

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Bombay mafia dons Islamic garb

Rioting over "The Satanic Verses" was a stunt to boost the underground's political fortunes.

Ten days after Iran's strongman Ruhollah Khomeini urged Muslims everywhere to find and kill the British-Indian author of a controversial book and its British and American publishers, an unruly mob of Muslims took to the streets in Bombay on Feb. 24 heading toward the British Consulate. The police opened fire as the mob went on a rampage, pelting stones at homes along the way in central Bombay. The battle left at least 12 dead and scores injured, including 11 policemen.

Though it probably does not signal the start of a new "satanic" communal upsurge, the incident was startling. India was the first nation to ban Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* because of its "mischief potential." Despite a personal call from Rushdie to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the ban was not lifted. Also, Bombay can hardly be considered a stronghold of the mullahs. The bustling port city is known as India's commercial center. But Bombay is also known for its powerful underground involved in drug- and gold-smuggling, with distinct ties to the Gulf area. This underground was the key factor in the riot.

The trouble began when Muslim groups based in the city and its suburbs called for a "Bombay *bandh*" (strike) on Feb. 24. The response was poor, so after Friday prayers in the city's 15 mosques, the imams incited their congregations, urging them to take part in the protest march. Sensing trouble, the police had rounded up most of the leaders, and the march was left in the hands of the instant leaders, most of them hotheads. Tragedy ensued.

It is evident that behind the tragedy, the mafia had seized another chance to establish itself as a political force with a show of "street power." One of the groups to issue the *bandh* call was the Dalit Muslim Minorities Surakhsha Mahasangh, led by Haji Mastan, one of four godfathers of the Bombay underground. Mastan started off as a dockworker and rose to become a rich and influential smuggler.

In 1984, Haji Mastan floated his political party under the banner of helping poor Muslims, shortly after he had been arrested and released. Mastan was charged by the Bombay police with financing the communal elements involved in the bloody 1984 riots in Bombay and its suburb, Bhiwandi. The police also charged Mastan with financing the purchase of sophisticated foreign weapons for the communalists.

The charges are not implausible. It is no secret that Bombay is a safe-house for groups of terrorists based in Syria, Libya, Lebanon, and elsewhere. This fact came to light in 1984 when the British Deputy High Commissioner was assassinated, allegedly by an Arab, in a case that remains unsolved. Bombay is also perhaps the largest drug-transit center in India, and a pivot for the international drug-gun network.

When the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* engulfed the region, an anonymous caller told a Bombay newsman that a number of Indians who had come to Rushdie's support were on the hit-list along with every British Airways aircraft.

But what is surprising is the extent

to which the seedy Haji Mastan has established himself as a political leader. Mainstream Muslim leaders were perplexed when V.P. Singh, former congressman, finance minister, and chief minister of Uttar Pradesh—India's most populous state—asked Mastan to campaign for him in the parliamentary by-election in Allahabad last year, where Singh successfully challenged the Congress (I).

In fact, Mastan had been spending quite a bit of time in the Uttar Pradesh capital of Lucknow, organizing rural Muslims as his "political base." Media reports say the one-time don of Bombay's mafia has managed to enlist several minority organizations, officials, and politicians in the state by disbursing his ill-gotten money generously.

Mastan has also been grooming his religious image. His close contact with the imams was evident on Feb. 24: Maulana Kashmiri of the Tableeghi Seerat supported the *bandh* call, and the imams at Mastan Talay dutifully incited the 3,000 faithful who had gathered following the Friday prayers.

Support came, too, from Delhi, if indirectly, when the spiritual leader of all Indian Muslims, the Imam Abdullah Bokhari of Delhi's Jama Masjid, told his large flock on Feb. 24 that he endorsed Khomeini's call to murder Rushdie. Imam Bokhari, a past master at using his religious authority to make political demands, also took the occasion to warn the Indian government that similar "death orders" would be released "if steps are not taken to check abuse and insult of Islam in India." Though Bokhari raised a number of issues which have become bones of contention between the country's Hindu majority and Muslim minority, issues which the government has been working to resolve, peace reigned in Delhi following the Friday prayers.