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Half measures will no longer fly

AI wants staff to carry their own luggage. It should be VIPs next

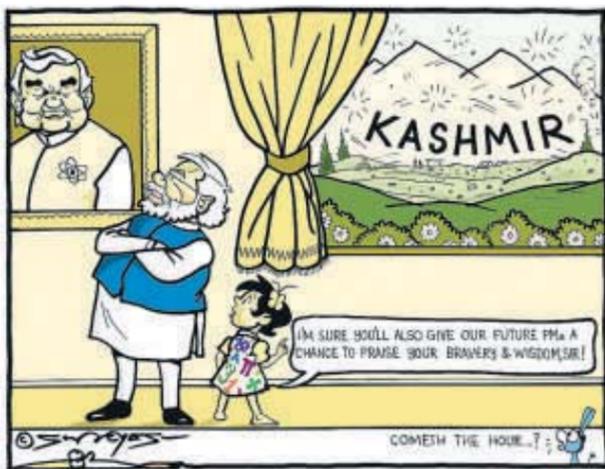
In the last few months, India's pervasive culture of privilege has got a sound beating: In March, Ravindra Gaikwad, an MP, hit a 60-year-old Air India (AI) employee with a slipper and soon found himself on a 'no-fly' list. Then in April, the Cabinet banned red beacons on cars. And Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that there are no VIPs, every Indian is a very important person.

On Wednesday, Air India (AI) scrapped one more privilege, this time an in-house one. Air India chairman and managing director Ashwani Lohani asked the staff to carry their hand baggage on their own and not use porters as has been the practice so far. Air India has a subsidiary called AI-SATS, a ground handling agency, which provides end-to-end services such as passenger and baggage handling. Apart from this, some people are reserved to assist VIPs and airline staff. They are called porters and carry the luggage of the 'VIP' passenger from the entry gate to the boarding point. But now only VIPs will continue to use the services of porters, the airline staff will be discouraged to use it. While the move is appreciable, the change is cosmetic. The move would have got a higher rating if this privilege was taken away from VIPs too. While such changes are fine and make for good optics, there are so many things that the AI needs to fix and, hopefully, those will also get adequate attention. Take for example, the airline's rating and public perception. In January, flight data firm FlightStats marked AI as the third worst-performing airline in the world. The Portland-headquartered firm's survey highlighted issues over cabins, service quality, and flight delays. Though Air India disagreed with the report, such reports do impact public perception and eventually bookings. It is important to manage perceptions and AI has to invest time, effort and money into it apart from doing away with perks and privileges extended to staff.

Then its finances. As a columnist pointed out last week, the organisation has incurred losses and is debt-ridden. More damaging was the Comptroller and Auditor General's performance audit report of the airline, which was tabled in Parliament in March. The report said inefficiencies in the company may mean that a lot more of public money will be needed to keep the Maharaaja afloat.

bigdeal

SHREYAS NAVARE



Technology is blurring national borders, politics is tightening them

Geopolitics will have to reconcile to 50 shades of grey, a change from the earlier black-white binary



ASHOK MALIK
SAMIR SARAN

At the cusp of the 2020s, what are the markers of change in the international system? The challenges are tectonic and technological and causing four major disruptions. First, the neat correlation of a big economy with big power that bears big responsibilities is under scrutiny. After World War II, the globe's largest economies were also its ultimate security guarantors, institution incubators and norm shapers. Today, the economic and domestic political capital of a great power with a per capita income of US\$40,000 is just not replicable by an emerging power with a per capita income of US\$10,000.

The latter faces inequities and developmental gaps at home, and its generosity will be restricted. Populist politics will anyway make it harder for any power-old or emerging-to be an unremitting provider of global public goods. To add to that, the largest economies of this century will also be among the weakest societies—a new paradigm.

Second, there is a creeping capture of provision of public goods and services by business corporations and large transnational philanthropic entities. For example, the developing world's public health agenda is being influenced by a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, in some cases to a greater degree than by the World Health Organisation.

The Trump administration's resolve to cut US funding for development programmes that support abortion services is being supplanted by large American charities and philanthropic institutions that see

the right to choose as central to women's health and empowerment. Such processes will curb the autonomy—or excesses—of national governments seeking to achieve politically desirable goals.

In the economic sphere too the concept of public goods and private provision—and of where the state, as the traditional provider of public goods, comes into this dynamic—has to be considered afresh. In most societies Internet and data services comprise a public utility being delivered by private corporations.

Tesla and Uber (and Ola in India) are current and future providers of public transport networks without which cities will be unable to do business. Yet they are also networks over which the government—or even traditional pressure groups such as trade unions—have only nominal control.

The devolution of a "public goods provider" role has in turn generated thinking on quasi-government obligations among futuristic corporations. That is why suggestions of an income tax to be paid by robots have come from the founder of Microsoft, or why the chief executive of Tesla—its driverless cars will disrupt driver communities—has urged governments to institute a universal basic income.

Third, there is an uneasy but imminent transition in industrial production from human-intensive to machine-driven ecosystems. The early 21st century will see the maturing and possible commodification of a menu of new technologies—artificial intelligence and robotics, 3D manufacturing and custom-made biological and pharmaceutical products, lethal autonomous weapons and driverless cars.

This will pose conundrums. The moral question of how a driverless car will decide between hitting a jaywalker and swerving and damaging the car has often been debated. The answer is both simple—save the human life—and complex. At which angle should the car swerve? Just enough to save the jaywalker or more than enough? If



THE MORAL QUESTION OF HOW A DRIVERLESS CAR WILL DECIDE BETWEEN HITTING A JAYWALKER AND DAMAGING THE CAR HAS BEEN DEBATED. THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE—SAVE THE HUMAN LIFE

the driverless car is in Dublin, is the decision taken by the Irish government, the car's original code writers in California or a software programmer in Hyderabad to whom maintenance is outsourced?

If different national jurisdictions have different fine print on something that should be so apparent—prioritising a human life—how will it affect insurance and investment decisions, including transnational ones, in relation to infrastructure that lies within damage-causing distance of a driverless car while it is attempting to evade a jaywalker?

The sociology and economy of the

machine will determine a specialised discipline in 21st century diplomacy and trade negotiations. Already the large cyber-attack has displaced the nuclear-tipped missile as the proximate threat.

Finally, technology is blurring national boundaries just as politics is tightening them. Innovation and capital have impinged upon the domain of the state at a juncture when statism, nativism, identity and nationalism are making a comeback.

As such, while the nation-state will remain the fundamental unit of reckoning in the international system, it will have to engage with, almost Brownian-motion like, other units and stakeholders in a fluid medium where disorder may have both permanence and legitimacy.

On its part, geopolitics will have to reconcile to 50 shades of grey, a departure from the black-white binary that framed the Anglo-Saxon ethic.

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The views expressed are personal

HARD TALK

Truth behind Kashmir's terror is rather mundane

The state's young militants are neither as educated nor as radicalised as they are made out to be by the media



SWAYAM PRAKASH PANI

The recent spells of unrest in Kashmir (the challenge of stone-pelting street protesters besides active theatres of terror) have led many to conclude that the acceptable threshold of violence has been crossed, pushing the situation back to the nineties. This situation looks all the more daunting in the light of the claim that young and intelligent minds are being drawn to the terror fold. The claim does not bear the scrutiny of empirical evaluation.

The profiling of new age terror across the globe fits the stereotype of young, educated and radicalised youth being attracted to it. But to what extent does such a profiling square with the ongoing Kashmir conflict? When it comes to joining the ISIS, the West witnessed a trend very similar to the description of educated and affluent youth being a part of it. Bangladesh has also been faced with a situation where the young and

the affluent are perpetrators of terror crimes. Not long ago, pursuing credible leads in India several persons mostly from urban centres with sound educational backgrounds were found involved in terror-related activities and are currently facing prosecution. Among these, there is only one individual from Kashmir.

So where exactly does the Valley stand? In South Kashmir, at present more than 80 locals are operating in tandem with outlawed terror outfits Hizbul Mujahideen, LeT and JeM. This figure is by no means alarming when compared to that of a decade ago. In terms of local recruitment to the terror fold in South Kashmir (which remains the hub of activities for home-grown recruits) the stereotypical profiling does not seem to hold good. Interestingly, of the educational profiles of 89 individuals with different terrorist outfits, 37 are under matriculate, 42 are just matriculate, six are graduates from local colleges, two post-graduates again from local institutions and two have technical backgrounds. With an exception of three or four, none had been outside the State. Most of them were from humble backgrounds.

The new face of terror is coming from rural Kashmir and not from the urban centres, a departure from the trends elsewhere.



People run as suspected militants fire in the air during the funeral of an extremist in Kulgam, May 7
REUTERS

Apparently increasing economic activities and exposure to outside world have contributed to this. Until a few years ago, the top echelons of the terror groups used to be in the urban centres in the Valley, which is not the case today.

These statistics bust some of the popular myths advocated in the national media. The first myth is that individual recruits to terror outfits have a sound educational background. Investigation has established that in all most all cases, the academic brilliance attributed to them is far from the truth. The second myth is that the recruits are all radicalised youth. The reason for joining militancy in most of the cases has been found to

be peer-group contact and not a strong radical lineage. Of course, after joining the terror fold, expressing radical thoughts in the social media at times becomes a potent weapon in some cases. This is seen to gain attention give them the high moral ground to defend their acts of violence.

Not surprisingly, therefore, we have not yet come across lone-wolf attacks in the Valley which are a prominent tactic of radical elements elsewhere in the world. In the words of Marc Sageman, the CIA veteran-turned-scholar, lone-wolf attacks constitute "leaderless jihad". The present form of terrorist violence in the Valley does not reflect this. Consequently, almost all the suicide attacks are the handiwork of foreign terrorists from across the border and not home-grown ones.

Finally, the activities of these groups are largely seen as purely criminal acts involving robbery, killings, extortion and so on. Some of the recent incidents of weapons snatching and bank robberies have established that the individuals involved in them are more prone to crime in the garb of militancy and are seen gloating about their achievements on social media rather than displaying any radical commitment.

The local elements in terror folds operate like gangs with no centrally organised hierarchy or command structures, hence Pakistan plays a key role in coordinating and organising them.

The challenge lies in handling them effectively through the legal instruments of the State. Studies across the world have revealed that a robust legal framework involving effective prosecution of these entities can scale down terror incidents and win the trust of society.

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The views expressed are personal

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ANIRUDH BHATTACHARYYA



The mobile is today's candid chronicler

The smartphone you carry comprises more computing power than the machines that crunched data for the lunar missions of the 1970s. The cell is still evolving. One of its functions is shooting, though not for the moon, but clips that aren't just making it to newscasts but into the world of movies, specifically documentaries.

This generation of cellphones is now part of a rapidly evolving genre, where documentary directors use powerful footage to craft

their narratives around. Among them is Academy Award-nominated Matthew Heineman, who sought to make a film about the Islamic State and faced the dilemma that defies the media—how do you cover a conflict where your head could end up on the chopping block and that brutality promoted online through slick propaganda videos.

His solution was in the form of the citizen journalist group, Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently or RBSS, with its expat members sourcing video and images, shot on the

sly by anonymous comrades countering the ISIS tale of a utopian Caliphate.

This is the story, as Heineman told me the afternoon after his film, City of Ghosts, screened at Toronto's Hot Docs film festival, of "democratisation of technology that has allowed people in undercovered, underserved parts of the world, who are able to document atrocities, able to document human rights violations: Use their phones, use social media to spread information around the world." This film would not have existed a decade back. And it's a potent vehicle to hitch a ride on, as Hot Docs' director of programming Shane Smith believes: "There's nothing more powerful than a first-person account of what it's like to be living in this situation." As Smith elaborates, directors take the raw material and burnish it with cinematic styling: "They are able to broaden focus to include the big picture of what the story is but also intimate, on-the-ground accounts of what happened." And that certainly makes for moving pictures.

For instance, Exodus, another documentary with footage filmed on camera phones by refugees as they flee their homelands

towards Europe, aboard dinghies that are less than seaworthy. Or Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait, where an exiled Paris-based director Ossama Mohammed collaborated with Kurdish activist Wiam Simav Bedirxan in besieged Homs, while using cellphone footage uploaded online by "1001" Syrians to make for 92 minutes of the telling of modern Arabian nightmares.

That much of this pioneering material is originating from West Asia is obvious—because of the sheer human drama that is occurring across the region, mostly away from the lens of professional filmmakers and journalists, leaving the unwilling, often unwitting, actors in these tragedies to also play the role of chronicler; leaving them to their own devices.

In that sense, the cellphone is playing a role larger than that of being a selfie-serving object. The mobile is, literally, the latest device in filmmaking and chronicling extremism. The camera has rarely been as candid.

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The views expressed are personal

On Mother's Day, fulfil the dormant dreams that your mom nurtured



Baljeet Kaur

The mother—who as an individual—who thinks solely of her own career growth is rare to find in our country. Today, when I sit back and reminisce, what comes to my mind is the picture of a strict lady who facilitated us in our chores but never made her pain visible. She seemed stoic when we narrated our success stories and her reaction didn't allow our successes to go to our heads. As a child, I was not able to decode the mystery behind her indifferent attitude but today I think I know

what made her the way she was. Mothers are also individuals who have their own aspirations. The burden of motherhood when laid on the shoulders of a young woman with unfulfilled ambitions results in disenchantment. A girl who didn't get a chance to live for herself can't be expected to live for others. But I have reasons to thank my mother. She allowed me to chase my professional dreams and when I embraced motherhood, it came as a breather.

Tomorrow, on Mother's Day, let us take a sneak peek into our mother's past and pick up dreams which are still lying dormant in the hidden corners of her mind. Take a vow to fulfil them.

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