

The Shiv Sena: Semi-Fascism in Action

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Introduction

The Shiv Sena, during nearly three and a half decades of its existence, has always symbolised the semi-fascist face of reaction. Amongst all the regional parties that are today opportunistically supporting the BJP-led regime at the Centre, it is only the Shiv Sena (SS) that has a clear ideological affinity with the RSS-controlled Sangh Parivar. That is precisely why the SS has been the BJP's earliest and oldest political ally in the country. For the last 11 years since 1989, the two have had an unbroken alliance at both national and state levels. Despite rough patches, this alliance is set to continue for the near future.

Although their interpretations may somewhat differ, the SS and the BJP share a common allegiance to the communal and fascistic concept of cultural nationalism and to the aim of achieving a "Hindu Rashtra". The rapid growth of the SS in Maharashtra since the mid-eighties is, in fact, closely linked to the parallel growth of the saffron brigade at the national level during the same period. One of the major reasons for the success of the communal appeal, whether of the SS or the BJP, is of course the fertile soil provided by the deepening economic crisis resulting from the policies of successive Congress governments. Another important reason has been the ruling class tendency of compromising with the communal forces, at both national and state levels. In the case of the SS, as we shall see, this tendency has been exhibited with a vengeance.

The SS has systematically targetted different sections of minorities in a cynical attempt to build its mass support. Such minority targets have included non-Maharashtrians, Muslims and Dalits. And considering the current nationwide Sangh Parivar drive, the next SS target could well be Christians. The communal riots and caste atrocities unleashed by the SS constitute one of the blackest chapters in the history of Maharashtra. The links of the SS with mafia gangs, organised crime, extortion rackets and corruption scandals are notorious. These links have been openly revealed especially during the SS-BJP state government's four and a half years in power. Although the SS-BJP are now out of power in the state, sections of the bureaucracy, the police and the media are still under their influence.

Rabid anti-Communism has been a fundamental and consistent plank of the SS ever since its inception. It is this aspect that has ensured it the firm support of big business and the ruling classes. As is only too well-known, it was the ruling Congress party that nurtured and supported the SS for over

two decades from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties. In the early phase, this support was given to break the Communist hold over the trade union movement in Mumbai; in the later phase, it was to settle factional scores within the Congress itself. At the same time, it is also true that, with the sole exception of the Communists, all other opposition parties in the state have also collaborated with the SS at various times, their leaders sharing the platform with the SS supremo and some of them even going to the extent of striking electoral alliances with the SS in local elections.

The SS has always been under the authoritarian grip of its demagogic supremo Bal Thackeray, who has never disguised his contempt for democracy and adulation of dictatorship. His servile support to the Emergency, although couched in these ideological terms, actually had the much more banal motive of somehow staying out of jail, an experience that he is known to dread. Thackeray has publicly glorified the likes of Adolf Hitler and Nathuram Godse, and this has given immense vicarious pleasure to the dominant hardcore elements of the Sangh Parivar.

We shall consider the Shiv Sena here in three broad sections. In the first, we shall trace the extremely revealing genesis of the SS during the last three and a half decades of its existence. In the second, we shall try to analyse the reasons that have led to its remarkable growth in recent years. And in the third, we shall consider its future prospects and the urgent need to combat this reactionary political force.

A. The Genesis of the Shiv Sena

The genesis of the SS can be clearly divided into four main phases:

1. The first phase from 1966-1975 was the period of its rise, mainly on the basis of regional chauvinism and anti-Communism. But during this time it was restricted only to the Mumbai-Thane urban belt.
2. The second phase from 1975-1984 were the years of its decline, when its political influence even in this limited sphere touched rock bottom due to its cringing support to the Emergency and other factors.
3. The third phase from 1984-1995 was the period of its rapid expansion throughout Maharashtra on the twin planks of aggressive Hindu communalism against Muslims and upper caste mobilisation against Dalits.
4. The fourth phase from 1995-2000 is its years in power and after, during which its proximity to foreign and indigenous vested interests, corruption and criminalisation were exposed as never before.

1. The First Phase, 1966-1975: The Years of Formation

The Shiv Sena was founded on June 19, 1966 with the avowed intention of fighting the alleged injustice in employment and other matters being faced by

the Maharashtrians in Mumbai. The reason cited for this injustice was the influx into Mumbai of people from other states, amongst whom the SS mainly targetted South Indians, derogatorily branding them as the "Yandu Gundus". It then simultaneously took up cudgels against the Communists, branding them as anti-national, and launched its strike-breaking activities and other attacks against the trade union movement. The bias against Muslims and Dalits was very much there ever since its inception, but apart from sporadic incidents, this remained a dormant feature till the mid-eighties.

The spadework for the formation of the SS had started six years earlier, with the launching of the Marathi weekly "Marmik" by Bal Thackeray on August 13, 1960, just three months after the formation of the state of Maharashtra on May 1, 1960. The publication of the first issue of "Marmik", significantly, took place at the hands of the first chief minister of Maharashtra and a top Congress leader, Y.B. Chavan!

The Samyukta Maharashtra Movement

The launching of "Marmik", which became a precursor to the formation of the SS, took place against the backdrop of a huge mass movement for Samyukta Maharashtra, i.e. a united Maharashtra inclusive of Mumbai, Konkan, Western Maharashtra, Vidarbha and Marathwada regions but exclusive of Gujarat.

The formation of a unilingual state of Maharashtra, with Mumbai as its capital, was achieved on May Day 1960 only after a long and bitter mass struggle. This democratic struggle began in 1955, lasted for five years and sacrificed 105 martyrs in brutal police firing ordered by the Morarji Desai-led state government in 1955-56. Tens of thousands of people were arrested and braved lathi-charges in the course of this movement. The struggle was led by the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti, which mainly comprised the Socialists, Communists and other democrats.

The Samiti fought the parliamentary and assembly elections of 1957 jointly and succeeded in giving a big jolt to the Congress, which could scrape through only because of its support in Gujarat and Vidarbha. The same year, the Samiti also swept the Bombay Municipal Corporation polls, routing the Congress. The Samyukta Maharashtra movement achieved victory, but as we shall analyse later, it also gave rise to a strong streak of regional chauvinism which was later exploited by "Marmik" and the SS to the hilt.

Double Irony of Fate

Bal Thackeray himself, along with some others who formed the SS, had been associated with the RSS in their early years, and this had the inevitable impact on SS ideology and organisation. Thackeray was a cartoonist who did a brief stint with the "Free Press Journal", an English daily in Mumbai. He soon fell out with its management and started his own weekly "Marmik". Day in and day out for six years, Thackeray wrote provocative pieces in "Marmik", highlighting instances of injustice to Maharashtrians in Mumbai, especially in

the matter of white collar jobs. Lists were regularly published of the names of officials in government concerns and private companies, making out that most of the officers were non-Maharashtrians, mostly South Indians.

The target of "Marmik" was never the Congress government policies that were leading to a rapid increase in unemployment; nor was it ever the anarchic capitalist development that was turning Mumbai into a stinking cesspool of misery; the target was invariably the "outsiders" who were snatching away jobs from the "sons of the soil". As a matter of fact, Thackeray always made it a point to praise the capitalists, although most of them were non-Marathi, under the plea that it was they who provided the jobs! He also strove to be on the right side of the Congress rulers, and every anniversary function of "Marmik" used to be graced in turns by chief minister Vasant Naik, home minister Balasaheb Desai, future chief ministers Vasantdada Patil, A.R. Antulay and other Congress bigwigs.

In any case, this crude and vulgar simplification of the vexed question of unemployment soon made "Marmik" popular in Mumbai and its environs. The public response to this weekly was, in fact, the main factor that prompted Thackeray to form the SS, and it was this "Marmik" readership that eventually became the nucleus of several SS "shakhas", or branches, in the urban belt of Mumbai and Thane districts.

The Shape of Things to Come

The first mass rally of the SS was held at the Shivaji Park in Mumbai on October 30, 1966. It was the day of Dussehra, and on every Dussehra day in subsequent years, similar SS rallies have been held on Shivaji Park. Like the "shakha" concept, this practice, too, has been lifted from the RSS, which has regularly held its annual Dussehra rallies at Nagpur. There was a large turnout for this first-ever SS rally, which is said to have surprised Thackeray himself. Apart from the Thackeray father-and-son duo and other SS leaders, it was another prominent Congress leader Ramrao Adik who addressed this SS rally.

This first rally of the SS ended in a manner that accurately foretold the shape of things to come. After inflammatory speeches by Thackeray and others, the dispersing mob savagely attacked shops and restaurants owned by South Indians, looted them and set them on fire. And as was to happen on innumerable later occasions, the police did not lift a finger against these hoodlums! This was obviously under special instructions from Congress chief minister Vasant Naik and home minister Balasaheb Desai, from both of whom Bal Thackeray and his hordes were to enjoy full protection for the next ten years! Twenty years later, in the mid-eighties, it was another Congress chief minister of the same name, Vasantdada Patil, who was to take the moribund Shiv Sena under his wing, help it to regain control over the Mumbai municipal corporation, and enable it to spread its communal tentacles all over Maharashtra!

The Card of Regional Chauvinism

The two main demands raised by the SS were 80 per cent jobs in government concerns and 80 per cent houses in state housing board colonies for Maharashtrians. In support of this, a virulent campaign was unleashed through the late sixties and early seventies. Attacks on South Indian establishments became a regular feature, and it was then that the extortion racket under the name of "protection money" began. In 1968, cinema theatres screening Hindi films brought out by South Indian producers were attacked and the shows brought to a halt. The shows began only when considerable sums of money changed hands. Demonstrations were held on government concerns demanding jobs for Maharashtrians, and many of these turned violent.

In 1972, an organisation called the Sthaniya Lokadhikar Samiti (SLS) was set up. In a bid to attract white collar employees, the SLS set up its units in large government and semi-government concerns like the RBI, SBI, LIC, GIC, Air India, Railways, other nationalised banks and so on. In many of these concerns there were All India unions led by the Left, which proved difficult to break. Hence, the SLS tried a new tactic. It concentrated on the demand that 80 per cent of the staff must be Maharashtrians and focussed exclusively on three main questions affecting the Marathi employees, viz, recruitment, transfers and promotions. It backed up this campaign by demonstrations and other intimidatory measures. This enabled the SS to attract the middle classes.

In another effort to play the regional chauvinist card, the SS took up the unresolved Maharashtra-Karnataka border dispute. This resulted in the first full-scale riot unleashed by the SS in Mumbai in February 1969. This was the one and only time that the state government arrested Bal Thackeray along with other SS leaders like Dattaji Salvi, Manohar Joshi and Sudhir Joshi. After this, as if pre-planned, all hell broke loose, the riot intensified and spread all over Mumbai. The police then implored Thackeray himself to issue a peace appeal from jail and got it published in all sections of the press. As per the data provided in the state assembly, the week-long riot left 59 dead, 274 wounded, 151 police injured, and property worth over one crore rupees destroyed in nearly 700 cases of assault. Mumbai ground to a halt that week and the SS showed its "prowess" to the country as a whole. This was to be the first and last riot engineered by the SS on purely regional sentiments; all future riots would be communal or casteist, directed against Muslims or Dalits. This was also to be the first and last time that the government would put Thackeray behind bars.

Attacks on Communists and on Working Class Unity

Anti-Communism, attacks on working class unity and serving as a handmaid of the capitalists are all part of fascistic ideology and practice. The SS displayed all these features in ample measure right from its inception. It made the Communists its foremost political target. And in this endeavour, it received

unstinted support from big business, the Congress state government and large sections of the capitalist-controlled media. The SS began by branding the Communists as anti-national, citing the case of the India-China border conflict which was still fresh in people's minds. The Congress, the Jan Sangh and the Socialists had all played the same tune earlier.

But the SS did not stop at verbal propaganda alone. Egged on by big business, it started using the Marathi chauvinist card to break working class unity. With some ground thus prepared, it began to display its muscle power to break Communist-led strikes, overthrow the established AITUC/CITU union and replace it with the SS union which would then sign an amicable agreement with the management. In this strike-breaking process, several militant workers of the Communist-led unions would be dismissed and replaced by Shiv Sainiks to strengthen the SS hold in the factory. In each such instance, local mobilisation would be carried out by the nearby SS "shakha". Wherever there was resistance, armed gangs of hoodlums would be let loose to physically attack leading activists and workers of the Communist-led unions. Support of the management from inside and of the state government from outside, to such terrorism was always assured, with the police being invariably on the SS side. Some major examples of Communist-led unions that were broken in this manner were the AITUC unions of Larsen and Toubro, T. Maneklal and Parle Bottling Plant in Mumbai, and the CITU unions of Devidayal Cables, Wyman Gordon and Surendra Industries in Thane. But there were also many other instances where the CITU and AITUC succeeded in repulsing this SS onslaught. Nevertheless, taking the picture as a whole, it is true that Communist-led unions did suffer major setbacks during this period.

In order to give this drive an organised channel, the SS set up its own trade union, the Bharatiya Kamgar Sena (BKS) on August 9, 1968. Needless to say, all unions were run in collusion with the managements, sacrificing the interests of the working class and accompanied by monumental levels of corruption. The anti-working class stand of the SS became crystal clear when it publicly opposed the state government employees strike and the textile workers strike in the early seventies and backed this up by opposing the Great Railway Strike of 1974.

There was one major section of the working class whose support at the union level continued to elude the SS, and this was the then three lakh strong textile workers of Mumbai, a large majority being Maharashtrians. Historically, the textile workers had long been under the influence of the Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) that was led by the Communists. They had fought and won several militant strike-struggles under Communist leadership right since the twenties. Here the SS began to use the most reprehensible tactics based on outright violence and naked terror.

In December 1967, the CPI headquarters of Mumbai at Dalvi Building in Parel, which is situated in the very midst of the textile area, was savagely attacked by SS hoodlums and almost destroyed. Organised attempts were made to

break up Communist public meetings and several leaders and activists of both the CPI and the CPI(M) were physically assaulted. The climax was reached on June 6, 1970, when armed goondas of the SS murdered the sitting MLA of the CPI, Krishna Desai. Krishna Desai was a popular and militant mass leader in the textile belt and had been elected municipal corporator four times before he was elected to the state assembly in 1967. This was the first major political assassination in Mumbai since independence, and it sent shock waves through the city and state. The leadership of the entire opposition alongwith thousands of incensed workers, marched in Krishna Desai's funeral procession. Opposition leaders directly accused the Shiv Sena and the Congress state government in general, and Bal Thackeray and Vasant Naik in particular, of being hand in glove in the perpetration of this heinous crime.

Communal, Casteist and Authoritarian Slant

The communal and casteist mobilisation of the SS started in a big way in the mid-eighties. But even in this first phase, the SS slant became clear from a few striking instances. Thackeray personally intervened on the side of the Hindus in two mandir-masjid disputes, which he utilised to rake up communal tensions. One was the Durgadi shrine at Kalyan in Thane district; the other was the Mahikavati shrine at Mahad in Raigad district. But the biggest communal incident in which the SS was involved in its early years was the Bhiwandi riots of May 1970, which also spread to Mahad and Jalgaon. The riots were ignited in connection with a Shiv Jayanti procession. 43 people were killed in Bhiwandi, 39 in Jalgaon and property worth crores was destroyed. The Justice Madon Commission of Inquiry squarely laid the blame on the following organisations for the riots: Shiv Sena, Jan Sangh, Hindu Mahasabha, Rashtriya Utsav Mandal and Bhiwandi Seva Samiti (both RSS outfits) and All India Majlis Tamir-e-Millat.

As for the casteist slant, the first flash point came in January 1974, when there was a violent clash between the SS and the Dalit Panthers. The Dalit Panthers was set up in 1972, both as a challenge to the injustice of the social system and as a rebellion against the then moribund and directionless Republican Party of India (RPI). The Panthers began by taking up both caste and class issues and also launched a campaign to expose the regressive aspects of some Hindu religious tenets. Capitalising on certain speeches made by Panther leaders about Hindu deities, the SS unleashed riots against Dalits in the Worli BDD chawls in Mumbai. The riots then spread to other areas of the city and continued for a week. Dalit Panther leader Bhagwat Jadhav was brutally killed by SS goons. Thus began the feud of the SS against the Dalit community.

Electoral Opportunism Galore

At the birth of the SS, Thackeray had declared that it was only a social organisation that treated politics with contempt. But within just six months of that statement, the SS had plunged into politics. Its first entry during the

parliamentary and assembly elections of 1967 was indirect and negative. It did not contest any seats itself, but gave a call for the defeat of Lok Sabha candidates in Mumbai like V.K. Krishna Menon (because he was an "outsider"), S.A. Dange (because he was a Communist) and George Fernandes (because he was a socialist). Menon lost, but the other two won. The rank opportunism of the SS became evident during this election itself. When it supported the then Bombay Congress boss S.K. Patil against Fernandes, after having lampooned Patil savagely for seven years in the columns of "Marmik" for his anti-Maharashtrian stances. In later parliamentary elections, the SS fully supported Naval Tata of the House of Tatas, made huge sums of money and also exposed its class bias. It also supported retired General of the Army, K.M. Cariappa, although he was an "outsider", exposing its militarist-authoritarian leanings.

Later the same year, 1967, the SS fought the Thane municipal elections won 17 of the 40 seats and managed to install its own Mayor. This was the first electoral breakthrough for the SS. The next year in 1968 came the elections to the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC). Here, the SS and the Praja Samajwadi Party (PSP) shocked the political world by concluding an electoral alliance. The latest example is that of George Fernandes himself!

Be that as it may, the SS won 42 of the 140 seats in the BMC, the PSP won 11, but the Congress still emerged as the largest party with 65. The CPI, however, was reduced from 18 seats won in 1961 to only 3 in 1968, the PWP was decimated from 8 to nil, and the newly-formed CPI(M) won 2. Two years later, in October 1970, the assembly by-election necessitated by Krishna Desai's murder was, unfortunately, narrowly won by the SS, despite the fact that the CPI had put up Krishna Desai's wife as its candidate. The winner, Wamanrao Mahadik, thus became the first SS MLA in the state assembly. These election results were an ominous indication that the anti-Communist campaign of the SS was beginning to bear fruit.

For the next BMC elections of 1973, the SS forged an alliance with the RPI led by R.S. Gavai! The SS almost retained its old strength by winning 39 seats, but the RPI had to be content with just 1. Sudhir Joshi of the SS was elected Mayor with the support of one Congress faction, the RPI, and – this is the astounding part – with the support of the corporators of the Muslim League!

2. The Second Phase, 1975-1984: The Years of Decline

In early 1975, Thackeray's reliable mentor Vasant Rao Naik was made to step down as chief minister after a record 12-year long tenure, which still remains unmatched in the history of the state. He was replaced by S.B. Chavan, a leader from Marathwada who was foisted from Delhi. Within a couple of months of this changeover came the Emergency in June 1975.

Servile Support to Emergency

In the beginning of the Emergency, there were rumours that alongwith the

RSS and other banned organisations, the SS would also be banned and its leaders put behind bars. But Thackeray stalled any such move by declaring full SS support to the Emergency, overruling the misgivings of some of his minions. He then buttressed this by publicly singing praises of not only Indira Gandhi but also Sanjay Gandhi. Thus, throughout the Emergency, the SS lay completely docile and dormant, raising no contentious issues and leading no fiery agitations. Its day-to-day "shakha" functioning and routine trade union work went on, but in muted fashion. It was as if the teeth had been knocked out of the tiger, which is always flaunted as the SS symbol.

In a sense, the SS support to the Emergency was ideologically consistent with its oft-repeated, fascistic adulation of dictatorship. However, it is widely believed that Thackeray took this stand because he was terrified at the prospect of an indefinitely long jail term. The one brief stint that he had of jail life in 1969 had been for him a dreadful experience, and he would do anything to avoid a repeat of the same.

Marginalisation of the Shiv Sena

SS support to the Congress(I) continued even after the Emergency and the subsequent rout of that party. In the 1977 Lok Sabha elections, the SS did not contest a single seat; instead, it worked for the Congress. The revulsion of the people against the Congress also rebounded on the SS and the opposition made a clean sweep of all the Lok Sabha seats from Mumbai. The same year, in the Bombay mayoral election, the SS backtracked on its own earlier assurance to support the opposition and instead supported the candidature of Congress candidate Murli Deora, who won. In the 1978 assembly elections, the SS contested some seats on its own but drew a complete blank. And in the BMC elections soon after, its strength was cut down by half; it won only 21 seats out of 140 as against 42 and 39 that it had won in the earlier two elections. There was now no doubt that SS influence even in its citadel of Mumbai was beginning to wane.

In the Lok Sabha elections of 1980, held after the collapse of the Janata Party rule at the Centre, the Congress(I) staged a comeback. Indira Gandhi promptly dismissed several opposition-led state governments, which included the PDF regime in Maharashtra, and fresh assembly elections were held. The Congress(I) swept the polls and, in order to teach a lesson to the Maratha lobby that had opposed her, she foisted A.R. Antulay as the chief minister. Thackeray and Antulay had always been the best of friends; indeed, so special was their relationship that the SS did not contest the 1980 assembly elections at all – instead, it worked for the Congress(I)! Returning the favour, Antulay got three SS leaders elected to the legislative council with Congress(I) support! All the above events showed to what extent the SS had been marginalised during this period.

Opposition to the Great Textile Strike

In January 1982, the great textile workers strike began in Mumbai under

Datta Samant's leadership. The Girni Kamgar Union (GKU), which had led militant struggles of the textile workers of Mumbai for so many decades, had been reduced to a shadow of its former self due to the class collaborationist line of the CPI's Dange leadership which had gone to the extent of supporting the Emergency. Regardless of their serious differences with Samant, all Left trade unions fully and actively supported the textile strike. Over two and a half lakh workers were involved in this great struggle which lasted for over an year. But the ruling classes had decided to crush this strike, come what may. The Central and state governments, both run by the Congress(I), were loyally carrying out the dictates of big business. Samant himself also made major strategic and tactical blunders which contributed to the eventual failure of this glorious working class struggle, but that is a different story altogether.

The relevant point is that the SS publicly opposed this historic strike action, once again proving that it was in league with big business and the Congress regime. Not merely that, but in the later phases of the strike, the SS also resorted to its notorious practice of strike-breaking and blacklegging! And that, too, when the overwhelming majority of the two and a half lakh textile workers on strike were Maharashtrians – and also Hindus!

Thackeray began to realise belatedly that his stand in the textile strike was leading to his political doom. And so he announced at a public meeting in September 1982 that the SS was now, at last, breaking off all its ties with the Congress(I), which had failed to find an honourable solution to the textile strike. But his credibility had by then sunk so low that hardly anybody believed him. And the disbelievers were soon to be proved right. For just three years later, Thackeray and the SS were to be resurrected as never before by yet another Congress(I) chief minister, Vasantdada Patil! But in the annual Dussehra rally of the SS held on October 27, 1982, he once again repeated the declaration that the SS was, once and for all, breaking off with the Congress(I). The two special "guests of honour" on the dais of this rally, who sat on either side of Thackeray to prop him up in his darkest hour – when he was on the verge of political oblivion – were none other than Sharad Pawar and George Fernandes!

3. The Third Phase, 1984-1995 : The Years of Expansion

The early eighties in Maharashtra, as elsewhere in the country, saw the first stirrings of a new drive launched by the forces of Hindu communalism, which was spearheaded by the RSS-controlled Sangh Parivar. Capitalising on events like the Meenakshipuram conversions, terrorism in Punjab and Kashmir, Christian missionary activities in the north-east and so on, the VHP began to make direct appeals for Hindu consolidation to meet these challenges. Ganga Jal yatras were taken out across the country and the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute was deliberately raked up. The communal cauldron was being stirred up by the saffron brigade.

Sangh Parivar's Strategy

The distortion of history, canards against the minorities, a hate campaign directed at the Muslims, propaganda about discrimination against Hindus, an aggressive appeal to Hindu pride, ridicule of the concept of secularism and all this leading to the incitement of communal riots to create polarisation along religious lines – these were the strategies used by the Sangh Parivar across the country.

Maharashtra already had a long tradition of Hindu revivalism in both literature and historiography. This found expression in the establishment of organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha led by Savarkar and the RSS led in its formative period by Hedgewar and Golwalkar. The saffron brigade took up the threads of his revivalist tradition and linked it to current issues. In the early eighties, these forces found in Maharashtra an obvious target, viz, chief minister A.R. Antulay who was a Muslim. Sections of the Maratha lobby led by the sugar barons, who had been snubbed by the Congress High Command, gave covert backing to the communal forces in their own drive to oust Antulay from the chief ministership.

In these years, militant Hindu organisations like the Patit Pavan, Hindu Ekata, Bahujan Yuva and so on sprang up in different parts of Maharashtra. They were all RSS-backed, but the difference this time was that a conscious attempt was made to rope in youth belonging to the Maratha-Kunabi and OBC castes into these organisations. The RSS-Jan Sangh-BJP upto then used to be branded as organisations of the "Bhatjis and Shetjis", ie, of the Brahmins and Banias. For the first time, they now tried to break out of that mould. The growing economic crisis leading to massive unemployment and destitution in both urban and rural Maharashtra created a fertile soil for the growth of these forces. We shall consider these socio-economic aspects in some details in a later section.

The Sangh Parivar's drive began to gather increasing response in large parts of the country, including Maharashtra. Seeing this response, the SS which was in the political doldrums, decided to use two major cards as passports to its rehabilitation. One was the communal card; the other was the casteist card. Both were consistent with its fascistic ideology, and as we have seen, it had already used them before as supplements to its regional chauvinism. The vital difference was that they now began to occupy centre-stage. And, free of any constraints like an All India presence, the purely regional SS used both these cards in Maharashtra much more blatantly and violently than the BJP. The political situation in Maharashtra during this period, which was characterised by Congress decline and inner-Congress factionalism, was a major factor that helped the SS strategy, and another vital factor was its alliance with the BJP.

The Communal Card

The SS inaugurated its new communal drive with the ghastly communal riots in Bhiwandi, Kalyan, Thane and Mumbai that were unleashed in May 1984. The provocation for the riots was a public speech by Thackeray wherein he made derogatory remarks against the Prophet, Mohammed Paigambar. These

remarks were printed in exaggerated form by some Urdu papers. As a reaction to this, in far-off Parbhani in the Marathwada region, a Congress MLA, A.R. Khan organised a large protest action in which Thackeray's photo was garlanded with shoes. This ignited the fuse which led the SS to unleash massive riots in which at least 258 people were killed, thousands injured and property worth crores destroyed. The riots were replete with terrible instances of cruelty, the most heinous being the Ansari Baug massacre at Bhiwandi.

It has been clearly established that the main culprit in these riots was the SS, aided by various RSS outfits on the one hand and by the Jamaat-e-Islami on the other. The other major culprit was the Congress(I) state government which was then headed by Vasantdada Patil. While the build-up to these riots, consisting of rabid communal propaganda and even collection of weapons, was going on openly for two months in Mumbai and Bhiwandi, the government did absolutely nothing. The attitude of the police not only reflected this complete apathy, but it also had additional communal bias. Even after the riots, no action was ever taken against Thackeray or any of the other culprits. Except for the Left, no other political party, whether ruling or opposition, had the guts to condemn the SS for these riots!

The same year, 1984, the SS held its first-ever state conference in Mumbai. The speeches of Thackeray and other SS leaders dripped with communal venom and they now gave the call that under the banner of Hindutva, the SS should go forth to spread its wings all over Maharashtra.

In the Lok Sabha elections of 1984 held in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination, the SS for the first time concluded an election alliance with the BJP. But in the sympathy wave that followed the assassination, the Congress(I) swept the polls, winning a record 43 of the 48 seats in Maharashtra. The SS-BJP alliance, which drew a blank, was dissolved soon after, to be reforged in a more lasting form five years later. In the 1985 assembly polls, the SS fought on its own and Chhagan Bhujbal became the lone SS candidate to get elected as MLA. Politically, the SS was still down in the dumps.

Resurrection of the Shiv Sena

The resurrection of the SS took place in the BMC elections of 1985, and after that it has never looked back. These elections were held within a few months of the assembly polls in which the SS had been clobbered, winning just one solitary seat, out of the 34 seats in Mumbai and 288 seats in Maharashtra. But just before this election, a very significant incident took place. When asked by SS MLC Pramod Navalkar in the legislative council, if there were any plans to separate Bombay from Maharashtra and make it a union territory, chief minister Vasantdada Patil himself gave the following reply: "I do not know if there is such a proposal, but we will fight tooth and nail if anyone tries to separate Bombay from Maharashtra"! Actually, there was never any such proposal, and both Patil and the SS knew it only too well. But this calculated reply was enough to set the cat among the pigeons, and it was on

this single issue that the SS whipped up regional sentiments, and won the elections with 78 seats of the 170 at stake!

Vasantdada Patil used this ploy for two reasons. One was that his relations with prime minister Rajiv Gandhi had soured and he wanted to hit back at the High Command. The second was that there was no love lost between Vasantdada Patil's faction in the MPCC and Murli Deora's faction in the BRCC. This rivalry between the Maharashtra and Bombay units of the Congress was a chronic affair and it was one of the reasons for various MPCC factions boosting the SS even earlier. But never had it been done so blatantly as on this occasion.

Capitalising on its victory, the SS lost no time in threatening another Assam-type agitation to rid Bombay of all "outsiders". Thackeray even went to the extent of demanding that 1972 be considered as the cut-off date, that all non-Maharashtrians who had settled in Mumbai after that date be driven out and that new laws be framed to stop further influx of "outsiders" into the city. None of this, of course, ever came into effect, but the SS often gave such threats even in later years.

The real use that the SS made of its unchallenged sway over the BMC was to siphon off its funds. The Bombay Municipal Corporation is the richest civic body in the country, its annual budget exceeding that of even some state governments. Corruption in the BMC soared astronomically after the SS takeover and a part of this wealth was used to finance SS expansion to the rest of Maharashtra. Soon after the BMC victory, the SS held its second state conference at Mahad, and here various SS leaders from Bombay were assigned charge of different districts in the state.

In 1986, the "homecoming" of Sharad Pawar to the Congress(I) proved to be another big bonanza for SS expansion in Maharashtra. This created a vacuum in the opposition space which the SS and the BJP, with their communal appeal on the ascendant, began to fill. This was further aided by the rising incidence of inner-Congress factionalism, which resulted in all too frequent changes of Congress chief ministers and their cabinets during the eighties. There were as many as six chief ministers in ten years. These were important reasons for SS-BJP growth during this period.

Another significant reason that contributed to the growth of the SS and the BJP during the late eighties and early nineties was the decline of the Shetkari Sanghatana led by Sharad Joshi. This organisation, which came to prominence in the late seventies and early eighties around the one-point programme of remunerative prices for agricultural produce, clearly represented the landlord lobby and the rich peasantry. But it mobilised thousands of peasants in Maharashtra for militant agitations around crops like onions, tobacco, sugarcane and cotton. Although it claimed to be aloof from politics, in the eighties it generally threw its weight behind selected third front candidates. But in the early nineties, Sharad Joshi revealed his true colours as an unashamed champion of the liberalisation policies and the GATT agreement. It

was this that led to a split in the Shetkari Sanghatana and to a nosedive in Sharad Joshi's influence in the peasantry. The peasant agitations also declined. It was in these years that sections of the peasantry who had been let down by the Shetkari Sanghatana and who were disillusioned with the Congress, began to gravitate towards the SS and the BJP.

Later, Sharad Joshi formed a new party called the Swatantra Bharat Party which was wiped out in successive elections and Joshi was himself defeated a couple of times. In 1999, he reached the nadir of political opportunism. The same Sharad Joshi, who in his heyday used to publicly lash out at the SS-BJP as "communal vultures", now pleaded with Thackeray to accommodate some of his candidates in the SS-BJP alliance! When Thackeray refused, Joshi turned to Sharad Pawar and in an election speech, he declared that "Sharad Pawar will become the Gorbachev of India and as prime minister he will at last finish off the Nehru model and the incense-permit raj!" Currently, Sharad Joshi and the remnants of the Sanghatana are debating whether to merge in the NCP or the BJP!

The Hindutva Campaign and Statewide Communal Riots

In November 1986, the SS gave a call for the observance of a "Saffron Week" all over the state to propagate its version of Hindutva. This was in the background of the Rajiv Gandhi regime's opportunistic decisions as regards the Shah Bano case and the opening of the lock of the Ayodhya shrine. The "Saffron Week" was used for the airing of rabid communal propaganda and for the starting of SS "shakhas" in villages. All this set the stage for communal riots in various parts of the state.

Actually, communal riots were a prominent feature in Maharashtra throughout the eighties. They began in 1982 with the Jan Jagran Yatras of the VHP, their scale increasing in 1984 when the SS got into the fray. From 1986 onwards, when the SS spread to Maharashtra began, communal riots and atrocities on Dalits were ignited in several towns and villages spread all over the state. These were spearheaded by the SS, with various RSS outfits and sometimes even local Congress bosses playing a supporting role. This created an atmosphere of communal and caste polarisation which was utilised by the SS and the BJP to expand and consolidate their base.

It was in this background that, in December 1987, an assembly by-poll was held in Mumbai for a middle-class suburban constituency called Vile Parle which had large chunks of both Marathi and Gujarati voters. For the first time, the SS contested this seat on a strident Hindutva platform, which even the BJP till then was hesitant to adopt. In fact, in this election the BJP supported the Janata Dal candidate, with the Congress also in the fray. The SS candidate Ramesh Prabhoo won this seat convincingly and the SS promptly proclaimed this as the victory of Hindutva.

Close on the heels of this success in Mumbai came the SS victory in the municipal corporation elections of Aurangabad in 1988. The rapidly growing

city of Aurangabad, with a large Muslim and Dalit population, is the political centre of the Marathwada region. The SS strategy here was to whip up majoritarian caste Hindu consolidation against both Muslims and Dalits. This was the first-ever electoral victory of the SS outside its traditional bastions of Mumbai and Thane and gave it a shot in the arm. The same year, in the context of the increased terrorism in Punjab, Thackeray gave a call for the 'boycott of Sikhs' in Mumbai, and this SS terrorism subsided only after the extortion of massive amounts from Sikh businessmen in the city.

The year 1989 was a turning point for SS fortunes. That year, in addition to its weekly "Marmik" which was being published all these years, it started the Mumbai edition of its daily called "Saamna" (which means Confrontation). This was obviously in preparation for the parliamentary and assembly elections due in 1989-90. With a daily newspaper in its hands, the poisonous divisive propaganda of the SS reached fever pitch.

In April 1989, a shocking incident occurred in Thane. The SS had unexpectedly lost the Thane mayoral election due to cross-voting by some of its own corporators. This was an unprecedented event in the annals of the thoroughly regimented organisation. An incensed Thackeray warned of dire consequences awaiting the betrayers. Within days of this warning, Shridhar Khopkar, one of the suspected corporators, was murdered in cold blood by SS hoodlums.

Within just two months of this incident, at the Palampur meeting of its national executive in June 1989, the BJP took the decision of forging an alliance with the SS for the ensuing elections. This was done with the blessings of L.K. Advani and under the insistence of Pramod Mahajan, Gopinath Munde and a large majority of the BJP state unit. The same Palampur meeting of the BJP also decided to come out in open support of the VHP's Ramjanmabhoomi agitation. This was the beginning of the SS-BJP alliance based on Hindutva, which has lasted upto this day.

The Casteist Card

While playing the communal card in such a cynical manner, the SS simultaneously began to open its casteist card. We have already seen in an earlier section the violent attacks of the SS on the Dalit Panthers in 1974. From the mid-eighties, the SS began to incite a series of assaults and atrocities on Dalits, particularly in the rural areas of Marathwada and Vidarbha regions but extending to other regions as well. The SS opposed encroachments by Dalits on fallow lands, going to the extent of destroying their crops and attacking their hutments. A few Dalits were even killed in these attacks, the most harrowing example being the murder of Ambadas Savane. Needless to say, most of the Dalits so attacked were agricultural labourers or marginal peasants.

When the Mandal Commission controversy erupted, Thackeray publicly declared his total and uncompromising opposition to all caste-based

reservations, not only for the OBCs but also for the SCs and STs. All the above stands of the SS were sweet music to the ears of the semi-feudal upper-caste sections in the countryside. They threw in their lot with the SS and became its stormtroopers in the campaign of atrocities on Dalits.

The casteist aspect of the SS came to prominent public attention in 1987. With the death centenary of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and the birth centenary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar due in 1990-91, the state government had begun the project of publishing the complete works of both. As part of this project, it brought out a volume that contained Ambedkar's hitherto unpublished work, "Riddles in Hinduism". In this, he made a rational and dispassionate analysis, from the standpoint of social justice, of the life stories of Hindu deities. The work also had a section which was called "the Riddle of Ram and Krishna".

The SS pounced on "Riddles", branded it as an intolerable insult to Hindu religion and Hindu deities and demanded a ban on its publication. It held a huge demonstration in Mumbai on January 15, 1988 and began disturbances all over the state, abusing Dr. Ambedkar and widening caste-communal divisions. It was only after an even larger counter-demonstration by all Dalit groups on February 5, 1988, that the publication could proceed.

At around the same time, another furore was raised when "Sobat", a Marathi journal with RSS leanings, launched a vicious attack on Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, another great champion of radical social justice, whom Dr. Ambedkar himself often referred to as his guru. The upper-caste prejudice of the saffron brigade became even more crystal clear.

One issue that kept simmering in Maharashtra for 16 years from 1978 to 1994 was that of the renaming of the Marathwada University at Aurangabad after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. On July 27, 1978, the state assembly adopted a unanimous resolution to rename the university. But even before the ink had dried on that resolution, large-scale caste riots and heinous atrocities on Dalits were unleashed throughout the Marathwada region, forcing a suspension of its implementation. This turmoil was instigated mainly by feudal landed interests in the Congress, and they were ably assisted by upper-caste zealots of the Jan Sangh, which was then part of the Janata Party. The SS publicly opposed the renaming move and it was the only political party to do so consistently for the next 16 years. But in 1978, it was confined to Mumbai and Thane and so could not play any mischief in Marathwada at the time.

Through the 1980s, there were several mass protests by Dalit and Left organisations in favour of the renaming, but successive Congress regimes refused to budge, fearing another conflagration.

On November 25, 1993, Gautam Waghmare, a Dalit Panther youth from Nanded, committed self-immolation to press the issue of renaming. His martyrdom electrified the state and massive united demonstrations of Dalit and Left organisations took place in every district. The SS tried to hold back the tide with a Marathwada Bandh opposing the renaming, but this time it

evoked little response. The state government finally implemented the renaming resolution on January 14, 1994 amidst massive security measures. However, it also carved out a separate university at Nanded that covered some Marathwada districts. The SS denounced the renaming decision with a violent statewide bandh call, but this time it failed in inciting riots.

All the above instances are a clear pointer to the reactionary and casteist character of the SS which, however, did pay it electoral dividends for a time. We shall analyse the caste strategy of the SS, as revealed from the above events, in a later section.

Emergence of a Reactionary Alternative

The SS-BJP alliance forged in 1989 fought its first Lok Sabha polls the same year and it won 14 of the 48 seats in Maharashtra. The basic agreement between the two that was reached then, and which has been followed since despite several stresses and strains, was that the BJP would contest more seats for Parliament, while the SS would contest more seats for the assembly. Thus, the SS fought only 6 seats, of which it won 4. The BJP contested 33 seats, of which it won 10. This lopsided proportion of seats contested subsequently changed radically in favour of the SS; in the latest 1999 parliamentary elections, the SS contested 22 seats, while the BJP contested 26.

In the 1989 Lok Sabha polls, the Congress managed to win 28 seats, and the NF-LF was pushed to third place with 6 seats. The significant feature was that the SS-BJP, with 14 seats, had won nearly 28 per cent of the total votes. Boosted by these results, the SS-BJP made a determined bid to wrest control of the state assembly in the elections of 1990. The BJP had already made a breakthrough at the national level by winning 88 seats in Parliament in the 1989 polls. With this success, a section of the ruling classes shifted their allegiance to the SS-BJP in Maharashtra. This was reflected in the tremendous resources that came in the hands of the communal combine during the campaign for the 1990 assembly polls.

The SS-BJP alliance won 94 of the 288 seats in the assembly elections, again garnering nearly 27 per cent of the vote. Of these 94 seats, the SS won 52 and the BJP got 42, establishing the former as the senior partner in the alliance. The Congress, then led by Sharad Pawar as the chief minister, just managed to scrape through with 141 seats, which was 4 short of a majority. This was made up with the support of Congress rebels and independents. The third front won only 37 seats. The results of both these elections conclusively pointed to the emergence of a right reactionary alternative in the politics of Maharashtra.

Both rounds of the Lok Sabha elections of 1991 in Maharashtra were held in the wake of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Consequently, the Congress won 38 seats, a straight gain of 10 seats over 1989. The SS-BJP tally fell from 14 to 9 (SS – 4, BJP – 5), but its voting percentage declined only marginally.

Glorification of Nathuram Godse and Adolf Hitler

This came in the Lok Sabha elections of May 1991. In three successive election rallies in Aurangabad, Pune and Kolhapur, Thackeray raised a nationwide storm of protest by his shockingly outrageous glorification of Nathuram Godse, the communally-surcharged assassin of Mahatma Gandhi! The PTI, in a despatch from Pune on May 17, 1991, which was carried in all the national dailies, quoted Thackeray as saying in the election rally, "We are proud of Nathuram, he saved the country from a second partition. Nathuram was not a hired assassin. He was genuinely infuriated by Mahatma Gandhi's betrayal of the nation. Gandhi had said that he would lay down his life before allowing the division of the country. But ultimately he did nothing to stop the partition". These odious remarks of Thackeray were also published in the SS daily "Saamnaa" itself.

In similar fashion, Thackeray often glorified Adolf Hitler in his speeches and writings, again following in the footsteps of RSS chief Golwalkar. It was at Thackeray's hands that a laudatory biography of Hitler written by a saffronite Bal Samant was published. In the speech made at the function, Thackeray not only praised Hitler to the skies as a great nationalist, but he also bought over 200 copies of the book and distributed them free to all his important SS lieutenants!

Attacks on the Press and the Judiciary

With this fascistic ideology, attacks on the press, the judiciary, and on culture and literature were a regular feature of SS activities since its inception. The battles conducted with the pen in earlier years were later supplemented by battles conducted with sticks and stones. The most notorious early instance was the running battle of words that went on for years together in the sixties between the "Marmik" run by Bal Thackeray and the "Maratha" run by P.K. Atre. Atre was an extremely versatile man of letters and also a great orator; he was one of the leading figures of the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement; and he was generally of a democratic and secular bent of mind. Thackeray took this battle of words to such lower depths that he began to routinely refer to Atre in "Marmik" as "that pig from Worli", this referring to the fact that the office of the popular Marathi daily "Maratha" was situated at Worli. Later, in the 1967 elections, SS hoodlums savagely attacked Atre's public meeting at Thane, and Atre himself escaped by the skin of his teeth.

Amongst scores of such incidents, we shall limit ourselves to just three major instances of press-bashing conducted by SS hordes in the early nineties. In October 1991, SS goons attacked the office of the Marathi evening paper in Mumbai called "Mahanagar", which had run a strong editorial condemning the SS for having dug up the cricket pitch at the Wankhede Stadium to prevent the holding of the India-Pakistan match. A journalists' demonstration held to protest this attack was stoned and three journalists, two of them women, were physically assaulted. One of them, Manimala of the 'Navbharat Times' was attacked with a crowbar, which fractured her skull! At around the same time,

another woman journalist who criticised the SS in a television programme had to face a campaign of character assassination in the Hindi evening paper of the SS "Dopahar Ka Saamna", which then went on to run a filthy editorial that compared women journalists to prostitutes!

In August 1993, SS hoodlums physically attacked the editor of "Mahanagar" Nikhil Wagle while he was addressing a seminar. All these successive incidents led to a wave of protests which culminated in a large mass dharna right outside the SS Bhavan in Mumbai. This protest was personally led by national-level editors like Nikhil Chakravarty, N. Ram, Prabhash Joshi, many other eminent secular intellectuals and by leaders of the Left and democratic parties in the state.

But within six months of this, in February 1994, SS stormtroopers made another dastardly assault on a dozen journalists at Aurangabad under the very nose of Thackeray, who had himself instigated this attack. Those who accompanied Thackeray included Manohar Joshi and other SS bigwigs. Three of the scribes, of whom two belonged to the minority community, were grievously injured in this assault. Still later, the Aurangabad office of the largest-selling Marathi daily in the state, "Lokmat", was vandalised by SS hoodlums. So far as the verbal attacks on several editors and journalists in the columns of "Saamna" and "Marmik" and the abysmal level of these attacks, the less said the better.

Similarly, whenever the judiciary handed down judgements against the SS, Thackeray assailed it openly through his statements and editorials. For instance, when the High Court ruled to unseat some SS-BJP MLAs, Thackeray made a speech in Mumbai to inaugurate the SS-BJP Lok Sabha election campaign of 1991. In this speech, as reported by "The Independent", a daily that was then run by the Times of India group, Thackeray "launched a vitriolic attack on the judiciary, terming it 'corrupt' and 'partial'. He minced no words while criticising the 'temples of justice' ". A report of the same meeting in the "Times of India" dated April 20 can only be construed as dark threats issued by Thackeray to the judiciary. It read, "clarifying that he was not speaking against all judges, he said a judge who had ruled against the SS had lost one eye permanently while his other eye, too, was about to go out of order. In the case of another judge, the chair on which he was sitting and delivering the judgement broke down. These were mere omens".

SS attacks on cultural artistes and literary figures reached a crescendo after it came to power. We shall deal with them later.

Unprecedented Revolt in Communal Monolith

During the winter session of the state assembly at Nagpur in December 1991, the monolithic SS was rocked by the unprecedented revolt of Chhagan Bhujbal alongwith 17 other MLAs from rural Maharashtra, all of whom promptly joined the Congress. This number constituted one-third of the 52 SS MLAs and thus they escaped the provisions of the anti-defection act, with some valuable help

from the assembly speaker! Chhagan Bhujbal was considered No. 3 in the SS hierarchy, after Bal Thackeray and Manohar Joshi. He hailed from the large Mali community amongst the OBCs and was primarily responsible for the spadework that enabled the SS to spread in rural Maharashtra in the latter half of the eighties. His revolt, therefore, naturally constituted a major setback for future SS prospects.

Bhujbal quit the SS for two main reasons. One reason was his personal rivalry with Manohar Joshi, whom Thackeray had anointed as the leader of the opposition after the assembly elections of 1990. The second reason was Thackeray's outright opposition to the Mandal Commission and to OBC reservations, a stand that had rankled Bhujbal and many others in the SS, which had a large OBC following. Bhujbal was immediately made Revenue Minister in the Congress regime, which gave him protection against SS hordes.

Stung by Bhujbal's stab in the back and suspicious of other as leaders as well, Thackeray now began to induct his family within the SS structure. The year 1992 thus saw the emergence of Thackeray's son Uddhav and nephew Raj as the new "youth leaders" of the SS. Sections of the press naturally began to attack the "dynastic ambitions" of the Thackeray clan and many senior SS leaders also shared these apprehensions. It was at this point, in July 1992, that Thackeray made a melodramatic move. He wrote a signed piece in "Saamna" announcing that he was resigning from the SS once and for all! All hell broke loose within SS ranks, thousands of Shiv Sainiks pleaded with him to reconsider his decision and in a massive rally outside the SS Bhavan, he "magnanimously" acceded to their requests! With this drama, Thackeray emerged stronger than ever, he cut the other SS leaders down to size and the "dynastic" issue was buried for ever!

The Road to Power: The Ghastly Bombay Riots

There were two main factors that were responsible for the dramatic rise in SS-BJP fortunes after 1992. The first was, of course, the ghastly communal riots in Bombay, and also in other parts of Maharashtra, in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, and the subsequent serial bomb blasts in Bombay in March 1993. And the second was the utter bankruptcy in all spheres that was exhibited by the Sharad Pawar-led Congress state government during the years 1993-95.

The Bombay riots of December 1992 and January 1993 must surely be ranked as by far the worst case of communal violence in the country since partition. They were characterised by an extremely venomous communal hate campaign led by the SS and the Sangh Parivar, a thoroughly systematic targeting of the minorities akin to the Nazi pogroms against the Jews, and an unprecedented degree of brutality and dehumanisation displayed by the frenzied SS hordes which, for the first time, also included women in large numbers. The unforgivable apathy of the Congress(I)-led state and Central governments, the involvement of criminal and mafia elements connected to the big builders and

other dubious lobbies and the massive communalisation of the police force completed the picture.

Both these catastrophes led to unprecedented communal polarisation throughout the state of Maharashtra. It was the single most important reason for the revival of SS-BJP fortunes and for their eventual victory in the assembly elections of 1995. The other two main reasons were the failure on all fronts of the Congress state government and tremendous factionalism, which was remarkable even by Congress standards. In these elections, the SS-BJP garnered nearly 30 per cent of the votes and won 138 seats, which was still 7 short of a majority. This was made up with the opportunistic support given by 40-odd Congress rebel MLAs of all factions. The SS won 73 of the 171 seats that it contested, while the BJP won 65 of the 117 that was its share. The decimated Congress won just 80 seats, and the divided third front was reduced to 23.

On March 14, 1995, the new SS-BJP state government with Manohar Joshi of the SS as chief minister and Gopinath Munde of the BJP as deputy chief minister took office. After a 30-year tortuous journey, this semi-fascist party had at last succeeded in reaching the pinnacle of state power in Maharashtra, in alliance with a partner that was to reach the pinnacle of state power in India just three years later.

4. The Fourth Phase, 1995-1999: The Years of Power

True to its class character, the very first announcement made on behalf of the new government by its chief minister Manohar Joshi was that the SS-BJP regime fully supported the new economic policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG) that had been initiated by the Congress Central government of Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh. As against the 500-odd false assurances that the SS-BJP regime was to dangle before the people of Maharashtra during its four and a half years in office, it was only this one assurance to the ruling classes that would be implemented to the hilt.

Plethora of False Assurances

In the first year of its reign itself, the SS-BJP regime gave as many as 252 different assurances to the people. Commenting on this, a sarcastic editorial in a leading Marathi daily wrote that, if nothing else, the number of promises given would at least ensure the SS-BJP regime a place in the Guinness Book of World records! We shall consider here the fate of only five such promises that were made in the SS-BJP election manifesto itself, which they had grandly advertised as their "Vachannama".

One major promise was that of providing 27 lakh jobs to unemployed youth, a figure that was later revised upwards to 32 lakhs! How this assurance was fulfilled can be gauged from the fact that in March 1995, when this regime took office, there were 34.64 lakh unemployed youth on the live register of employment exchanges; in October 1999, when it quit office, this figure had

soared to 42.27 lakhs! To make a show of trying to implement this promise, Raj Thackeray floated an organisation called the Shiv Udyog Sena which organised huge concerts featuring Michael Jackson and others, (what happened now to the beloved 'Indian culture' of the SS?) but then he made the incredible claim that these events had run into a massive loss! The implications of large-scale corruption under the cover of helping poor unemployed youth became obvious.

Another assurance was that of providing 40 lakh slum-dwellers in Mumbai with free permanent houses. This scheme was actually formulated to ensure a bonanza to the big builder lobby, which was to build a certain proportion of houses for slum-dwellers and well the remaining in the open market at astronomical rates. But then the real estate prices in Mumbai and its environs fell sharply and the entire scheme went haywire. The builder lobby immediately backed out. Barely 2000 houses were built in four years to accommodate hardly 10 thousand instead of 40 lakhs, and even these houses were a result of schemes of the previous Congress regime!

Yet another promise in the manifesto was that of providing Zunka Bhakar, a staple food to the people all over the state at one rupee per plate. Prime pieces of land were given, mainly to SS-BJP activists, to set up Zunka Bhakar stalls. In addition, the government gave them a fixed subsidy per month for the scheme. But most of the stalls hardly functioned for more than an hour per day, and the rest of the time they were turned into profitable eateries and even liquor bars! The whole scheme turned into a ridiculous fiasco and four years later, the new SS chief minister Narayan Rane himself was forced to announce its closure. But the land was usurped by SS-BJP men, for whom the scheme was perhaps really intended!

One more assurance was that the prices of five essential commodities in ration shops would be frozen for five years. Large boards were put up outside all government offices announcing these "frozen" prices. But alongwith this, the rice, wheat, dal, sugar and kerosene quotas to the ration shops were also "frozen" and these items simply disappeared from the PDS! This forced the people to buy at much higher prices on the open market. A similar fiasco occurred as regards the targetted PDS, with ridiculous conditions being imposed and false surveys being conducted to identify (read disqualify) the families living below the poverty line.

Abject Surrender to Enron

The breaking of the above four promises, serious though it was, nevertheless paled into insignificance when compared to the breaking of the fifty promise, which was to have the most disastrous long-term effects. It was also to provide the most glaring instance of the pro-imperialist, anti-people and corrupt LPG policies pursued by the SS-BJP regime.

This fifth promise was drowning of the Enron Power Project at Dabhol into the Arabian Sea! After initially declaring the "drowning" as a bargaining ploy, the

SS-BJP regime, no doubt influenced by the ample "educational expenses" made by Enron, promptly renegotiated the project! Phase I of the Enron's Dabhol Power Company (DPC) project was originally approved by the Congress regime of Sharad Pawar, which was also said to have availed of the same "educational expenses". After renegotiation by the SS-BJP regime, Phase I was completed and went onstream in May 1999. Phase II of the DPC, which was twice as large, was solely the baby of the SS-BJP regime and of Bal Thackeray (as he has himself bragged to the press) and it is now under construction. It must also be underlined that the decision to give the Central government's counter-guarantee to Enron was hastily taken by the short-lived BJP government led by Vajpayee in May 1996. In fact, this was the only major decision taken by that regime and it sent out the desired signals to imperialism and the MNCs lobby.

Without going into any other details of the Enron Project, it will suffice to highlight only one aspect. According to the earlier Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) signed by the Congress government, the cost of DPC power was to have been Rs. 2.40 per unit. After the renegotiation by the SS-BJP regime, it was announced amidst great fanfare that this cost had been brought down to Rs. 1.86 per unit. What was the truth?

The shocking truth can be gleaned from the revised proposal for power tariff revision submitted by the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) in March 2000. From the figures provided by the MSEB, the cost of DPC power at generation is an astounding Rs. 4.76 per unit, and after considering transmission and distribution losses, the cost of supply will be Rs. 6.53 per unit! The MSEB has said that in the current financial year, it will purchase 16.435 billion units of power at a total cost of Rs. 3798 crores. Of this, 12.235 billion units from all other sources except DPC will cost Rs. 1800 crores. The remaining 4.2 billion units purchased from Enron's DPC will cost Rs. 1998 crores! And once Phase II of DPC is completed, the payment burden will escalate to Rs. 7000 crores a year! Besides, since the PPA stipulates that it is incumbent on the MSEB to purchase the power generated by Enron, and that Enron must be paid first, a massive payments crisis stares Maharashtra in the face. As a result, the MSEB will have to close down many of its own power generation units which are much cheaper (a process that has already begun) and it will have to hike the power tariff much higher. All this has already begun to play havoc with both the industrial and agricultural sectors of Maharashtra.

Privatisation Drive, Attacks on the Working Class

In addition to the power tariff hikes, the SS-BJP regime during its tenure relentlessly attacked the people by hiking almost everything else in sight. It raised taxes on petrol and diesel, with the inevitable cascading effect on statewide bus fares, autorickshaw fares and also on general price levels. It steeply hiked house rents and water charges for both drinking and irrigation. Collection of toll tax on highways and bridges became a regular feature. Some of these hikes were directly related to its privatisation drive. Even

school note-books were not spared from the tax net. But on the other hand, the state government agreed to forego crores of rupees by reducing the premium on five-star luxury hotels, one of which was owned by the chief minister himself!

A major thrust of the SS-BJP regime's economic policies was its shrill advocacy of privatisation. Here, too, it proved a worthy successor to the Sharad Pawar-led Congress regime. One of the operative parts of a special White paper that it brought out on the water problem was the privatisation of irrigation projects. Another major area selected for privatisation was highways, bridges and fly-overs. Several contracts for the same were signed, with mind-boggling levels of corruption. The most significant of these projects was the construction of the Mumbai-Pune expressway involving an investment of Rs. 1500 crores. In its last year in power, it concluded contracts with private firms for the construction of as many as 55 fly-overs in Mumbai alone! Yet, other areas marked out for privatisation were transport, health and education.

Privatisation and commercialisation of education, which first began in a big way under previous Congress regimes with the opening of thousands of "Non-Grant" educational institutions from KG to PG with stiff donations and capitation fees, gathered further momentum under this regime. Many of the SS-BJP bigwigs began vying with Congress bosses in the race to become "education barons". This led to a precipitate fall in standards and also to huge corruption scandals. In one such scandal that was uncovered in Nagpur University, replete with bogus mark-sheets and bogus degree certificates, top local education barons of all bourgeois parties like the BJP, SS, NCP and INC were involved right upto their necks. The private coaching classes racket became a thriving business. RSS-controlled bodies made further inroads in the educational sphere.

During the SS-BJP regime, the working class of Maharashtra faced the brunt of attacks on its jobs and livelihood. The twin assault of recession and privatisation led to ever-growing numbers of sick or closed mills and factories, retrenchments, lay-offs and "voluntary" retirement schemes – in short, massive unemployment. In another reversal of its election pledge, the government gave the green signal to the sale of textile mill lands in Mumbai, which was a direct assault on the already decimated textile workers. The unorganised working class in the new industrial centres was singled out for savage attacks like the flouting of minimum wage, denial of the right to form unions, violation of labour laws and direct repression on their struggles, as happened in the case of CITU unions in Nasik, Nagpur and elsewhere.

Peasant Suicides, Agrarian Crisis

The agrarian scene in Maharashtra during the SS-BJP regime saw the unprecedented phenomenon of distress suicides of over 100 peasants and agricultural workers, mainly in the Vidarbha and Marathwada regions. These suicides in 1998 were a result of indebtedness and crop failure. Never before

had such a phenomenon occurred in the state since independence. Thousands of other peasants had to sell off their lands to clear their debts. But the response of the SS-BJP regime to this devastating rural tragedy was callous in the extreme.

The failure to ensure remunerative prices and payments in time to major cash crops like cotton and sugarcane; the massive price hikes in, and black-marketeering of, agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilisers and pesticides; the disastrous effects of the privatisation of irrigation as well as power; the denial of a fair living wage and basic amenities to agricultural workers – these were some of the factors triggered by SS-BJP policies that led to a deep agrarian crisis in Maharashtra.

On top of this, the government launched new high-flown schemes like "Agro Advantage" to attract foreign and indigenous monopoly capitalist investment to the countryside. For this, land ceiling laws were amended, as part of a process begun by the Sharad Pawar-led regime. As a result, the twin process of acquisition of large tracts of agricultural land by multinationals, big business and landlords on the one hand, and the uprooting and pauperisation of the poor and middle peasantry on the other, gathered momentum. Funds from the Employment Guarantee Scheme were diverted to sectors like horticulture to enable the rural rich to make profits from exports. The American multinational seed company Monsanto struck a collaboration deal with one of the largest seed companies in Maharashtra called Mahyco, and the state government gave Monsanto permission to carry out its dangerous field trials.

Maharashtra on the Brink of Bankruptcy

One of the most serious aspects of this regime was that it brought the state of Maharashtra to the brink of bankruptcy. This led to massive debts and overdrafts, delays in payment of salaries, increased drive towards privatisation and the stoppage of work on several major developmental projects, including irrigation schemes. For instance, hundreds of contractors in the Krishna Valley Development Project stopped work and led demonstrations against the government since they had not been paid for months together. And yet, the SS-BJP regime set up many more such Irrigation Development Corporations for Vidarbha, Marathwada, Konkan and Khandesh regions. Public bonds were issued for these, leading to further rise in debt liabilities. All these projects are now languishing for lack of funds and no one can predict when, if ever, they will be completed.

The INC-NCP-led Democratic Front state government, after three months of coming to power, released a White Paper in December 1999 on the current financial situation of Maharashtra. This document blasted the financial fiasco of the previous SS-BJP regime, giving several shocking facts and figures, of which we shall cite only three sets. The total debt of the state, which was Rs. 16,020 crores at the end of 1994-95, when the SS-BJP regime came to power, reached Rs. 37,226 crores at the end of 1998-99, six months before it was

thrown out of office. The aggregate revenue deficit for the five years from 1990-91 to 1994-95 was Rs. 1789 crores, whereas for the next five years from 1995-96 to 1999-2000 (budget estimates) the aggregate revenue deficit reached Rs. 15,494 crores. Similarly, the total fiscal deficit for the same first five years was Rs. 12,271 crores; for the next five years it reached Rs. 33,188 crores!

Record-breaking Corruption

Although several previous Congress regimes were notorious for their venality, no government in Maharashtra so far has ever surpassed the incredible levels of corruption and criminalisation that were attained by the SS-BJP regime. This is the general consensus of all discerning political analysts, responsible journalists and knowledgeable sections in the bureaucracy itself. Eminent people of stature, who had no political axe to grind, like the Gandhian social activist Anna Hazare, versatile literary figure P.L. Deshpande, historian Y.D. Phadke, poets Narayan Surve and Vasant Bapat, retired High Court judges Hosbet Suresh and S.M. Daud, retired police chief Julio Ribeiro, victimised deputy municipal commissioner of Mumbai G.R. Khairnar and several other luminaries publicly castigated the corruption and criminalisation of the SS-BJP regime. Anna Hazare even led a running battle against it which proved highly effective and, in the end, successful.

Corruption charges were openly and repeatedly made against many of the leading lights of the SS-BJP regime. The list was headed by Bal Thackeray, Pramod Mahajan, Manohar Joshi, Narayan Rane and Gopinath Munde and it included Shashikant Sutar, Babanrao Gholap, Mahadev Shivankar, Nitin Gadkari, Shobha Phadnavis (all SS-BJP ministers), Kirit Somaiya, Raj Thackeray and many others. In some cases, the High Courts and Inquiry Commissions passed strong indictments, due to which SS ministers Sutar and Gholap were forced to resign from the Cabinet.

Some of the major scams of this period, in which these leading lights were allegedly involved, were the Nippon Denro Ispat Coal Mine scam, the Sahara India Amby Valley Resort scam, the CRB capital markets scam, the shoe companies scam, the co-operative banks scam, the pulses purchase scam, the innumerable scams connected to the privatisation drive and, of course, the Enron scam, which was probably the mother of all scams of this time. All these scams involved mind-boggling sums of money.

The "Maharashtra Times" of January 13, 1994 published a shocking report, which was never denied by SS sources, that a fund of five crore rupees was being collected by the SS through large-scale extortions and other means, and that this fund would be presented to Bal Thackeray on his 67th birthday, the following week. Compulsion was made that every SS MLA in Maharashtra must give Rs. one lakh, every corporator Rs. 50,000 and every shakha pramukh Rs. 25,000 to this fund. The report said that even the previous year, a similar fund was collected. All this, it must be remembered, was before the SS came to power. After coming to power, all these "haftas" were hiked much

further, and all SS ministers were also included, with much higher "haftas" which were fixed taking into account which ministry they headed!

Unprecedented Criminalisation

Even before the SS-BJP had come to power, some of their MLAs and corporators had been killed as a result of their involvement with mafia gangs and shady rackets concerning land, property or extortion. These included SS MLAs Vithal Chavan and Ramesh More, SS corporators Vinayak Wable and Khimbahadur Thapa, BJP MLA Prem Kumar Sharma and BJP corporator, Ex-MLA and its city president Ramdas Nayak. After the murder of Nayak, who was the most prominent of all the above, the "Maharashtra Times" published a shocking report on September 3, 1994. While exposing the shady deals of Nayak, it stated that in the last one and a half years alone, Nayak had collected over two and a half crore rupees for the BJP, of which one and a half crores were given as a purse to L.K. Advani and seventy lakhs were spent for purchasing a new office for the BJP at Dadar! Note that this was at a time when the BJP was nowhere near power!

The SS connection with mafia gangs was not new. Years before, Thackeray had himself publicly declared that "If they have their Dawood Ibrahim, then we have our Arun Gavli!" Gavli later fell out with the SS, especially after the revolt of Chhagan Bhujbal. The SS then patronised Gavli's rival gang that was led by the two brothers Amar Naik and Ashwin Naik. It went to the extent of nominating the wives of both these gangsters for the BMC elections. One of them won, the other lost. Later, the SS also put up one of them as a candidate for the assembly elections. During the SS-BJP reign itself, Amar Naik was mysteriously killed by the police in an encounter. A "Saamnaa" editorial condemned this killing, and accused the police of getting rid of only Hindu and Marathi mafia dons, while Muslim and non-Marathi dons like Dawood Ibrahim went scotfree!

The case that really rocked the SS-BJP regime to its roots was that of the murder of Ramesh Kini in July 1996. Kini was an ordinary middle-class resident of Mumbai (he was both Marathi and Hindu!) and he was being pressurised to vacate his flat by his landlords who were close to the Thackeray family. To increase the pressure on him, he used to be called to the "Saamnaa" office and intimidated. Based on what Kini had told her and the note that he had left before he was suddenly found dead in a cinema theatre in Pune, his wife Sheela Kini directly charged that Raj Thackeray had a hand in her husband's death. This created a furore all over the state, the SS-BJP regime tried to suppress the police investigation as part of a cover-up, the High Court then ruled to hand over the case to the CBI for a probe, but by then the police had already destroyed or obfuscated most of the evidence. Although Raj Thackeray went scotfree, it was this one case that really destroyed the image of the SS-BJP regime and of the Thackeray clan itself.

Communalism with a Vengeance

The most glaring instance of the communal stance of the SS-BJP regime was its summary rejection of the devastating Report of the Srikrishna Commission in August 1998. Thackeray, who headed the list of those who were severely indicted in the Report, began a virulent campaign through editorials in "Saamnaa" to discredit its findings. The editorial on August 8, for instance, had this headline, "The Crime of Vande Mataram! Srikrishna, Whose Motherland Is It?" Another Marathi daily "Navakal", which alongwith "Saamnaa" had also been indicted for inflammatory writing began to flay Justice Srikrishna personally. The headline of its editorial on August 8 was "A Judge Turned Mad; Report Is A Bottle Of Poison". The editorial on August 10 was even more provocative and was titled, "Arrest Justice Srikrishna Immediately! Srikrishna Is A Criminal Inciting Communal Riots!" It was crystal clear that such shameless and brazen arrogance could only stem from the protection of the SS-BJP regime.

Chief minister Manohar Joshi, while rejecting the Report, launched a rabidly communal harangue on two consecutive days in the state assembly. His speech dripped with venom and contempt for Justice Srikrishna and the Commission Report, which he termed as being "biased, anti-Hindu and pro-Muslim". He further declared that rather than arrest Bal Thackeray, he would resign as chief minister and battle on the streets alongwith his mentor! In all this, the regime had the full backing of the BJP-led government at the Centre, as was amply proved by the deafening silence of prime minister Vajpayee and the supportive statements of home minister Advani. But the entire opposition in Maharashtra, both inside and outside the assembly, hit back and threw the SS-BJP regime on the defensive.

Earlier, in January 1996, this regime had in fact scrapped the Srikrishna Commission which had almost completed its inquiry. Within a week of this outrageous decision, the state government had the temerity to withdraw all 24 cases against Thackeray and "Saamnaa" for incendiary communal writing during the Bombay riots. These cases had been filed by the previous Congress state government which was itself none too enthusiastic about pursuing them to their logical conclusion.

Many other communal decisions were taken by the SS-BJP regime. These were the abolition of the State Minorities Commission, the Urdu Academy and the Haj Committee; the bringing of a bill banning all forms of cow slaughter, including buffaloes, but which was defeated in the Council; a shrill campaign for the imposition of a uniform civil code; an attempt to drive out so-called Bangladeshi infiltrators, most of whom were bonafide citizens of India hailing from West Bengal but who happened to be Muslim; and so on. The claim that was made by the regime that there were no communal riots under its tenure was also false. Communal riots did take place at Pen in Raigad district, Junnar in Pune district, Khirwad in Jalgaon district, in Aurangabad city and other places. The decrease in intensity was simply because the rioters were themselves in state power!

Attacks on Dalits, Adivasis and Women

The vicious attitude of the SS-BJP regime towards the Dalits was thoroughly exposed in the massacre at the Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar in Mumbai. On July 11, 1997, the police and SRP unleashed a macabre dance of death. Firing without warning and shooting to kill at point-blank range, they mercilessly gunned down ten innocent Dalits and wounded over thirty others. Their only "crime" was that they were protesting against the desecration of a statue of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. The government and its police then began a campaign of shameless Goebbelsian lies to justify the brutal act. This massacre raised a furore all over the state and massive protest rallies were held that culminated in a total Maharashtra Bandh called by the opposition. Earlier, this regime had summarily withdrawn over 1100 cases of atrocities on Dalits in Marathwada, exposing its upper caste bias.

The attitude of the SS-BJP regime towards Adivasis, and also towards Communists, was revealed by another bloody attack that took place on Republic Day, January 26, 1997. Two young Adivasi activists of the CPI(M) were shot dead in cold blood near Talasari in Thane district by the police. Scores of CPI(M) leaders and activists, most of them also Adivasis, were immediately thrown behind bars for over a month on trumped up charges. Adivasi women in the area were molested by the police and SRP. All this was a diabolical conspiracy of the BJP to create terror through repression, undermine the traditional CPI(M) base and then capture the zilla parishad and panchayat samiti seats in the ensuing elections. But this conspiracy was blown to smithereens by the valiant struggle of thousands of Adivasi activists of the CPI(M), which won a magnificent victory in the elections.

Women were one of the worst sufferers under SS-BJP rule. During its tenure, atrocities against women registered an alarming increase all over the state. The SS-BJP regime earned the shameful distinction that under its stewardship, Maharashtra topped the country in atrocities on women. Besides, its bankruptcy in matters like the public distribution system, drinking water, health, education, employment, industry and agriculture directly affected women in the most adverse fashion.

Assaults on Culture, Art, Literature and Sports

The Nazi boss and Gestapo founder Hermann Goering used to say that whenever he heard the word "culture", his hand immediately went to his pistol! Thackeray and his SS hordes faithfully followed Goering's example.

Very early in its career, the SS had attacked two radical plays by Vijay Tendulkar, called "Sakharam Binder" and "Ghashiram Kotwal". The latter had exposed the degenerate ways of the Peshwas, the Brahmin rulers of Maharashtra who had succeeded the Maratha reign. This exposure was resented by the Brahminical SS. In the eighties, it was the turn of the film "Tamas", which was made by Govind Nihalani on the basis of the novel by Bhisham Sahni. The theme was the catastrophic communal inferno at the time of partition, and the film began with the apt sentence, "Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it." The SS, BJP, RSS and VHP began a

violent campaign demanding a ban on the film, but they did not succeed.

A decade later, a saffron playwright wrote a play called "Mee Nathuram Boltoy" (I am Nathuram Speaking) whose shows created a furore. But it was these same organisations that defended it to the hilt in the name of "freedom of expression"! The play had to be eventually withdrawn. But in the very first year of the SS-BJP regime, a public function was held in Pune to felicitate Nathuram's brother Gopal Godse, who was himself one of the accused in Mahatma Gandhi's assassination! He had spent many years in jail and unrepentant Hindu fanatic that he was, he had even written a book justifying the assassination. Although no major SS-BJP leader dared to attend this function, it was clearly an SS and RSS show. The same rabid communal angle was exhibited by the SS later in the disruption of Ghulam Ali's concerts and the destruction of M.F. Hussain's paintings.

Then came the hooliganism of the SS against Deepa Mehta's film "fire", under the plea that the depiction of a lesbian relationship went against Indian culture. On the heels of the opposition to "fire" came the vulgar demonstration outside Dilip Kumar's house – because Dilip Kumar had defended "Fire", because he was a Muslim and also because he was a secularist. On top of this, SS MP Sanjay Nirupam went to the extent of calling Dilip Kumar a "Pakistani" in Parliament! Another renowned thespian Sunil Dutt, who trounced SS leader Madhukar Sarpotdar (of the Bombay riots fame) in the Lok Sabha polls in Mumbai, has also been a special target of SS ire.

P.L. Deshpande, who was one of the most popular writers in the state, was selected for the "Maharashtra Bhushan" award by the SS-BJP regime. In his acceptance speech, he criticised the lawless and violent ways of the SS. Thackeray promptly insulted him by asking why he had accepted the award in the first place! When eminent historian and current president of the Marathi Sahitya Sammelan Y.D. Phadke wrote an article in a local daily criticising the SS leadership in the Ramesh Kini murder case, "Saamnaa" responded by declaring that if anyone were to beat up Phadke with shoes, he would be performing a sacred task! When post Vasant Bapat in his presidential address at the Marathi Sahitya Sammelan last year chided the intolerant ways of the SS, Thackeray poured contempt on him, branded all writers as "buffaloes for sale" and demanded that the state government withdraw its subsidy of Rs.25 lakhs given to the Sammelan!

A decade ago, in its bid to stop India-Pakistan cricket matches, the SS had dug up the pitch of the Wankhede stadium in Mumbai. In 1999, as part of a renewed campaign for the same cause, hundreds of SS hoodlums attacked the Cricket Control Board office in the state capital, and they destroyed and ransacked the invaluable international cups and trophies that had been won by the Indian cricket team! Most of the above mentioned acts of goondaism occurred when the SS-BJP regime was itself in power, but, as expected, nothing whatsoever was done to nail the culprits. Alongwith all other factors, these fascistic actions, too, were to lead the SS-BJP regime to its political doom.

The Fall of the SS-BJP Regime

The SS-BJP regime met its Waterloo in the assembly elections of 1999. But before that, two general elections to Parliament took place in 1996 and 1998. In 1996, the people were still in the mood to give the new regime a chance and the SS-BJP won a record 33 of the 48 seats (SS-15, BJP – 18). But even more significant was the fact that their total vote share rose to nearly 39 per cent. This was more than a 10 per cent rise over their vote share in all the elections from 1989 to 1995. The Congress got 15 seats.

But the picture was completely reversed in 1998. The SS-BJP were reduced to just 10 seats (SS – 6, BJP – 4). This was a direct fall of 23 seats compared to 1996. But mainly due to the disintegration of the third front, the SS-BJP vote share increased to over 42 per cent. The Congress-RPI-SP alliance won 50 per cent of the vote, the Congress bagged 33 seats and the RPI got 4 seats. With this major setback, the SS-BJP regime made a last-ditch effort to revive its sagging fortunes by dumping chief minister Manohar Joshi in January 1999 and replacing him with Narayan Rane, who had an even more dubious past record. This was actually done out of caste considerations, since Joshi was a Brahmin and Rane was a Maratha. But even this last ploy proved fruitless. Thackeray himself was disenfranchised by the Election Commission for his earlier communal speeches and writings.

The 1999 LS/VS elections were widely predicted to herald a stunning and spectacular defeat for the SS-BJP combine. But just before the polls came the revolt of Sharad Pawar and the formation of the NCP, throwing all earlier calculations haywire. In the event, the SS-BJP won 28 seats in the Lok Sabha (SS –15, BJP – 13) with 38 per cent of the vote, which was 4 per cent lower than in 1998. The INC, with nearly 30 per cent of the vote won 10 seats, and the NCP with almost 22 per cent of the vote got only 6 seats. The remaining 4 seats went to NCP/INC allies like RPI, PWP and JD(S).

But in the simultaneous assembly elections, the SS-BJP vote was less than 32 per cent, which was 6 per cent lower than in the parliamentary elections, mainly because the people were bent on teaching the state government a lesson. Thus, the SS-BJP won only 125 seats out of 288 (SS-69, BJP-56). The INC won 75 seats and the NCP got 58 seats, making a total of 133. This led to a hung assembly. But the smaller secular parties won 15 seats, tilting the balance against the SS-BJP.

If the Congress split had not occurred and if the various parties had got the same vote share that they got in these elections, the SS-BJP tally would have been slashed to just 9 seats in the Lok Sabha and to merely 48 seats in the Vidhan Sabha! But the most significant point is that even the vertical split in the Congress could not save the SS-BJP regime from the wrath of the and from its own doom. After a lot of callous wrangling and cynical manipulation on the part of all four major bourgeois parties that lasted over a fortnight, the INC-NCP-led Democratic Front government assumed the reins of power in Maharashtra in October 1999.