



A credibility crisis

The Mecca Masjid acquittals will reinforce cynicism about the state of the justice system

The acquittal of five suspects in the Mecca Masjid bomb blast case is likely to reinforce public cynicism in the country about the state of the criminal justice system. Regardless of whether the acquittal was owing to the innocence of Swami Aseemanand and four others belonging to a Hindu right-wing group, or because the prosecuting agency lacked the resolve and freedom to obtain their conviction, the outcome is undoubtedly a substantial denial of justice for a crime that killed nine people and injured many others. It also shattered the lives of dozens of Muslims who were taken into custody by the Hyderabad police in the immediate aftermath of the blast in May 2007; their arbitrary incarceration, alleged custodial torture and the protracted court hearings amounted to grave miscarriage of justice. It has a striking similarity to the Malegaon blasts in Maharashtra: a group of Muslims being portrayed as the perpetrators in the initial stages, but the involvement of a Hindu group being uncovered later. The police first named the Harkat-ul-Jihadi-e-Islami as the organisation involved. The Central Bureau of Investigation, which took over the probe, chargesheeted 21 suspects, but they were acquitted in 2009 for want of evidence. It was only in 2010 that the CBI named some members of Abhinav Bharat, a few of whom were formerly RSS pracharaks, in a fresh charge sheet. The case changed hands again in 2011 and went to the National Investigation Agency.

The prosecution case appeared to have been significantly bolstered by a confession by Aseemanand in 2010 in a magistrate's court in Delhi, but his subsequent retraction cast a shadow over its voluntary nature. However, given the details in his statement on the planning and execution of some key terror attacks between 2006 and 2008, including bomb attacks in Malegaon, on the Samjhauta Express, at the Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad and the Ajmer Dargah, there will be inevitable questions about why the NIA failed to produce any significant evidence in the trial. Even after the judgment, one is at a loss to understand who was responsible for the blasts. If the initial knee-jerk response of the police was in keeping with the mood of the times, the record of the central agencies appears tainted by shoddy investigation and irresolute prosecution. The NIA has faced charges of going soft on Hindutva groups after the regime change at the Centre in 2014, once even from a public prosecutor handling the Malegaon blast case. That 66 out of 226 witnesses turned hostile reflects poorly on the investigating agency and exposes the lack of legal safeguards to protect witnesses. The investigating agencies face a credibility crisis, and how public faith in their impartiality can be restored is something the country ought to worry about now.

Cash is still king

The sudden cash crunch shows that remonetisation remains a work in progress

Nearly 18 months after the government's decision to scrap currency notes of ₹500 and ₹1,000, which accounted for over 86% of the currency in circulation at the time, large parts of India are in the throes of a severe cash crunch again. The government started acting belatedly on Tuesday in response to reports of cash shortages from States including Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh over a fortnight. Terming the shortage a manifestation of an 'unusual spurt in currency demand' over three months, the Finance Ministry has emphasised that the first 13 days of April recorded an increase in currency supply of ₹45,000 crore. Yet, thousands of automated teller machines are either not functioning or not dispensing adequate cash as banks are reluctant to divert cash to them at the cost of customers visiting branches for withdrawals. The Ministry has asserted that over ₹1.75 lakh crore of cash lies in reserves, which may now be deployed to meet the demand. On its part, the Reserve Bank of India has claimed there is enough cash in its vaults, but it has ramped up the printing of all notes. At the same time, it blamed the shortages on logistical issues of replenishing ATMs and said it is moving more cash to regions that witnessed high cash withdrawals.

Theories abound on how upcoming elections, starting with Karnataka and possibly ending with the Lok Sabha polls in 2019, have prompted a large-scale cash management exercise among political parties. Part of the retail love for cash is also being attributed to depositor fears about the impending Financial Resolution and Deposit Insurance Bill that makes it possible to deploy investor savings to bail out stressed banks and financial institutions. There could be some truth in these explanations, but the genesis of the current cash crisis is firmly rooted in the lack of system-wide thinking that went into the Centre's big-bang note ban gambit. The government may have chosen to go for ₹2,000 notes post-demonetisation to remonetise the economy faster, but with lower denomination notes taking longer to flow freely, circulation wasn't efficient and the big note has become a preferred mode for hoarding capital. That a plan to re-introduce ₹1,000 notes was later junked didn't help; nor did the difference in the sizes of the new notes. As the RBI noted on Tuesday, recalibration of ATMs is still under way for the ₹200 note. Demonetisation may have been aimed at weeding out black money, but perpetuating dependency on the ₹2,000 note ignores an age-old heuristic for currency management that every denomination should be 2 to 2.5 times its preceding denomination. The current cash crunch shows how the consequences of the overnight demonetisation of November 8-9, 2016 continue to haunt us.

The soft power of India

A mere wish to be praised as a global or regional power should not be allowed to guide our foreign policy



CHINMAYA R. GHAREKHAN

There is a lot of talk these days, not so much among government circles as among the 'strategic community', about India being a major or even global power, with the capability, even responsibility, to play an 'important role' on the world stage as a balancing power between major powers and as a 'security provider' to others. We need to temper this rhetoric, be more realistic and less ambitious. The dividing line between national pride and national ego can be thin.

Nehru's vision

India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was convinced that India was bound to play an increasing and beneficent part in world affairs. He had developed a zeal for diplomacy that was not backed by the needed military and economic hard power. He was banking on our moral high ground because he and the nation were proud of the non-violent manner in which we had achieved our independence. As early as 1948, he declared: "India had already become the fourth or fifth most influential country in the United Nations." This was a strange claim; just a year earlier, we were forced to withdraw our candidature for the Security Council when Ukraine, which was contesting the same seat, secured more votes than us in seven successive ballots

in a single day. We have been afflicted with this malady ever since.

Over the decades, no doubt influenced by our experience in the early years in Kashmir and China, the idealist strain has diminished and eventually disappeared altogether; national interest alone would guide our policy. This is not necessarily an undesirable thing. The only caveat is that we have to be realists and check the inexplicable urge to play a big role in international relations.

We have to ask ourselves: What kind of role do we want to play? Where and how do we want to play the role? Do we have the means to play such role?

Status and responsibility

Leaders everywhere look for a role for themselves. They believe, perhaps genuinely, that an increased prestige for themselves will translate into more votes domestically and ipso facto bring benefits to their countries. The driving factor is prestige, status. Often the leaders do not realise that playing a role carries with it responsibilities which we may not be able or keen to accept but which we might be dragged into. These responsibilities would be defined by others and would invariably involve us in tasks and areas which we may not wish to get involved in.

Are we clear about the kind of role we wish to play internationally? Do we have a role model for it? Do we wish to emulate what Vladimir Putin's Russia is doing in West Asia? Or, what the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan in the 1980s or what America did in Iran in 1953, in Indo-China in the 1950s and 1960s, and frequently in Central



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and South America? All those operations lacked legitimacy and for the most part cost the countries concerned dear in human and material terms. Nor did they bring them glory. One will look in vain for an example when such a role was played with benign intentions.

Regional aspirations

If not global, what about a regional role, in our neighbourhood? Experts seem unanimous that India is certainly a regional power. But is it? Recent events do not lend support to that view and the government was right in not paying heed to that rhetoric. India is without doubt the pre-eminent power in South Asia. However, given our firm commitment not to use force and to non-interference in internal affairs in other states, our neighbours do not feel threatened by us. (We do not rule out strong measures when we have to.) We did make a huge effort in Sri Lanka to bring peace and stability to that country and we did so at the request of its lawful government. The venture ended in failure and eventually cost the life of a former prime minister. Small-scale interventions in the Maldives and the

Shaken to the core in Kathua

The chilling details of the Kathua rape are important, but so is the disturbing politics behind it



ZOYA HASAN & FARIDA ABDULLA KHAN

The tragic and gruesome rape and killing of an eight-year-old girl in Kathua, Jammu, with a blatantly communal agenda (as suggested by the details that have come to light in the charge sheet filed by the Jammu and Kashmir police), and the events following it, demonstrate a descent into the deepest levels of depravity. This is shocking even for India where a swiftly accumulating record of lynchings, rape and brutalisation on the grounds of caste and religion is being allowed to happen not only with impunity but also, and often, with support and protection from members of the political establishment.

Overcoming obstacles

In this case, a minor belonging to a marginalised community of Bakherwals, a nomadic tribe based in the Pir Panjal and Himalayan mountains, was abducted, raped and murdered in January this year. An investigation was launched and completed with the efforts of several courageous members of the legal community and law-enforcing agencies against heavy odds, and threats by and interference from ministers of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); the

People's Democratic Party (PDP)-BJP combine is in power in the State. Even as the charge sheet detailing the pre-meditated crime was to be submitted before the chief judicial magistrate, lawyers of the State called a strike in defence of the accused. Members of the Bar Associations of Kathua and Jammu prevented the State police from filing the charge sheet and it could only be handed to the judicial magistrate at his home. Lawyers, actively helped by the right-wing Hindu Ekta Manch, carried out protests in support of special police officer Deepak Khajuria, one of the accused in the case. These protests, which went on for a month, in fact defiled the tricolour by using it to defend the men accused of rape and murder. Finally, eight people, including two special police officers, were arrested in connection with the crime.

Worse still, several members of the PDP-BJP coalition supported their conduct and sought to protect those responsible for this horrendous crime. They included two BJP Ministers who joined rallies in support of the Kathua accused, but who resigned in the wake of public outrage expressed through social media and street protests. Their resignation rather than dismissal or expulsion from the party leaves the door open for them to come back to the government.

A generic assurance

Last week, almost three months after the incident, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, broke his silence amid widespread national and in-



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ternational outrage, and assured the country that no culprit would be spared and that justice would be done. But this statement has little meaning and even less conviction as it was a generic statement of assurance blanking out the specifics of the Kathua or Unnao cases (in the latter, a BJP MLA is accused of rape). Contrast this with Mr. Modi's statement in 2013, in the aftermath of the ghastly Nirbhaya rape case, when, as the prime ministerial candidate, he exhorted the people of Delhi not to forget her while casting their vote for the Delhi Assembly polls on December 4.

The response of the Prime Minister has been wholly inadequate and as always a case of too little too late. Nevertheless, the mainstream media applauded his belated intervention by giving him full credit for silencing his critics with the resignation of the two Ministers even though there has been little evidence, over nearly three months, of government action to prosecute the perpetrators or their supporters of violence. What is more, PDP legislators and senior party leaders in Srinagar "praised the role played by the BJP in the

Seychelles in the 1980s were successful in stabilising legitimate governments. To that extent, India was able to play a positive role in the region. In these examples, the motivating factor was not prestige, there were domestic factors at play. The resulting increase in our prestige was incidental. If intervention does not succeed, as in Sri Lanka, the ensuing loss of prestige more than offsets whatever prestige we might have gained in the other operations. Often, when a country gets involved in what might be assessed as a low cost foreign adventure, it remains bogged down even when the going gets tough precisely because it apprehends loss of face or prestige. It is easy to get in but difficult to get out.

The real goals

Apart from protecting our people from adverse external factors and interventions, the principal criterion in the conduct of foreign policy for India ought to be lifting the poor from poverty. Whatever brings concrete benefits to our people should be encouraged. A mere wish to be praised as a global or even regional power should not be allowed to guide the policy. When other countries flatter us by describing us as a major power, it is invariably because they want to rope us into some schemes of their own. It is best not to get too entangled in the chess moves of other countries. The principal interest of most of them is to sell very expensive military hardware to us. Our single minded focus should be on economic development. Without the necessary economic strength, we cannot strengthen

our military. We do need a strong military but for that we need undisturbed double digit economic growth for a generation. Prime Minister Vajpayee's seasoned adviser Brajesh Mishra's advice was sound: do not provoke nor get provoked for two decades, concentrate on building the economy. Since we do have to think critically about allocating our scarce resources among alternative uses, and since we are a democratic polity with a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society with a large number of poor, we have to think more than twice about defence spending. Even when at some stage we acquire credible hard power, we must not allow ourselves to be seduced by the flattering and mostly insincere talk of others about India playing a global role.

When I used to visit West Asia on behalf of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, my interlocutors expressed their admiration, not so much for our economy or military, but for the orderly manner in which power was transferred from one party to another and for the largely harmonious and peaceful, integrated manner in which people of different faiths lived together. An internally divided India cannot play any role externally. The 'strategic community' should concentrate on reinforcing this real soft power of India which is what the rest of the world appreciates and not lose time and resources in peripheral ventures that bring no lasting benefit.

Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, a former Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, was Special Envoy for West Asia in the Manmohan Singh government

Kathua case". Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti thanked the Prime Minister for "defusing the situation" and claimed that the "unfortunate incident had united the nation". Having taken no responsibility for the deplorable series of events herself, she now proclaims that the Kathua case has united the nation. Both responses should worry us for what it means for a democratic, just and egalitarian order.

Part of a pattern

Mr. Modi's non-specific and banal avowal of justice for the victims appears to be an attempt to brush aside the communal nature of the crime which is writ large in the charge sheet of the Kathua case. Rape was part of a plan to scare and dislodge the Bakherwal community from the Rasana area in Jammu, by sections of the Hindu community. This becomes apparent when interests based on community or religion are invoked to support the perpetrators and intimidate the family of the victim to drop the case. It is not a coincidence that this pattern of communal violence, its valorisation and the total lack of justice for the victims was established in Gujarat in 2002. The Kathua case replicates the Gujarat model of using rape as a weapon of communal hate and ethnic cleansing to threaten and drive out, in this case, a Muslim tribal community.

The chilling details of the Kathua rape are important but the politics behind it is no less so. It is communal politics and the envi-

ronment of impunity allowed by the ruling party and the public support they have garnered that should concern us. The culture of majoritarian hostility and incessant propaganda let loose by the Sangh Parivar has emboldened communal elements to pursue their politics of hate. Those involved in such crimes knew that their actions and behaviour would be condoned by the political leadership which has indeed let them off the hook by stating that the two leaders who joined the rallies in support of the accused were "misled and misguided" by a few people.

The most disturbing aspect is the fact that the perpetrators and their supporters perpetrated off such reprehensible acts as 'nationalism' by packaging their immorality in the *tiranga*. It is not only the BJP's rationalisations and whataboutery which has been evident from the responses of party leaders but also the climate of hate that provides the social sanction and legitimacy for such unspeakable crimes. The Prime Minister's feeble response in the aftermath of these events does nothing to reassure communities that are repeatedly targeted under this government. It only reveals the disdain that BJP cadres have adopted for constitutional values and which the leadership seems to condone.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

A scandal, a blot

We have come across numerous stories about the casting couch being prevalent in the film industry. That such an abominable practice could have percolated to the education system is cause for concern ("Governor dismisses trafficking allegations" and "PIL seeks CBI probe", both April 18). Talking about women's empowerment should not remain a mere slogan. A fast-track probe with the culprits being brought to book is the only remedy that can restore our confidence and trust in the education system.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

■ Tamil Nadu is known as the Capital of the east in recognition of the high standard of education (at all levels) prevalent in the State. It is a matter of deep shame

that there are now allegations of women students being trafficked in anticipation of favours from officials. There has to be a swift and transparent probe.

ANGELINE JESURAJ,
Madurai

■ The news report about a faculty member luring girl students for a quid pro quo on their career prospects is shocking. That a teacher, and a woman, could stoop so low is even more stunning. The issue does not rest with the suspension of the assistant professor. The 'powerful lords' within the academic system must be traced and subject to stringent punishment. It is disgusting that there are monsters polluting the learning process.

S.V. VENUGOPALAN,
Chennai

■ A professor trying to lure students to provide

"favours" to higher officials in exchange for money, good marks, life-time security and a good job spells a huge threat to girl students. It appears as though corrupt practices have reached the next level. There is no doubt that there needs to be a CBI probe as it involves higher officials.

ANISH ARUMUGAM,
Karankadu, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu

Capital punishment

We cannot eliminate rape simply by punishing the rapists in a barbaric manner (Editorial - "Clamour for death", April 18). We have to eliminate the idea of women being viewed as a sexual object which is etched in the collective conscience and strengthened by our upbringing, education, and media influences. By resorting to simple logic such as drastic measures/capital punishment we conveniently forget to see the ubiquitous

misogynistic culture from which sexual crimes sprout. The ultimate solution to end rape is to make society a gender egalitarian one. And it also doesn't mean that rapists can go scot-free.

SUKUMARAN C.V.,
Palakkad, Kerala

■ The Hindu's principled and consistent opposition to the death penalty is laudable in terms of it being savage and uncivilised. So far so good. But the gruesome case of the rape and murder of the minor in Kathua, Jammu, stands out from the rest. The plan to torture and eliminate the minor was planned in order to instil fear in a nomadic community. It was about the politics of dispossession, perverted right-wing nationalism and sexual violence. The perpetrators should get severe punishment.

ABDUL ASSIS P.A.,
Padiyam, Thrissur, Kerala

Fight for Karnataka

While there can be no denying the fact that the Karnataka Assembly election is likely to be a closely-fought one, the campaigning has focussed more on trivial issues, forgetting the people of the State (Editorial page - "Managing an election", April 18). The Bharatiya Janata Party, which blotted its copybook during its tenure in office earlier, has little to show in terms of achievements. It has been forced to train its guns on the Congress government and been raising the charge of corruption without any evidence to back its claims. The JD(S) too has been using the same template. The Congress has only been busy fending off the charges. None of the three parties has made a commitment to solve pressing problems, especially those which concern the farming community that has been

reeling under drought for years now.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

Catching the rain

It is paradoxical that we allow monsoon rainwater run-off flow to the sea but spend crores converting seawater to drinking water. Measures such as estimating water available in shallow and deep aquifers, use of water conservation techniques, redefining the criteria for recycling and reuse of effluents, installation of water meters, water auditing, and efficient use of recycled water must acquire importance. Predictions remain predictions only till they become reality (Editorial - "Chasing the monsoon", April 18).

R. SAMPATH,
Chennai

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