

Dettol, Basmati and Terrorism

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Prashant Rangnekar's report in the *Sunday Express* (8th Nov) headlined : 'Goa bombers tried to leave Muslim imprint.' Union Home Minister P Chidambaram too should read Rangnekar's dispatch from Mumbai. After all, as a senior leader of the majority community, the home minister recently reiterated a solemn pledge to Wahhabi clerics of the Deoband seminary that Hindus will and should always protect the minorities.

He obviously doesn't subscribe to the more tenable view that the only real minority in India is the ruling elite and they need nobody's protection, much less sympathy. The rest of the people are commoners-Dalits, tribals, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians, Jews, Jains, Buddhists, non-believers, pagans, everyone. If these people need anyone's protection it is that of the state, not any community. That the clerics showed scant interest in Chidam-baram's promise of security is of a piece with their experience of vacuous resolves made to them since decades with an eye on their votes. The dismissiveness shown to the senior minister also subsumes Deoband's own obscurantist agenda. The ageing clerics went into paroxysms, on their part, about how the singing of *Vande Matram* was not acceptable to Muslims. Of course *Vande Matram* is not an ideal song for a secular republic. It would be, had the Indian constitution made provisions for God in the preamble. But it didn't. But scores of Muslim, Sikh, Christian and agnostic singers have sung praises of Hindu deities in classical and popular music. There are Pakistani men who carry 'sindur' and 'mangalsutra' from Delhi, insignia of married Hindu women, to adorn their Muslim spouses with. These are cultural gives and takes. If one makes them a test of patriotism the patrons of a fine culture would turn away.

So while Chidambaram and his sparring partners from Deoband were locked in a fruitless and diversionary discourse about physical security and an 'obscurantist' song, the real-life Muslim citizens, like the Dalits, like the tribals, like the majority of impoverished and abused Indians were engaged in assiduously disabusing the state of its blinkered view about them. A part of this struggle involves explaining to the state that they are not all terrorists.

Mr Chidambaram should also read a powerful message, if he reads Hindi, which one can see on the back of Delhi's three-wheeler taxis these days. The simple lines throw a mighty challenge to the state, by asking: When a truthful citizen is stricken with fear of the police, the law courts and the government, is it freedom or is it slavery? But Mr Chidambaram's state is programmed to see, much like the fire-spitting robot in the Hollywood movie—Terminator—organic signs of conformism and dissent.

In the West, it is called profiling and is generally frowned upon by decent people. But Indians are different. In the malaria-infested forests of Chhatisgarh, anyone carrying quinine tablets or even a bottle of Dettol is identified as a Maoist. What about Muslim terrorists, how can one tell them from a distance, particularly if they have been shot or have blown themselves up? Rangnekar's eerily funny report reveals how at least some of the Hindu extremists visualise what a Muslim terrorist should look like.

According to the *Express* story, investigators in Goa now believe that the Sanatan Sanstha men who were killed while apparently planting bombs in the coastal state during Diwali celebrations in October were hoping to fan communal tensions.

How? Well, they were planning to mislead the police through items they wanted to leave behind at the site: a shopping bag from Delhi's 'Khan Market', a bottle of traditional perfume 'popular among Muslims' and an empty bag of branded Basmati rice on which all the words were in Urdu.

The items were recovered by policemen from the site of the crude bomb blast in Margao on October 16 in which two Sanatan members, Malgounda Patil and Yogesh Naik, were killed. According to the report, it was found after investigations and the subsequent arrest of two men suspected to be linked to Patil and Naik that they were carrying these items to leave them behind at the blast site in order to signal a Muslim hand. 'The material was enough to spark communal trouble in Margao and extremist elements from outside would have found it easy to aggravate it,' an officer was quoted as saying. Margao, Goa's main commercial city, is represented by Chief Minister Digambar Kamat in the state assembly and has a large Muslim population. Kamat, incidentally, was near the site of the blast, taking part in the Diwali celebrations but was not hurt. The alleged plan to blame the bomb blast on Muslim groups had echoes of the Malegaon bomb blast last year, the officer said. Members of Hindu extremist group Abhinav Bharat accused for that blast, had parked the motorbike packed with the bomb below the defunct first-floor office of the outlawed Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI).

Patil and Naik are accused of planting three bombs at the crowded Diwali celebrations in Margao and another at a celebration in Sancaole town 20 km away. Of these, only one of the bombs in Margao exploded, prematurely, police say. While Patil died within hours, Naik succumbed to his injuries in hospital days later. Patil worked as an administrator at the Ramnathi headquarters of Sanatan while Naik, a teacher at a school for mentally challenged students, supplied milk to the organisation and circulated its mouthpiece *Sanatan Prabhat*. Subsequently, the Special Investigating Team constituted by the Goa police to probe the blast arrested Vinay Talekar and Vinayak Patil, alleging that they were linked to the conspiracy. Sanatan has denied it had anything to do with the blast.

It would be far more purposeful for Mr Chidambaram and his friendly opponents from Deoband to focus on more crucial issues, such as the trail of evidence with which the state could pin down groups that use false flag attacks to implicate members of a different community with an intent to cause social ruptures. He must reopen the probe into what has come to be known as the dubious Batla House encounter killings in Delhi. In fact the accidental deaths of suspected Hindu extremists in the Goa blasts may have a link with the firebombing of the Samjhauta Express in February 2007. Press Trust of India reported on October 19 that India's federal police (CBI) and Rajasthan Police had questioned four persons in Indore, including a local leader of Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), in connection with the Samjhauta Express blast.

According to the news agency, during the initial investigation, the CBI had stumbled on some clues 'which hinted that material used in the (Samjhauta) explosion might have been bought from Indore following which some people came under the scanner of the CBI'.

BJYM is the youth wing of India's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party.

Sixty-eight persons, including many Pakistanis, were killed and other passengers sustained injuries when explosions ripped through Samjhauta Express during its transit through Panipat on its way to Lahore from Delhi.

In a separate dispatch from Panaji, state capital of Goa, PTI said the local government was examining the possibility of banning *Sanatan Sanstha*, the right wing group being seen behind the blast in Margao.

Last year, the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) had revealed that Purohit supplied the RDX used in the Samjhauta Express. The police officer investigating the case was, however, killed during the terror attack on Mumbai in November last year. If the state wishes to appear credible with the common people, which is what Muslims really are, it needs to look into this and count less other shady happenings. But that may be a difficult mission for a security establishment seeking out traces of Dettol and Basmati rice to combat terrorism.
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