

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

Political failures stir more violence

"Goons, mobsters, and beasts in the form of men" take over Bombay—while New Delhi seems paralyzed.

India's commercial capital, Bombay, has witnessed an unprecedented wave of violence since the demolition of the Babri Masjid (mosque) on Dec. 6.

A new spate of riots has taken more than 500 lives as of this writing, driven thousands from their homes, and refuses to die down. Recent reports indicate that the riots have spread to the suburbs.

Announcing his resignation from the Parliament, Sunil Dutt, the Congress-I parliamentarian from Bombay South and a noted movie personality, said: "I feel totally helpless, pained, and tortured that I, as an MP, am unable to bring some solace and peace in the lives of the people."

The gravity of the situation is also reflected in the appeal issued by two eminent Bombayites, J.R.D. Tata, the man who runs India's largest industrial concern, the Tata Group of Industries, and Nani Palkhivala, an eminent lawyer.

In their appeal to New Delhi they said, "The situation is totally out of hand in Bombay. *Goondas* [goons] and criminals, mobsters, and beasts in the form of men have taken over the city." Urging the Indian government to impose a partial emergency and hand over power to the army to administer the city without interference, Tata and Palkhivala warned that any delay in taking such a step "would be a crime against our nation."

While the riots were breaking up whatever was left of racial harmony in the city following the Dec. 6 riots, New Delhi acted as if struck by total paralysis. Congress-I Chief Minister Sudhakarrao Naik was also silent over

what was happening. A new governor, P.C. Alexander, a reputed bureaucrat from the days of Mrs. Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, has taken over in the state of Maharashtra, and some believe the ruling Congress-I government will be dismissed because of its inability to stop the violence. As of this writing, Governor Alexander has not acted.

What exactly triggered the latest spate of violence is not fully understood, but there are many telltale signs. Bombay has long been the stronghold of a mafia with open connections to the Persian Gulf. The mafia, which controls the movie world among other things, is involved in smuggling gold and electronics from Arabia and in dealing in narcotics as well.

The mafia operations have been under the control of a few Muslim chieftains who also exert some control over the sprawling slums where more than 40% of Bombayites live. The slums, which became huge dens of illegal activities, were serving the rich and in the process, also getting affluent. Bombay politics has always been intertwined with this mafia. There was hardly a politician in Bombay who did not cater to this mafia and used it for his own political purpose. In recent days, however, new forces have begun to emerge.

The rise of the chauvinist Maharashtra political party, the Shiv Sena, which began its campaign in the 1950s to keep Bombay free of non-Maharashtrians and later switched to a more prominent anti-Muslim posture, and the emergence

of an affluent middle class have tilted the scales lately.

In addition, the presence of more than 100,000 illegal Bangladeshi migrants has added to the poverty scene.

While the middle class was getting increasingly hostile because of the poor living conditions and was blaming the mafia and the sprawling slums for the housing and other problems, the Shiv Sena was keen to seize the growing discontent of the middle class to wrest power in the city, and the control of illegal money-making activities. These two groups have played a significant role in igniting the passions still sweeping across Bombay—as they did when there were riots in Bombay in 1984.

The Bombay mafia was also getting weaker. The present Congress-I government had clamped down heavily on the mafia and there were reports of shooting wars between police and mafiosi earlier. When the Babri Masjid was demolished, the mafia seized the opportunity to incite violence to give itself a communal color. Shiv Sena, a communal outfit, did not let this opportunity slip by, and unleashed its anti-Muslim violence as never before.

While the central government in New Delhi continued to expect that the violence would die down quickly, little was done to ameliorate the tense situation. The state chief minister, having been taken to task for being too tough in the post-Dec. 6 riots, chose to become a bystander allowing the goons to take over the city.

It has also been noted that the political institution, represented by the Congress-I chiefly, is practically dead in Bombay, having catered to the mafia and slum-dwelling voters for so long, and alienated the middle class. Shiv Sena, a follower of violent politics, has run the mayoralty in Bombay.