets. Next came the Gujaratis and Muslims. Again, it was the South Indians' turn. It's only with the anti-Babri campaign in the mid-1980s that the Sena became rabidly anti-Muslim in a focussed way. Early on, the Sena was a tool in the hands of the political Right. The Bombay Congress boss, S.K. Patil, deployed its goons to disrupt the 1967 election campaign of the Left-leaning V.K. Krishna Menon. Menon was forced to contest as an independent because Patil denied him the Congress ticket. He lost the election. The greatest resistance to the Sena's thuggery came from the Communists. Krishna Desai, CPI MLA from Parel, organised Left-leaning youths and gave them self-defence training. The police, he believed, couldn't be trusted to defend the Left against the Sena.

In 1970, the Sena's thugs hacked Desai to death-Independent India's first political murder. They got away lightly thanks to the deeply compromised ruling Congress. The Sena's politics of blackmail, violence and murder came to prevail. Unfortunately, the Communists' resistance got subdued. The Sena had a field day.

In its anti-union activities, the Sena was supported by the police, the state government and the Right-wing media. The government regarded ensuring "industrial peace" a higher priority than defending fundamental rights, even law-and-order. Without the support of petty short-sighted leaders like V.P. Naik, the Sena couldn't have grown. The Congress

nurtured the monster. And later, the BJP shamelessly allied with it. Equally reprehensible was the role of industrialists who financed and mentored the Sena and formulated its political strategy. Mr Thackeray had none. He was always a low-level demagogue who knew how to appeal to the crassest, basest instincts of his audience. They manipulated him to impose his own pro-employer Bharatiya Kamgar Sena on workers. They used him to demand jobs exclusively for "sons-of-the-soil" and exploit the sense of inferiority and identity-loss that the Maharashtrian middle class in Bombay had long nursed. Unlike other Indian metropolises, Bombay has never been strongly dominated by one ethnic-linguistic group. Its Marathi-speaking population has been about 40 percent. So the slogan of "neglect" of the "Marathi Manoos" evokes a strong response especially when jobs become scarce and the middle class feels threatened. The Shiv Sena's historic role has been fourfold: undermine and destroy working class radicalism in India's most advanced industries, in Bombay; infuse chauvinism and extreme intolerance into Maharashtra's society and reverse the entire tradition of liberal social reform which began with Jyotiba Phule; communalise politics and institutionalise lawlessness and coercion; and, finally, push the terrain of mainstream politics to the Right.

This is a deeply deplorable agenda. The Sena succeeded in implementing its first half with the help of the Congress in the 1960s and 1970s. Its cult of Shivaji helped consolidate Maratha power and rabid Maharashtrian chauvinism, as well as deeply Islamophobic, illiberal, macho ideas. It succeeded on the second half of the agenda through the able assistance of the BJP after the 1980s.

The Sena's greatest political gains, ironically, came not through its "sons-of-the-soil" appeal, which it pushed in Bombay and Konkan, but through OBC support. In the mid-1980s, it extended its influence to Marathwada and Vidarbha. The key here was not Mr Thackeray, but OBC leader Chhagan Bhujbal. In 1995, the Sena came to power in Maharashtra in alliance with the BJP. Crucial to this was the terrible post-Babri demolition anti-Muslim violence of 1993, which it organised/instigated, followed by the March bomb blasts. The Sena leveraged power to award "crony capitalist" contracts, including tripling the size of the Enron power project after winning elections on the promise of "drowning it in the sea".

Soon, politics took the back seat in the Sena. By 1999, it was out of power, but its leaders had accumulated enormous wealth. For instance, a few months ago, Mr Raj Thackeray, in collaboration with former Lok Sabha Speaker Manohar Joshi, bought the huge properties of Kohinoor Mills in Central Bombay, worth over Rs 350 crores. Barring the Raj Thackeray-led Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Sena, which claims five lakh members in Maharashtra, the Sena's mobilisation stagnated. It had every opportunity to outmanoeuvre the shaky Congress-Nationalist Congress government which replaced it in 1999-2004, but failed to seize it. Its political appeal shrank, as did the Senapati's always semi-manufactured charisma. Eventually, Mr Thackeray went the way of all tinpot dictators and

third-rate demagogues. He became a prisoner of a small coterie, based upon family loyalties, and a cult of himself and his wife. That dependence undermined the Sena and led to one revolt after another. The Sena is probably now at the end of the road. But the “Marathi Manoos” sentiment it promoted, the sense of injury it cultivated, and the chauvinist political space it occupied for four decades hasn’t gone away. It could well be exploited by other currents, including sections of the NCP and the Congress. That would be a tragedy of historic proportions. One can only hope that Ms Sonia Gandhi does not repeat the blunders her mother-in-law made in the 1960s and 1970s, and that Mr Sharad Pawar doesn’t emulate V.P. Naik.

P.S.

* Published in Kashmir Times, November 5, 2005 and reproduced in South Asia Citizens Wire | 4-6 Dec, 2005 | Dispatch No. 2184.