

Indian bomb blasts: the end product of communal politics

By Sarath Kumara
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Two devastating bomb blasts in Bombay, India's financial centre, last week claimed the lives of at least 52 people and injured more than 150. One exploded at the Zaveri Bazaar, the city's jewelry district, near the Hindu Mumbadevi temple. The other blast took place near one of the city's main tourist attractions—the Gateway of India—a British monument built during the colonial rule of India.

The two bombs, both planted in taxis, detonated within 15 minutes of each other around midday last Monday. Both areas were crowded and the results were indiscriminate casualties. According to police, the two taxis had compressed gas cylinders, adding to the force of the blasts, which hurled car parts more than 100 metres.

There have been four other explosions in Bombay since last December but the latest was by far the most destructive. It is the worst in the city since a series of bomb blasts in 1993 claimed the lives of 260 people and injured hundreds.

No one has claimed responsibility for last week's bombings. The police immediately accused Kashmiri separatist militia groups—Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad—as well as the outlawed Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) but provided no evidence of their involvement. A police spokesman announced yesterday that five suspects had been detained. No details have been released.

Whoever was responsible, the attack was a deeply reactionary act that has already been seized upon by the ruling Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) and its Hindu extremist allies to foment further communal antagonisms. In Bombay itself, thousands of BJP activists and supporters of the fascistic Shiv Sena party held a demonstration last Thursday.

There is widespread concern about the prospect of communal violence. "Every moment, I feel there is danger in Bombay. But still, I have to put my life on the

line and go to work today," a Muslim tailor told the media. Yet thousands of people from all religious backgrounds have flocked to the city's hospitals to donate blood to help the victims. "In the Zaveri Bazaar, Muslims and Hindus helped each other, pulling bloody victims from the smoking wreckage of cars and shops," the *Hindu* reported.

By contrast, India's Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani immediately stirred up communal hostilities by pointing the finger at India's rival, Pakistan. While he did not accuse Islamabad of being directly involved in the bombing, he nevertheless blamed Pakistan for not doing enough to stop terrorism. "Pakistan's war of terrorism... is not directed only at Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, it's targeted at destabilising the country and its secular fabric," he said.

Islamabad issued an official statement condemning the attack. But Advani dismissed the comments, demanding that Pakistan "prove its sincerity" by handing over 20 people alleged to have taken part in an attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001. Following the incident, the two nuclear-armed countries were poised on the brink of war after New Delhi initiated a massive troop build up along the border with Pakistan.

While there is no indication of an immediate return to military confrontation, the resort to communal politics has a logic of its own. Following the explosions in Bombay, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee warned that planned talks between the two countries would not go ahead if "terrorist" activities continued. The Pakistani foreign ministry immediately responded by declaring that it was India's responsibility to maintain normalcy in areas of tension like Kashmir.

The BJP is directly responsible for heightening communal tensions inside India. There are some indications that the bombs may have been directed against Hindus from the state of Gujarat. One of the two bombs

was detonated near the Gujarati section of Bombay's Zaveri Bazaar. Three of the previous blasts—on December 6, January 28 and March 4—took place in the area of Bombay known as the Gujarati section.

The bombings took place after a communal pogrom in Gujarat in March 2002 by mobs of BJP, Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal supporters that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 2,500 Muslims. The violence, which had the tacit support of the BJP government in Gujarat, left 150,000 people homeless. Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and sections of the BJP leadership exploited the communal polarisation and directly appealed to Hindu chauvinist sentiment to win last year's state elections.

Eighteen months later, the Gujarat pogrom is still a source of communal tensions. Despite compelling evidence, no one has been convicted for the murders, rapes and other violent acts that took place. The police, courts and prosecutors have shown systematic bias in favour of the accused. The police have summarily closed many cases without any significant investigation or attempt to find the culprits. It has recently been revealed that eyewitnesses in one high profile case—the burning of Best Bakery—were intimidated into recanting their testimony.

As even the Indian press has noted, the persecution of Muslims in Gujarat could have provided fresh recruits to various Islamic extremist organisations. A *Hindustan Times* columnist speculated that some of those involved in the Bombay bombings may have been "Indian Muslims who have found no justice within the system and who have been traumatised and brutalised by such events as the Gujarat riots."

Communal tensions have also been exacerbated by the long-running campaign for the construction of a temple on the site of Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya that was destroyed by a Hindu mob in December 1992. The BJP and leaders like Advani were directly involved in the destruction of the mosque, which triggered widespread communal violence throughout the Indian subcontinent resulting in more than 3,000 deaths.

Bombay was one of the worst affected cities. Hindu mobs led by Shiv Sena attacked Muslim homes and businesses in the city leaving 575 people dead and another 50,000 homeless. A series of bomb blasts in Bombay in 1993 were attributed to Muslim extremists seeking revenge.

The BJP exploited Ayodhya to whip up Hindu chauvinist sentiment to consolidate its political base.

Having come to power, however, Vajpayee and Advani sought to play down the issue and left the courts to decide on the divisive issue of building a Hindu temple. That protracted process is reaching a conclusion after the Archeology Survey of India recently presented a report to the courts claiming to have found evidence that the site of the destroyed mosque was previously used by Hindus.

Hindu chauvinist organisations seized on the report to insist that construction of a temple to the Hindu god Ram should begin. VHP General Secretary Pravin Togadia announced: "We have decided to start a mass movement to mobilise support for the temple in Ayodhya". BJP president Venkaiah Naidu declared that "this dispute should be put to rest and all of us should come together to rebuild the temple."

A senior BJP leader last week commented to the *Hindu* newspaper: "We will be able to get back our Hindu vote with the help of Ram temple issue." Incapable of addressing the appalling social conditions facing the majority of the Indian population, the BJP, with the complicity of the opposition parties, has no compunction in whipping up communal divisions to shore up its declining political support.

After a string of electoral losses, the BJP won last year's poll in Gujarat through a vicious anti-Muslim campaign, to which Congress and other opposition parties adapted. In November, the BJP faces state elections in five states—the capital Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Mizoram—as well as national elections next year. The BJP's strategy is already evident: to whip up and openly appeal to chauvinist sentiment.

It is this fetid political atmosphere that has produced the bomb blasts in Bombay.

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