

The many faces of terror in J&K

Fringe groups are aligning themselves to global networks

The Hizbul Mujahideen leader, Syed Salahuddin, and the Lashkar-e-Taiba commander, Mehmood Shah, have in the past several days come out against Al Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS), arguing that neither of them have a role in the Kashmir separatist cause.

While there is irony in two terrorist leaders calling out two other terrorist groups for excessive violence, their statements seem to reflect concerns of the Pakistani deep state that the Kashmir insurgency is becoming merged with the larger global Islamicist terror problem. When it came to Kashmir, Salahuddin said: "Neither there is need nor space for any international organisation." The immediate reason was the declaration, recently confirmed by Al Qaeda, that former Hizbul fighter Zakir Musa has been declared head of Al Qaeda in Kashmir.

There is a deeper hypocrisy in the statements of Hizbul and LeT. Hizbul regularly provides assistance to groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad to fight in Kashmir even though the latter organisation was founded with the direct blessings of the late Osama bin Laden, founder of Al Qaeda. LeT camps in Pakistan are known to have been used by Al Qaeda fighters for training purposes. Underneath all this one can detect the designs of the Pakistani military. The Hizbul and LeT have close ties with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). They have served as the Pakistani military's primary instruments in keeping Kashmir on the boil. At a time that most indicators are showing a renewal of the United States military commitment to fighting in Afghanistan and a greater emphasis on preemptive military action against ISIS and Al Qaeda, Pakistan's generals wish to keep a distance between the US' target list and the militant groups they use to keep India off balance. This is the primary motive behind the statements of Salahuddin and Shah.

What Rawalpindi needs to remember, is that once one decides to ride the tiger of terrorism it is more or less impossible to control its direction. Pakistan-backed terrorist groups may have begun with Kashmir on their mind, but their ideological spawn now target half the world—including Pakistan itself.

Don't assume all dowry complaints are false

It takes a lot of courage for a woman to actually file a charge of harassment

It cannot be denied that there are several instances of women misusing Section 498A of the Indian penal code, under the aegis of which a man and his family, if named in a dowry harassment case, will be immediately arrested. A Supreme Court bench has now ruled that a family welfare committee in every district will scrutinise dowry harassment cases before the local police can arrest the accused.

There is evidence that the misuse of the law is not minuscule enough to be ignored. Data from a National Crime Records Bureau's 2012 report shows that while charge-sheets were filed for 93.6% of registered dowry cases, only 14.4% ended in convictions. The report projected that out of the 3,72,706 cases pending trial in 2012, as many as 3,17,000 were projected to lead to acquittals. There has been much discussion on the subject of women described as "disgruntled" misusing the Section to punish or exact revenge from their spouses and his family. But while this issue is being addressed, it must be kept in mind that there are many, many cases still in India of dowry harassment, and many that even lead to the death of the woman. In a deeply patriarchal society, even in the higher economic strata, eligible men are seen as potential earners in the transaction of marriage. Fathers of daughters are forced to "gift" money, gold, cars, etc for the favour of a man agreeing to marry their daughters.

Therefore, it would be prudent to be careful before assuming that every woman complaining about an abusive family or dowry harassment is "disgruntled" or wishes to exact revenge. It takes a lot of courage, in a very toxic set up, for a woman to muster up the courage to complain to the authorities. Such women find it very difficult to even move on from the trauma of their lives; and society must take steps to ensure that these women have the support and legal help they need to escape the abuse that they face at home.

Religion can't disturb public peace

Faith leaders must direct their followers to return kanwar yatra to its individualised purity



CHANDAN MITRA

Indians are overly exhibitionist in matters of faith. Many of us appear to believe that unless our respective religions and rituals associated with them are volubly demonstrated in public, we have somehow failed in performing our religious duty. Even festivals, which have no religious ceremony associated, such as Holi and Diwali are observed boisterously through the splashing of colours and bursting crackers. Similarly Shia Muslims observe Muharram through self-flagellating processions and carrying Tazias down the street. But since loud music is not an integral part of these observances the public disturbance is limited.

In recent years, a section of young Hindus, especially in north India, has started reviving and celebrating the ritual of collecting water from the Ganga and ferrying it in canisters to the village temple for pouring the water on the shiv lingam during Shraavan. Although derived from a tradition of walking from one's village to a pilgrimage site on (such as Haridwar) on the banks of the Ganga and returning to the village on or before shiv

ratri, the recent rise of religiosity has transformed a personal observance of faith into an offensive display of public nuisance.

In earlier times kanwars, as the pilgrims are called, evoked devotion. They were respected for undertaking a long and arduous journey on foot, braving heat, humidity and rain, to perform a ritual for their own and the community's salvation. Consequently, affluent traders set up camps on the way where pilgrims could rest, have a meal at night before setting off at dawn next day. The physical endurance is what was believed to bestow piety upon them. Although they always walked in groups, they did so silently with a prayer on their lips.

But in the last few decades, kanwars have broken all traditions converting their yatras to and from Haridwar or Garh Ganga into raucous events, travelling in trucks blaring loud music.

Their behaviour on the roads is anything but devotional. They carry hockey sticks and baseball bats to intimidate and injure other road users, state governments, not necessarily of BJP persuasion, make concerted efforts to facilitate their journey, even closing down highways or erecting scaffolding barriers to protect the rowdy pilgrims who are known to turn violent if faced with any obstacle. The month of Shraavan (July-August) is viewed with trepidation by most on north India's roads.

Should observance of religiosity be such a demonstrative public affair, especially if it



In the last few decades, kanwar yatras have become raucous events

inconveniences others? Most religious teachers tell us that religion is a private affair and should definitely not impinge on others' beliefs. But the kanwar revellers have no patience for such pious thoughts. Incidentally, even Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath, a man deeply steeped in religion, had warned kanwars this year not to be unruly or play vulgar film songs. But the fear of violence seems to petrify the police who continue to treat these self-styled devotees with kid gloves.

Possibly as a demonstration effect, young Muslims have started observing the sombre event of Shab-e-Baraat (night of ancestral spirits) in an equally ruffianish way. At least in Delhi, they come out in droves on noisy

motor-cycles at night, waving flags and intimidating other road users by their unruly driving.

The tragic aspect of this rowdy behaviour is that it robs such functions of all vestiges of sobriety. Arguably Hindu community pujas such as Ganesh Utsav and Durga Puja have always been noisy, loud music being their integral part. But it is often counter-argued that the muezzin's call to prayer at the crack of dawn each morning is no less of an invasion of others' privacy and right to sound sleep. The shabad relayed over loud speakers from Sikh gurdwaras also causes disturbance in the neighbourhood.

Sociologists may attribute such behaviour to India's warm climate wherein late nights and early mornings are most conducive for observing religious ceremonies. When India was almost entirely a rural society, such activities were not just tolerated but had complete community sanction. Ironically, in those times, kanwars never played raucous music, nor did they travel on motorbikes carrying baseball bats.

Is there no way to roll back the progressive degeneration of public behaviour associated with religious functions? Politicians are loath to act for fear of offending voters, and ignore the vast majority of the electorate that is profoundly inconvenienced by such rowdy outbursts of purported devotion. It is for religious leaders of all faiths, particularly those in the pravachan industry, to counsel their vast number of followers to return observances like kanwar yatra to their pristine, individualised purity.

Chandan Mitra is editor, The Pioneer, and has been two-time Rajya Sabha MP from the BJP. The views expressed are personal.

UNPALATABLE TRUTHS



There have been several catering policy changes, but these have either been partially implemented – or not executed at all

KARUN SHARMA/HINDUSTAN TIMES

Indian Railways should exit the catering business

Such a move may bring relief to the transporter, providing it more time and energy to focus on its core activities



SRINAND JHA

A TV flash about a nail or a lizard found in a meal served to a train passenger is usually followed by a predictable official drill: Portentous announcements on termination of contracts, imposition of fines or the blacklisting of the firms. Disciplinary action is announced against officials found to be either negligent or for being in cahoots with the "rail catering mafia". Clear-cut action plans and strict timelines aimed at fixing problems are issued. Once all these are done, the gigantic machinery of the Indian Railways (IR) reverts to its state of recess.

India's 163-year-old State-owned transporter has clearly been unable to fix its catering business as the Comptroller and Auditor General has pointed out in a report tabled in Parliament. Why have all railways ministers failed to tackle the on-board catering business? The trouble begins with the mindset. The standard response of a railway officer to complaints about the poor quality of food is this: "We (Indian Railways) serve warm and cheap quality food to approximately 40% of the 1.1 million passengers who travel each day on long-distance trains, besides offering 5 million meals distributed through the static

units. Instead of being appreciative, the passengers are always nit-picking. Do they complain as much about the food served at their homes?" In other words: The IR is doing its best and passengers must stop complaining.

One of the key problems is "cartelisation". There have been several policy changes (2005, 2010 and 2017), but these have either been partially implemented – or not executed at all. The same set of caterers – or their front companies – have continued to monopolise the business; finding ways to circumvent policy guidelines. One firm – or its front companies – has been known to have monopolised 70% of the catering business in past decades. There have been reports about rail kitchens having been either bought over or sublet.

This situation persists with the knowledge – or even connivance – of the rail bureaucracy. Charges of "cuts" having been taken have often hit headlines, while tales about an officer's birthday party having been sponsored by a rail contractor are not unheard of. Often constables of the Government Railway Police of the Railway Police Force are seen tucking into sumptuous fare in the berths provided for in the pantry cars.

Everything that ever needed to be experimented with by the railways to fix the catering issue has been attempted in past decades. Just one job remains: A decision on a complete exit from the catering business. Such a move may bring relief to the State-owned transporter, providing to it more time to focus on its core activities of operating and managing train services.

srinand.jha@hindustantimes.com

pulp-it

R SUKUMAR



SoftBank's investments could elbow out funds

Its vision fund could result in consolidation or hasten the share-sale process for firms looking to launch IPOs

The New York Times reported on July 25 that SoftBank Group Corp. is considering a "multi-billion dollar investment" in ride-hailing service Uber Technologies Inc. The report said talks between the two companies were at a preliminary stage.

SoftBank already has a stake in several Uber rivals, including Ola (ANI Technologies Pvt. Ltd) Ola in India and Grab (Grab-Taxi Holdings Pte. Ltd) in Singapore. The Indian company already has an investment from China's Didi Chuxing, which also has a stake in Uber (made after Uber exited China after selling its Chinese operations to Didi). SoftBank itself has a huge investment (\$5 billion) in Didi. What this means is that SoftBank wins, no matter who does in the market.

That's probably one of the advantages of having a \$100 billion (give or take a few billion) fund, which is what SoftBank has. Called the SoftBank Vision Fund, this is the largest technology fund ever raised. The size of that fund is probably why the storied investor can make a play for a stake in the world's most valuable start-up (Uber) — just to hedge its bets.

In India, Ola and the local arm of Uber are fighting it out for market dominance. Independent analysts say the two companies are neck-and-neck; Ola says it is significantly ahead; Uber says it is significantly ahead.

There's no debate about one of SoftBank's other investments in India, though. Snapdeal (Jasper Infotech Pvt Ltd), was once mentioned in the same breath as Flipkart. Now, it is a distant third after Flipkart and Amazon.com Inc's Indian unit and in all sorts of trouble. Still, SoftBank is just a step away from parlaying its investment in Snapdeal into a stake in Flipkart (by getting the latter to buy the former). What's in it for Flipkart? A significant investment by SoftBank from its new fund. In this case, SoftBank is simply salvaging an older invest-

SOFTBANK IS ALSO AN INVESTOR IN ALIBABA GROUP HOLDING LTD., WHICH, WHILE IT MAY BE TAKING FOREVER TO FINALISE ITS INDIA STRATEGY, COULD BE THE ONLY COMPANY CAPABLE OF STANDING UP TO AMAZON

ment that hasn't worked out (which, again, is fairly easy to do for a company that has just raised a \$100 billion fund). SoftBank is also a significant investor in Alibaba Group Holding Ltd, which, while it may be taking forever to finalise its India strategy, is seen by some as the only company capable of standing up to Amazon in India. SoftBank also has an investment in One97 Communications Ltd, the company behind Paytm. Alibaba, through its payments company Alipay, already has a significant stake in Paytm. Clearly, there are wheels within wheels, and SoftBank is at the hub.

That's not a bad position to be in for a company many of whose early investments didn't play out as expected. Somehow, despite that start, SoftBank has maneuvered itself into a position of strength — a process that has not been aided by the money at its disposal.

That's both good and bad news for other venture capital firms. It's good news because the size of the cheques the new fund will write. According to a January report by Mint, the SoftBank Vision Fund will "not make early-stage investments, preferring to invest in later rounds (so-called Series C and Series D rounds), and putting in at least a few hundred million to up to a few billion dollars in each investment." Such investments could result in consolidation, or they could accelerate the share-sale process for companies looking to launch an initial public offering. Both provide exit options for investors.

It's bad news because the size of SoftBank's investments will crowd most other funds out of the market. A senior executive at a venture capital company says this happened in 2014-15, and that his fund, a well-known US one, and several others, had to choose between being relegated to the sidelines by SoftBank and Tiger Global Management (the other company that was writing big cheques back then) or competing with them by making investments of the same magnitude. Neither, this person told me, was a preferred option. The situation changed in the second half of 2015 and 2016 and some amount of rationality returned to the space, this person said. "Now, we are back in those times," he added. Only, Tiger is no longer playing that game because it can't afford it. Now, it's just SoftBank, which seems to have all the money in the world.

R Sukumar is editor, Mint. letters@hindustantimes.com

innervoice

HURDLES ARE A PART AND PARCEL OF OUR LIVES, WE SHOULDN'T LOSE HEART

Abhay Rawal

There is a kid named Rio in my locality. He is 9 years old, walks with leg braces because polio took away his strength to walk normally. I always watch him running outside the small park in our society. You will not find him during normal days except rainy day. He runs across the park when the sky starts getting dense with black clouds and stays there the last drop falls from the sky.

Yesterday, I asked him why he only runs on a rainy day. He replied, "I love the drops

of water and aroma of the soil and plants". With a smile on his face, he added that he also loves taking the natural shower and watching plants getting wet. I was enjoying listening to him and to carry the conversation, I asked him, "What do you want to be?" He said, "I want to join the army" after a pause he added, "my legs may not like my decision but my God can't be so rude and one day, I will join the Army".

He stood up, started walking towards his house and left me with tears. What a great thinking this little kid has and so coura-

geous by heart. I think we should learn from this kid that despite all hurdles, we shouldn't lose our heart, keep our eyes on the target like he wants to join army and enjoy the rain which is life. This reminds me of a great saying by Christopher Reeve, "A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles".

Innervoice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal. innervoice@hindustantimes.com