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The Fires of Hate and the Failures of the State in South Asia

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No one would have believed in the last years of the twentieth century that this world would be in such tumult over so little that is understood. Unimaginable violence, most of it for triumphs that are obscure. Politics buried so deep in their actions, that the motives disappear in the flames, and the suffering itself becomes the end. Aerial bombardment of entire countries, cold-blooded massacre of citizenries. Armies set in place to hold people down, and themselves held down by their inexperience and bewilderment. Populations motivated for revenge rather than for revolution, harmed beyond belief and then diverted from their oppressors to take their justice where it comes. A cheapened world, where values are given over to pieties, and tears quickly dry into the very rage that created them in the first place. Time is circular: this is the myth of eternal return, with the avenging angel appearing once as Demon, then Angel, then Demon again. This is our cauldron.

> Aye dil he mushkil jeena yahan
> Zara hat ke zara bach ke, yeh hai Bombay meri jaan.
> [O heart, living here is difficult,
> Be alert, be crafty, this is Bombay, my love.]
> Majrooh Sultanpuri, “CID.”

So many bombs over Bombay! The ten men came out of the dark waters, walked past the Gateway of India and created mayhem in the hotels and restaurants, Jewish Center and rail station, and in the hearts of a city. But these men are only the latest installment. The line of culprits who have gone after this city is long: flagitious politicians and their feral goons, depraved gangsters of Dalal Street and of the Underworld. They have produced a gallimaufry of disorder and despair. This is the context for the current violence. Bombay is not virginal. It is experienced. But this violence has struck at the heart of the enclave of the elite. When they say that this is Mumbai’s 911, it is true. This is an attack into the heart of the zones of comfort in Indian cities. Other dates resonate in other neighborhoods. Some of them refer to events forgotten or unresolved: killers remain at large, justice remains unfulfilled. Almost a thousand people died in the riots of 1992-1993. They died in places like Dharavi and Pydhonie. Two hundred thousand Muslims fled the city in its aftermath. Three hard right functionaries went to prison in 2008 for one year. In 1993, car and suitcase bombs in hotels and in the stock market killed 257 people. The culprits were linked to a former Bombay gangster, D-Company boss Dawood Ibrahim, who is believed to live between Dubai and Karachi. One hundred people have been convicted of this crime, several given the death penalty. From there the bomb blasts have escalated: 2002, 2003, 2006, and now 2008.

Attack in Mumbai financial district

Outside Bombay, in the countryside and in the smaller towns, violence has also become commonplace. Time bombs on a short fuse were left across the agrarian belt of Vidharbha; agricultural polices destined to create distress forced thousands of farmers to suicide. Agricultural failures and deindustrialization created a footloose population, a pool of labor that is on the move, destined to a nomadic life. Random murder on the byways provides work for the actuaries of the morgues, but little remorse from the system. Some of the dead are women, many on the road to Bombay's red light area, Kamathipura.

Bombings have their rituals. When blasts rocked a Muslim neighborhood in Malegaon, a city northeast of Mumbai, the authorities followed a by now familiar script. They initially blamed the matter on the Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), a group formed in 1977 and banned by the government in 2002. I remember meeting two activists of SIMI about fifteen years ago; they were young men, with remorseful eyes, angered beyond belief by the destruction of a 16th century mosque in the town of Ayodhya, driven by frustrations that had no outlet. Their organization had little of the expansive ability to bring these young men into a politics of national transformation. Their politics was governed by a sense of loss. The investigative agencies determined that the three they arrested (Noor-ul-Hooda, Shabeer Batterywala and Raees Ahmed) were not only with SIMI, but also with the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Toiba. The Lashkar is one of those organizations that emerged in 1991 out of the detritus of the Afghan jihad (it was formed in Kunar province). Carter's Brzezinski vowed to "sow shit in the Soviet backyard." His Afghan toilet overflowed into South Asia. The Lashkar is the armed unit of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa, centered in a seminary at Muridke, Pakistan. It is a particularly repellent organization that feeds on the unsettled conflict in Kashmir. But some careful investigation by the government found, two years later, that the culprits were neither SIMI nor the Lashkar, but a group of hardened activists with histories in the hard right Hindu organizations, such as the RSS, the VHP, and the Bajrang Dal. One is a monk (Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur) and another is a military officer (Lt. Col. S. P. Purohit). These activists of Abhinav Bharat came to trial on November 24, 2008, shortly before the Mumbai attacks. One of those careful investigators was Hemant Karkare. He died in the recent attacks, in the line of duty.

Abhinav Bharat, Lashkar-e-Toiba, one deriving its sustenance from Hinduism, another from Islam. They are the children of States that have failed to deliver on social development, and which have since given up on the agenda of equality to throw themselves into a celebration of upward mobility and spectacular consumerism. The Abhinav Bharat and its parent groups sustain themselves on hatred of Muslims and of Pakistan, on the cultivation of fear about Islam and of its assaults on the Hindus. The Lashkar and its various kin thrive on hatred of Hindus and of India, and harvest young people who feel threatened by India and angered by their shallow understanding of the Kashmir conflict. In October 2008, the Lashkar's leader, Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, told his lieutenants, "The only language India understands is that of force, and that is the language it must be talked to in." This could have come out of the mouth of the VHP's Pravin Togadia (and this is what he did say, "If our government is ready to finish Pakistan, we are ready to wait"). The Lashkar's animosity toward India often spills over to its hatred for the leadership in Pakistan (responsibility for the September 2008 bombing of the Islamabad Marriott that killed 54 might lie at the entrance to the Lashkar's seminary). After the 2005 earthquake that crushed the Pakistani side of the Kashmir mountains, Saeed blamed the Pakistani leadership, "They blatantly ridiculed the commandments of Allah. Thus they invited the wrath of God in the form of the earthquake." Mirror images of each other, the VHP

and the Lashkar offer nothing for the future, but boil the resentments of selected parts of the population, to artificially hasten their hope for change with promises of martyrdom and paradise. These are the alchemists of resentment, who use bombs and swords, guns and axes to do their magic for them. There is no development of the protracted struggle to change the conditions of the present, only the irrational commitment to fleeting acts of terrible violence. Terror in saffron robes or draped in green flags has absolute contempt for the desperate needs of people who are increasingly abandoned by the policies that bring homelessness and hunger to the hundreds of millions.

> The evil that I do, I understand full well.
> But a passion drives me greater than my will.
> Euripides, “Medea.”

In December 1992, I was near Seelampur, in Delhi, which was in the midst of a riot. I was studying the process by which oppressed castes enter such conflagrations on the side of oppressor castes who otherwise disdain them. Silence, screams, gunfire, silence: this was the sound track of the riot. I was in a temple consecrated to the sage Valmiki, revered by an oppressed caste, the Balmikis. By nightfall, the empty temple opened its doors to young boys who were sweaty with excitement and bloodshed. These were the shock troops of the riot. We spent the night in the courtyard of the temple. They were boys, not men, filled with the kinds of cheap jokes and anxieties of teenagers. Their eyes sparkled and then became cold in an instant, for these were not just any boys. They had killed and seen their friends die. The oldest of the lot shook incessantly, filled with longing for the heroin that his aged mother brought to him, breaking the curfew that he was too scared to risk. The bile of these boys had been somehow harnessed to the lusts of older men, who had agendas unclear to those who held the guns for them. In my diary I wrote that this bespoke an end to politics. They acted politically, and with political effect, but they themselves had little political vision. They were motivated by an endless cycle of revenge and bitterness; the present was given over to the past. There was no future in this.

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Disoriented, like a musth elephant, the State seeks easy solutions: more draconian legislation, more fiery rhetoric, and more warmongering. The Congress-led Government is pushed from the Right by the BJP, who seem to want an instant attack on Pakistan, a sort of Bush reaction to 911. Those in the government in charge of intelligence and security have been sacked. Discussions are in process for how to move forward. The Communists caution against hasty action, and have urged the government to make a motion to the UN rather than to the Indian Air Force. The Pakistani Worker Communist Party sends its condolences and says, “Crimes of such barbarity must make people realize that the moment has arrived for the people of both India and Pakistan to develop a unified commitment towards peace and harmony in the world and to combat extremism and terrorism in all its shades and colors.” The call for unity seems remote in these times, and yet, utterly necessary. Hopes slumber even in those who take aim for the debauched. More blood feeds the beast; it is food, shelter and conviviality that transform it into a neighbor.

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