



Christchurch massacre

The attack on mosques is a wake-up call on the anti-immigration, white supremacist cult New Zealand was shaken to its core on Friday when at least 49 people were killed by a gunman in two mosques in Christchurch. Brenton Harrison Tarrant, the suspect, livestreamed the massacre on social media after releasing a white supremacist manifesto that called for removing the “invaders” and “retaking” Europe. The 27-year-old Australian, who the authorities said was not on any intelligence watch list, apparently travelled to New Zealand to carry out the attack. His targets were clearly Muslims, who make up less than 1% of New Zealand’s population. The manifesto and the symbols he carried suggest that he was influenced by far-right terrorists and their anti-Muslim, anti-immigration and anti-Semitic ideology. He came in military fatigues, wore neo-Nazi emblems and was listening in his car to a song devoted to Bosnian war criminal Radovan Karadžić. The manifesto lauds Anders Breivik, the Norwegian far-right terrorist who killed 77 people in 2011 and released a 1,518-page racist manifesto. He saw President Donald Trump as a “symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose”.

Right-wing racist terror, which has largely been on the fringes in the post-War world, is emerging as a major political and security threat, especially in white-majority societies. In recent years, mosques in Germany and France have been targeted; in Britain an MP was stabbed to death; and in the U.S. a synagogue was attacked, leaving 11 people dead. In most cases, the attackers were obsessed with immigration and the far-right ideas of Euro-Christian white racial purity, which is fundamentally not different from the ideology of the Nazis. The language these attackers use resembles that of mainstream anti-immigrant politicians in Western countries, such as Mr. Trump, who wanted to ban Muslims from entering the U.S.; Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, who wants to defend “Christian Europe”; or Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, known for his hardline views on migrants. Besides, a number of far-right parties known for their Islamophobic, white nationalist views are either in power in Europe or are on the rise, be it the Freedom Party of Austria, the AfD of Germany or the National Front of France. While they and their leaders set the broad contours of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic politics as part of their nationalist narrative, neo-Nazis such as Breivik and the Christchurch shooter are killing common people. Societies worldwide should wake up to the growing danger right-wing racist terrorism poses, and not view it as mere isolated, irrational responses to Islamist terror. It has to be fought politically, by driving a counter-narrative to white supremacism, and by using the security apparatus, through allocation of enough resources to tackle all threats of violence.

Lapse and collapse

Mumbai’s creaking public infrastructure must be urgently upgraded

The pedestrian bridge that collapsed at Mumbai’s Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, leaving six people dead and several injured, underscores the irony of India’s race to development on creaking urban infrastructure. It was only in September 2017 that there was a stampede at Mumbai’s Elphinstone bridge that left at least 23 people dead, an incident that officials blamed on heavy rain and overcrowding on the rickety structure. Beyond such acute disasters, there is the chronic toll of eight people, on average, dying every day on the city’s railway tracks. This is a dismal image for a metropolis that generates so much wealth, but cannot guarantee the safety of its public infrastructure. In the first response to the CST incident, the Maharashtra government and the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) have launched action on the contractor who carried out repairs on the bridge five years ago, the structural safety auditor who had certified the bridge to be in ‘good’ condition among a total of 39 bridges, and some civic body officials. Such steps may serve to mollify public anger, and no one would argue against efforts to fix accountability for lapses. However, far-reaching administrative reform is necessary to raise public confidence in the way government works. It is extraordinary that the BMC is wiser after the fact, and has determined that the quality of repairs performed on the CST bridge was not ‘up to the mark,’ since it collapsed within six years. It has also closed several busy footbridges, virtually confirming prolonged neglect of maintenance.

In a city where eight million passenger trips are made daily on an overburdened railway system, besides other modes of transport, the highest policy priority should be to raise levels of safety. In the wake of the bridge disaster, the municipal corporation must explain how much of its annual budget of ₹30,692 crore for the coming year will go towards improving facilities and safety for the majority of its citizens who ride trains and buses or walk. Mumbai’s citizens badly need a new deal in the form of a modernised bus system, with expansion of services that can be funded through a levy on private vehicles or on fuel. The move to privatise BEST bus services may result in greater pressure on other systems, reducing access and adding to the stress faced by citizens. Mumbai’s experience should serve as a warning to all fast-expanding Indian cities governed by municipal systems that have low capacity and capability to create people-friendly infrastructure. Distortions in urban policymaking in recent years are all too evident, marked by support for loosely defined smart cities and personal vehicles, at the cost of basic interventions that will make the commons more accessible – roads, pavements, pedestrian facilities and public transport. The safe mobility of people must be prioritised.

An election that is not about one

For the Opposition parties, this is the time to enlarge democracy’s base, not necessarily any one party’s



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

In the extremes of our tropical climate, every summer seems the worst ever. But the Tamil ‘kathiri’ – literally ‘scissors’, and metaphorically the merciless sun of May-June – is truly upon us in the peninsula this year. And it is only March.

Likewise, in the multi-polarities of our democracy every election seems to be about the most crucial we have ever had. And though the candidates for the April-May elections are yet to be formally announced, the election’s ‘kathiri’ is already in motion – sharp, cutting. And it is only March.

Continuation vs. change

The elections this time are unusual, even unprecedentedly so, for they are not about how India chooses but about what India is about. For those many who want the present government back, the coming elections are a national referendum for an India that is rearing to be a Super Power under a leader who wants India to be exactly that with himself at the helm. One might say, and why not? True, why ever not, except that when that happens, everyone else becomes inferior, minimal, subordinate to the Supreme. Including the Constitution and the laws. And that is not what India has become a democratic republic for.

Those many – and it must be acknowledged they are many – regard the coming elections as presidential with but one candidate, Narendra Modi. And an occasion to re-affirm belief in his helming a strong Centre for nothing less than 15 more years, a golden era, when we will have Sanskrit proclaimed our Rashtra Bhasha, Veer Savarkar

a Rashtra Guru, Saffron a Rashtra Ranga, we will have the Constitution amended to provide for national emergencies under new circumstances, an executive presidency, with the Rajya Sabha abolished, appointments to the higher judiciary tempered by considerations of ‘loyalty to national security’, compulsory military service for one year with the liberal option of ‘drill Yoga’, the media self-disciplined into self-censorship, the bureaucratic and diplomatic echelons made colourless and comfortable rather than fearless and uncomfortable, the citizenry one merry choir well-practised in patriotic tunes and collective chants.

None of this is or will be in any Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or National Democratic Alliance (NDA) manifesto. And Mr. Modi will never ever, I think, subscribe to any of these ‘goals’. In fact, he may be expected to deny that these reflect his views by a long shot. But these comeos do represent, broadly, the thinking of a kind of Modi-supporter, Modi-devotee who is to be encountered among many Indians, mostly from the educated urban and suburban middle-classes.

For the many others who want the present government dislodged, the coming elections are about the exact opposite. They are a non-presidential election where the many are against One Supremacy, and are in favour of an order in which every region, language and faith tradition is the equal of every other, where political opposition is valued for its own sake, dissent cherished as long as it remains non-violent, where the judiciary is respected for its stubborn independence, bureaucratic and diplomatic cadres for their professional integrity, technocrats for their rigorous professionalism, where the nation’s natural resources, particularly those that lie within and beneath forests, mines and on the seafloor, are not looted, where prisoners do not live in



RITU RAJ KUMAR

sub-human conditions and where, above all else, the Constitution is seen as the dynamic, living guardian of the citizens’ human rights pertaining to life, liberty, privacy and judicial remedy.

That being the reality or hard truth about the elections ahead, they are indeed the most important ever held in free India.

Rhetoric and reality

And that being the case, when one hears Aradhana Mishra, a Congress MLA in Uttar Pradesh say, “Priyanka ji has reiterated that the INC (Indian National Congress) will contest all 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh,” or the Congress’s doughty veteran and chief of the Delhi Congress, Sheila Dikshit say about the seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi, “It has been unanimously decided that the Congress will not go for an alliance with AAP (Aam Aadmi Party)”, the election’s results seem foregone.

The Congress, five years ago, contested not “all 80” seats but 67 seats in U.P. in those elections, winning only two, United Progressive Alliance chairperson Sonia Gandhi’s seat in Rae Bareilly and Rahul Gandhi’s in Amethi. And in Delhi, it was number three, after the AAP at number two, in terms of vote share.

“All 80 seats” in U.P. and “no alliance with AAP” in Delhi are great news for the BJP, whose vote-share

in U.P. for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections was lower than that of the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) combined (the combined vote share of the other three being 49.30%, a clear 7 percentage points above the BJP’s 42.30%). In Delhi, too, the BJP was ahead of the AAP and INC when those two stood divided but was clearly behind them, in all but one (New Delhi) of the seven seats, if the vote-share percentages of those two were to be seen together.

Weighing on the record so far

The jury is out on whether the nation’s outrage over the killing of 40 Indian brave-hearts in Pulwama and its pride in the gutsy riposte by the Indian Air Force has changed the electoral math. Perhaps it has not, and given that Winston Churchill lost the elections after winning the war in 1945 and, nearer home, the NDA government lost the elections after Kargil, it will vote for change. But the Opposition has to accept the fact that an unmeasured percentage of vote-share has slipped from its anticipated scores into the BJP’s.

The Congress showed statesmanship in Bengaluru last year. If reports are to be believed, not just Rahul Gandhi but Priyanka Gandhi had something to do with the Congress’s decision to propose and then actively put in place a coalition government led by H.D. Kumaraswamy of the Janata Dal (Secular). That was highly realistic, prudent, sagacious. As is the Congress-DMK-Left alliance in Tamil Nadu.

That spirit needs to be shown now in U.P., Delhi and elsewhere if those who believe in India being meant to be democratic and a re-

public are not to be betrayed. Is it too late? Late, yes, but not too late yet. Pride bolts the door to accommodation, prudence opens it.

Contesting India

This is the time to enlarge democracy’s, not one party’s base. Getting even with the AAP in Delhi, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party in U.P. and the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha can be a temptation for the Congress in ordinary times, not for this election summer when the ‘kathiri’ is out. Every party which believes in democracy is a natural ally of every other party believing in the same. Smaller confrontations must step aside in the face of the biggest contradiction that there can be, namely, of two contesting Indias – that of Gandhi-Nehru-Ghaffar Khan-Bhagat Singh-Ambedkar on the one hand and of a Hindu Rashtra on the other.

And this should be done in grim awareness of the fact that the 21st century autocrat is now to be seen not just in India but in countries as different and distant from one another as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Venezuela, Egypt, the Philippines, Hungary, using traditional ‘resources’ as well as new, softer and deadlier technologies, to spot and immobilise dissent, create a sense of perpetual ‘other’, an eternal ‘enemy’, all in the name of a hyper nationalism.

But if there is gloom, there is also hope, as in the instance of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who, from the white heat of trauma spoke of the Christchurch victims of terror as “us” and of New Zealand being “home” to them.

Jayaprakash Narayan brought the democratic coalition together in 1977. There is no Jayaprakash today. But his spirit beckons the conflicted soul of India’s democracy.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and governor

Nehru, China, and the Security Council seat

Today’s policymakers fail to understand Nehru’s eminently sensible approach



MOHAMMED AYOOB

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley recently said that India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the “original sinner” who favoured China over India for permanent membership in the UN Security Council. His assertion obviously refers to Washington’s feeler sent to New Delhi in August 1950 through the Indian Ambassador in the U.S., mentioning the American desire to remove China from permanent membership of the UNSC and possibly replace it with India. The allegation that Nehru refused to take this suggestion seriously and thus abdicated India’s opportunity to become a permanent member of the UNSC is the result of the critics’ inability to comprehend the complexity of the international situation in the early 1950s and the very tentative nature of the inquiry.

The Asian landscape

This episode took place in August 1950. The Cold War was in its early stages, with the two superpowers in eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation that threatened nuclear catas-

trophe. The People’s Republic of China, which had just emerged from a bloody civil war and was seen at the time as the Soviets’ closest ally, was prevented from taking its permanent seat in the UNSC because of American opposition premised on Cold War logic. Furthermore, war was raging in the Korean peninsula, with U.S. and allied troops locked in fierce combat with North Korean forces supported by China and the Soviet Union.

Nehru was trying to carve a policy that ensured India’s security, strategic autonomy and state-led industrialisation in these very dangerous times. He was well aware of the fact that pushing China out, as the U.S. wished to do, was a recipe for perpetual conflict that could engulf all of Asia. To him, the Korean War appeared a forerunner to more such conflagrations in Asia that could even turn nuclear. The U.S. had dropped nuclear bombs on Japan only five years ago and many observers believed it would not hesitate to do so again in an Asian conflict, especially since nuclear deterrence had not yet become a recognised reality. Nehru did not want India to get embroiled in hazardous Cold War conflicts and become a pawn in the superpowers’ great game risking its own security.

Nehru’s approach to China was



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dictated by realpolitik and not wishful thinking. He understood that peace could not be assured in Asia without accommodating a potential great power like China and providing it with its proper place in the international system. Moreover, China was India’s next-door neighbour and it was essential for New Delhi to keep relations with China on an even keel and not fall prey to the urgings of outside powers, the U.S. foremost among them, which were following their own agendas that had nothing to do with Indian security interests.

A combustible context

The so-called American “offer” to India of a permanent seat in the Security Council replacing China was made in this combustible context. To be precise, it was not an offer but merely a vague feeler to explore Indian reactions to such a

contingency. The U.S. intended it to be a bait to entice India into an alliance with the West against the Sino-Soviet bloc, as it was then known, and lure it into becoming a member of the “defence” organisations it was setting up in Asia to contain presumed “Communist expansionism”.

The enticement, as the correspondence between the then Indian Ambassador in Washington, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, and Prime Minister Nehru makes clear, was suggested during her conversations with U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Ambassador-at-large Philip Jessup. When Pandit informed Nehru of these feelers, he responded, “India because of many factors is certainly entitled to a permanent seat in the Security Council. But we are not going in at the cost of China.” In September 1955, Nehru stated categorically in the Lok Sabha: “There has been no offer, formal or informal, of this kind... The composition of the Security Council is prescribed by the UN Charter, according to which certain specified nations have permanent seats. No change or addition can be made to this without an amendment of the Charter.”

Nehru refused to consider the American feeler not because he was a wide-eyed Sinophile but because he was well aware that all Washington was interested in was

to use India for its own ends. Had India accepted the American bait, it would have meant enduring enmity with China without the achievement of a permanent seat in the UNSC. The Soviet Union, then China’s closest ally, would have vetoed any such move since it would have required amendment of the UN Charter that is subject to the veto of the permanent members.

It would have also soured relations between India and the Soviet Union and made it impossible to establish the trust required to later build a close political and military relationship with Moscow that became necessary once the U.S. entered into an alliance relationship with Pakistan. The Indo-Soviet relationship paid immense dividends to India during the Bangladesh war of 1971.

Mr. Jaitley and other critics of Nehru’s eminently sensible decision not to fall into the American trap would do well to analyse the decision in the particular strategic and political context in which it was made and not allow their current political preferences to dictate their amateurish conclusions.

Mohammed Ayoob is University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University and Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Center for Global Policy, Washington DC

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.

Christchurch carnage

A sickening mass murder has struck New Zealand, one of the world’s most idyllic countries, and New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, has been remarkably forthright in emphatically declaring that the victims, many of whom may be migrants or refugees, “are us” (‘World’ page, “Gunman charged as Ardern pledges to reform gun laws”, March 17). The overriding theme of her statements is that her country represents “diversity, compassion and refuge”. Christchurch and Pulwama together represent senseless bloodshed. Terrorism of every stripe, in every nation, must be collectively rejected using the same language of unequivocal

condemnation. One hopes that leaders in the subcontinent remember this.

MEGHANA A.,
Shell Cove, NSW, Australia

■ It is admirable that Prime Minister Ardern has offered her condolences in person irrespective of religion. Her quick move to impart a healing touch has not gone unnoticed. One hopes that she will ensure justice for the victims’ families.

NAJMUL HUDA,
Mumbai

■ The swift and decisive response of the New Zealand government and its law enforcement agencies, and the mature and empathetic response of the people offer hope that the lunatic fringe purveying hatred and

violence can be isolated. Instead of pointing fingers at tolerant societies, global communities and institutions should strengthen the hands of the majority in a collaborative endeavour. The brittle and leaky edifice of the social media needs to be demolished and a new framework has to be put in place to rein in the propagation of extreme and virulent ideologies.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ The tragedy in New Zealand comes just after Pulwama, which is another ghastly incident of violence. Extremism appears to be spreading exponentially across the globe even in places where its presence was thought to be the least. We cannot go along like this.

Global leaders must speak in one voice.

SAVOOJ P.,
Varikkol, Kallachi, Kerala

Hop, skip and jump

Switching parties has become a joyous and worthwhile pastime for politicians (“Blow to BJP, as two MPs and a veteran quit” and “Leaving JD(S) amicably, Danish Ali joins BSP”, both March 17). Some incumbent lawmakers are quitting their parties the moment they realise that they are likely to be denied tickets while others like ticket-aspirants are doing so as they are not in the list of probable party candidates. It is amusing and laughable to hear that JD(S) general secretary Danish Ali has joined the BSP with the ‘consent’ of his party

leadership. There should be a limit to taking people for a ride. Do politicians think that people are so naive? The alacrity shown by parties to welcome defectors with open arms speaks of their opportunism and lack of scruples. Compunction and self-esteem do not count much in politics.

C.G. KURIAROSE,
Kothamangalam, Kerala

The empty nest

When our children were young, we couldn’t wait for the day when they would become adults with lives of their own (‘Open Page’, “The promise of a sunset - and a sunrise”, March 17). It is a time for us, elders, to move on to the next chapter of life; when that day dawns, one should be prepared for it. Gone are the days when

employment was local. Youngsters today look to every corner of the world for jobs and careers. So, as adults, we should not restrain them or their ambitions. The empty nest syndrome does not have to be a change for the worse. It can be fun visiting our children in a new place. Even if the extended family has now broken up into small units, often leaving the elderly to live on their own, they can still handle it successfully by keeping fit through yoga, meditation, being curious and active, and, of course, meeting friends. I write this as an empty nester of over 20 years.

H.N. RAMAKRISHNA,
Bengaluru

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