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Once upon a hijack

Could the Punjab Police have prevented the hijacked IC 814 flight from taking off to Kandahar? The then Punjab DGP recalls the sequence of events on that fateful day in December 1999



SARABJIT SINGH

A LOT HAS been written about the dramatic hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu in December 1999. There is currently a political blame-game on. The then BJP-led NDA government is accused of surrendering to the demands of the hijackers. They are accused of escorting the Jaish-e-Mohammad supremo, Masood Azhar, to Kandahar after releasing him from Kot Bhalwal jail in Jammu. Senior intelligence officers were involved in the negotiations with the hijackers and the release of Azhar and the two others, who were exchanged for the hostages.

It is a matter of public record that the then foreign minister, Jaswant Singh, went with the three to Kandahar, where they were released to the Afghan Taliban. In all this revived interest, the apparent failure of the Punjab Police to take action at Amritsar, the only point in India where the hijacked flight landed, has also been dredged up.

As the then Director General of Punjab Police, I would like to place on record my version of the events of that fateful day. There has been much finger pointing against the Punjab Police. But barring a report in one national magazine, then based on a perfunctory talk with me, and AS Dulat's remarks in his book, *Kashmir: The Vajpayee Years*, based on an afternoon lunch on the banks of the Serpentine in Hyde Park, London, no one has bothered to check with me as to what happened at Amritsar that day.

For what it is worth, here's my version. I had come home to my official residence, in Chandigarh, from a dental appointment that evening. Switching on the television, I saw the news of the hijack. For a few minutes initially, I was blasé about it. In any case, there were few details then. But my own training as a pilot (I hold a private pilot's licence) made me realise that owing to the flight being on a possible flight path to Pakistan, there was a more than even chance that Amritsar might come into the picture, as in an earlier incident.

The late Jagdish Parshad Birdi was then Inspector General of Police, Border Range, Amritsar. I asked him to move two companies of Punjab Police commandos then available with him to the Raja Sansi airport immediately. I also requisitioned the state helicopter, but the Pawan Hans pilots called and told me that they were in Bathinda on duty with the then chief minister, Parkash Singh Badal. Although CM Badal had cleared the chopper for my use, they were prohibited by the Indian Air Force from taking off after sunset.

Sometime later I was told that the hijacked plane had landed in Amritsar. Birdi, with his earthy good sense, had stationed his Deputy Inspector General, Jasmininder Singh, at the airport, and Jasmininder was already then in the ATC (Air Traffic Control) when IC 814 landed.

The plane taxied to the apron and immediately Captain Devi Sharan requested for fuel, saying he had only about nine minutes worth left. Yet he did not switch off his engines, which was odd. I refused the fuel. By now, Jasmininder from his mobile phone



Suvajit Dey

(which were then a rarity), had put me on to Devi Sharan's conversation, which the airport director, VS Mulekar, had wisely put on the ATC public address system. Despite using a pleading tone, the pilot sounded like a brave, composed man in control of himself. Jasmininder also pleaded with me for fuel but I refused. In the meantime, Jasmininder explored the possibilities, found the bowser (the refueling tanker), and called for the operating staff of the same, who had all packed off for the night. That they had to be brought back to the airport gave us a few more precious minutes, though at that time, we could hardly tell how long we had.

By then I was on the phone with Delhi, where I was told that the Central Crisis Management Group was in session. The top brass of the country were there. On their behalf, my interlocutor was my batch mate Shyamal Datta, the then director of the Intelligence Bureau. He asked if I could immobilise the aircraft, one suggestion being that we could maybe puncture the tyres by shooting at them. It was an outlandish suggestion, and I don't know if others were listening at the other end when I used some expletives and asked him if he thought those were cycle tyres. They were huge tubeless tyres, multiple to each wheel, and puncturing them would have set off huge explosions and possibly not had any impact. Shyamal asked if we could disable the plane any other way. I then explained our limitations. The only approach to the fuselage was by the ancient rolling ladder, which would be spotted the minute it rolled. That or any other action would invite reprisals and likely result in casualties among the hostages. We were well-armed with automatic weapons and long-range rifles, but their use would equally invite a response of course, which we could deal with, but also to the passengers and crew. Our own firing would be mainly blind so passenger casualties were very likely. Delhi's response was a vehement "No casualties to passengers". Also, I was asked to hold on as the National Security Guard team was coming.

Here let me clarify that in national level crisis situations, it is the Centre that has overriding authority and states are bound to obey

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their guidance/orders. The Punjab State Crisis Management Group was already in operation. The chief minister, chief secretary R S Mann, the home secretary and I were in constant telephonic contact. The only caution given by CM Badal was to be careful about the possibility of casualties.

By now, Jasmininder again pleaded for refueling. On my refusing, he told me that the hijackers had killed a passenger. Then I was relayed Devi Sharan's voice pleading for fuel as one passenger had been killed. Since no body was thrown out I stuck to my stand of no fuel. Rupin Katyal, one of the passengers, had been seriously injured after being slashed on the throat with a knife by one of the hijackers. He subsequently died.

I had gambled that being low on fuel and stationed on the apron, the plane was in no position to take off. One of the earliest lessons in flying was always to take off from the end of the runway so as to have adequate space to deal with emergencies, including an engine failure on takeoff.

But to my great shock, Jasmininder suddenly called to say the aircraft had taken off. On his own initiative, he had moved the bowser towards the plane to disable the wheels while putting on a show of refueling. But the hijackers got suspicious and ordered the pilot to take off. Devi Sharan was forced to take off a fully loaded Airbus rock bottom on fuel from the middle of Amritsar's inadequate-length runway, and was allowed to land in Lahore after he threatened to land on a road because he had no fuel.

Could the Punjab Police have done something to prevent the flight from taking off? Dulat has mentioned my telling him that I was no K P S Gill. True, I wasn't the one to take matters in my own hands to launch a commando operation of my own in defiance of Delhi. And, we had very little time with the aircraft, and instructions that there should be no casualties.

IC 814 took off after about 47 minutes from Amritsar. On being informed of the departure, Shyamal Datta's reply to me was: "Your headache is over. Ours is getting worse."

The writer is former DGP, Punjab

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

A Chinese economy forging ahead under pressure will help boost the global economy and, more importantly, help people to have a deeper understanding of economic patterns. —GLOBAL TIMES CHINA

A misunderstood scheme

There is no trade-off between primary and secondary healthcare. In Ayushman Bharat, the two sectors complement each other



INDU BHUSHAN

RECENT MEDIA reports, including ones in this newspaper, have raised raised concerns that Ayushman Bharat promotes secondary and tertiary care at the cost of primary care. These reports attribute these concerns to Amartya Sen's recent comments on the scheme, which may have been taken out of context. Sen's views on the need to strengthen primary care might have been wrongly construed as his disapproval of Ayushman Bharat. Other reports suggest that the scheme, at best, targets a narrow set of healthcare issues and, at worst, benefits only a few rich individuals. Sen's reported comments and other concerns can be deconstructed as: One, Ayushman Bharat as a solution is not consistent with the problem — in other words, the scheme is a giant leap in the wrong direction. Two, primary healthcare has been historically neglected and the resources spent on Ayushman Bharat can instead be spent on strengthening primary healthcare. Ayushman Bharat will benefit only a few rich individuals, the doubters claim.

There seems to be a perception that all health needs in India relate only to primary care and there is no need to expand support for tertiary care. There is also a perception that Ayushman Bharat is taking away resources from primary care and benefiting big private hospitals. A careful analysis shows that both these perceptions are wrong.

Even if we do our best to promote good health, there will still be a critical need for tertiary care and secondary care. First, even with the best prevention programmes, we will still have a significant prevalence of non-communicable diseases. The countries with the best preventive systems have strong provisions for secondary and tertiary care. Moreover, with the aging of population due to increase in life-expectancy, diseases related to old age will increase — even among the poor. Third, a strong primary healthcare system requires an equally strong secondary and tertiary healthcare system. Screening for cancers, for example, has limited utility if there is no system to treat the disease. Secondary and tertiary care in the country is largely provided by private sector. These services have largely been, hitherto, inaccessible to the poor. Ayushman Bharat has changed that.

Ayushman Bharat has two legs. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), covers more than 50 crore people in the country — the poorest — against serious illnesses. It has an equally important and equally ambitious leg to strengthen primary healthcare — the scheme seeks to upgrade more than 1.5 lakh health facilities to health and wellness Centres (HWC). The perception that Ayushman Bharat does not support primary healthcare might be due to greater visibility of PMJAY in the media as compared to the other leg. An ailing person treated successfully under PMJAY is more visible, emotionally more appealing

and makes for a better "news", as compared to the screening of millions of people for cancer, for example. However, actually, the scheme's two legs complement each other.

Could the money spent on Ayushman Bharat be better spent on strengthening primary healthcare? Ayushman Bharat is a very recent initiative. The chronic neglect of primary healthcare in the country cannot be attributed to it. The resources spent on the PMJAY component of Ayushman Bharat are still a very small proportion of the entire health budget. A major portion of the health budget is spent on primary care and secondary care, almost entirely focused on public sector supply of the healthcare services.

There is no trade-off between primary care and curative care; the policy challenge is to strengthen both. Ayushman Bharat does exactly that with its two legs. In the medium-term, we need to expand the public resources for the health sector. The 2017 Health Policy clearly commits to increasing the health sector allocation to 2.5 per cent of the GDP — for decades, the health sector's budget has hovered at around 1 per cent of the GDP. We have recently seen very high level political commitment for the health sector — perhaps for the first time in recent decades. We have also seen an increased allocation for the sector. If this trend continues, we should be able to provide much needed tertiary care for the poor without compromising the support for primary healthcare.

The assertion that Ayushman Bharat will benefit only few rich individuals is highly misleading. In fact, the initiative will benefit the poorest in the country. The concern that some private insurance companies will receive a windfall gain is also misplaced. States have freedom to choose the implementation model; in fact, most states, including all the large ones (UP, Bihar, MP, AP) have decided to use a trust model where the government directly purchases healthcare services from the hospitals without using any insurance company. Of the states that are using the insurance model most have resorted to public sector insurance companies. Finally, the scheme has a "claw-back" clause in its model contract, which limits the margin of the insurance companies to only 15 per cent — they will have to return the government any extra margin. This margin includes administrative expenses and therefore the potential profit is much less than 15 per cent, while the loss for the company could be quite high.

The scheme's design ensures that private sector hospitals do not unduly receive a large proportion of financial resources. The payment for services is based on fixed package rate for each procedure, which is largely based on the marginal cost. The scheme also has strong features for preventing, mitigating and deterring fraud and abuse.

The momentum gained by the scheme in a short period since its launch testifies to the huge unmet need for curative care in the country. If the momentum continues, it will dramatically change the face of the country's health sector in the country — for the better. It will prove to be a giant leap towards Universal Health Coverage.

The writer is CEO Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana



APOORVANAND

Islamophobia, theirs and ours

Until we realise our several complicities, it will continue to rage

THE MASSACRE at Christchurch in New Zealand has forced European countries into deep introspection. New Zealanders are bewildered as to how and why such a horror could visit their country. In Australia, the birthplace of the accused, people are being asked to look at the reality of increasing malice and hatred against Muslims in particular and immigrants in general. It has been pointed out that the massacre is only the end point of the Islamophobia that is spreading across public life, institutions and the media.

Amidst this recognition of Islamophobia, it was heartening to read about mosques across the globe being flooded with flowers from people from other faiths. In Singapore, New Zealanders went to mosques to express their solidarity with the Muslims. They felt it was important not only to underline that the perpetrator, who sought to speak in their name through his 74-page manifesto, was rejected by them, but also to express their active empathy.

You could see the sincerity of pain on the face of the prime minister of New Zealand and could sense the urgency in the worry expressed by the Australian prime minister. He has also supported the call for action against an Australian senator who put the blame on the victims.

In India, home to the second largest population of Muslims in the world, we saw no such initiative. Indian Muslims were killed

in the massacre but no compatriot sympathised with them. It is futile to expect the governments and political classes to join their kin in their mourning. We happily accept the foreign currency they bring but would not share their loss.

My mind went to the attacks on mosques in India — Malegaon, Mecca Masjid, Ajmer Sharif. How did the nation react then and what was the response of the governments?

Mosques, in these election times, are in the news for a different reason. The BJP in Delhi has asked the Election Commission to "appoint special observers for the mosques especially in the Muslim-dominated areas so that political and religious leaders cannot spread hate among people to influence elections on the lines of religion". It did not evoke outrage. Barring the AAP, no political party thought it necessary to call out the BJP for making mosques objects of suspicion.

In the West, there are people who work constantly to identify Islamophobia in all forms and demand action against those who promote it. In India, we have normalised it so much that if Muslims complain, they are called unnecessarily touchy. Experiences of Muslim children being mocked and bullied in their schools travel through generations. A man past his 70s tells me about how he was harassed by his schoolmates 68 years back for being a Muslim. A man in his 50s said that sitting through the classes of medieval his-

tory was painful for him. He could feel the accusing eyes of his classmates as the stories of Muslims plundering India rolled out as objective history. A Muslim girl, all of 6, studying in a "progressive" school in Delhi, thanked her Hindu mother for being so wise as to not let the surname of her Muslim father be in her name. The principal of my daughter's school refused to believe her when she complained about a teacher indulging in blatantly othering Muslims. And we are not even talking about the chain of schools under the Saraswati Shishu Mandir organisation which turn out Hindus as perfect Others of Muslims.

Policy makers and implementers unabashedly express their Islamophobia under cover of national security. Recently a friend shared his horror after returning from a mid career training of police officers and civil servants who openly denounced Muslims and underscored the need to "put them in their place". Madrasas are being asked to submit proof of nationalism by different governments. It has not shocked us that in the name of culture and economy the eating habits of a large number of people have been criminalised. The Supreme Court, by making Sri Sri Ravishankar one of the mediators in the Ayodhya dispute, legitimised Muslimophobia. You can speak against Muslims and yet remain respectable.

The ultimate form of Islamophobia ex-

perienced by Muslims is when they are told that they are so modern that they do not look like Muslims. Muslims are asked to shed their Muslimness in all forms to be accepted as equal members of a civilised society.

Elections are around the corner. We will see the open demonisation of Muslims as a means to mobilise Hindu votes. Recently, in the campaign for the assembly elections, the prime minister and his party talked about a conspiracy to make a Muslim the chief minister of a state. A minister in Assam is openly talking about the fear of some constituencies turning Muslim majority and also about the "disastrous" prospects of Badruddin Ajmal becoming the chief minister. We have made Muslim demonisers our leaders and ask Muslims to accept them to prove their tolerance and inclusiveness. We see them as our role models. It is seen as a good bargain to secure economic growth.

Writers like Premchand and Ramdhari Singh Dinkar repeatedly asked Hindus to accept Muslims as equals. They are long dead. Islamophobia continues to run like blood in our veins. We share our lives with those who hate Muslims and yet claim to remain civilised. Unless we first recognise this duplicity, we would not be able to move towards getting rid of this disease.

The writer teaches Hindi at Delhi University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAWANT'S TASK

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The CM's test' (IE, March 20). The first priority of Pramod Sawant, the new chief minister of Goa, will be to prove his government's majority in the floor test and to provide political stability. This would mean a fine balancing act between his party MLAs and the BJP's allies. Diversifying Goa's tourism based-economy while keeping its fragile ecology intact will need vision and acumen.

Vijai Pant, Hemptur

LEADERS WE NEED

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Ardern's way' (IE, March 20). When the tide of populism swept across the globe, right-wing populists leaders like Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Viktor Orbán in Hungary gained traction. New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern emerged as the new hope in such an era. She showed immense maturity after the deadly terrorist attack. German Chancellor Angela Merkel showed similar maturity earlier when all European states closed their borders for migrants.

Suchak D Patel, Ahmedabad

ONLINE DECORUM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Foreign hand returns' (IE, March 19). The cyber

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

space must be used responsibly given the prevalence of fake news. A road map must be framed to make social media giants accountable. The Election Commission is playing a commendable role in monitoring social media content for political purposes and regulating it.

Pranay Kumar Shome, Kolkata