

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Bombay mafia wins another round

Black money and gangsterism are turning this premier city into a Sodom and Gomorrah.

The sudden and still unexplained release of two top underground operatives by the state of Maharashtra government at the end of July indicates not only the bankruptcy of the state's politics, but also the enormous muscle that the Bombay mafia wields within the duly elected government.

Where there is a whispering campaign that the release was at the bid of the central government of Indira Gandhi, newspaper reports indicate that Congress Party officials, including General Secretary Rajiv Gandhi, have castigated the action by the Maharashtra Chief Minister Vasantdada Patil. In India, "law and order" is reserved for the states.

The two underground kingpins, Haji Mastan and K. M. Lala, had been arrested in early July under the National Security Act and kept in prison without trial. The Bombay police are of the strong opinion, a leading Indian journal wrote, that the May riots in central Bombay were the premeditated handiwork of the underground. Press reports indicated that Mastan and Lala had been caught "red-handed" funneling money and weapons to the rioters through several "charitable organization" fronts.

In early July, the ruling Congress (I) government in Maharashtra made a big show of cracking down against the alleged smugglers and anti-social elements, but the recent release of Mastan and Lala, indicates that the gangsters have obviously managed to carry the day.

Bombay, a port and large metropolitan center harboring more than 8 million people, is a city which grew rapidly following independence to become the corporate headquarters of India. While the city boasts clusters of modern skyscrapers, it also possesses the most extensive and appalling slums anywhere in the world.

Bombay's underground, the scene of flourishing and dangerous rackets, draws its blood money from such mind-destroying operations as the Hollywood-style film industry (a good part of whose financial transactions take place under the table) and massive smuggling operations involving, on the one hand, electronic goods, gold, and so forth from across the Arabian Sea and hard drugs such as heroin from Pakistan on the other. The slums—which spin off rackets such as illicit manufacture and sale of liquor (as deadly as the more spectacular vices), drugs, prostitution, and gambling—are also under the control of the underground.

Since Bombay's real estate is perhaps the most expensive in India, the slum landlords, many of whom are political financiers and political figures in Bombay, wield a great deal of power in the city. Besides making money from various rackets that go on within the slums, the landlords also recruit from among slum dwellers to organize riots, among other things. The law is bought and paid off on almost every street corner.

While both Mastan and Lala are

Muslims by faith, a part of the underground is controlled by the Shiv Sena—a fanatical Hindu Maharashtra group that preaches Mahratta chauvinism. Both these groups were intimately involved in the riots that took place last May in Bombay and nearby Bhiwandi—as well as the occasional flair-ups that are still occurring in the city. Although it is not clear what was the specific motivation behind the recent riots is, it is not uncommon that the mafia organizes such riots to divert the attention of the law from some big underground operation that is then carried out amid the chaos.

Bombay is also teeming with with pleasure seekers and those who cater to them. Over the years, hard drugs such as brown and white heroin have been sold openly in Shuklaji and Falkland streets. In fact, hard drugs can be bought anywhere, be it Colaba or Worli or Mahim. Sitting in a five-star hotel lobby, one can see the drug traffickers moving briskly around, making contacts. Iranian, Afghan, and Mangalorean youth can be observing making quick trips to residents' rooms or engaging in brief encounters in the elevators or the stairwells.

The Arab oil-money boom that started in the early 1970s has fueled the narcotics traffic and helped push the city toward further cultural decay. The Arab sheikhs who dominate Bombay's Nariman Point seafront walk every evening, have a lot of money to spend and a big appetite for any filth that is not allowed in their country because of Islamic edicts.

The spiral of cultural decay and political corruption that has taken hold threatens the city's very existence. While it would be wrong to say that the situation has become irreversible, proof that such a process is in progress was conveyed unmistakably to all Indians with the sudden release of those two creatures from the netherworld.