

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

A new boost to fundamentalism?

An Islamic irrationalist assembly heard some ominous statements from its leaders.

A small report on Jan. 20 from the port of city of Calicut in India's south-eastern Kerala state, may reflect the opening shots in a new fundamentalist upsurge in India. The daily *Hindu* of Madras reported on a just-concluded three-day convention of the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), whose adopted slogan was "Liberation of India through Islam" as the "panacea" for deliverance of the "repressed" among the Indian population.

SIMI's resolution claimed that India continues to be enslaved by Western culture and ideologies, while the upper class is exploiting the masses under an "umbrella of trade-union capitalism and bureaucratic feudalism." The SIMI called on all to transcend communal barriers and seek individual salvation and social welfare through Islam.

The highlight of the convention was a public meeting on the final day addressed by the Imam of Delhi, Abdulla Bukhari. Bukhari claimed that the Indian Supreme Court's ruling on the application of a marital law to Muslims and other matters, was irrelevant to Muslims, and that Shariat (Holy Law) is the Muslims' only supreme court.

Bukhari is a Mullah with close links to the fundamentalist Iranian regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. He has apparently not hesitated to propitiate these links, in defiance of his own government.

According to reports, Bukhari took a delegation of Indian Haj pilgrims to

Saudi Arabia this fall, to rendezvous with Iranian leaders, and also participated in the Ayatollah's demonstrations against the Saudi Royal House in Mecca. The demonstrations were aimed at inciting the pilgrims to disrupt the Haj, and had been banned by the Saudi authorities, and condemned by the Indian ambassador there.

Bukhari's decision to pick Calicut as the venue for SIMI is significant, since coastal Kerala has a large population of Muslims, many of whom had found greener pastures in the Gulf areas, where they were involved in the hectic construction activities succeeding the oil boom.

India's official relations with Iran are tentative. A promising economic relationship begun under the Shah was junked by the Ayatollah, and the damage is only now being painstakingly repaired. Prime Minister Gandhi's efforts to help bring an end to the Iran-Iraq war have led nowhere.

At the same time, the Iranian parliament is a regular arena for tirades against the Indian government, denouncing the government in general and the prime minister in particular for "oppression of the Muslims." Unconfirmed reports indicate that the Iranian regime has also cultivated ties with the Sikh separatists.

But it is not just his dubious foreign ties that make Imam Bukhari's participation in the SIMI convention significant. The Imam is a powerful figure in India in his own right: As head of the Jama Masjid, one of the largest mosques in Asia, he is the re-

ligious kingpin of India's 75-million-member Muslim minority.

Bukhari is an intensely political person, who uses his command over the huge Muslim voting bloc to earn many privileges. Prior to the general election, he was courted by all major political parties for public support. His baptism of an Islamic "liberation" campaign among Muslim youth reflects not only his own penchant for the communalist game, but something of the way the wind is generally blowing.

Not surprisingly, Bukhari seized on a recent Supreme Court issue, the case of a 73-year-old woman divorcee, Shah Bano. There have been previous awards of alimony or maintenance under various provisions of the Indian legal code, but what has stirred the hornet's nest this time is that the judgment exhorted the government to enact a uniform personal law throughout the country, as promised in the Constitution.

A uniform civil code for the different religious faiths in India was one of the thorny issues the republic had to face in its infancy, and after fierce debate the Constitutional Assembly produced Article 44, a compromise in which "the State shall endeavor to secure" a uniform code—but not draft and enforce one. It has been a bugbear to the Muslim religious leadership ever since.

In contrast with a deliberate communal provocation that surfaced in Calcutta last spring, when the suit of a nonexistent individual to ban the Koran in India was entertained at a high court level, the Shah Bano case raises fundamental issues, both internal to Islam and with regard to the requirements of a secular republic, that will ultimately have to be resolved. The worry here now, though, is that the fundamentalists may already have the upper hand.