

# Welcome to the Ministry of Utmost Noise

## POLITICALLY INCORRECT



SHOBHA DE

We Indians are a noisy, garrulous, over-talkative lot. We thrive on hot air and cacophony. Our decibel levels are significantly higher than those of most other nationalities. We believe we have to shout to be heard. We lack volume control and carry on like people around us are severely hearing impaired. Last week's din was no different. But for one detail — the person making a racket happened to be a Lok Sabha MP. And his jarring words led to pandemonium and polarisation across the board. The sound barrier was broken several times over, as assorted interested parties generously contributed to stepped-up national noise pollution levels by taking sides and chipping in with belligerent reactions.

Paresh Rawal's inflammatory tweet (deleted later) was directed at author Arundhati Roy. Roy's new book titled *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, marks the internationally acclaimed writer's return to fiction after a break of 20 long years. Known for her strong views, Ms Roy is more than capable of taking on the likes of Paresh Rawal and demolishing his jibes with lethal literary precision. But she sensibly absented herself from indulging in a public spat with a man who had suggested she be tied to a jeep as a human shield, a la Farooq Ahmed Dar, a shawl weaver from Chil-Bras village in Kashmir.

There was zero logic involved. But then, hateful tweets rarely follow a logical path. Why did Paresh Rawal, the accomplished actor-turned-MP, pick on Roy? Most would say she makes an attractive target. Also, hitting out at her was one more way to further impress his political bosses, what with impending assembly elections in Gujarat (January 2018). What followed was mayhem across social media platforms, with loyal bhakts out-shouting those who condemned Rawal. The script got even more out of hand when Major Nitin Leetul Gogoi, the original master strategist of the human-shield stunt, was rewarded for his unconventional tactical manoeuvre by army bosses and given a military commendation.

There are several complicated issues involved. Apart from the human rights violation of using an unarmed civilian to combat strife, it is also a question of the army's image and morale at this most sensitive of times. Several political commentators have expressed deep concern over repeated attempts to inject politics into our hitherto apolitical armed forces. They see this negative development as a cleverly organised plan to destabilise India. It is not about Dar being



**ROUGH RIDE:** With this single picture, Farooq Ahmed Dar has found his place in the tragic history of Kashmir

correctly or incorrectly identified as a trouble-maker. It is not about Dar being or not being a 'stone pelted' (everything suggests he was a bystander who had just cast his vote, in an area where voter turnout was just 7%), it is about an army officer taking such a call in the first place, considering his men were armed and entitled to fire in self-defence. Of course, Major Gogoi is not the first man to adopt such a tactic, but that doesn't make this incident look any better.

While the country was still coming to terms with the horror of the act, one more voice contributed to the chaos by not just condoning Gogoi but praising him to the skies. The unexpected endorsement coming from Captain Amarinder Singh, the CM of Punjab, an ex-armyman himself, was the real shocker, given his politics (strictly Congress). I met a much-decorated, retired armyman a few nights after the controversy broke, and was relieved to hear his sober condemnation of what had transpired in the name of 'maintaining security and protecting innocent lives'. He articulated his worries regarding the hidden battle that is launched daily by the vast army of trolls who don't spare even the most respected senior faujis if they express their disapproval of such methods to 'discipline' civilians — stone pelters included.

Farooq Ahmed Dar has found his place in the tragic history of Kashmir. That single picture of his, with a placard strung around his neck, as he sits precariously tied to the bonnet of a Rashtriya Rifles jeep which is being driven through several villages, has elevated him overnight from being just another anonymous, faceless Kashmiri to Exhibit No.1 — a poster boy for the perceived injustice in the Valley. What have we achieved by scaling up the war against civilians, our own people, in this cruel and crude manner? It's a question worth asking the likes of Sir Paresh Rawal (what's with the 'Sir'? Who knighted him?). Whether it's a Dar or a Roy, tied and paraded through the streets of Kashmir; there is no way the strife will subside, much less disappear altogether. When you treat your own worse than animals, all you can expect in return is a savage backlash.

Words, dear Paresh Rawal and Capt Amarinder Singh, cost one hell of a lot. Use them with more caution. Or the same words will come back in full force to bite you some day. Welcome to The Ministry of Utmost Noise.

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# Surveillance shouldn't be the business model of the internet. We can change it

Dubbed a 'security guru' by *The Economist*, **Bruce Schneier** has authored several books, including NYT bestseller *Data and Goliath: The Hidden Battles to Collect Your Data and Control Your World*, as well as hundreds of articles and academic papers. In 2013, the American security technologist was invited to brief a US Congress group about the documents revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden, and to explain 'what the NSA (National Security Agency) was doing'. In an email interview to **Kim Arora**, he spoke about the recent Wannacry ransomware attack, cybersecurity, and threats to privacy

**With the Wannacry ransomware attack, we saw how neglecting to install a security update in time led to massive losses worldwide. How do we need to change the way we think about data security?**

Promptly installing security updates is one of the most important things you can do to improve your security. That was true well before Wannacry, and it's still true. Most people follow this advice, and it's the primary reason Wannacry wasn't nearly as devastating as it could have been. Hopefully this very public malware attack will convince everyone else.

**We keep installing apps which demand access to so much private information. Have people given up on trying to protect privacy?**

No, people have not given up. Every study and survey conducted confirms that people are no less concerned about their privacy today than they ever were. People install apps that spy on them because they see no alternative. They want what the apps provide, and don't fully understand the surveillance implications of what they're giving up. The app makers like this, of course. They don't want people making informed decisions; they prefer learned helplessness. It doesn't have to be this way, of course. We decided that surveillance is the business model of the internet. We can change it. All it takes is regulation.

## FOR THE RECORD

**How do you see ransomware attacks in the future developing with the Internet of Things?**

It's not a good combination. Internet of Things devices will be lower cost and will have even worse security than our computers and phones. Many of them are not patchable, even if there were engineering teams at the companies to write the patches. And they will have implications to life and property. Researchers have already demonstrated ransomware against home thermostats. Imagine them against your car, your home appliances, or medical devices.

**With CryptoWall, WannaCry and other similar attacks Bitcoin seems to be the preferred mode of payment, where geographical tracing becomes a problem. How can law enforcement catch up to be able to get to the hackers in these cases?**

It's very hard to find and prosecute malware writers, even without Bitcoin. Bitcoin does provide ransomware makers with an untraceable payment system, which

makes it harder to find these people. But law enforcement has other techniques at its disposal. The more serious problem is that cybercriminals like to operate out of countries with ineffective police and laws, making it hard to prosecute them even if we can identify them.

**We've seen here and with earlier ransomware attacks the lengths to which hackers go to explain to their victims about paying in Bitcoin. Some even set up call centres to do this! How do you see this phenomenon?**

Ransomware is a business, albeit an illegal business. If people can't pay, the ransomware makers don't make money. So it makes perfect sense for those businesses to set up call centres to assist their victims. That they can't be stopped even with this is another illustration that Bitcoin isn't the only reason they can get away with their crimes.

**After the Sony hack last year, the attack on Bangladesh Bank, and with Wannacry now — the suspicion has always landed on North Korea. Is that justified?**

The suspicion lands where the evidence points. In recent months, we've seen many attacks attributed to both Russia and China. The North Korean attribution, still tentative, is based on forensic analysis of the code. As we learn more, we'll know whether it is a proper attribution or not.

**In a blog you wrote, it seems that you regard Edward Snowden as somewhat of a hero. Is he being judged unfairly?**

I think he is being judged fairly. What he did is public, and the effects of it — both positive and negative — are largely public. Different people have different opinions of his actions, but I don't think that either 'side' is being unfair. I believe history will judge him a whistleblower and a positive force for change, because history will better see the big picture.

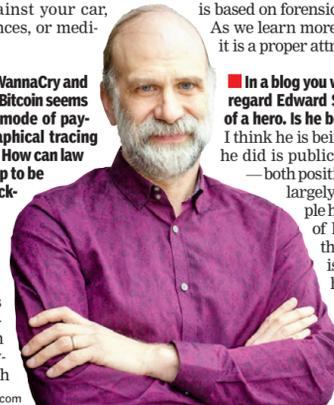


Photo courtesy schneier.com

# Stiffer cow slaughter laws may save cattle but what about people?

## AAKARVANI



AAKAR PATEL

When did you first read stories of cow vigilantes? When did Indian Muslims first begin to be killed over this issue and when did we first begin to brutalise Dalits over it?

I suspect that like me you did not read of cow vigilantism before this government signalled intent and then state governments like Maharashtra and Haryana began introducing laws in March 2015. This triggered something that began the violence, and Mohammed Akhlaq was murdered in September 2015. So what did the change in laws trigger? Why did you not read of cow vigilantism in India before that, if the cow has always been holy and revered by Hindus? And why are we reading so regularly about it these days that barely a week goes by without incident? I'll come to that in a bit. Now that we are aware

of causality, we should be concerned about the fallout of a new law that the government introduced on Friday, May 26. In brief, the rules allowing how cattle (including buffaloes) may be sold for slaughter have been changed to make it very difficult, if not impossible, to conduct a meat business. Where the sale may happen, who may make the sale, why the sale is happening and what sort of animal may be sold, all of this is being regulated. And it will have to be reported, meaning those dealing with cattle now have to do lots of paperwork. Ostensibly the reason is to control disease and hygiene, but you have to be particularly innocent to believe that.

There will, of course, be an economic fallout of this. I am not discussing that here. The fallout that I'd like to focus on is that of the violence that it is guaranteed to bring down on Muslims and Dalits.

To turn to the point made at the start. What did the change in laws trigger and why did the gau rakshaks suddenly turn violent and why are they not stopping their violence? To understand

that, let us look at a similar country (so similar that it used to be India). Blasphemy was once a religious crime that produced no violence in Pakistan. From 1927 to 1947 (in all of undivided India) and from 1947 to 1986 (in Pakistan), a total of only seven cases of blasphemy were registered. But in the 25 years after 1986, over 1,000 cases were registered in Pakistan, mostly against minorities. And many of the accused are today lynched by mobs before trial or even arrest.

What changed in 1986? The law. What used to be an offence punishable by a jail term of a few years was changed to an offence punishable by death. This change in the law highlighted, emphasised and criminalised the 'otherness' of minorities that were already hated and despised. Non-Muslims, who are 4% of Pakistan's population, are 57% of those charged with blasphemy. The change in law legitimised the violence.

The same thing is happening in India under the BJP's legal and RSS' cultural gau raksha programme. The Hindutvawadi will be loath to ac-

cept the parallel though it is obvious. He may not even understand the causality.

Union minister Nitin Gadkari said on May 25 that though he supported gau raksha, he did not support gau rakshaks. In his words: "they're not our people." Of course, they're not. Those made apologetic by distinctions between good terrorists and bad terrorists now make a distinction between good Hindutvawadis and bad Hindutvawadis. How difficult is it to understand that if you keep pushing gau raksha what you will get is gau rakshaks?

This understanding of causality seems to be missing in the BJP. They will rouse a mob of lakhs and then be surprised when it pulls down a monument and 2,000 Indians are killed. A member of Parliament, Paresh Rawal (disclaimer: he is a family friend of 40 years) casually encourages violence against a dissenting writer in a country where rule of law is weak and where there is news of lynchings and mob killings every week. One could well suspect that it is not stupidity or ignorance of causality that is the

motivation, but something more cynical and bordering on evil.

In March this year, Gujarat announced a change in the sentence for cow slaughter. From seven years in jail, the cow murderer would now get a life term. The conviction rate in India is pretty low and it's unlikely to be a deterrent. But it will be helpful in encouraging gau rakshaks.

In August 2016, the Prime Minister nobly offered that gau rakshaks should kill him instead of Dalits. I was moved to tears. But if he really wants to stop violence he should consider what started it. It is indisputable that gau rakshak violence was triggered by the gau raksha laws.

That's why, in the matter of Hindutva's continuing cow obsession, I will predict one fallout of the new law of Friday: more animals may or may not be saved but more Indians will certainly be slaughtered.

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# 28% GST? At this rate, India's movie biz will be a flop show

## THE UNDERAGE OPTIMIST



CHETAN BHAGAT

The GST is finally here. It is a major reform that can streamline India's complicated indirect taxation. Instead of multiple sales, service, entertainment, VAT, excise and octroi-like taxes, there will be one GST, making accounting easier and avoiding situations like taxes on taxes.

The GST also hopefully reduces the impact of abrupt changes in industrial tax rates. Every budget tinkered around with them. The hope is that now with one GST, things will be more stable, and hence, more predictable.

Except, there is no one GST. It should perhaps be called GSTs. For, at its introduction, the GST has five different rates: 0%, 5%, 12%, 18% and 28%. Then there are also goods that fall outside the purview of these rates. And in a few cases, local bodies such as municipal corporations can impose their own taxes too.



**PRIME TARGET:** There's no logic in hitting the film industry with a high tax that will make it uncompetitive

Hence the GSTs is a halfway house to the final idea: to primarily have one rate of indirect tax in the country. Since that hasn't happened yet, various goods and services have been placed in one of the five buckets. The decision to do so is based on a mixture of commonsense and morality — that we Indians love to bring into our tax rates. Hence, sinful items such as liquor and cigarettes will be taxed higher. Fresh milk won't be taxed. UHT milk, or milk sold in cartons will have a tax of 5%. Condensed milk will have a tax of 18%.

The reasoning behind GSTs could be to ensure that the shift to one GST is gradual. If only one rate was decided, it would lead to big changes in prices of some items taxed at very different rates earlier. GSTs helps find a suitable rate that's close to the pre-GST era.

However, GSTs also has problems. It still leaves scope for arbitrariness in terms of which item to place in what rate. And that creates scope for industry to lobby politicians to place their items in a lower tax bucket. It also makes certain industries uncompetitive. One example is the film industry.

For some strange historical reason, watching mov-

ies in a theatre is seen as a luxury, a hedonistic pleasure bordering on sin. Little wonder, we have entertainment taxes as high as 100% on ticket sales in some states. These laws were made well before the era of television, let alone internet or digital entertainment. So today we have a situation where you pay a higher tax to watch a movie in a theatre, but less if you watch it on TV or your home, and none if you watch a pirated one.

The current GST rate for cinema tickets is 28%, on par with gambling. Local bodies can further tax cinemas, increasing the burden on ticket buyers. The set-top box subscription you have at home will be taxed at 18%. So for some reason, the government wants to charge you more if you watch a movie in a theatre than on TV. And of course, many who watch pirated content pay absolutely nothing.

In this scenario, the film industry is the one that's getting penalised most. There are no logical reasons, only flimsy ones such as — these filmi types are so rich anyway (not true, wages across the industry are meagre, barring a few powerful people); films make so much money, look at Baahubali (not true, only 10% films are theatrical hits, Baahubali was an exception), and why should we care about such an unnecessary industry anyway (we should, because it has a huge impact on the economy and around the world).

Due to such unreasonable biases, we have hit the industry with a rate that will render it uncompetitive. For every ticket sold, a high GST would be deducted. Then, nearly half of what is left will be kept by the theatre owner. After that, there will be a distributor margin of 10-20%. Whatever is left (say 25-30%) will go to the makers of the film. TV and subscribed digital content neither have such high taxes, nor so many middlemen. Also, compared to TV, there is relatively higher piracy in films.

In other words, this current structure will only mean one thing — the eventual decline of India's film industry, whether in terms of overall profitability, volume of output or revenues. As content becomes better and more easily available on your phone or TV, the incentive to go to the theatre will reduce for the moviegoer. And even if they do go, most of what they pay will be eaten up by taxes and middlemen. This doesn't leave filmmakers with much business. Sure, there will be the occasional superstar movie that will do wonders at the box office. But exceptions do not make an industry. A healthy, regular output does. The film industry drives a lot of our economy. When people come to theatres, they step out of homes and do more retail shopping. Films drive our music industry. They also represent a key part of brand India to the world.

Overall, the bigger issue is to move GSTs to GST1, where one reasonable GST rate covers every good and service in the country. Until that happens, the government would do well to move the film industry to a lower tax bucket, so it remains competitive and continues to entertain us for times to come.

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## INBOX

### Not so achhe

This refers to Swapan Dasgupta's article 'Why we're more achhe today than three years ago' (May 21). The encomiums on three years of Modi govt were expected of the writer. But in representative democracy, the strength of the ruling party is directly proportional to the weakness of the opposition. A dull and directionless opposition has helped the ruling party consolidate its power further by poaching on disgruntled netas of other parties. The stark reality remains the same: abysmal job creation, scanty manufacturing, poor industrial growth and a distressed farm sector. The PM's massive popularity cannot justify non-appointment of the Lokpal and a messed-up border situation. Achhe din is a long way off.

Manoranjan Prasad, Bhubaneswar

The good times promised by the BJP do not seem to be anywhere round the corner. Despite this, the trust in Modi to deliver on his promises remains unshaken. Consequently, the general mood among the people is optimistic, and this is the single biggest achievement of the ruling party.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

### Noisy ain't newsy

Apropos Aakarvani (ATM, May 21), 'Anchor Jihad' is definitely hurting Indians. Every evening, I wait before my TV for factual information, expert analyses and diverse opinions on the affairs of my country. It is exasperating to watch how regularly serious issues degenerate into noisy roadside squabbles. Consider this: in a promotional clip for a 'to the point' show, the 'fiery and combative' anchor advances to my TV screen, dusts a perfect sleeve, folds his arms and scowls. This is bizarre. Who is the enemy here?

Chitra Anand, Muscat

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# Why Cornell's death should get us thinking about ourselves

## THE RATIONALIST



AMIT VARMA

I was 17 when I first heard Chris Cornell sing, and I still remember the shock of that moment. The song was Hunger Strike, by a band called Temple of the Dog, and the other vocalist on that song was Eddie Vedder. Cornell and Vedder, with Soundgarden and Pearl Jam respectively, would go on to become the iconic vocalists of their age. Unlike their grunge peers, Kurt Cobain and Layne Staley, they didn't die young, and actually built a strong body of work.

Wait, strike that: Cornell died last week at the age of 52, and now that I too am on the wrong side of 40, it feels like it was way too young. This column is not a nostalgic musing of a middle-aged man, though. Instead, it's sparked by something Cornell's wife Vicky said after he died. He was not the type to commit suicide, she said, and his death was probably caused by an anti-anxiety medicine he was taking called Ativan. The side-effects of Ativan include "paranoid or suicidal thoughts, slurred speech and impaired judgment." When Vicky spoke to Chris over the phone after his last concert, she said, his speech was slurred.

That mildly tweaking the chemical balance of the brain could turn a person suicidal is not surprising: antidepressants are so popular because we know you can turn the switch the other way. Indeed, it drives home the fact that what we call our 'personality' is actually deeply contingent. It arises from the state of the brain. You damage a tiny part of the brain, or tweak its chemical or hormonal balance, and voila, you have a different person.

Back in the day, the brain wasn't considered as important as it should be. Bodies supposedly had souls inside them, and people spoke of minds as if they were independent of the brain. We now know that the former is bunkum, and the latter, at best a metaphor.

The most popular case study in neuroscience is probably that of Phineas Gage, a 19th century American railroad worker. When he was 25, an iron rod went through his head, and a large part of his left frontal lobe was destroyed. Miraculously, he survived — but did he survive as himself? His memory and intelligence weren't affected by his accident, but his personality changed so much that his friends and family described him as "no longer Gage."

Over the decades, we have learnt that the physical structure of the brain determines personality. For example, sociopathy is not a behavioural defect but a biological one: damage to the amygdala, the part of the brain believed to cause feelings of empathy for others, is the probable culprit. Four percent of us are born sociopaths, though they are over-represented among criminals, bankers, lawyers and politicians. (I'm not joking.) Neu-

roscientists have even identified parts of the brain that are responsible for spiritual feelings, though I classified being devout as a mental disorder long before I knew this.

The physical structure of the brain is just the start of it. Tweaking the chemical or hormonal balance of the brain can also shape and change personality. That accounts for the popularity of antidepressants and cognitive super-drugs like Modafinil (which I take occasionally). Similarly, a coffee or sugar high can change behaviour, and hunger or lust can transform us. Most of these processes we are barely beginning to understand, leave alone control, but one day we will be able to shape a child's personality before its birth using genetic engineering.

The big point I am making here is that what we call our 'self' is fragile and accidental. All humans, and their brains, are more or less identical. Tiny differences in our physical brains, and their chemical and hormonal balance, account for who we are.



**MINDFIELD:** The singer was taking antidepressants whose side-effects include suicidal thoughts

Self-help books teach us that we are all unique, but the truth is that we are basically made of the same matter, differ only in circumstance, and that embracing this truth is the only route to a happiness that is not delusional.

I don't mean to imply here that Nature is everything. Nurture is as important. As Steven Pinker once wrote, Nature gives us knobs of varying sizes, and Nurture turns them. That underlines, even more, the accidental nature of our identity. We have the brains and bodies that we have; and then, we are born into the circumstances that we are. It's all just luck.

So the next time you meet a Hindutva nationalist who dreams of Akhand Bharat, ask him if he would have felt the same way if he happened to be born in Lahore and his parents named him Anwar. If the question makes him angry, hand him an Ativan.

But no, in all seriousness, empathise with that dude. There, but for the grace of Luck, stand you.

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