

## In Mumbai's name, Thackeray dwells on Hindu theme

It was to be a campaign speech on how to run Mumbai, India's financial and movie capital. But Shiv Sena's old and ailing chief Bal Thackeray largely spewed venom at a Shivaji Park rally here Sunday.

As he sought votes for yet another term to the Shiv Sena and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance in the coming civic body elections, instead of highlighting the achievements of the alliance he could only exhibit a divisive appeal.

The muffled exhortation to Hindus to forge a strong unity and knock down Islam and a vacuous assertion of Marathi supremacy were the highlights of his short, incoherent speech that he ended abruptly to make way for Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi who came in late.

He also took potshots at 'Narya', a reference to Sena deserter Narayan Rane, made veiled references to estranged nephew Raj Thackeray's seeming 'concern' for his falling health and lavishly praised the unemployed mill workers of Parel-Lalbag area.

There was no mention - not even a passing one - to the woeful state of Mumbai's basic amenities, no promise of a better civic dispensation and no answer to the repeated allegations of the corrupt nexus between contractors and corporators in the Shiv Sena-BJP administration of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corp (BMC).

The unending bouts of cough punctuating Thackeray's laboured speech naturally evoked a lot of sympathy from the large gathering of his diehard admirers but it had a ring of guilt about it - for having troubled the patriarch to garner votes for a sagging Shiv Sena that he nurtured for 40 years.

That was what Raj Thackeray, leading the Maharashtra Nav Nirman Sena's election campaign, had said of Shiv Sena - the party whose awesome writ once ran unchallenged in [Mumbai](#) has become so weak that it has no option but to drag its ailing leader into the campaign.

And that is what Bal Thackeray son Uddhav and other leaders of the party know - that the only potent weapon left in their armoury is the old man who ruled Mumbai like a colossus for four decades.

They also know that he can still shore up the sagging fortunes of the party by the sheer love he commands from large chunks of Maharashtrian population of the metropolis.

It is indeed true, though ironical, that the Shiv Sena stands to win something like 70 seats in the Feb 1 civic elections to the 227-member body and find the majority mark at a handshaking distance if its ally BJP musters 40 seats which soothsayers are giving it.

But what does Thackeray's overtly communal appeal mean to Mumbai, poised for a quantum leap to the promised Shanghai level?

Well, if it is the divisive appeal that wins the saffron alliance the votes it needs to come to power once again in BMC, it will mean the communal embers are still alive in the metropolis.

And in that case it augurs ill for the city that NRIs and foreign investors are eyeing, considering the

huge funds the central government is pumping in it for further developing its creaking infrastructure.

But such fears could well prove to be unfounded given the very logic of development that reduces to irrelevance emotive issues and marginalizes the forces espousing them.

And more than anything else it will be the sheer habit of the Shiv Sena-BJP's traditional voters that will drive them to the polling booths, not the communal passion in their heart.

In any case, the Shiv Sena is on a decline with the new leadership, in the shape of Uddhav Thackeray and his aides, unable to rebuild the party, whether they win or lose the coming elections to the civic body.

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