

No proof of Tigers' role in Gandhi death

by Ramtanu Maitra

If the media, domestic and abroad, is any indication, there would be hardly any doubt that the Sri Lankan separatist terrorists, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), masterminded the bomb-explosion which killed India's former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and a dozen others at an election rally near Madras city on May 21. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), ostensibly solely in charge of the investigation, is routinely detaining Tamils of Sri Lankan origin, and the newspapers are duly carrying the stories every day. Leading Congress Party members, such as Kalpanath Rai from Uttar Pradesh and Dr. Channa Reddy of Andhra Pradesh, have announced to the press that the killing is the handiwork of the Tamil Tigers, and no local Indian groups should be blamed.

But behind this crescendo of consensus formation (a practice highly unfamiliar in India on most social, political, or economic issues), the facts that have come to light in no way make the case.

For instance:

- According to *The Hindu* of May 28, the Special Investigation Team of the CBI is, a week after the crime, desperately looking for the break which will further its probe. In short, no decisive evidence in hand.

- As of the end of May, the woman who allegedly strapped the lethal charge to her waist and triggered it at point blank range against Rajiv Gandhi, and whose lower limbs and head were found intact at the scene of the crime, is yet to be identified. At first it was stated she wore a wig, and was therefore in disguise, a claim later proved to be false.

- The alleged assassin was immediately dubbed a "Tamil of Sri Lankan origin," and one news report went so far as to claim that she came from the same district in Sri Lanka as the Tamil Tiger leader V. Pirabhakaran. In fact, as former chief minister of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, M. Karnanidhi, ostensibly a friend of the Sri Lankan separatist Tamil Tigers, pointed out, all that can be said of the woman is that she was dark-complexioned, a feature not uncommon throughout southern India.

- On May 25, *The Hindu* reported that a top Tiger leader, Kasi Anandan, had met Rajiv Gandhi at the latter's New Delhi residence in early March. The Tamil Tigers' leaders

reported that they found Mr. Gandhi was not hostile toward them, and their leader Pirabhakaran, from his hideout in northern Sri Lanka, welcomed reopening the channel with Mr. Gandhi. Though leading Congress Party members denied the report, *The Hindu* revealed that its source was none other than the late Rajiv Gandhi himself. Undaunted, Congress members continue to claim that the meeting is an Tiger ruse.

- On May 28, the *Times of India* reported, front page, that the assassin's accomplice had been arrested—a difficult proposition when the assassin herself remains unidentified. It was a catchy story held together by "suspected LTTE links."

The effort to place unilateral blame has been complemented by intelligence leaks. Early on, we were informed that the assassins, with "suspected LTTE links," trailed Mr. Gandhi and would have committed their crime somewhere during the Tamil Nadu campaign tour. Now, leaks are pointing at some other Sri Lankan groups which also enjoy free movement in Tamil Nadu.

In the drumbeat around the LTTE, two crucial facts have been virtually buried. First, the bomb's switching device and battery were foreign made, and the entire explosive device highly sophisticated. This does not establish the LTTE as the author of the crime, but it does establish that the murderer had a foreign connection.

Tamil Tigers lacked motive

Much more important is the failure to identify the benefit to the Tigers of assassinating Rajiv Gandhi or any other top Indian leader. LTTE has built up assets over the years and has been constantly trying to open the channel with New Delhi so that their "liberation struggle" in Sri Lanka does not fail. If the LTTE is identified as the killers of Rajiv Gandhi, this effort will be destroyed. No Indian government will lift a finger against the Sri Lankan government's annihilation of the group. Unless the LTTE simply loves to kill anyone it does not like, the motive seems very weak.

Meanwhile, the statement of Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan, that Rajiv Gandhi was a "victim of the new world order," went undiscussed in New Delhi. Likewise the May 23 editorials in the *Teheran Times* and *Jamhuri-ye Eslami* of Iran charging that U.S. intelligence was behind the plot. Neither did the London *Sunday Times* editorial—India should have been broken up into "thousands of Hong Kongs" long ago—receive more than passing attention.

No doubt, pinning the blame on the LTTE is most convenient for Indian officials. The Khalistanis' involvement in Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assassination led to a whole range of ethnic problems which resulted in the shutdown of the case. If the Tamil Tigers are blamed for the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, no one in India, except for a few security men, have to answer for anything. Perhaps the Indian government will even hang the LTTE chief *in absentia* as the finale to yet another high-level assassination.