

12 IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

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WHY RUCHIR SHARMA

Ruchir Sharma has been travelling across India with a group of journalists and politicians for over two decades, documenting electoral politics, through interviews with top leaders such as Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi, and conversations with voters. His new book, *Democracy on the Road*, is an outcome of these

travels and offers insights into how — since Indira Gandhi's time — issues of caste, economics, development, and corruption have influenced politics on the ground. A global investor and columnist, Sharma has previously authored *The Rise and Fall of Nations: Forces of Change in a Post-Crisis World* in 2016 and *Breakout Nations* in 2012



"In 2007, I met Rahul Gandhi in Moradabad. In the two-hour meet, we got a 1 hour-59 minute speech on caste politics in UP. I found it very disorienting... There has possibly been a change in him in the last few years"

VANDITA MISHRA: In the last chapter of your book, you say that anti-incumbency is a heartening phenomenon because it doesn't allow anybody in power to get too comfortable. Secondly, throughout the book one gets the sense that you are looking for that grand reformer, but in the end you say that there are no grand reformers, and that hope lies in smaller changes in states, rather than at the Centre. Could you place these two conclusions in the context of the situation we are in now, in what could be India's first national security election?

Will this be the first national security election? I am not sure because even the 1999 election was fought in the backdrop of the Kargil war, and you can argue how much that influenced it.

It is generally believed that whichever party or government is in power tends to benefit when the nation feels it is under siege. But even assuming that the BJP benefits a lot from it, assuming that their vote-share goes up a bit... No national party in India has ever got more than 50 per cent of the votes, going back to the first election, including the Congress, given that there was one national party in all those decades. Even in this election, at best, the BJP's vote-share will go up to maybe 35-36 per cent from 31 per cent — assuming that there is a surge in its favour because of this nationalist kind of movement. The BJP recognises that even during the entire movement, as we have seen in the past few weeks, the headlines are the same, the small changes... They have given up seats in Bihar, they have given up seats in Maharashtra, to accommodate alliance partners. So, for me, that's the journey as far as India is concerned. This is still a continent like the European Union, it is not a country. There is no one narrative. So even though to us it appears that national security is the narrative, I don't know how much of that storyline carries into the hinterland.

VANDITA MISHRA: For the bulk of the book you talk about anti-incumbency as a symptom of the 'broken State', but towards the end you actually hold it up as the most heartening feature of Indian democracy.

A year ago, there was so much talk in India that we were heading towards a one-party hegemony. That the BJP had the entire organisational strength, the muscle power, the money power, and so it seemed as if there was nothing that could beat the party. That's what the conventional wisdom was a year ago. Since then, the election results (in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh), and the fact that so many coalitions have come together in the states, are things that have happened despite the odds.

In this country, whosoever is in power, the entire business community favours over that party, the entire money power seems to be with that party. Despite these very obvious advantages, the underdog, with much less money, and a weaker organisation, is able to win. The conversation in Delhi is as if the business people are able to buy out whichever politician is in power, they are able to manipulate stuff. Despite that, the fact that the voter at the end of the day is able to toss out the incumbent... that is heartening.

VANDITA MISHRA: The other conclusion, which is less heartening, is your giving up on the search for the grand reformer. You talk in this context about Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Chandrababu Naidu and others. You speak about the time when you were travelling with Naidu in his hi-tech van. In his van, he is a reformer. When he goes up to the roof to address the people, he is a populist. By the end of the book, you give up on the idea.

I grew up in India in the 1980s and '90s, with a sort of naive feeling as a kid that we have got political freedom so early, then why don't we get economic freedom? That is the basic question that would haunt me. I grew up in the era where everyone celebrated Margaret Thatcher (former UK PM), Ronald Reagan (former US president) and others. I remember having my first extensive meeting with Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi in 2002. I was 28 then. I had the hope that I could go and speak to Sonia Gandhi and tell her what the world is doing, the reforms that are taking place. I thought she was relatively new in Indian politics and that she would understand. After an hour, I walked out crestfallen. I felt I was on a completely different wavelength.

In 2004, Naidu lost. I quote in the book what he told us after he won the election in 1999 — "This is a message to the world. People are sceptical that reforms don't take place anywhere. But, in India, free market economy can actually work." There was a moment of hope. But then onwards, the re-

'Biggest sign of statist control is that no businessman will speak out against govt. It's different in the US'

Global investor and author Ruchir Sharma says national security may not be the only narrative in Lok Sabha polls, believes hope for real reform lies in states, notes that development is only one of the factors that impacts polls, and says Oppn has understood alliance game



Ruchir Sharma with National Opinion Editor Vandita Mishra in *The Indian Express* newsroom. Gajendra Yadav

alisation kept on sinking in that in India maybe this is just not going to work.

When Narendra Modi got elected in 2014, I remember writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, which I look back with some embarrassment, that this is India's Reagan moment. They loved it in the West. My idea was that because he was talking of 'minimum government, maximum governance', he would go down that path. At the time, many were fed up with the UPA government's welfare schemes, which were being rolled out one after the other, with no focus on economic reforms. I was hopeful that Modi would actually do it (reform).

The biggest reform was demonetisation, which for me is the sort of policy that only a Communist nation makes. I was very upset with what happened. Now, at the end of Modi's term, it's back to one scheme after another.

VANDITA MISHRA: So what do you think went wrong? You were very impressed with the economic reforms Modi had undertaken in Gujarat.

I misunderstood it. It is very different to run a state and a country. At the state level, you can still talk to people and fix things. It's a project management kind of approach. You can put the right people in the right enterprises. At the national level, it is very difficult to do that. At the national level you have to devolve power; give as much power as possible to the states.

VANDITA MISHRA: Why do you not like Rahul Gandhi? In the book, you write about a two-hour meeting with him, where he speaks for 1 hour 59 minutes.

Saying 'I don't like him' is a strong statement. I talk about a 2007 meeting in Moradabad. We were a contingent of 20 people. We got a 1 hour-59 minute speech on caste politics in UP. I found it very disorienting. In 2010, when we met him in Bihar... after keeping the crowd waiting for four hours, he didn't even acknowledge us properly. Back then, I think, he felt that the 2009 victory was all about him. When we had subsequent interactions with him in 2012, he was still talking to us, rather than engaging with us. One of my favourite anecdotes is from 2012. We had a senior journalist from *The Financial Times* who asked him a question. He snapped back at her, saying how long have you been in India, how much do you understand India? She replied in Hindi that she had been here long enough, and even met his grandmother (Indira Gandhi) in Allahabad. She knew India very well. I did begin to see some easing up just before the 2014 general elec-

tions — he himself said that the 2014 election was the biggest learning for him. So there has possibly been a change in him in the last few years. I haven't had any extensive interaction with him since then.

VANDITA MISHRA: Priyanka Gandhi, on the other hand, seems to have made a wonderful first impression on you.

Yes, when we saw her in 2004 in Amethi and Rae Bareilly, the view then was that she is the one. That time there was still speculation about whether she would join politics. She made a real impression on the group in terms of her campaigning skills. Today, it is a different India. I don't know what difference she can make. Back then, it felt very different, and we were contrasting her with Rahul all the time. At the time, she could speak much better Hindi (than him), could connect with the people better. Now, we have to see it in terms of how Rahul does. He has changed his campaigning style. He has adopted the same Modi kind of shout-and-call, which is basically to say something and then wait for the crowd to respond.

SANDEEP SINGH: You spoke about the government's statist control. Can you elaborate?

The Central government today actually does not know how many schemes there are. I am told that at last count there were more than a 1,000 schemes — Central and Central government-assisted schemes. Even when it comes to schemes that the BJP and Modi criticised when they were in Opposition, like the MNREGA... Today, the allocation for those are up substantially.

Also, about privatisation. Even in the Vajpayee government we saw some privatisation. Today, I think privatisation in this country is a dead issue.

To me the biggest sign of statist control

in India is the fact that no businessperson will speak out against the government. In the US, if the business people do not like Donald Trump, they make it very apparent. Every CEO will tell you whether he or she is a Democrat or a Republican. In India, the fear of politicians is incredible. When you ask industrialists off the record why don't you tell the Prime Minister that this should be done, the response often is 'Mama hai kya (Do I want to die)?'. To me these are signs of very statist stuff... If you say anything against it (the government), the amount of opposition to that, the fear that they can come down on you like a ton of bricks, is very dominant today.

(When Modi was in Gujarat) I would hear that business people could actually approach him and get stuff done. I am not sure if that is happening today. I don't know if it is that one comment of 'suit-boot ki sarkar' (that has led to this), but I don't think the businessperson today feels that heard, as compared to what it was in Gujarat.

HARISH DAMODARAN: Vajpayee headed a coalition government and introduced big bang reforms. But you are saying that Modi hasn't done that, despite heading a majority government. Why is that?

As I document in the book, there are two things. One, there is no relationship in this country between coalition governments and reforms, and between coalition governments and growth. Indira Gandhi probably ran the most strong and stable government and was arguably the most statist in India's history.

Two, I think, context matters a lot. In 2011-12, when we got big bang reforms, India's growth rate had really slipped a lot. In India, I find, the best reforms only take place when the government has its back to the wall, for instance in 1991-92. I think one

of the biggest mistakes that this government made, and I think it happened more out of the incompetence of the Stats Department, was to accept the GDP data revisions in February 2015. It was early in their term and the GDP data revisions to me then looked totally ridiculous. By accepting it they began to think that the economy is doing a lot better than it was. Since then the narrative has been about how things are fine, without quite accepting what the reality is. To me it was one of the biggest mistakes. I think they are paying the price for it even today.

PRANAV MUKUL: During the 2014 election campaign, corruption was a big issue. Do you think this government has succeeded in living up to its promises? And, will it be an issue in the coming polls as well?

I think in India corruption is always an election issue. What I have documented is that we have seen a rise of some 'billionaires' in India. The ratio of good and bad billionaires has changed a bit — in favour of good billionaires. A lot of this has happened because the commodity boom went bust, the real estate sector went bust. Those are the sectors where a lot of the bad billionaires come from, compared to sectors such as technology. This has happened independently of the government.

At the top level, there is still a perception that corruption may have come down, but on the ground people will tell you that they don't feel the difference. So that is a reason that will continue to stoke some resentment and anti-incumbency.

KRISHN KAUSHIK: In your private conversations with industrialists, what are they saying about the present government?

There is generally a frustration that they wanted more. And, there is a fear factor which they don't like. So even if they are forced to say something in public, in private things have an effect on them in some way. There is certainly a dissonance that they have to live with.

MANOJ CG: Do you think the Congress and Rahul Gandhi are moving more and more towards the left of centre?

I always discount what people say when they are out of power. Left of centre, right of centre, I don't know, but in India everyone seems to be an incremental reformer when they come to power. In India, if you have to look at reforms, look at it state by state. That is where the real India story of reform is coming through. In the US, the number of (Indian) chief ministers who

land up, trying to sell their states as an investment destination... That is a big change.

VANDITA MISHRA: Has the gap between the city and the village shrunk in the past 25 years because of technology and migration?

Undoubtedly. As far as voting is concerned, caste tends to dominate. Yes, things have shrunk at some level. But caste is a reality and that reality hasn't changed in all these years of me covering elections.

VANDITA MISHRA: There is an interesting statistic that you mention in the book. You say that in 1988 there was no chief minister who was single, but by 2016 there were seven of them.

Everybody then was a family-based leader, and that was very much in sync with the Indian culture... By last year, we found that eight chief ministers were single or unattached, and the pioneer of this trend was possibly Jayalalithaa. Then there was Mayawati. There are different reasons for why this trend has come into play.

VANDITA MISHRA: Is this the Indian voter making a statement against dynasty?

It is. But I still feel that dynasty dominates in this country. There are three reasons for it. One is that there are leaders like Modi, (Yogi) Adityanath (UP CM), the RSS background people... These people are trying to make a point that we are single and so we cannot be corrupt. Then, there are leaders such as Mayawati who haven't made a statement about it. For them it was about the circumstances that they lived through, which had to do with a very patriarchal society, where they felt that they were fighting against a cabal of people. Also, politics is a 24/7 business. The distinction between personal and private is not there. It is unthinkable in America for you to have a meeting with a leader in their bedroom.

VANDITA MISHRA: The one strand you suggest that will play a major role in 2019, is alliance. PM Modi has referred to the Opposition's alliance as 'Mahamilavat'.

In 2014, when Modi won the election, at the peak of his wave, he got 31 per cent of the national vote. But the ratio between the number of seats he won and the number of votes he got was the highest in India's history — a 9 to 1 ratio. This was because the Opposition was so fragmented. Had the Opposition been a bit more united then, even at the peak of the Modi wave, he would not have got a majority. I think this time they have understood the game. The BJP is, therefore, sacrificing seats in many states to get its coalition politics correct.

SANDEEP SINGH: How has the BJP government performed on the economic front? Will it impact polls?

Development is, at best, one of the six factors that may matter. There's one telling statistic I quote in the book — there have been 27 instances in India's economic history when a state government has recorded a growth rate of 8 per cent or more over its five-year term. In 50 per cent of the instances, the state government has lost the elections. So development is, at best, a marginal issue in elections, and to win an election in India based solely on development is extremely difficult.

RAVISH TIWARI: In your journey, what changes did you observe among those at the bottom of the pyramid?

We noticed small changes. The most transformed state, which I document as well, has been Bihar. In February 2005, we went for our first poll trip to Bihar. We noticed small things. At election rallies hardly anybody wore any footwear. By the time we went for election rallies in Bihar in 2010, people were wearing slippers. In the 2014 rallies, people were wearing shoes with open soles, and now they are wearing shoes with closed soles. Also, the clothing. Even now in Bihar you see people not wearing woollen clothes because they are expensive. They wear multiple layers of clothing.

The other change that one sees is that there are many more women in voting queues now.



"The govt's biggest mistake was to accept GDP data revisions in 2015. By accepting it they began to think that the economy is doing a lot better than it was... They are paying the price for it even today"

ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

There are valuable lessons to be learnt from the success in eliminating separatism (in Punjab) and containing Maoism (in the Naxal-affected states, including West Bengal). The lessons are (1) firmness and maximum force in dealing with the adversary and (2) fairness and a conciliatory approach in dealing with the rest of the people

Muffled sounds of war drums

AS A NATION, we tend to draw a distinction between external security and internal security. For some reason, the former is permitted to wear the 'national' cloak but the latter is denied that privilege.

A close analysis will reveal that external security and internal security cannot be placed in two watertight compartments. The condition of one has an impact on the other. I shall, however, just flag the issue for the present.

As I write this essay on the Friday before you read it, India finds itself in a war-like situation, although no one believes that there will be a full-scale war with Pakistan. We were told that Pakistan lost an F-16 aircraft and perhaps the pilot too. The government also claimed that over 300 *jihadis* had been killed. I am prepared to believe my government, but the world will not suspend its disbelief. India lost a MIG-21, the pilot was taken prisoner by Pakistan and later released. From the official statements, it seems that both sides are posturing and neither really wants a war.

NO NEED FOR WAR

India does not need to get embroiled in a war. Unlike 1971, there is no pressure on India to go to the help of a restive province of Pakistan. Unlike Kargil, there is no attempt by Pakistan to grab Indian territory. Both countries know that the trigger for the present situation was the terrorist attack on a CRPF convoy in

Pulwama on February 14, 2019. We therefore come back to the core issue of terror. Terrorism has grave consequences for the internal security of any country. India is no exception.

- Let me list the issues that affect India's internal security:
1. Terrorism
 2. Infiltration of militants
 3. Naxalism or Maoism
 4. Communal/religious conflict
 5. Secession or separatism
 6. Reservation agitations
 7. Farmers' agitations
 8. Inter-state water or boundary disputes
 9. Language conflict

TERRORISM TOP THREAT

I wrote down the issues as they came to my mind without intending any order of importance, but the order in which they appear above reflects, more or less, the gravity of the issues. The order is also an evaluation of the government's relative success or failure in containing/resolving the issues. For instance, in 1965, the status of Hindi became an explosive issue in Tamil Nadu and the embers have not died down till this date, but, today, there is no serious language conflict anywhere in the country.

Terrorism (in Jammu and Kashmir) tops the list of issues that threaten India's internal security. Only a few years ago it was Naxalism or Maoism; that has been contained to a large extent, if not elimi-

nated. In the 1980s, it was separatism in Punjab but that scourge has been practically wiped out in that state.

There are valuable lessons to be learnt from the success in eliminating separatism (in Punjab) and containing Maoism (in the Naxal-affected states, including West Bengal). The lessons are (1) firmness and maximum force in dealing with the adversary and (2) fairness and a conciliatory approach in dealing with the rest of the people.

LESSONS NOW LEARNT

It has always been a puzzle to me why the Central government refuses to apply the lessons learned elsewhere to J&K. I suspect it is because of a deep-rooted animosity toward Pakistan. I have argued that the defence of the border (International Border and Line of Control) should be strengthened with more troops, and infiltration prevented. The government's record in this regard is poor. The year 2017 witnessed a high of 136 infiltrations and, when the final numbers are out, 2018 will be worse (it was 128 at the end of October). I have also argued that the government must adopt a softer approach in the Valley and engage the stakeholders. Instead, we have the infamous muscular, militaristic and majoritarian nationalism that only drives more young men into the arms of militant groups (126 in 2017 and 164 up to October 2018). The policy is a colossal flop, it has resulted in more infiltration

and more casualties. Pakistan is a misguided, often malevolent, neighbour. Nevertheless it is a neighbouring country. As A B Vajpayee recognised and as Dr Manmohan Singh once said, 'we can change our friends but we cannot change our neighbours'.

The BJP government has shifted the focus from terrorism to Pakistan and asks the people for unquestioning support. That will not pass muster after a few days and pertinent questions will be asked. By way of contrast, not a day passes without the Prime Minister making an unabashed political speech relentlessly attacking the Congress and the Opposition!

As far as J&K is concerned, unless the government addressed the fundamental question of alienation in the Kashmir Valley, the threat of terrorist acts in J&K will not be overcome. It will eventually acquire a larger dimension and become a national security issue.

That may be the way the BJP wants the situation to develop so that it can claim that Pakistan was 'defeated'. That's how the script is being written, but even carefully written scripts can throw up nasty endings. There was Kargil, there was Operation Parakram, there was the India Shining campaign, and there was A B Vajpayee. In the end the wisdom of the people handed the charge of the new government to another party and its allies.

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FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Well done, PM Modi

IF INDIA had not avenged the Pulwama massacre, I would have been angry and ashamed. I believe I speak for most Indians when I say this. I believe that like me they were ashamed when, after 26/11, all that our leaders did was try to shame Pakistan in the forums of the world. We knew, as did everyone else, that the attack on Mumbai was not some amateur exercise executed by 10 Pakistani *jihadis*. Long before David Headley's confessions, we knew that it was an act of war conducted with the synchronised proficiency of a military operation. But, Pakistan was allowed to get away with blaming 'non-State actors'. It was a big mistake that came after other big mistakes, like allowing Pakistan to get away with sheltering the evil men who in March 1993 planted bombs in Mumbai that killed nearly 300 people.

Last week, when Indian Air Force fighters flew deep into Pakistan to destroy *jihadist* training camps, they made it clear that the Islamic Republic next door will not get away any more with waging its cowardly, undeclared war against India. If we had done something like this after 26/11 it is possible that *jihadist* terrorism would not have become the cowardly but effective new form of warfare that it has become. So well done, Prime Minister, and may our response to *jihadist* attacks on India always be as potent.

Now it is time to look hard and carefully at some other harsh realities. We should begin by acknowledging that there is no 'deep State' in Pakistan, and there are no 'non-State actors'. Pakistan is ruled by military men who allow dwarf prime ministers a measure of municipal power. As soon as they show signs of becoming real political leaders, they are got rid of, one way or another. This has happened time and time again, but in India there are an unfortunately large number of political leaders and commentators who believe in the myth that there exists a kind of 'bonsai democracy' in Pakistan.

No Indian prime ministers (including Narendra Modi) have tried to talk peace with the civilian leaders thrown up by what they believe are real elections, without realising that these leaders have absolutely no say in matters of war and peace. They are actually vital actors in the charade of democracy that the Islamist military men continue to play because when there is a crisis they are put forward as Pakistan's real leaders to disguise the awful nature of the Pakistani State. This works so well that there has been no need for a coup since Pervez Musharraf ousted Nawaz Sharif 20 years ago.

Another harsh reality that we in India need to confront is that the reluctance of our prime ministers to respond effectively to *jihadist* crimes on Indian soil is seen by Pakistan's military rulers as evidence of 'Hindu cowardice'. One of the most unforgettable conversations I ever had in Pakistan was with the late General Hamid Gul. When he discovered that I was a Sikh, he said, "The Sikhs were not meant to have left. If the Sikhs had stayed in Pakistan we could have defeated India long ago." This remark would have been unimportant if it had not come from the father of the *jihad*. As Director General of the ISI, he created the *jihadist* groups that have been used as an instrument of Pakistani foreign policy ever since. He was not unique. I have met other Pakistani military men who believe the same kind of nonsense.

So I am proud of what the Indian Air Force did last week and congratulate the Prime Minister on his courageous decision to allow a military response. But, a little annoyed that the Modi government has let the narrative slip out of its hands. The strike across the border was not about Kashmir, but every foreign correspondent in Delhi has reported it as being just another chapter in the Kashmir story. BBC and CNN ignored the strike for more than 24 hours and then started banging on about how India and Pakistan had fought several wars over the 'disputed' region of Kashmir. Other than perfunctory briefings by the Foreign Secretary and senior officers of the armed forces, no attempt was made to persuade the media that this was not about Kashmir but about *jihadist* terrorism.

Pakistan believes that the 'core' of our problems is Kashmir, but this is not our view and we need to say this much more loudly than we have so far. It was only about Kashmir, there is no explanation for why Mumbai has been attacked more than once or for why there have been *jihadist* attacks in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. We have problems in Kashmir but they are our problems. With Pakistan we have one problem and one problem alone. It is *jihadist* terrorism.

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INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

THE PULWAMA EDGE

INDIA'S RESPONSE at Balakot to the Pulwama attack may have given Prime Minister Narendra Modi an edge in the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls. On social media, some known Modi baiters suddenly changed their tune. A Gujarati newspaper critical of Modi for over a decade did a U-turn. After Pulwama, there was a front-page cartoon of Modi with the headline '56-inch Cowardice'; after Balakot, the headline was '56-inch Valour'. A senior columnist with a Sangh background, who has frequently accused the PM and BJP president Amit Shah of sinking the country, wrote that heads of the Opposition will roll in the 'Third battle of Panipat' and that Modi could emerge with 300 seats. The Opposition fears that Modi has stolen the narrative and issued a statement urging the PM not to politicise the action against Pakistan. The timing of events certainly is disadvantageous for the Congress. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra was to have addressed her first press conference on the same day as the suicide attack. She discretely shelved the conference after observing a minute's silence for the dead men. The Congress postponed its Working Committee meeting in Gujarat following India's strike against Pakistan, and Jairam Ramesh was asked to redraft some of the party's resolutions, keeping in mind the stress on national security. The PM's decision to make Sushma Swaraj brief opposition leaders was seen as Modi putting himself on a pedestal above everyone else. But in politics the situation can change overnight, and elections are yet to be declared.

BJP'S MALIK PROBLEM

J&K GOVERNOR Satya Pal Malik does not conduct himself on the lines of a traditional head of state. The office is ceremonial and he is not expected to express himself beyond platitudes and prepared texts. But Malik is not a seasoned bureaucrat, nor does he belong to the Sangh tradition of not speaking out of turn. Malik, who was once Chaudhary Charan Singh's Man Friday, is from the Lok Dal/socialist school of politics, with an opinion on most topics and always ready to express himself freely. He may be a newsman's delight, but the BJP's Kashmir think-tank is furious with him for frequently giving interviews which embarrass the government.

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

THE PULWAMA attack has been countered by the attack on the Jaish-e-Mohammad camps. As expected, escalation followed. But as of now the crisis seems to be over.

Of course, our reaction would increase unrest in Kashmir itself. The feeling of alienation among Kashmiris, especially the younger ones, is undeniable. This is a festering sore because of the failure in

HISTORY HEADLINE

That September near Sialkot



S KRISHNASWAMY

THE SHOOTING down of a Pakistani F-16 by Wing Commander Abhinandan with his MIG-21 — the first-ever Indian pilot to do so — is of historical significance. It also marks the first MIG-21 kill of the legendary F-16 in the world, and ushers in a new era of air warriors snapping the umbilical cord tying them to old traditions and constraints regarding aerial combat. This coincides with the Indian Air Force attaining maturity through global exposure, improved infrastructure, upgraded machines etc, as a result of friendly relationships with foreign air forces and exercising with them.

The successful strike at Balakot on a dark night by a group of combat aircraft was the very first pre-emptive strike ordered by the government since Independence. It went like clock-work, signifying the sophistication in planning and executing a complex mission. A knee-jerk reaction, supported by the belief of their invincibility and of their superior force, brought the Pakistani Air Force out the next morning. The IAF was fully prepared; they were welcomed by a sharp formation of Mig-21 Bisons.

This incident takes me back to 1965 when the IAF launched the very first offensive air sweep mission against Pakistan after Independence. It is interesting to note the changes and improvements in these 54 years.

Towards the end of August 1965, the IAF Vampire jets attacked advancing Pakistani tanks in the Akhnoor sector and engaged them for two days. On the third day, Pakistani F-86 jets pounced on the slower Vampire jets and shot down four, killing three pilots. After that loss, the IAF withdrew the Vampires and the faster and heavier Mystere-IVs were employed. Gnat fighters were India's frontline air combat squadrons at the time. I had converted to the Gnat five months earlier. On September 1, eight pilots from Gnat Squadrons were chosen to head to Pathankot. On landing, we were taken to the briefing room. There was anticipation about what was to come. On the tarmac we were told that our task was to even out the score — to shoot down four enemy jets.

In the operations room there was a



Different variants of MIG fighter aircraft participate in an exercise. Indian Air Force

vertical glassboard with circles drawn and some rudimentary maps with borders marked. An elaborate briefing was held for four hours, but it was all mundane stuff. I felt 10 ft tall but had no idea how this would work out. We were told that our radars were not fully functional and to not depend on them for information on enemy aircraft. The base communication system was weak and we were to contact adjacent bases if we needed help.

Jammu airfield could not be used by the Gnats. The infrastructure for stay and meals was meagre. The next morning we were to go for a briefing at 4 am. The next morning, eight Gnats in two groups of four took off at dawn and headed low towards Sialkot, following the foothills up to Jammu. We then climbed to 20,000 ft towards Sialkot. Our brief was simple: to fly deep into Pakistan. Once we were detected, the enemy F-86s would come to intercept us, we were to fight them and shoot them down! But, we had no radar cover and depended totally on eyeballs. We can't imagine such a mission today. But there was a major difference: those days none of the fighters carried air-to-air missiles. Shooting was done with guns, for which the attacking aircraft had to come less than 800 metres near. Fighter pilots had to visually pick their targets for shooting down. Ground radars controlled and brought them closer to the target. These days all fighters carry air-to-air missiles that are launched typically between 2- to 10-km ranges.

We reached 20,000 ft and started pa-

trolling near Sialkot. Very soon, we spotted the F-86s. The Gnat was a very small aircraft and difficult to spot. Combat ensued, we managed to shoot down one F-86 while the rest disappeared. On our way back, we had no help from our ground stations and radars. We headed in a general direction. One of our members was running short on fuel and, being unsure of his position, landed on an airfield. The airfield happened to be inside Pakistan. That was a nightmare.

Despite infrastructural challenges, what kept us going was the spirit of taking risks beyond the call of duty — that was the way of life for fighter pilots those days, a bit careless, but highly motivated to fly. Our quality of training depended on our commanding officers and flight commanders, and our keenness to learn.

The IAF has set up fine institutions over the last two decades. They now have excellent infrastructure and support systems, and modern electronic displays and automated systems in the operations room. Our Air Force routinely trains with Air Forces of Europe, the US, the UAE, Oman, Singapore and others. With aerial tanker support, our combat aircraft have flown all the way to Alaska, South Africa, Singapore and elsewhere. They now have proven capabilities that can match the large modern Air Forces of the world.

I am glad that the government has taken cognisance of the capability and decided to utilise their potential effectively.

The writer is a former IAF chief

Justice for Kashmir

winning Kashmir (leave Jammu and Ladakh out for the moment) to India's side. This is again not a party, political issue. Over the last 70 years, India has failed to make Kashmir love it nor has it learned to love Kashmir. We say Kashmir is an integral part of India. Yet, the reaction against Kashmiris in mainland India showed that Indians do not like Kashmiris.

To be frank, this notion that these people living in peripheral lands far away from the Hindi heartland are strange and un-Indian aliens has hit the people of the Northeast as well, though not as violently as it does Kashmiris, but then they are not mostly Muslims. The Nagas and Assamese just feel neglected, not hated. The post-Pulwama reaction was quite clear in re-

vealing how little Kashmir has been integrated into India's national life. Time has come to change tack. Begin with the idea that Kashmir is a difficult part of India to govern, seek the reasons for this in the history of Kashmir. It is forgotten that relative to other princely states which went through accession and merger, Kashmir went through accession but never proper merger. Hyderabad and Junagadh held popular votes to approve the merger. Kashmir due to Pakistan invasion and UN ceasefire never had that process. Articles 370 and 35A stand witness to the unfinished nature of Kashmir's integration. Kashmiris have not forgotten this.

The hard line of many people is to do away with the transitional provisions 370

and 35A. What we should learn from Pulwama is that if that is done, Kashmir could become ungovernable. Notice that the US is about to leave Afghanistan. The Taliban have won. They will turn to India and terrorist attacks would redouble in Kashmir if there is local support. The sane and soft strategy would be to reaffirm that Articles 370 and 35A will stay in place until a proper referendum has been conducted in Kashmir. The referendum would be on whether 370/35A should stay as they are or be removed.

The referendum cannot be held as yet but the removal of 370/35A can be eliminated from immediate policy options. In the meantime, Kashmir should be treated as an autonomous part of India. It will give

Kashmiris a sense of uniqueness, though connected with India. Whatever *azadi* may mean to the separatists, autonomy will secure the trust of Kashmiris. How would autonomy differ from what is there now? It would require that elections be contested only by local parties. National parties should refrain from contesting. Tamil Nadu already has de facto autonomy as no outside parties get elected there. Why not Kashmir?

India needs to make sure Kashmir loves it. On its part, it has to learn to love Kashmiris and not alienate them. It has to trust Kashmiris to be able to manage their affairs, to feel special.

Autonomy is urgent. It will save lives, Indian and Kashmiri.