

ON THE DEATH OF A THUG

You may have missed the story, but this month one of the most notorious and powerful jerks in India's political pantheon died. His name was Bal Thackeray and in his life he summed up many of the dangers of modern-day India. Many Canadians when they think of that country still have a vague impression of a place run by spiritually-motivated people, wearing turbans and doing yoga. Thackeray almost single-handedly disproved that cliché.

Remember *Slum-Dog Millionaire* the 'feel-good' movie about millions of people living in abject poverty, enforced slavery and piles of garbage? Thackeray was the unspoken villain of the movie. In the real-life incident that some of the film was based on, it was his thugs who were responsible for the violent ethnic cleansing that was shown in the movie (the hero's mum is killed in such an event). It was his Bombay mafia goons that are responsible for much of the poverty that the slum community endures. In recent years, his party launched a series of violent attacks on people who were celebrating the 'non-Hindu' holiday of Valentine's Day.

In general, it is pretty difficult to overstate how much Thackeray was a piece of work. For example, along with being officially named by an Indian government commission as the person responsible for instigating the massacres of thousands of his fellow Indians, being connected to the murder, intimidation and extortion of dozens of political rivals, Thackeray was also a fan of Hitler.

Perhaps, the best story that sums up Bal Thackeray's unique "I do what seems right to me" personality, comes in the making of the film *Bombay*. The film was an attempt by Bollywood to portray the 1992 massacres. As such the producers had included a scene where a character based on Thackeray agonizes over his decision to have been involved in setting off the massacres of so many people. Thackeray was furious with the film-makers, not for claiming that he was responsible for the massacres, but because they portrayed him as being at all remorseful.

So why is the death of a Hollywood-badie-like political thug in India important for Canadians?

Thackeray may have been an extreme example, but he is no way untypical of many of India's contemporary politicians. The amount of corruption that infects almost any Indian government office is so large that there have been a wave of widespread protests by the public dismayed at the outright stealing that goes on in much of the country. This corruption has so paralysed the political establishment that it is difficult to get anything done by the government.

One example from the many that exist, comes from Bangalore where the city has simply run out of room to put their garbage. I do not mean they have run out of room in a Canadian sense of sometime-in-the-next-twenty-years-we-will-have-a-crisis-if-we-do-not-learn-to-recycle. I mean right now there are large piles of garbage rotting on the

streets of the city. The significance is that Bangalore as a city is purportedly to be the most advanced and best-run of all of India's new high-tech urban centres.

Far worse than corruption and inaptitude is the outright sectarian violence and calls for ethnic cleansing of many of India's top politicians. This statement may sound extreme to anyone unfamiliar with current-day India, particularly with the general Western, but out-of-date, view of life in that country as a Mahatma Gandhi-inspired hug-fest (Gandhi was actually killed by a murderous bigot because he expressed tolerance for other religions).

There are state premiers and other prominent Indian politicians who have made their careers on calls for intra-ethnic or caste violence. Even one of India's main political parties - the BJP - is notorious for forming around the issue of excluding minorities from India's political power.

Despite this highly-combustible mix of corruption, inaptitude and sectarian violence the Canadian government has just decided, for the first time in forty years, to export our nuclear material to India. Quite why they have chosen to do so is a mystery. After all, you expect that our government would not export highly toxic radioactive material to a country that builds nuclear power plants on geological tectonic fault-lines. Why then would our government export this material to a country that cannot look after its garbage and has nuclear power plants amidst worsening social tectonic fault-lines?

The best thing that can be said about Bal Thackeray's career is that at least he did not have access to Canadian nuclear material. We will not be able to say that about his successors and it could mean a very bad scenario for us all.

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