

## Hindutva in dire straits

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The Bharatiya Janata Party is a remarkably bad loser. During its six years in power in New Delhi, it deluded itself that as a proponent of Hindutva, it was the 'natural' party of governance because 82 percent of Indians are Hindu by birth. The delusion persisted although the BJP couldn't have come to power on its own, with barely a third of all Lok Sabha seats, and despite the visible cracks which appeared in the Hindutva edifice especially after 2001. In reality, only one of its 20-odd partners in the BJP-led coalition professed Hindutva — the Shiv Sena. For all others, the alliance was purely expedient. Even worse, many others too started believing — including some Indian secularists and not a few Pakistanis — in a mythical fit between Hindutva and the BJP's real or potential success. Today, that myth lies shattered.

The BJP is in serious political decline and organisational disarray. It is in government in just six states (of a total of 28 Indian states and seven Union territories) — and in just three of them on its own. It has no political strategy to relaunch itself. Its policies are shopworn or bankrupt. Its allies are deserting it, as are its Hindutva cohorts. It faces its gravest organisational crisis and leadership succession struggle as L.K. Advani departs as party president — in ignominy.

Last month, the BJP got a temporary boost, when its alliance with the Janata Dal (United) won the Bihar Assembly — not least because the ruling United Progressive Alliance grossly mishandled the situation after an election in February produced a hung verdict. Now, even that success stands eclipsed by a first-rate crisis precipitated by the maverick, self-styled sanyasin, Uma Bharati.

This is a crisis of the BJP's own making. Bharati, a backward caste leader, won the Madhya Pradesh Assembly with a three-fourths majority in 2003. She was charge sheeted for instigating communal violence in Karnataka and was replaced by another leader. She expected to return to the chief ministership when she was temporarily exonerated and her successor was replaced. But the party leadership thought otherwise and appointed someone else. Bharati is on the warpath and stands suspended. She may now destabilise the BJP in MP, deepening its national crisis.

That's not the only bad news for the BJP. Its cousin, the Shiv Sena, is witnessing an internal revolt by supremo Bal Thackeray's nephew Raj, against his son, Uddhav. Raj, politically more capable than and senior to Uddhav, accuses him of ruining the party. Last Sunday, he resigned from all Sena posts.

This happened within days of the Sena's crushing defeat in a Maharashtra Assembly by-election, inflicted by former Chief Minister Narayan Rane. Rane, now in the Congress, was the Sena's most-rooted leader. Like Raj, his inner-party battle was directed against Uddhav.

Raj Thackeray hasn't directly criticised his uncle, who remains his 'God'. But logic pits him against the Senapati. Bal Thackeray anointed Uddhav as Sena's 'executive president' and allowed him to marginalise Raj. Now, a patch-up seems unlikely.

Raj will probably set up a 'parallel Sena'. He will be the fifth major leader to quit the Sena since 1977. The pattern is well-established. You might be extremely talented. But if you don't get on with the Fuehrer & Son, you don't count. Raj's family connection will magnify the revolt's impact. The

Sena will probably soon cease to be a significant force.

We must rejoice in the Sena's demise — without feeling embarrassed. The Sena was the nearest thing to European fascism that India produced. 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 blackmail, fear and violence.

The Sena fomented religious hatred and communalised politics. Sena demagogues manufactured chauvinist prejudice against non-Maharashtrians and instigated hate-crimes. The Sena represents unadulterated evil. It concentrates much that's negative in Indian society, including ultra-conservatism, authoritarianism and addiction to force. It militates against the bedrock constitutional values of secularism and democracy.

The Sena was created in 1966 by Bombay's industrialists as a counterweight to the Communists' growing trade unionism in 'sunrise' industries like electricals, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. Sena goons would break strikes, disrupt union meetings and beat up worker-activists — especially the educated, skilled new migrants from the South, with Left-wing sympathies.

These were the Sena's earliest targets. Next came the Gujaratis and Muslims. It again returned to targeting South Indians. With the anti-Babri campaign of the mid-1980s, the Sena became decisively and rabidly anti-Muslim.

The Sena was a tool in the hands of the Right. The Bombay Congress boss, S.K. Patil, used it to disrupt the 1967 election campaign of the Left-leaning V.K. Krishna Menon. The greatest resistance to the Sena's thuggery came from the Communists. Krishna Desai, a working-class communist MLA, gave Left-leaning youths self-defence training. The police, he rightly believed, won't defend the Left against the Sena.

In 1970, Sena thugs hacked Desai to death — Independent India's first political murder. They got away lightly. The Sena's politics of violence and mayhem came to prevail. Unfortunately, Communist resistance became subdued.

The Sena's anti-unionism was supported by the state government, which regarded 'industrial peace' a higher priority than fundamental rights, even law-and-order. First the Congress, and later, the BJP, nurtured the monster. Equally reprehensible were the industrialists who financed and mentored the Sena. They formulated strategy for Thackeray.

Thackeray demanded jobs for 'sons-of-the-soil' and exploited the sense of inferiority and identity-loss among Bombay's Maharashtrian middle class. Unlike other Indian metropolises, Bombay has never been dominated by one ethnic-linguistic group. Marathi chauvinism evoked a response there. The Sena-built cult of Shivaji helped consolidate Maratha power, and promote communal, illiberal and macho ideas.

The Shiv Sena's historic role was fourfold: destroy working-class radicalism; infuse extreme intolerance into society and reverse Maharashtra's tradition of liberal social reform; institutionalise lawlessness and coercion; and, push mainstream politics to the communal Right. The Sena succeeded in imposing the first half of this agenda through the Congress, and the second half through the BJP, especially after Bombay's 1993 anti-Muslim pogrom, which it organised.

In 1995, the Sena for the first time took power in Maharashtra, in alliance with the BJP. Crucial to this was the 1993 violence and the March bomb-blasts reportedly organised by Dawood Ibrahim. It leveraged political power to award 'crony-capitalist' contracts, including tripling the Enron power project after promising to 'drown it in the sea'.

In 1999, the Sena lost power. Politics took the back seat. Sena leaders had accumulated enormous wealth. Recently, its leaders, including Raj, bought mill lands worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Over the past few years, the Sena's appeal has shrunk, as has the Senapati's manufactured charisma. Thackeray went the way of all tinpot dictators. He became a prisoner of a small coterie, based upon family loyalties.

The Sena story is probably over. But the Marathi middle class's sense of injury, which the Sena cultivated within a chauvinist political space, hasn't gone. It could well be exploited by others, including sections of the NCP or Congress. That would be a historic tragedy. One can only hope that Sonia Gandhi doesn't repeat her mother-in-law's blunders of the 1960s, and that Sharad Pawar doesn't emulate V.P. Naik.

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