

Kashmir's troubled future



TICKER

MIHIR SHARMA

In the aftermath of the bloodiest attack in the Valley's history, there are several points that could be made about what it implies for the future. None of them are anything other than deeply disturbing.

The first is that there has been a steady increase in violence in the Valley since 2014. This has multiple reasons, but the fact that New Delhi has squandered the gains from the 10 years of relative quiet prior to 2014 is perhaps the biggest. Rather than trying to integrate more Kashmiris into the mainstream in the years since then, the central government has turned Kashmir into a political issue that it wishes to use to win votes in the Hindi heartland.

The Valley was no paradise prior to 2014, but the escalation in violence since then is starkly visible in the data. The number of terrorist incidents, according to the Union home ministry's numbers that were presented to Parliament, has risen steadily — from 222 in 2014 to 614 in 2018. The number of security force personnel killed has similarly shot up, from 47 in 2014 to 80 in 2017 and 91 in 2018.

When the current government came into power, it abandoned the long-standing ceasefire protocol on the Line of Control. This was meant to combat infiltration. Not only has it clearly not reduced the number of incidents, it avoided the real problem. And that is that, once again, we are seeing local young people "taking up the gun", in the phrase that became so tragically common in the 1990s. Rather than worrying about foreign militants, we should have been worrying about the radicalisation of locals like the 20-year-old who drove the Pulwama car bomb. The return of home-grown militancy is the second point. While the low-level brutality of an intrusive police state through the 2000s and 2010s — which used detention and checkpoints as a matter of course — may not compare in numbers with the out-and-out anti-insurgency tactics of earlier, it did suffice to ensure that an entire generation of Kashmiris has been lost to the Indian state. We will now have to deal with the consequences of this.

The third worry is the changing nature of the Islamists' tactics. Tactics can easily be copied from insurgents and terrorists across the world. Intelligence about this attack came in as a "Syria-style car bomb". Kashmir has seen few suicide attacks — in fact the Jaish-e-Mohammed pioneered them in an attack on Srinagar's Badami Bagh cantonment in 2000 — and no car bomb of this size. The bomber, in the video released after his death — again, something familiar from the bloodstained recent history of the Middle East — specifies the "defeat" of the United States by the Taliban as his inspiration. A Valley full of IEDs and car bombs and suicide bombers is a very different proposition from what security forces have had to face before.

Fourth, the strategy of the militants has also changed. The jihadists have sought to target military or police targets specifically. Partly as a consequence, more civilians are sympathetic than in the 1990s. Combined with increasing religious radicalisation — the replacement of local religious traditions with harder, more nihilistic imports from the Middle East — this means that the army and the paramilitaries have a far harder job. They have already complained about civilian crowds forming to protect areas where militants have reportedly holed up. Fighting terrorists is one thing. Fighting insurgents is worse. Fighting a population is worst of all.

Fifth, the impact of neighbourhood developments can clearly be felt. The United States' promise of a precipitate withdrawal from Afghanistan is dangerously stupid; not only will it inspire jihadists everywhere the same way that the USSR's defeat by the mujahedins did, the confidence of the Pakistani military establishment given this expected departure and the solid support of Beijing has soared. The last time Pakistan-backed jihadists were at a loose end after a superpower withdrawal, three decades ago, the Valley exploded. We should deeply fear the consequences of an easing of pressure on Pakistan's western border.

Sixth, Kashmir is oddly distant from the conversation in Pakistan itself. That country is currently obsessed with its cricket league and with the forthcoming visit of Saudi Arabia's strongman (for which, apparently, 3,500 pigeons are being procured). Kashmir is far less of a headline in Pakistan now than it was a couple of decades ago. Yet little has been done to take advantage of this decline in the domestic political use of the Kashmir issue there.

Seventh, Kashmir is a live political issue in India in a way that it never has been before. The India of the 1990s had to deal with an insurgency and managed without worrying about national machismo. This is no longer the case. Kashmir is used as a metaphor, a threat, and a rhetorical battleground by such politicians as Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Adityanath. This is a vast and worrying change.

We do not face an insurgency of the sort that erupted in the 1990s. Thanks to shocking mismanagement, radicalisation and politicisation, the danger is a great deal worse today.

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Friendship above everything else

For all that he blazed like a meteor across the revolutionary sky, George Fernandes was an innocent among the cut-throats and pickpockets who infest the political jungle



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K-DATTA RAY

Returning from China in 2003, George Fernandes broke journey in Singapore and visited my flat in the Nanyang Technological University campus where I was teaching in the journalism school. He seemed somehow subdued, his voice almost a whisper, but what he said was arresting. "I've got a new slogan for them when I get back — 'Chase China!'"

The words didn't sound as if they would galvanise an Indian mob but George was so profoundly impressed by every aspect of the progress China had made that he wanted India

to emulate it. "Chase China," he murmured, pleased with the sound. He spent the rest of the evening not exactly denying he had ever called China India's "Enemy Number One" but explaining it was a Hindi film phrase ("like Hero Number One") that he didn't understand. George's enthusiasms were as ardent as his explanations were long-winded.

Given his lifelong teetotalism, it was paradoxical that our first encounter was in a London pub in early 1970. I don't know what George was doing in England but I was finishing my stint as *The Statesman's* first Indian representative there. The lease of my flat in Hampstead having ended, I had moved in with a friend, M R Sivaramakrishnan, a diplomat I had known since his posting in Hong Kong. Siva had to meet George and chose the pub across the road from India House because it was after office hours. I was keen on seeing one of the legends of the 1967 election and remember a tousled (as he always was I later learnt) man in a shabby brown tweed jacket with a woollen scarf wrapped round his neck in the style of English university students of that era. In fact, with his glasses, pleasant smile and bright inquiring look, George might

have been a student himself.

We didn't actually meet until about 15 years later when he telephoned me from Delhi about a conference on Tibet in his house. David Ennals, whom I had known when he was a minister in Britain's Labour government, was a speaker. He also roped in Zail Singh, who came (I suspected) not to support Tibet but to defy Rajiv Gandhi with whom he was publicly at war. Tibet wasn't a sudden infatuation like China for George. It was a long-standing affair like Myanmar. Why he asked me I don't know; perhaps he had heard of my interest in another lost cause, Sikkim. But George didn't regard Tibet as a lost cause. Nor did he see any problem in reconciling loyalty to Tibet with admiration for China. He also admired Vietnam, especially for its pragmatism in coming to terms with the superpower that ravaged the country for nearly two decades and killed three million Vietnamese.

Socialism was not a doctrinaire creed for him but an expression of caring. He was horrified when asking for water in a dusty Muzaffarpur village, he was told that only Coca-Cola was potable. "Do you need an American bowl for potty?" he asked in outrage because Rajiv's liberalisation had meant for-

eign household goods. "Aren't Indian suitcases good enough?" No wonder he had sent Coke and IBM packing. The technical justification covered a deep philosophical objection.

I asked why an agnostic secularist and former Christian seminarian should support Hindu revivalists. In reply, he spoke at length about hosts of eminent people who had pleaded with him, leaving me with the conclusion that like E M Forster, he placed friendship above other considerations. I could understand his hurt when a prominent journalist whom I shan't name attacked him. "I sent him abroad for the first time you know!" George exclaimed. Another incident illustrated the conundrums in which he found himself. Dropping in unexpectedly at his Krishna Menon Marg (New Delhi) bungalow, I found George sunk in gloom. Hearing that the Congress party managers were giving substantial inducements to election candidates, he had sent one of his own aides to pose as a turncoat intending to expose Congress corruption after the man returned with the bribe. He didn't. He pocketed the money and vanished. Among other inconsistencies, I remember him performing the *mukhagni* rite as solemnly as any loyal Hindu son when Mrs K K Chettur, mother of his long-time partner, Jaya Jaitly, died.

For all that he blazed like a meteor across the revolutionary sky, George Fernandes was an innocent among the cut-throats and pickpockets who infest the political jungle. He was too good a man to achieve spectacular success in the game of thrones. RIP

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ ANITA DUBE | ARTIST & CURATOR, KOCHI ART BIENNALE

Better late than never

Dube gives Anjali Bhargava a peek into her journey as an artist — that began later than usual but is far from over

You may call her a late bloomer but it took Anita Dube 30 years to discover her first love. The year was 1989. Dube had created a name for herself as an art writer and historian but she found herself at the crossroads in terms of her professional development — she was dealing with the trauma of a recent divorce, the disbandment of the Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association (IRPSA), was far from home (Lucknow) in Delhi and financial security.

Like many artists, in her pain, Dube found out what she loved doing best — creating art rather than writing about it. Thirty years on, Dube is the first female curator of the Kochi art biennale 2018 edition selected by an artistic advisory committee set up for each edition.

Dube and I are meeting for lunch at China Kitchen in Delhi's Hyatt Regency as she simply could not find the time for it in Kochi, where we first met during the inaugural week of the biennale in December. I pursued her for the five days I was there but she was too harried with all the goings on to make time for a long, life-journey kind of a chat. We order a sweet and sour pork for her, a soup and a stir-fried vegetable for me and decide to share an egg fried rice. She orders a glass of Prosecco while I stick with water.

Born to highly educated and equally unconventional parents — both doctors by profession — Dube had an idyllic childhood on the banks of the river Gomti in Lucknow — a wild and free upbringing, cycling, climbing trees and dissecting frogs. The two factors — her childhood and non-conformist parents — combined to imbue the radical spirit evident in her work even today.

A high performer — she is a product of Loreto, Lucknow — Dube managed to leave a provincial Lucknow to join Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi to study history. History as a subject itself didn't excite her. In her second year she began attending art shows in the

capital, began to appreciate theater and poetry, coming across artists and collectors like Jatin Das and Aman Nath in her poetry reading circle. "My love for art and culture was spawned during this time," she explains.

It was this brief affair with the arts that led her to apply for a master's in art history at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. She was fortunate to cross paths with none other than Padma Bhushan awardee Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh in the school. It was thanks to his offering her admission and under his guidance and tutelage that she ventured deeper in the dive she had already taken. Her parents, who wanted her to take the civil services examination or do medicine, were a trifle disappointed by her choices but allowed her to follow her heart.

After graduating, Dube taught at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) for a while and her first big break came when she wrote the catalogue for Ebrahim Alkazi's Art Heritage. Around that time, excited by what he saw, Vivan Sundaram organised a workshop for upcoming sculptors in Kasauli, which she attended. This was followed by a major exhibition held in Delhi, "Seven Young Sculptors", for which Dube wrote the text. By then she had begun to be known in the art world for her writing.

I interrupt to ask how she supported herself: There's a lack of concern about the more mundane aspects of life in many artists — something I find intriguing. She explains that there was simply nothing to lure one back then. Unlike today's material world and the preoccupation she sees with comfort and luxury, the 1980s and 1990s was a period when you could get by on very little. Bohemian was the way to be.

By 1985-86, Dube married a fellow artist and got pulled into the IRPSA, an intellectually charged and radically inclined association of artists from Kerala. The IRPSA spawned a new genre of politically and socially con-

scious artists, who took art beyond the ordinary. Art became more of a statement and expression of views than it ever was. It spurred commoditisation of art, conveying a larger message through the artworks, something that influenced Dube's work as a sculptor later. At that time, Dube was still writing texts and catalogues for shows. A manifesto-type text she wrote during this phase, "Questions and Dialogue", for a contemporary show held in Baroda was well received. But by 1988, IRPSA had been disbanded (following the death of its founder), Dube herself had got divorced and she found herself at the crossroads. Dube returned home to Lucknow to recover from, what she recalls, was one of the lowest points of her life.

Our food arrives and we decide to concentrate on eating for a while.

It's when she returned from Lucknow that Dube's life took a new turn. At home she had started carving and dabbling with clay in a serious way — almost as therapy — and on returning to Delhi, she had a small exhibition at her home in Tara Apartments in 1992. Nothing was sold, though the show was well received. That's when she realised she had an artist within her, one that was waiting to be unleashed.

She plunged headlong into her newly found passion in her 30s. Her first big break and what defined her work in some ways was a metal and wood carving show in Namibia in 1996 — her first international trip at 40 years which, she says, sounds practically funny today since people seem to have wheels on their feet. Post Africa, she began to work with new materials including fabric and her work took a new turn. Fiery and feisty, it began to reflect her opinions.

She started doing more ambitious work. A 1999 piece, Silence (Blood Wedding), was considered her seminal work and widely acclaimed. There was no looking



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

We are coming to the end of our meal so I shift focus to Kochi. She's been housed there for almost the entire period and is only here in Delhi briefly — for a family wedding and the India Art Fair. Otherwise, since August 2017, Dube has been living, breathing, eating, thinking and dreaming the biennale. There has been no room for anything else. After she worked out a theme in her mind, she started travelling to invite artists whose work she liked and which fit in with her larger message, visiting close to 20 countries in a whirlwind fashion over two years.

Dube's theme for the biennale — "Possibilities for a non-alienated world" — is reflective of the communication breakdown one sees in an increasingly virtual world. "We have been on the phone and on WhatsApp but isn't this meeting the real thing," she asks to illustrate the larger message of her show.

"Everyone is looking at their screens and we think we are connected. We are not," she argues.

She wants people to connect and remain connected, face to face. She met all the artists she loved and whose work she chose to display. The show asks people to be more accepting of differences — be it religion or sexual preferences. "I have been able to convey my ideas on such a large scale thanks to the biennale; it's a major opportunity," she adds.

So what next, I ask. Her own life has been on hold. What does Anita Dube look forward to?

The last few years have been one of consolidation and preparation for the years ahead. She is looking to get out of the "mess of Delhi" and pen the next chapter of her life — a quieter one she expects — at her new home in Noida and her new studio in Kaladham, an artists' colony set up by former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati. Dube invites me to visit her studio — designed by renowned architect Madhav Raman who is currently giving it finishing touches — and see her work over a glass of wine. She may be a late starter but her spirit remains intact.

The 'call' of the fields



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

This week, whilst in the boonocks of Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh, I had this strange feeling that something was off. Soon I realised what it was. While everywhere there were large billboards emblazoned with slogans of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, and newly constructed outdoor toilets were visible in many houses — I saw a disproportionate number of people emerging from the woods carrying that telltale empty plastic bottle. Women chattered gaily in large groups that periodically disappeared discreetly behind the trees and into the mustard fields. Young boys were playing cricket with the bottles they had just emptied. In the meantime, the toilets constructed

by the government stood there, unused.

Don't they work? I asked Lalit Kumar, my local host. The famous Awadhi hospitality immediately kicked in. "You want to go," he asked. "Please use it, it's very clean." And clean it was. Why didn't they use their lovely new loos, I asked? Kumar laughed good-naturedly. He took me to the local tea shop where dozens of people offered dozens of reasons why they preferred to answer nature's call in natural surroundings instead of in toilets.

"Over 75 per cent of our village likes to go to the fields," Ram Pal Rawat, a farmer said. "That's what they're used to and that's what they like." In fact, their neighbouring village had even more toilets than they did. "There too, most prefer not to use them," he said. What about the women? I asked. The government had built pink toilets for them everywhere and called them *samman ghar* or honour houses. "Our daily gossip sessions in the field would come to an end if we started using bathrooms," an old lady exclaimed. "Besides, outdoors is much cleaner than indoors."

As we drank steaming cups of tea, someone came up with the strangest reason for using his loo only sparingly. "When the weather is good, I insist that my family defecates in the open so that

we can make our septic tank last longer before it overflows," said Tej Narain, another farmer. It turned out that many others also used their loos only when the weather was bad or if they were sick. Soon, the people who liked to do their "jobs" outdoors anyway, said that preserving their septic tanks was the reason why they didn't use their toilets.

I hastened to point out that the new toilets had been built on the twin pit composting technology. They could use their loos all the time and they'd never fill up. Narain said that he'd heard about this but didn't quite believe it. "Long ago, a septic tank overflowed in the village," he said. "No labourers were available, so we had to clean it ourselves and I'll never forget the stink."

His friends and neighbours concurred. "Who knows how long these composting pits will work anyway?" one said. "Even if they work, who'll use that compost anyway?" asked another.

Just then lightning lit up the clouds overhead and it started raining. The tea party broke up as we all hastened for cover. As we left, I saw the light in an outdoor toilet come on. "See! We do use toilets when we have to," said my host. "The rest of the time, we go to the fields behind the toilet and praise Swachh Bharat Abhiyan."

An evening to remember



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

Why did the waiter fall into the swimming pool? Witnesses heard a shout and a splash, and then the cry "Man overboard!" Okay, I made up the last bit, but an "Oh! Oh! Oh!" surrured through the party. Something had happened, and as Indians, everyone gawped as the poor young lad, shocked into silence and speechless with the cold, tried to find a footing on the pool's floor. His platter of kebabs floated surreally to the bottom of the pool, there to rest like corpses. Another waiter pulled him out, slipping and sliding. As he stood dripping on the pool deck, a towel was handed to him. Guests stood around sipping their cocktails, marvelling that he hadn't turned blue.

"He needs a change of clothes," my wife said, stepping forward to take charge. None of us had clothes to spare at the cottage — we still carried clothes to and from the farm, not keeping any in storage yet — but quiet thinking led her to head for the caretaker's hut. Having seen her take charge, everyone went back to drinking and dancing, and I went back indoors to check on the food arrangements. A few moments later, my wife stormed into the living room to ask why I couldn't have taken the waiter to get changed. It turns out, the caretaker wasn't in, so my wife had to forage through his clothes in absentia to find some that would fit. "I had to find him underwear," she remonstrated with me later, but how was I responsible for that?

But why did the waiter fall in the swimming pool in the first place? He hadn't been drinking, or so we were told. And since his scope of work was the grill counter and not the bar, he couldn't have been tipping surreptitiously. We hadn't factored in anyone falling into the pool but my son had had the forethought to have it filled. "Just in case," he'd said then, which I had imagined to imply someone wanting to go skinny-dipping under the moon. Now he was gloating. "Told you," he said. Without the water,

we would have had someone with broken bones. Now, at worst, we had no more than a case of sniffles and some embarrassment.

Witnesses disclosed the waiter's crime was one of impropriety. His eyes were temporarily distracted by a young lady's passage, causing his humiliating fall from grace to disgrace. "Serves him right," said the young lady in question, when she heard. Perhaps she spoke too soon though. By the time the evening was over, we had a list of casualties that was as long as it was varied. One friend had walked into a glass door. (The door survived.) She sat with a packet of ice clutched to her forehead for the rest of the evening. Another fell on the dance floor, earning himself a slash across his nose.

A further inventory is required to list the demeanours of the evening. Five youngsters threw up, all of them inside the cottage. The smell is still lingering some days later. An equal number passed out — on sofas, beds, on the lawn. Some had to be carried to their cars (fortunately, none of them was driving). The Party Smart tablets they had consumed were clearly not working. The leftovers filled the fridge to overflowing because no one ate (they only drank). We ran out of Disprins.

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

Fix the process

It can be no one's case that buying complex weaponry like fighter aircraft or helicopters is easy business. The Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG's) report on air force purchases mentions 660 specifications in the medium fighter order, and 42 for a radar system. Nor can it be a cut-and-dried process — for that might lead to all bidders in most contracts being disqualified at the outset. Besides, the relative importance given to individual specifications or product features can significantly affect judgements on what the best offer is — and (let's face it) these are often matters of judgement. In the real world, there would also be user preferences — as with the air force, which kept insisting in the early stages that it wanted the Mirage because of its performance in the Kargil war. Did similar air force pressure explain the choice of the Rafale (Mirage's successor) in 2012, though the aircraft did not qualify?

The choice can be between tweedledum and tweedledee. The Eurofighter must have been as good as the Rafale, since it too was shortlisted; and, earlier, the French alternative as good as Sweden's Bofors gun. But would choosing the Eurofighter have obviated the "India-specific enhancements" and its bill of \$1.4 billion or more, incurred basically to make the Rafale meet the required specifications? On top of that, diplomatic considerations can and have influenced choices. What else can explain why the benchmark price for heavy-lift helicopters was changed after the financial bids had been opened? In the end, therefore, while audit strictures must be taken seriously, real-world perspectives do intrude into the frame.

Audit reports themselves don't do much better than the more complex business of buying weapons. It passes understanding, for instance, as to why the CAG acquiesced to the defence ministry's insistence on financial secrecy with regard to the Rafale contract, when all the financial numbers are laid out for all the other weapons acquisitions reviewed in the same CAG report! Also, it is obvious that the CAG has given the government a free pass by not putting a number to the amount that the Rafale was allowed to save by avoiding financial guarantees. So much for auditors.

Are the elaborate processes and procedures for buying weapons sub-optimal precisely because they are so elaborate? Put into the equation the time factor, for it takes eight to 10 years in many cases for a selection process to be carried through while the defence services wait. Indeed, in the end there may be no acquisition at all (as with the AgustaWestland), or technology has changed in the interim. Is a simpler, shorter process possible for choosing between competitive bids? After all, most acquisitions in recent years have been done with no competitive bidding at all. As for the perennial issue of pay-offs, only the naive would think there are none when the purchases are so large that they can make or break vendors, when decisions are taken at multiple levels over years, and the choices are so complex as to be capable of endless fiddling (an air chief faces charges for allegedly having fiddled one number).

Meanwhile, there are no real answers to the larger questions. There is, for instance, no satisfactory explanation why only 36 fighter aircraft were ordered when the air force needed 126 — necessitating now a second round of bidding for the same kind of aircraft and possible delay of several years in getting the balance aircraft. The defence ministry's response on the issue (says the CAG) is that light combat aircraft were also being ordered. That treats medium and light aircraft as interchangeable. But with the Tejas also making slow progress, the air force is now trying to get hold of extra Sukhoi-30s, which are heavy aircraft! On top of this haphazard building of the fleet, we have the air force's seemingly ingrained distaste for putting in the effort to support a domestic aircraft manufacturing industry (such as the navy has done for shipbuilding). So the country gets locked into permanent import dependence of the kind that no other country with a large defence budget (other than Saudi Arabia) is exposed to. Something sure is rotten in the state of Denmark.

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Pakistan has pulled the trigger on itself

Pakistan has taken too much of a chance with Pulwama — with the wrong government in India, and at the wrong time

Stephen P Cohen, the noted American scholar on South Asia, has a genius description for Pakistani strategic thought. Pakistan, he says, negotiates with the world by holding the gun to its own head: Give me what I want, or I will blow my brains out. You then handle the mess. Has Pakistan pulled that trigger in Pulwama?

First, get any notion that this was a purely indigenous act of terror out of the way. The suicide terrorist was a radicalised Indian Kashmiri. But count the reasons why his couldn't be an entirely Indian planned and executed operation:

■ The Jaish-e-Mohammed has claimed responsibility. It is purely a Pakistan-based and ISI-controlled organisation.

■ While radicalisation and motivation can be local, there is zero evidence that this volume of high explosive (most likely RDX or RDX-mixed) is available with usually amateurish local groups, along with skills to rig the trigger-timer mechanism.

■ See that last video the bomber recorded. He is reading from a pre-written text from a board placed in front of cards held by someone. The language isn't so much about Kashmiri grievances or revenge as to instigate Muslims in the rest of India. Babri Masjid and Gujarat are invoked, and "all our Muslims" exhorted to rise in revolt against "cow-urine drinkers". This is precisely how the Jaish, even more than the Lashkar-e-Taiba, thinks. Not local Kashmiris.

This action fits perfectly the pattern set by the Jaish in the past. The suicide bombing of the Assembly in Srinagar in 2001, the attack on Parliament later in the same year, raids on Pathankot and Gurdaspur have all had the same objective: To somehow take the terror fallout beyond Kashmir. The Lashkar did so in Mumbai (26/11), too, but much of its energy and manpower is still used in fighting in Kashmir. Under global pressure, it is also being mainstreamed by its GHQ patrons into Pakistani politics. The Jaish, much smaller but enormously more vicious, resourceful and an ISI

favourite, is more selective with "impact" attacks.

How resourceful the Jaish is we know from the IC-814 hijack. It could get an Indian plane hijacked from Kathmandu and taken to safe harbour in Kandahar to trade hostages for their key leaders jailed in India. It's been established repeatedly in subsequent research that every step in that hijack — from facilitation in Kathmandu to negotiations in Kandahar using the Taliban, and then safe "recovery" of released Jaish chief Masood Azhar and others — was overseen by the ISI.

To the Pakistani establishment and ISI, Azhar and the Jaish are much bigger assets than even the Lashkar and Hafiz Saeed. The Jaish is their main force-multiplier. The Chinese also acknowledge it, which is the reason they are shamelessly complicit in protecting him.

That this terrorist was a local Kashmiri is no surprise. In each of its actions so far, including IC-814, Parliament and other attacks, the Jaish has had key participation of Indian Kashmiris. Afzal Guru, remember, was Indian. Mushtaq Ahmed Zargar, one of the two jailed terrorists traded for IC-814 passengers, was Kashmiri. We have enough evidence, therefore, to stop wasting time in local, root-cause theories and giving Pakistan any deniability, however implausible.



NATIONAL INTEREST SHEKHAR GUPTA

Why do we raise that question?

Has Pakistan finally pulled that trigger into its own head? Because, all the earlier Jaish and Lashkar attacks passed without a publicised retaliation, although we know about some secret "surgical strikes" in the past. Between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, India was able to ride out the moments of anger with coercive diplomacy, global pressure on Pakistan, and a strategic mindset that was fundamentally pacifist, and believed in responding no more than proportionately to any provocation.

The Modi government has no such pretence. It holds both Dr Singh and Vajpayee and other governments of the past in contempt for what it sees as their

"pusillanimity". Further, having made such noise and political capital from the post-Uri surgical strikes, there is no way it is going to be able to hold fire or restrain itself for long. Pakistan has it coming. Where, how, when, nobody knows. But it can't be long.

A retaliatory response could come soon. It will also be visible, high-decibel and wrapped in claims of victorious retribution. India is in the early days of its most vicious election campaign yet. Narendra Modi will not go seeking a second term with the taint of Pulwama.

It will then be for Pakistan to decide whether to leave it there or respond to its own popular compulsions to begin a retaliatory cycle. It could, besides whatever happens militarily, end this tenure of Imran Khan. History tells us no Pakistani leader can go to war, big or small, with India and survive. Ayub Khan (1965), Yahya Khan (1971), Nawaz Sharif (Kargil, 1999) tell us that. Three instances, as we say in journalism, is a straight line.

There can't be much argument over the essential reality of Pakistan: That Imran will not have a decisive say in what happens next. He might ultimately pay for the army/ISI bullheadedness as Nawaz Sharif did for Kargil, and he will need enormous skill and luck not to become that scapegoat. No elected prime minister has the final word on such issues in Pakistan and Imran, if anything, is among the weakest in some time. The call to engage in an immediate escalating cycle or not will be his army's. Could he even counsel them against it? We can't be sure. They will decide whether to blow their brains out or not. He's a loser either way.

Besides the difference between Mr Modi and his predecessors, there are two other important distinctions now. One, that it is a world radically different from what we left behind in 2008 (26/11) or 2001-02 (J&K assembly and Parliament attacks). Then, top American and European leaders would come flying in, heads of states would make phone calls, Russia, China would all weigh in to calm things down, calm and reassure Indian public opinion by expressing solidarity with us and condemning Pakistan.

That world doesn't exist anymore. It unravelled the day Donald Trump was elected US president and kept his promise of making America great again by withdrawing and leaving the rest of the world to its own devices. If stuff hits the fan in the subcontinent now, he may not even bother tweeting restraint immediately. The modern world's oldest antagonists can set their region on fire now, without the comfort of the American/global fire truck waiting at our door.

This has also diminished, if not eliminated, the subcontinent's old leverage with the world: Come and stop us or we will nuke each other. Mr Trump may be the one we blame but there is generally a wariness about the region holding the world to blackmail after claiming to be responsible nuclear weapons powers.

Of course, it applies much more to Pakistan than India. Because, in the subcontinent, the nukes are the preferred weapon of the weaker power, the likely loser. Beginning with V P Singh's spineless year in 1990, Pakistan has used the nuclear deterrent entirely to its own advantage, keeping its provocations within that threshold, ruling out any sizeable retaliation from India. Obsession with tactical nukes tells us that the Pakistanis have probably not reviewed that position. If they haven't, they will get a disastrous surprise. This Indian establishment no longer sees nukes as only one side's deterrence. If you take chances with it, and that too in election weeks, you might as well have pulled that trigger.

By Special Arrangement with ThePrint

The rise of xenophobia across the world



VIEWPOINT DEVANGSHU DATTA

There is a common thread running through the rise of the right wing across the world and that thread is xenophobia. The fear of the outsider, laced with a cocktail of racism and religious bigotry, have been skillfully used by right-wingers in various places to manipulate varying political systems in order to take and consolidate power.

This has happened through democratic means in many places. Consider Donald Trump with his "wall" and his broad categorisation of Latin Americans, Muslims and all non-whites as criminals. Mr Trump still has roughly 40 per cent approval, despite children being forcibly separated from their parents, and dying

in government custody.

Consider Brexit, with its "Leaver" campaign founded on fears of Britain being overrun by foreigners. It is only now that the average Briton is realising the enormity of the cost of leaving the European Union. Similarly in Hungary, where Viktor Orban won an election by orchestrating a campaign against the "invasion" of asylum seekers. Or France, where Marine Le Pen took over her father's mantle as the dark angel of the far right. Or India, where the BJP's re-election campaign mixes majoritarian rhetoric, with bigotry and dog-whistling.

It's all about the fear of the outsider. It is easy to rationally dismiss xenophobic rhetoric. Immigrants tend to work harder than the locals. They take the dirty, low-paid jobs. They tend to generate more in taxes than they cost in terms of social welfare.

In the US, an immigrant is far less likely to commit a random mass-shooting than a citizen born and bred. In Britain, the National Health Service will likely collapse if Brexit results in all the foreigners leaving. France would never have won either of its World Cups without the footballing skills of immigrants from its former colonies.

But the fear of the foreigner is atavistic and widespread. The campaigns referred to above were all based on large dollops of fake news and false premises, and each was manipulative in the extreme. But each of these campaigns was successful because it tapped into an extant wellspring of bigotry and xenophobia that affected a substantial chunk of the local electorate.

In every case, there were historical causes for the fears. Those fears may no longer be rational but there was a time when they were. Modern India is a country created by waves of large-scale migrations and invasions, and it endured two hundred years of colonialism. That makes it easy to trigger majoritarian sentiments and xenophobia.

Britain was a relatively small country that suffered the threat of catastrophic invasions by Napoleon and Hitler. The White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) settlers who are the single-largest American demographic achieved their pre-eminence position via the genocide of the original settlers, alongside the import of slaves. Some WASPs are terrified of possible pay-back if they cease to be a majority.

Xenophobia was actually rational back in the colonial era. The Native Americans and the Africans of the Slave Coast were absolutely right to fear the Europeans.

The technological superiority of Europeans enabled them to brutally subjugate populations that outnumbered them by orders of magnitude.

Xenophobia is less rational in the 21st century because easy global information flows make it hard to create and maintain the technological asymmetry required to keep populations in subjugation. But getting a plurality of the world's voters to recognise that xenophobia is irrational, may admittedly, be difficult.

Oddly, xenophobia might become entirely rational again if homo sapiens do become space faring animals. Suppose that we encounter an alien civilisation vastly superior to us, technologically. Those aliens may enslave us, or exterminate us, for much the same reasons that humans have enslaved, or exterminated other humans. The aliens may even eliminate humans purely because we represent a potential threat. And if we encounter an alien race technologically inferior to us, we may decide to exterminate them before they do it to us! That's the "Dark Forest" theory, which sees the Universe as a dark forest, where predators lurk everywhere. It is a horrible thought.

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Stepping into their shoes

EYE CULTURE

ADRIJA SHUKLA

What is it like to be a woman in a male-dominated profession like a police officer? Netflix has recently released a film, *Soni*, to take the viewers closest to the possible answer. The film is a brutally honest representation of the scenario, which neither takes us too deep into the miseries of the women nor gives false hopes.

The best thing about the actors of the film is that one can relate to them. We have seen the glimpse of these women everywhere around us. These are not larger than life characters that do extraordinary things. They are just regular women, who come up with their own way of dealing with things despite pressure from society and their own families.

The film, directed by Ivan Ayr, is a story of a sub-inspector Soni (Geetika Vidya Ohlyan), a hot-headed woman, who has anger issues. After a point, Soni wants to teach every man a lesson who misbehaves with her. She obviously has to face consequences for her actions. Soni works under an IPS officer, Kalpana Ummat (Saloni Bhatta), who has to face a lot of flak because of Soni's actions. But, Kalpana does not leave Soni's side. In fact, the comradery between the two women gains strength because of their dedication towards their work.

Kalpana is a level-headed woman. At home, her mother-in-law is worried that she has crossed her 30s, time is running out, when will she become a mother? At the office, her husband tells her that her juniors are getting her into trouble because she is too soft in dealing with them. But Kalpana knows what she wants. During the film, this character feels suffocated because of the behaviour of the people but she doesn't shy away from performing her personal and professional duties.

With changing times, women have become more vocal about exercising their rights. But a lot of stereotypes still come handy when women step into the roles that are conventionally performed by men. Taking the example of the Army, recently, General Bipin Rawat said that the Army is not yet ready for women in combat roles. "We are not yet ready for that... Women are needed to be prepared for that kind of hardships. It is not easy. Let us not compare ourselves with the western nations. They are more open," he said. "There are orders that we have to cocoon her separately. She will say that somebody is peeping, so we will have to give a sheet around her." I think in that case a better statement would have been that men, along with women, will also be needed to be prepared for that kind of situation.

General Rawat even said since the majority of Indian soldiers still come from villages, they will have a problem taking

orders from a woman commander. Apparently, when it comes to the show of power, it is pretty good to make a woman lead an all-men Army services contingent on the Republic Day.

Contrary to man, no matter how high-ranking officer a woman becomes, her gender never leaves her. This reminded me of the time, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while his visit to Bangladesh, praised his counterpart by saying that Sheikh Hasina was tough on terrorism, "despite being a woman."

A few weeks ago, Congress president Rahul Gandhi sparked a controversy with his remark. "The watchman with a 56-inch chest ran away and told a *mahila*, defend me," he said. The use of the word *mahila* for Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in a demeaning manner angered many women activists. If you have seen the video in Rajasthan, where Gandhi was giving his speech, the mic also captured the obvious loud cheering from audiences after his remark.

In one of the scenes, during duty on a check-post at night, the police officers stop the car of a drunk Navy officer. Being a senior on the duty, Soni tells the officer to come out of the car. Her anger shoots up when the officer holds her hand. She throws him out and beats him up. She had to face repercussions for her decisions and being her boss, Kalpana, too. When Soni is attacked at home, her estranged husband tells her had he been living at home, no one would have dared to do this to her.

Throughout the film, Kalpana's junior officers call her 'sir' which seemed to be a practice in the police department. She scolds her juniors for not following the protocol of giving women officer to an abandoned girl, found by a constable. In one of the scenes, Kalpana's husband, who is also a high-rank police officer, asks her why did she even choose to become an IPS officer, when she can't behave like one? Despite being dismissed as someone soft and weak, she does not stop dealing with people with empathy. Sometimes I feel that in the fight of feminism and equality, women have been so busy proving themselves to be tough that no one now gives importance to this quality empathy anymore.

Soni comes home after the spat with the Navy officer. Her neighbour gives her ultimate solution to her problems. "Start wearing *sindoor* (vermillion). People will stop misbehaving with you." On the other hand, Kalpana teaches her 13-year-old niece to confront the students who made fun of her periods at school. Maybe women helping women will make this world a little better.

Every week, Eye Culture features writers with an entertaining critical take on art, music, dance, film and sport

Voters' dilemma: BJP? No. Modi? Yes.



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

Two weeks ago, a very senior member of the Congress publicly said the BJP would lose 135 seats in the 2019 general election. I thought this was a very precise number, based possibly on some internal estimates of the party. He did not, however, say how many the Congress would win.

Should this happen — and that huge a fall seems unlikely — the BJP will come down to 147 seats from the 282 it won in 2014, and 133 from its current position of 268 in the Lok Sabha.

This is very close to the 138 seats it had won in 2004.

Meanwhile, the Congress itself does not believe that it will get more than 125 seats, which is around three times what it won in 2014. Less hopeful and more realistic estimates place its tally at around 100. That will be enough for it to cry victory and hail Rahul Gandhi as a champion.

If we take the most optimistic estimates of the Congress — BJP 133, Congress 125 — who will the president invite to form the next government? This question has only one answer.

Then, whoever the prime minister is, we will have to see if he gets 1996'd. Remember how Atal Bihari Vajpayee was unseated after just 13 days in office? That too could happen if the BJP loses more than 100 seats.

Also if, as seems more likely, the BJP and the Congress between them manage to win only around 280 seats, the rest of the parties will account for the

remaining 264 seats. In 2014 BJP+Congress was 326 seats, which left the rest with 218.

So regardless of who leads the next government, we are going to have a weak or a very weak government after five years of a very strong one. For this not to happen, the party that leads the next government will have to win at least 210 seats because it is only then that its foundational weakness diminishes sufficiently.

We have the experiences of 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004 as witness. Each of these governments was hostage to regional parties. True, the Congress won 206 seats in 2009 and was less of a hostage than in 2004, where it had won 145. But it squandered the opportunity.

Caste, community, Inflation

So, what are we in for? Politics in India is about two things only — 90 per cent of it is about social policies and only 10 per cent is about economic policies. And, most regrettably, 90

per cent of the 90 per cent is about caste and community while 90 per cent of the remaining 10 per cent is about inflation.

It is also true that for their own reasons both the BJP and the Congress have avoided using caste as their main driver. The BJP has tried to unite the Hindus and the Congress has tried to unite the minorities.

This is perhaps the only good thing they have in common. On bad things they are peas of a pod. Take out the family from the Congress and the RSS from the BJP and the two could unite.

Thus, after 2004, the Congress focused on community — recall the 2015 Antony report, which said it had bent too far in favour of Muslims — and neglected inflation and caste. The BJP, on the other hand, has always focused on inflation and community while neglecting caste.

The result has been a walkover for the caste-based parties. These could well account for