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# Washington fires a warning shot

US' response to the attack in Syria signals a return to its traditional foreign policy

**T**he Syrian civil war has taken another turn with the massive missile strike by the US on an airbase of the Bashar al-Assad government. The proximate cause of the attack was a horrific chemical gas attack on civilians near the province of Idlib, likely carried out by the Assad regime. The question is whether this signifies a fundamental change in the US' policy towards the Syrian conflict. That is not clear yet, especially given the highly personalised and mercurial nature of President Donald Trump's policy-making.

Nonetheless, there are three observations that can be made about the attack. One, the attack has sent a strong signal that the Trump administration will no longer remain aloof as the Syrian war seemed to be headed towards an Assad victory – and, therefore, a success for his Iranian and Russian backers. This does not mean Washington is again seeking Assad's overthrow. But the US now seems prepared to help the non-extremist rebels have a stronger hand in any future negotiations. Two, though designed to help other rebel factions the attack will give some breathing space to the Islamic State (IS). While the overthrow of the terrorist State remains the number one US strategic goal, the fact the IS as a territorial entity is now clearly on its last legs means more traditional geopolitical considerations are beginning to surface in the US's policy calculations. Three, there has been growing evidence, most notably the eviction of Mr Trump's chief strategist Stephen Bannon from the National Security Council, that the US president's more ideologically-driven advisers are slowly being marginalised in the US government. Their influence remains and the Trump administration is likely to remain unpredictable and mercurial in many matters given the character of the president.

But the Syrian attack, the increasing hostility to Russia, the return to a one-China policy and the seeming decision to not rip up the Iran-US nuclear agreement are among the signs that mainstream foreign-policy thinking is slowly seeping back into the White House and the line ministries below. The US ship of State is now starting to show an increasing tendency to hew to a straighter and more predictable course. This alone is a welcome development: Capriciousness at the highest level is unsettling in small countries, but with a superpower it is dangerous. Mr Trump is not the type to embed something like the Syrian attack in any larger strategic explanation, however, his actions give a sense of business as usual.

## ourtake

thirdeye

BARKHA DUTT

# We must call a spade a spade

As murders by 'gau rakshaks' rise, it is time to stop cloaking these terrifying incidents in euphemisms such as manhandling

**E**nd the euphemisms. Call it by its name- Murder. Not manhandling. Not vigilanism. And stop saying, 'gau rakshaks,' please.

The men who dragged Pehlu Khan out of his vehicle on the Alwar highway in Rajasthan, flung him on the roadside and lynched him so brutally that he died four days later, are not 'protectors', self-appointed or otherwise; they are not even ordinary criminals. They are thugs, who driven by blind religious prejudice, and emboldened by an environment that will justify the perpetrator instead of standing with the victim, brazenly killed an innocent man.

It didn't matter that Pehlu Khan, a trader from Haryana, pleaded with his assailants that the cattle he was transporting was with legal documentation and had been purchased at a fair in Jaipur. Quite frankly, even if he were a cow-smuggler it was no one's business but that of the state police to enforce the law. That the Rajasthan home minister - the man who is meant to be a custodian of the law - sees "two sides" to a singular horrific truth is what is frightening.

In the India of 2017, we are asked to see these murderous mobs as men whose intent is pure and ennobling, even if their actions are not. In the noisy debates over 'cow-protectionism', we gloss over the fact that it is Indian Muslims and, in some cases Dalits, who are being repeatedly targeted. And that bigotry, and not some misguided sacred zeal, is the subtext that ties all the attacks together. The lynch mobs count on two things - the ifs and buts ambivalence of government response as illustrated in the rationalisations of Rajasthan's home minister and our short, fickle memory that is either too numb or too distracted to stay focused on the issue.

We have already moved on from Mohammad Akhlaq who was killed in Uttar Pradesh over rumours that there

**PEHLU KHAN'S MURDER IN ALWAR WILL OCCUPY THE NEWS CYCLE TILL ANOTHER STORY BUMPS IT OFF. HE WILL BE A TALKING POINT IN PARLIAMENT TILL THE NEXT DEAL HAS TO BE NEGOTIATED BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE OPPosition**

was beef in his house and whose son, a corporal in the air force continued to believe his country would grant him justice. And I can confidently wager that not too many people would even know, leave alone remember, who Majlloom Ansari and Inayatullah Imtiaz Khan are. In March 2016 they were found hanging from a tree in a Jharkhand village, their hands tied together by the nylon chords used to hold cattle. Imtiaz was only 12 years old. A school-going child, he was accompanying Ansari to a cattle fair in the hope of making a few extra bucks for his family. Later it emerged that Ansari had been threatened just a few days earlier by a gang of extortionists who asked him for a 20,000 rupee bribe money to ferry his oxen. The National Commission of Minorities team that investigated the killing reported a "brazen communal bias" in the police handling of the lynching and said that complaints by Muslim traders against the so-called cow-protection groups had been ignored. A few months later the Jharkhand Chief Minister declared that "If India is your country, the cow is your mother." But no mother would allow murder in her name.

If we barely remember Ansari and Khan, we didn't even pay marginal attention to the death of Zaid Ahmed Bhat, a young man in his twenties who died in a Delhi hospital after being attacked with petrol bombs on the highway in

Udhampur, Jammu & Kashmir. His body was unable to recover from the 60% burns the flames had inflicted. And once again the rumours of cow slaughter turned out to be unfounded.

Now Pehlu Khan joins this growing list of (forgotten) victims. His murder will occupy the news cycle till another story bumps it off. He will be a talking point in Parliament till the next deal has to be negotiated between the government and the opposition. There will be outrage and analysis; we will tell you how cow hide is used in other parts of our life, from leather to musical instruments. The opposition will urge the Prime Minister to break his silence and make a statement. He may even do so, as he did in 2016 after four Dalits were flogged in Gujarat. Back then, he eviscerated what he called the 'gau-rakshak business' underlining that nearly 80% were 'anti-social' elements hiding under the cover of cow protection. Yet, several BJP leaders of Uttar Pradesh had rallied behind those accused in the Dadri lynching, demanding punishment for Akhlaq's family instead for eating beef. The opposition outbursts will be replete with hypocrisies as well. (After Dadri, Congress leader Digvijaya Singh boasted that the Congress had banned cow slaughter in 24 states and was even open to a debate around a nationwide ban). And the BJP will fulminate in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat - where a law was just passed on life imprisonment for cow slaughter - but reject any idea of a beef ban in the north-east where it's looking to expand its political presence.

Soon enough the debate will go off the front pages and the prime time headlines and we will all get on with our lives. Till the next murder. In the meantime, the 'cowards' will thrive. This has become the New Normal.

Barkha Dutt is an award winning journalist and author

The views expressed are personal

## newsmaker

DALER MEHNDI Singer

I REALLY WANTED TO WORK WITH MICHAEL JACKSON. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN AMAZING FUN IF I COULD WORK WITH HIM, BECAUSE HE WAS LIKE ELECTRIC CURRENT, AND MY MUSIC AND DANCE WERE ALSO UNUSUAL... WE WOULD'VE HAD A BLAST!

## WHAT HE REALLY MEANT »

LIKE MANY ARTISTES I ALSO WANTED TO PERFORM WITH THE KING OF POP. I BELIEVE HIS DANCE MOVES AND THE PACE AND RHYTHM IN MY MUSIC WOULD HAVE BEEN A PERFECT FIT.



## WHAT HE DEFINITELY DIDN'T »

ANYONE WHO SHARES THE STAGE WITH ME SHOULD BE OF MY STATURE AND THE ONLY PERSON WHO I FEEL COMES CLOSE TO ME IS MICHAEL JACKSON.

# Teesta deal: Mamata's got nothing to lose

Opposition leaders agree that the Centre cannot and should not do anything that compromises the interests of Bengal

Avijit Ghosal

Since childhood Mamata Banerjee has lived beside Adi Ganga, which is regarded as one of the original courses of the Hooghly river. Though it is a matter of speculation whether that proximity has lent her extra sensitivity to matters of rivers, the Bengal CM has taken a decision on the Teesta water-sharing deal with Bangladesh, which has struck rare political unanimity in the state otherwise marked by sharp political faultlines, and even put the BJP in a bind. Just hours ahead of the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit, opposition leaders in Bengal were saying that the CM's stand of 'Bengal first' is correct and that Delhi will find it difficult to ignore.

The point to remember is that the Centre cannot be accused of unconstitutionality if it concludes the Teesta water-sharing agreement with Dhaka. But then, Banerjee is only too aware that Indian foreign policy takes the relevant states on board while dealing with neighbours, which is why Tamil Nadu is important while dealing with Sri Lanka, and vice versa.

India's steady slide to a nanny state continues: What you eat, drink, watch, sing, and wear is increasingly decided not just by elected representatives, the judiciary, and institutions, but also that amorphous bully known as 'public opinion'. Much of the banning and monitoring come not from official sources but majoritarian muscle, sometimes with ghastly consequences. In Alwar, five men returning to Haryana after buying two dairy cows were brutally assaulted by criminals who call themselves 'gau rakshaks'.

Shockingly, Rajasthan's home minister insists both sides are to blame; surviving victims have been arrested for apparently breaking a law that prohibits transportation of cows outside the state.

When it becomes state policy to protect

J&K with Pakistan and Bengal (and the Northeast) when dealing with Bangladesh.

All opposition leaders without exception in Bengal also concede that the Centre cannot - read should not - do anything that compromises the interests of Bengal. They also point out that the Centre should have studied the technical parameters - availability of water in the river in different seasons and the domestic needs - to prepare the ground in consultation with the state government.

Since the onus of striking the agreement is on Delhi, they point out that the Centre should have taken Bengal on board long ago. Banerjee has categorically said she has not heard from the Centre on the matter.

This is one issue where she loses nothing by sitting tight. Even if Delhi ignores her concerns and goes ahead, she can say that BJP does not think twice before sacrificing the interests of Bengal. As the war between Trinamool Congress and BJP intensifies before the 2018 rural polls and 2019 Lok Sabha polls, it can translate into a political windfall for the embattled Bengal chief minister.

However, Banerjee is also aware that

Delhi needs Dhaka by its side in its fight against terrorist elements entering India through the porous borders of Bengal. It will be only to Delhi's interest that the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina return to power in the 2019 elections in Bangladesh, and the water-sharing treaty can be a handy tool in her hands to refute charges at home that she is unnecessarily soft towards India.

There can also be compulsions that may silently be at play. With CBI launching investigation into the Narada footage, where about dozen leaders of Trinamool Congress - MPs, ministers, MLAs, Kolkata mayor - were seen accepting cash, the Bengal CM is facing the biggest embarrassment of her four-decade long political career.

There is only one cost - more appropriately, opportunity cost - that Banerjee may have to bear. Sheikh Hasina reportedly indicated that she will allow export of Padma's Hilsha to India as the water flows from the Teesta. However, Mamata Banerjee also hopes that Bengal will put Bengal ahead of their favourite fish.

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municipal corporation meetings in Bareilly, Meerut, Varanasi and Gorakhpur or if you're a college student in Uttarakhand. Observe hostel curfews. Staging Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* will lead to demands for arrest of those involved. No plays on intolerance. Lecturers must exercise extreme caution when inviting JNU professors to speak - or face suspension.

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matas - gau and human - as is in Uttar Pradesh, there will be a rise in vigilantism. In Delhi, a woman was beaten for throwing a stone at a cow. In Gurgaon, thugs forced the temporary closure of 500 meat shops during navratri. And in Assam, where cow slaughter is not banned, three people were arrested on Thursday for 'hurting religious sentiment' by openly carrying 'beef'.

In UP, couples are humiliated in public, and not always by the police. There are reports also that a Bajrang Dal office bearer in Uttarakhand wants to meet the chief minister to discuss his concerns about the state turning into a 'den of lovers'.

Women's groups want UP's anti-Romeo squads to be taken off the street, saying they have become 'an even greater source of harassment and fear'. Under the guise of protecting women, we have khaps panchayat-style curtailing of freedom. Hostels in universities observe discriminatory curfew timings and some even restrict or ban internet access.

The greatest danger of this creeping intrusion is not the increasing restrictions by states, vigilanism by thugs, or further diminution of women and minorities. It is the erosion of civil liberties and democratic values. Forget dissent, the meek acquiescence by citizens has been alarming.

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The government's insistence on linking Aadhaar to welfare schemes, for instance, despite a Supreme Court order to the contrary has barely caused a ripple. The UP abattoir crackdown has not resulted in any loud protest by opposition parties who have also been playing competitive cow politics for years. Gujarat has now amended a law that makes cow slaughter punishable by life imprisonment and Rajasthan has introduced a 10% cow protection cess on stamp duty. Silence.

A survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies finds that 60% of respondents in the age group 15-34 believe that films that hurt religious sentiment ought to be banned. There's no stopping the slide. On social media, an "All India Fish Protection" committee threatens Bengalis who eat fish with a brutal thrashing. Faking news? These days it's hard to tell.

Namita Bhadare writes on social issues and gender.

The views expressed are personal

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## innervoice

Real peace and happiness spring from within

SC Khungar

Man is a divine self. When he forgets that he is the soul and identifies himself with the body, ego originates. With the birth of this ego, the transcendental identity is forgotten.

In the Mundaka Upanishad it is stated that on the same tree there are two identical birds, eternal companions, one on the top, the other below. The divine self, seated on the top, is calm, silent and majestic, immersed in his own glory. The one on the lower branches eats sweet and bitter fruits by turns hopping from branch to branch and is happy and sad by turns.

After sometime, the bird sitting on the lower branch eats a bitter fruit, and feels miserable. It comes near the other bird and when he finds that he is a reflection, he is relieved of all grief.

This story teaches us that man suffers only because he is ignorant of this true being. In the Gita, Krishna says that jiva (soul) is part of the supreme soul. As a spark from a conflagration contains all the potentialities of the mighty fire, jiva contains all the divine qualities of the supreme.

Swami Vivekananda said: "Every soul is potentially divine." When a man advances towards his inner self and experiences peace, then he realises that as heat is the nature of fire, his true nature is peace.

Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa said: "Real happiness springs from within itself." Even Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven is within us." Seers have experienced unlimited bliss, and gained the vision of the lord within the depth of their souls.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal)

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## bigdeal

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## anotherday



NAMITA BHADARE

# Here comes the nanny state

The greatest danger of this creeping intrusion is not the increasing restrictions by states, vigilanism by thugs, or further diminution of women and minorities. It is the erosion of civil liberties and democratic values. Forget dissent, the meek acquiescence by citizens has been alarming.

Don't eat beef. Don't transport cows. Don't buy cows. Don't drink alcohol if in Gujarat or Bihar or within 500 metres of state and national highways. Don't play cricket with Pakistan and don't hire Pakistani actors in films. Stand to attention during the national anthem before watching culturally appropriate movies. Scenes that show that Hanuman Chalisa doesn't scare away ghosts will be excised. Tasteless remarks about Hindu Gods and sages will lead to arrest warrants.

Do yoga. Dress decently. Do not loiter in parks and malls. Definitely do not loiter with people of the opposite sex, even if they are your siblings. Sing Vande Mataram at

municipal corporation meetings in Bareilly, Meerut, Varanasi and Gorakhpur or if you're a college student in Uttarakhand. Observe hostel curfews. Staging Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* will lead to demands for arrest of those involved. No plays on intolerance. Lecturers must exercise extreme caution when inviting JNU professors to speak - or face suspension.

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