

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

A hard blow to syncretism

Amarnath killings: Hardliners mustn't communalise the attack

The terror attack that killed seven Amarnath shrine pilgrims is a reminder of how fragile peace is in Kashmir. The attack is also a blow to the state's syncretic traditions that bind Hindus and Muslims. The cave-shrine was discovered by a Muslim shepherd

in 1850 and his family and Hindu priests together were its custodians for decades till a board was set up to regulate the yatra in 2000. The yatra, in fact, is incomplete without both communities and local logistics are provided for by the Muslims. The pilgrimage has come under threat on several occasions since terrorism reared its head in 1989 but even through the 1990s — when violence was at an all-time high and Kashmiri Pandits were forced to flee their homes — the pilgrimage has not once been suspended.

The killings on Monday has cast a deep shadow over the Valley. The attack has taken place at a time when the state is reeling under the impact of an unprecedented uprising that followed the death of militant commander Burhan Wani. The security establishment is stretched and has to now ensure that there is no communal flare-up in the ideologically opposed regions of Jammu and the Valley. The terrorist bullets that killed the pilgrims also took aim at a government, which has two unlikely parties as allies: The soft-separatist PDP and the right-wing BJP. It is imperative for the alliance partners to behave maturely and hold the peace that is already tentative.

The most-heartening signals of Kashmiriyat not taking a beating in the face of extreme provocation are coming from the common citizens. In an important signalling, a fresh batch of 3,000 yatris left Jammu a day after the terror attack. Kashmiris, too, are deeply disturbed by the killing of the pilgrims. The separatists from the Hurriyat Conference were quick to condemn the attack. Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said that the pilgrims will always be respected guests. It is important to remember that the same separatists were silent when militants killed policemen and government employees. As the state braces for testing times ahead and as the bodies of the pilgrims reach their homes in Gujarat and Maharashtra, political hardliners must desist from communalising the killings.

Why every hour has become rush hour

Our cities can't be decongested unless private cars are taxed more than buses

With 10 million registered vehicles, rush hour is a round-the-clock phenomenon in the Indian Capital. If you believed that certain times of the day witness less traffic on the roads as commuters might not venture outdoors during those hours, it's time you revisited the assumption. Belying the notion that the number of vehicles takes a sharp dip during non-peak hours, a Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) study emphasises that in the Capital, there is "virtually no difference in time taken to travel between peak and non-peak hours." The Capital is not the only city bursting at the seams with too many cars. By 2025, India's car population is set to treble to nearly 35 per 1,000 persons. Certain Indian cities, including Delhi, Chennai and Coimbatore will have more than 100 cars per 1,000 persons, suggest estimates by The Energy and Resources Institute. The average peak hour speeds in major corridors in Delhi (16 km/hr), Mumbai (16 km/hr) and Kolkata (18 km/hr) are abysmally poor.

Environmentalists have come up with two approaches to fight traffic congestion in cities. The first has to do with scaling up affordable and reliable modes of transport, with last mile connectivity. The second — more popular across the globe — is to disincentivise car travel with demand management. For instance, recommends the Centre for Science and Environment, the government should take away the hidden subsidies for car owners. Parking fees in Indian cities are among the lowest in the world and there is no congestion charge for cars.

Compared to other means of transport, buses, the mainstay of public transport, end up paying the highest road tax. This should shift to private vehicles, if we are serious about decongesting our roads.

Incidentally

GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI



We need a president like Narayanan

The Opposition candidate for vice-president on the ideal occupant of Rashtrapati Bhavan

Twenty years ago, on the 17th of this month, India elected Kocheil Raman Narayanan its President, the 10th in the line that had been inaugurated by Rajendra Prasad in 1950.

The election was hailed not just because he had obtained a staggering 95% of the votes cast and that, with a minority government having proposed him for the office, but because Narayanan was these five 'things': One, a scholar-diplomat; two, possessed of clear, independent views; three, no yes-man; four, nor a habitual nay-sayer, and; five, a man of impeccable integrity.

That he had educated himself against financial and social odds, had become a cherished student of Harold Laski and Karl Popper at the London School of Economics and become all that he had become — ambassador, vice-chancellor, minister, vice-president and now, president — by dint of his phenomenal merit, was known. That he was self-made was understood, appreciated. That he was Dalit was, for most, an appealing but adjunct factoid. Only the incorrigibly caste-minded thought Narayanan being Dalit was either defining or determining.

India's getting its first Dalit Rashtrapati of course made world news, as it should have. In

Pretoria, South Africa, where I was working at the time, the fact was of compelling interest.

"When can you come?" The soft voice over the long distance from Delhi to Pretoria was tough in its substance. KRN was looking for a secretary. I had just done a year in my assignment as high commissioner and was cherishing every moment in Nelson Mandela's rainbow nation. I said as much, politely. "I know," he said, "But I need you around here. There are certain things which, I am told, can be done only under the authority of a secretary..."

Who can remonstrate with the president? Reported at Rashtrapati Bhavan under a month. It was no party, working for that intellectual powerhouse. There may have been "certain things" which had to be transacted under the name and style of the secretary to the president. But, in reality, the head of State was also in control of his secretariat which became his disembodied mind, his thought-vessel. And he posed questions to his staff, to his government.

Not surprising in the 77-year-old considering that when he was 25 he had asked of the Mahatma questions that put the answers in a shade. He had just been awarded a Tata scholarship and was going to London. "You



Former President KR Narayanan at Rashtrapati Bhavan, 2002

have simplified for us the choice between truth and untruth", he asked, "but what would you advise when the choice is not between truth and untruth but between two truths? And, when in England I am asked about the untouchability issue in India, should I reply as an Indian or a Harijan?"

When KRN finished his course of study in the London School of Economics with a first division, the Kerala people there threw a party to felicitate him. And Krishna Menon was invited to be the chief guest. Narayanan

says: "Leaning on his walking stick at the doorway Menon said to me, 'So, Narayanan, I hear you have got a first. You know, some people get it by a fluke'. I do not know how but I managed to say 'Is that how you got your's?'"

There is nothing that KR Narayanan got by a fluke, not his Tata scholarship, not his appointment with Gandhi, his 'first' at the LSE, his appointment to the Indian Foreign Service, his election to the Lok Sabha, the vice presidency, presidency. Not the fluke of birth, not that of high contacts. He got to where he got because he deserved to be there, was meant to do well by India from there, to speak with frank fearlessness to the State and society alike.

In his Republic Day address to the nation in 2000, President Narayanan said: "Be it the way cars and buses are driven on our city roads, the way garbage and particularly plastic garbage is strewn around, the way public servants treat the public, or the public handles public utilities, the manner in which we squander or pollute precious resources like water, the way owners of vehicles allow toxic gases to be spewed onto the air we breathe, the way we allow children to be exploited, the India of today is not a compassionate one..."

A president who can speak bitter truths like that is the president India needs, be he or she Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Dalit, OBC, Brahmin, political or non-political.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is distinguished professor of history and politics, Ashoka University. The views expressed by the author are personal.

DIGITAL PUSH



A voter gets his finger inked after voting at a polling station in Kalyan Puri, New Delhi, April 23, 2017

How technology can help clean up politics

The funding information of parties must be cross-checked in real time with the spending history of all types of donors



ANIL ANTONY

The Centre has given several hints that the next big wave of financial reforms after the Goods and Services Tax (GST) roll out would be in political funding. Though its plan has been received well, the government's efforts on this to date hasn't been enough.

However, the Finance Bill had seen a few progressive changes, such as the reduction of the ceiling of all cash donations to political parties from ₹20,000 to ₹2,000, and a proposal for the creation of electoral bonds. The reduction in the limit of cash donations to ₹2,000 decreases the ceiling to 1/10th, but the absence of a cap in the total number of such payments that could be collected, and the lack of any requirement to collect donor details create the same loopholes as before.

The same bill also had a few eyebrow raising amendments, including fresh provisions that allowed companies to donate any amount to a political party, without disclosing the name of the party in the company records, and the removal of an earlier restriction that prevented companies from donating more than 7.5% of its average net profit in the three immediate preceding fiscal years to a political party — steps that made corporate funding of political parties more opaque.

The government's decision to give I-T exemptions to political parties when they deposited the old ₹500 and ₹1,000 notes in their bank accounts during the demonetisation exercise, provided that the donations taken were under ₹20,000 per individual, and were "well documented", also did not give the impression of a step in a direction towards increased transparency.

Even though the bonds give donors anonymity while they make digital political contributions, they do not offer tax exemptions. There remains an alternative route to make donations along with tax-breaks, through electoral trusts, entities that can collect funds without disclosing source of funding, and distribute them to political parties.

The government should start integrating our political systems into the Digital India and Cashless India programmes. The donors could be incentivised to make digital donations through tax rebates and cash transaction surcharges. Legacy entities and provisions that aid transactional opacity should be simultaneously eased out.

As India's digital economy matures further and exhaustive databases are created, funding information filed by the parties could be cross-checked real-time with the spending history of individual and corporate donors. The Centre must make deep-rooted technology-aided reforms to bring in transparency in political funding.

Anil K Antony is a technology and social entrepreneur, and executive director of Cyber India. The views expressed are personal.

Mamata's communal politics is singeing Bengal

This is preventing the state administration from acting in an unbiased manner in conflict situations



PRASENJIT BOSE

As the lives of ordinary citizens limp back to normalcy in the riot-hit regions of the state, it is time for serious reflection for all those who want to prevent West Bengal's slide into the disastrous trajectory of communal polarisation and violence.

The riots in Baduria and Basirhat last week were triggered by an abusive Facebook post derogatorily depicting Prophet Muhammad, following which angry mobs of Muslims resorted to blockades and vandalism. This happened days after Eid al-Fitr and coincided with the processions of Ultrath (the conclusion of the Jagannath Rathayatra). It is clear that religious occasions of the Hindus and Muslims, which have been celebrated in peace and harmony for centuries in Bengal, are being deliberately targeted by communal and criminal elements of both communities to engineer communal conflagrations and fan mutual hatred. There is a distinct method in this madness.

The RSS-BJP is playing the most pernicious role in misusing religious occasions to facilitate communal polarisation in Bengal today. This was fully exposed when during the Ramnavami celebrations in April 2017, BJP leaders openly brandished swords and even forced school children to carry weapons in religious processions. Circulation of inflammatory material, containing fake news or hate-filled communal messages, has also seen a phenomenal rise in Bengal through social media and messaging platforms like Whatsapp, Facebook and Twitter.

The reason why the state administration is unable to combat this diabolic but obvious strategy, however, has much to do with the dubious nature of Trinamool Congress' politics. Defying the secular principle of separating religion from politics, the chief minister has assiduously mixed the two from the very inception of her rule, besides accommodating fundamentalist sections within

IT IS CLEAR THAT RELIGIOUS OCCASIONS OF THE HINDUS AND MUSLIMS, WHICH HAVE BEEN CELEBRATED IN HARMONY FOR CENTURIES IN BENGAL, ARE BEING TARGETED BY COMMUNAL AND CRIMINAL ELEMENTS

the Muslim community within her party.

Communal elements within the community have been systematically encouraged by the TMC government's policies of announcing stipends for imams, trying to stop the immersion of Durga idols on the day of Muharram procession last year or senior ministers of the TMC Government participating in a AIMPLB rally on the triple talaq issue last November, when the matter was still under the apex court's consideration.

The TMC has simultaneously allowed majoritarian communal outfits like the Hindu Sanhati to openly mobilise people on communal lines and asking them to vote for the ruling party during elections. This dangerous concoction of communal politics patronised by the ruling party has eroded the credibility of the administration and prevented it from acting in an effective and non-partisan manner in conflict situations.

The most alarming aspect of the recurring communal violence in West Bengal is the absence of any punishment for the perpetrators. In all the incidents that have recurred during the last one year, the miscreants have seldom been arrested. In rare cases of some arrests, they were later set free, succumbing to communal pressures.

In the case of the recent violence in Baduria, Basirhat and adjoining areas, several crimes have been committed besides the initial Facebook post — the house of the provocateur was torched, the Baduria police station was vandalised, the SP's vehicle was attacked and set on fire. In Basirhat, criminals from both the communities destroyed shops and properties of innocent people and a 65-year-old citizen was stabbed to death. The perpetrators of each of these crimes need to be identified and punished in order to ensure justice.

While ordering an inquiry, however, the chief minister has tried to shield the perpetrators by blaming forces from "across the border" for the misdeeds. Even if religious extremists from Bangladesh had a role in the violence in Basirhat, it could not have occurred on this scale without local collaborators. Unless these miscreants are clearly identified and brought to justice, irrespective of their religious and political background, the mutual distrust among the Hindus and Muslims will only grow.

If the ruling Trinamool Congress and the administration continue to condone the perpetrators of communal violence and the RSS-BJP pursues its polarisation agenda without any credible opposition, it will be left to the ordinary people of Bengal to hit the streets in order to save the state from a descent into endless internecine conflicts.

Prasenjit Bose is an economist and activist. The views expressed are personal.

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ALWAYS NURTURE SELF-BELIEF, THE KEY INGREDIENT FOR SUCCESS

Pradeep Khatri

Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference. Being negative and envisioning the worst scenarios are the easiest way to never achieve one's goals. Self-belief helps us take the right path in life.

When you start believing yourself, you realise that failure is just a part of the process to your success, and that lull is a temporary phase. Keep trying, and have confidence in yourself.

You have to let the negative thoughts fade

away. By feeding your brain with positive thinking and self-belief, you create no space for pessimistic thoughts. And even when they arrive from time to time, your confidence in yourself will beat them instantly.

Some people say that it is resources, background and connections that create successful people. While I surely agree that all these factors influence the path of every individual, but the most contributing factor to achieve something significant is one's self-belief.

If you don't believe in yourself that you

are going to succeed, then how on earth would anybody else do? For instance, if you want to build a successful business, you need to convince the investors that your idea is the one worth putting funds into. For that, the first thing is to absolutely believe that your concept is going to succeed, otherwise no one will trust in it.

Self-belief is the key ingredient to success and one should always nurture it.

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

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