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Bigotry vs history

In the course of the BJP's Jana Raksha Yatra in Kerala, the state BJP chief, Kummanam Rajasekharan, described the 1921 Malabar rebellion as the first jihadi massacre in Kerala. The Sangh Parivar has, in the past too, insisted that this contested episode in the history of the freedom movement be remembered as an anti-Hindu revolt. Historians have, however, warned against such a reductive reading and encouraged an approach that recognises the numerous strands of this complex event.

The Malabar rebellion or Moplah revolt was inspired by the Khilafat Movement, which sought to bring Hindus and Muslims together to fight the British occupation of India. The Muslim-dominated southern Malabar region of the Madras Presidency wholeheartedly responded to the call of Gandhi and the Ali Brothers and revolted against the British administration. Scholars have argued that the rebellion was the culmination of a series of revolts by the restive peasantry of the region, mostly Muslims, from the 19th century onwards. By the time Khilafat Movement was declared, its relations with the British administrators and their local allies, the landlords, a majority of them upper caste Hindus, had frayed. When the British forces cracked down on the Movement, the class and religious divides came to the fore.

The religious undertone of the popular rebellion gave way to a communal overtone as it spread across the region. The anti-colonial impulse that triggered the rebellion receded to the background and the communal outrages committed by a section of the rebels became the focus of attention, especially since the post-Khilafat years saw a widening of the Hindu-Muslim divide. The British crackdown on the rebellion was severe: Many men found or suspected to have participated in the revolt were sentenced to death and a large number of them were shipped to the Andamans, then a penal colony of the British empire. Over a hundred prisoners died of suffocation in a railway wagon during the journey.

Communities in the region harbour very different memories of the rebellion. Recent scholarship on the rebellion has sought to contextualise it and explain its different strands — peasant unrest, religious dimension of the rebel leadership, anti-British impulse, and the communal outrages. Privileging a particular strand and relegating the others for political gain could amount to a communal reading of the event. The Jana Raksha Yatra has acquired a polarising pitch since it was flagged off last week. The BJP leadership must reflect on this outcome since it defeats the stated intent of the yatra, which is to end political violence.

Don't ban, say no

Every year, on the morning after Diwali, Delhi wins the world bad air championship. Already stressed by the burden of stubble burning in neighbouring states, besides atmospheric effects, air quality plummets to the lowest among the world's cities, and a pall is cast over the lives of the capital's citizens. The effects are so palpably visible that arguing the matter has become a mere game of scoring debating points, like the debate over tobacco use, and restrictive action seems the only reasonable response. But should that action take the form of a blunt instrument like a ban, imposed by a court? On Monday, the Supreme Court put its weight behind the 2016 ban on the sale of fireworks in Delhi-NCR, which was imposed in response to an unusual plea filed by children affected by air pollution. It has suggested that the ban follows on naturally from numerous awareness campaigns run by government agencies and civil society organisations which urge citizens to "say no to crackers". And yet, the ban is a problematic overstep.

A ban is an inefficient instrument. Aimed at restricting a celebration, the ban on firecrackers may alienate people who were otherwise receptive to the idea of giving up or cutting down on the fireworks. Besides, it would have the predictable effect of driving sales underground at inflated prices. No one would burst crackers in Delhi, precisely in the manner in which no one drinks in Gujarat. A Supreme Court ban which cannot be implemented in spirit would have the unfortunate effect of undermining the authority of the apex court in the eyes of the people. Besides, while the court has admitted that other factors like stubble burning contribute to the disastrous air quality of Delhi, the focus on fireworks makes its response seem unequal. Livelihoods will be harmed by the court's order, which is precisely the argument used by farmers to oppose moves against stubble burning — it yields a better margin than clearing the fields manually after the combine harvesters have done their job.

Matters of policy and implementation are ideally left to the legislature and executive. The court has a moral obligation to step in if they are in complete dereliction of their duty to the people. Since governments and society itself have shown an inclination to stop polluting practices, the last resort has been unnecessarily invoked. Instead, the Supreme Court could have urged government to intensify its efforts to influence the public will, and the process could have played out under its cautionary eye. That would have been a better solution than to impose a ban which may be observed more in the breach.

The smallest deed is better than the greatest intention.

—John Burroughs

By Narayani Gupta

In 1911, when Delhi, to its surprise, found itself honoured with the title of capital of British India, it was evident that national politics would become a real presence in the city, not just a long shadow. The open space outside the Town Hall in Chandni Chowk became a piazza for protesters. The new city was designed to ensure that such gatherings would not take place in New Delhi. Like most planned capital towns, the government offices were at the centre, surrounded by a protective swathe of open land. Kingsway matured into an expanse of green and water. Even in the 1950s, its two kilometres saw little traffic and few people, except at 9 in the morning and 5 in the evening when serried rows of bicycles flowed down, bearing babus big and small to work and then home.

Protest marches come in different lengths — some start at the Red Fort, others at ITO, some only the distance between India Gate and Krishi Bhavan. Their destinations have varied. The most defiant was that of December 2012 when crowds swarmed up Raisina Hill. (What an opportunity the President lost when he refused to come out!)

In the 1950s people could go up to Parliament House and shout slogans. I recall admiring my college-going sister who, with other students from Delhi University, assembled there and



sang out, "Purtgaali, Goa Chhodo!" But the agitators-turned-legislators wanted a greater distance between themselves and the people. An invisible cordon was thrown round Parliament House, and the "Boat Club" lawn on Rajpath was approved as an Indian Hyde Park Corner. This lasted till farmers' leader Mahendra Singh Tikait and his supporters in 1988 turned the lawns into a lively village (similar to protesting French farmers in 2010 turning the Avenue Champs Elysees literally into a champ/field). The venue for protests was moved to the Jantar Mantar crossing. At that time I wondered whether the Mandi House roundabout would be next, followed by the Ramlila Maidan. Sure enough, the National Green Tribunal has suggested just this. For the three generations from the 1940s, nostalgia is about different public places — the kabab-ery on the India Gate lawns cheekily called "Gayladies" (Gaylords was THE posh restaurant then) which was banished to Pandara Road; the Connaught Place Central Park coffee house which exuded fumes of political dissent, and which vanished during the Emergency; the gulmohur-studded Central Park for a still older generation; open-air film shows in neighbourhood parks... and it is but natural that if Jantar Mantar were to return to the anonymous sleekness of a New Delhi landscape, there are many who will feel a sense of loss. The Jantar Mantar site links Jaisinghpura of

the 1730s with Lutyens' city centre of the 1930s. The Ramlila Maidan links 14th century Tughlaq Delhi with the New Delhi of the 1960s. The Ramlila was enacted there in Mughal times and to the south were forests (jungle baahar), the shrine named for Mata Sundri, and the endless ruins of older cities (khandraat kalan). When the Lutyens team prepared a plan for New Delhi, they left the area from Dilli Gate to what we call ITO un-designated. This grew into a landscape of modern Delhi, with newspaper and administrative offices and educational establishments. The east-west boundary has two parallel roads, each named for a nationalist leader, Jawaharlal Nehru and Asaf Ali. The former is lined with hospitals and a college,

the other curves along Shahjahanabad's southern boundary, lined with business establishments. Between them lies the Ramlila Maidan. Here, in a moment of silence, the memories of Jayaprakash Narayan's rally in 1975 come crowding back, and the optimism of the swearing-in of the AAP government in 2015.

Jantar Mantar, with its shady full-grown trees, has a pleasant ambience, as has much of Lutyens' New Delhi. But an equally pleasant landscape can be generated on the frontier between the two Delhis. This area could be made into a dedicated public space, organised at different scales depending on the number of people to be accommodated, kept scrupulously clean, with provision for shade, for refreshments, and for people to stay

overnight. A tribute to democracy, and a way to integrate the two cities in Delhi.

To the north is Ajmeri Gate, a densely-built neighbourhood, to the south, in counterpoint, the towering Civic Centre, depressingly gigantic, looming over the Mughal city. In 2004, when it was under discussion, it had been suggested by the Delhi Urban Art Commission that the Civic Centre be faithful to its name, and create an atmosphere which welcomed its citizens, with open access to a good library, a museum, a restaurant serving simple clean food, and extend landscaped spaces to link New Delhi with Ajmeri and Turkman Gates, an area which carried memories of the brutality of 1975. This would bridge the gap between "Old" and New Delhi. Need I say that earnest assurances were given that this would be done, and none of it was. What a pity that the designing of public spaces in a city like Delhi is not seen as an opportunity to create an inclusive society.

To argue that the Jantar Mantar venue is more effective because it is three kilometres closer to Parliament House does not convince. I am not sure that the speeches reverberate inside Herbert Baker's circular building or his secretariats, that MPs and officials pay any attention to the gatherings. The mental distance is as great at Jantar Mantar as in Ramlila Maidan. It is not measured in kilometres, it lies in the minds of men. (Courtesy: Indian Express)

New Pattern Of Urban Terror

By Anil Chowdhry

The sniper attack by a "lone wolf", which took a heavy toll of innocent lives at a Sunday night country music concert in Las Vegas, has been described as the deadliest shoot-out in modern US history. This happened in the richest and most powerful democracy in the world on the heels of similar attacks carried out by small groups of terrorists in London. The change in the pattern of global urban terrorist attacks is clearly discernible. Instead of large groups of trained and armed terrorists attacking targets selected by their masters, we see lone wolf attackers targeting large gatherings.

As a former internal security professional, I am struck by the contrast in the reactions to such attacks by the political leadership, public, police and media in the US and those in our own country. The US president, after expressing grief, profusely thanked the Las Vegas Police for their "miraculous response" to the attack, and extolled their "exemplary professionalism". Police agencies, local and federal, were on the same page. The electronic media was not overreacting or speculating. The people on the streets of the city that never sleeps were quiet, not



indulging in rumour mongering or spreading panic. There was no politicking, blame games or mudslinging. A comparison of these reactions to those witnessed after the last major terrorist attack in India — Mumbai, 26/11 — is not out of place. Mumbai Police, one of the finest metropolitan police forces in the country, was taken by surprise and was ill-prepared to respond to such an attack. It reached out to the Indian Navy which had helicopter-borne commandos, who did fly around but did not engage the attackers. The NSG (Black Cat) Commandos who flew out from Delhi reached Mumbai in

about eight long hours, and could locate the attackers and neutralise them but not before 166 innocent persons including four Mumbai Police bravehearts were killed. About the role of certain sections of the electronic media, the less said the better. The blame game over intelligence and police failure went on and on. A committee was constituted to go into the lapses and some progress has been made in training and equipping the Maharashtra and Mumbai Police with their own commandos. Fortunately, there has not been any major terrorist attack since 26/11, but terrorist attacks have

been on the increase in J&K where the police with the help of the Central police forces and the army has been able to respond swiftly and effectively.

Indian police officers and men are second to none in bravery and courage but they need to be trained and equipped. But is our political and bureaucratic leadership willing to pay attention to this need? Similarly, raising the strength of our police thanas and posts in cities, the first responders to any terrorist threat to our citizens, needs to be stepped up on a war footing. The thana beat staff is the nerve centre of law enforcement, while also gathering intelligence to

inform the higher-ups about tell-tale signs of brewing trouble or terrorist attacks. But unfortunately, the limited resources of the Central and state home ministries are being mindlessly spent in rapidly expanding the paramilitary forces and hordes of policemen and officers continue to be deployed on so-called VIP security duties. Finally, our response of flooding places requiring law and order arrangements with untrained and ill-equipped policemen must be replaced by meticulously planned operations on the ground. Finally, our response of flooding places requiring law and order arrangements with untrained

and ill-equipped policemen must be replaced by meticulously planned operations on the ground.

Here are a few suggestions for consideration from an ex-professional: One, the approach has to be dynamic. The importance and urgency of security concerns must be appreciated and addressed. Urgency must dictate the implementation of steps needed for security measures.

Two, audit of the work done has to be an ongoing process and obstacles must be addressed with urgency without waiting for a repeat of a disaster. Mock/simulated exercises to check the efficacy of the measures should factor in new threats and tactics which the enemy may possibly adopt/think of. Finally, communication to the nation about the need to understand security threats has to be carried out. A nation which understands the importance of the issue is well prepared. An alert citizenry is a powerful countermeasure, perhaps the most effective preventive weapon.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency to leave everything to the government and police, a legacy of the long years of British rule. The citizens too must learn to become the eyes and ears of law enforcement agencies. (Courtesy: Indian Express)