From Bullet Trail to Bullet Train

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On 5th September 2017, the bullet trail of the Hindutva forces devoured one more precious life. Personally speaking, this was my third loss of a comrade or friend – Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and now, Gauri Lankesh. The man on the street, too, broadly knows who their killers are. However, even after four years of the first of these murders, the investigations have not made any significant progress. The special investigation team of the Maharashtra police had apprehended one Sameer Gaikwad, a sadhak of the Sanatan Sanstha, on 15th September 2015 for the murder of Pansare and filed a chargesheet against him on 14th December 2015.

In Dabholkar’s case, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), brought in on the directions of the Bombay High Court, had arrested one Virendra Tawde, an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) surgeon and a member of the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS), a splinter of the Sanatan Sanstha, in Pune in June 2016 on the charges of arranging weapons and logistics for the planned murder.

Recently, on 17th June 2017, Gaikwad managed to get bail from the Kolhapur District and Sessions Court, which was rejected earlier by the same court as well as by the High Court, and effectively demolished the hope of securing justice for these martyrs. His two accomplices, Vinay Pawar and Sarang Akolkar, both sanstha members are still at large. There is absolutely no forward movement in Kalburgi’s case whereas in Gauri’s, the Karnataka government, as though to cover up its inaction, held a state funeral for the slain journalist.

While the world is aghast at the impunity with which these
murders are being committed, the Prime Minister does not feel it worth his while to so much as utter a word of concern. On the contrary, he follows the Hindutva bigots, who openly celebrated the killing of Gauri and abused her in the filthiest terms on social media. Some of them are even rewarded with plum posts in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). As a matter of fact, there is, perhaps, nothing indecent or vulgar when it comes to the partisan behaviour of the Narendra Modi-led government. All the culprits of the Gujarat carnage and the accused in several acts of Hindu terror stand acquitted and on the contrary, those like Teesta Setalvad are harassed and the late Hemant Karkare maligned.

As this bullet trail continues unhindered, pushing India into a dark abyss of bigotry and backwardness, Modi is on an ego trip over a bullet train to project India's forwardness. What is common to both these seemingly dissimilar acts is the impunity and unscrupulousness of the current ruling dispensation.

**Terror tracks**

Why did they kill Gauri? She was staunchly opposed to the communal politics and cultural mumbo jumbo of the Hindutva forces. But that it is unlikely to be the sole reason, because there were scores of others who were even more intensely opposed to them, than her or Dabholkar/ Pansare/ Kalburgi for that matter. All of them reflected a liberal outlook and still spoke unambiguously against Hindutva overtures, which resonated with common people much more effectively than the radical voice of the diehard opponent of Hindutva forces.

The act of killing, in the above cases, is meant not just to eliminate an individual but to terrorise many others who might follow in their footsteps. Being the least suspect, these individuals, moreover, become relatively soft targets. The prime suspect identified by investigations, thus far, is the Goa-based Sanatan Sanstha run by an Ericksonian hypnotherapist Jayant
Athavale, who is said to transform his subjects into human automatons, to make them commit any crime. The sadhaks of this sanstha were arrested earlier in four bombings in Vashi, Thane, Panvel (all in 2007) and Goa (in 2009). The Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) had filed a 1,020-page chargesheet against six of them and others of the sanstha affiliate, HJS, for these blasts in 2008. However, Ranjit Patil, Maharashtra's Minister of State for Home (Urban) (Hindustan Times 2015), the Karnataka Criminal Investigation Department (CID) (New Indian Express 2015), Laxmikant Parsekar, the then Chief Minister of Goa (Times of India 2015) and the union minister of state for home spoke out against the banning of the Sanatan Sanstha.

This was strange because the investigating agency had established that the weapon used (7.65 mm country made pistol) and the modus operandi of all these murders were similar, and directly and circumstantially, pointed to the people connected with the Sanatan Sanstha. The CID in Karnataka is also on the look-out for Rudra Patil, another sanatan sadhak who is an accused in the 2010 Goa blast case. Sanatan head Athavale however, remains untouched although an array of crazy, violent rants in his books and proclamations of “war for righteousness” can be directly linked to these heinous acts. His publications had been openly telling its members that violence against durjans (evil persons) is not actually violence at all. His timetable for a successful dharmayudh (holy war), against “evildoers” (rationalists, Muslims, Christians and Hindus who do not follow their dictates) in order to establish a “divine kingdom” runs as follows:

1) 1997–99: Impressing the minds of people that destroying evildoers is part of spiritual practice.
2) 2000–06: Performing the act of destroying evildoers.
4) 2023–25: Commencement of the divine kingdom.

One wonders whether the consistency of this timeline with
the one being touted by Modi and his cohorts of 2022–23 is just coincidental. These details had come into the open through a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed against the sanstha by Vijay Rokade in 2011, much before Dabholkar was murdered. While the case was heard till 2013, it has yet to come up for hearing ever since.

**High-speed hoax**

While the bullet train eliminated select individuals, the bullet train, born out of Modi’s megalomaniac obsession, will saddle the entire coming generations with huge debt. Ironically, the bullet train was announced in the backdrop of 193 deaths from train derailments in 2016–17, the highest in a decade. As many as 1,394 train accidents were reported over the last decade, of which 51% or 708 were due to derailments (Mallapur 2017). They are mainly caused by excessive traffic and neglect of investment in the maintenance of rail infrastructure.

The other priority sectors, like education and healthcare, have accumulated huge backlogs and face further neglect in the Modi era. The healthcare spending came down to 1.2% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the lowest in a decade as against the global average of 5.4%. Education likewise stagnated at 2.7% of the GDP, with an increasing push for privatisation. Similarly, the agrarian distress is further deepening due to the continued dearth of investment. In such a context, the profligate idea of having a bullet train—relevant to at the most 4% of the population—is nationally distasteful. But it is being justified widely, including by the bankrupt opposition that has lost its coherence against Modi’s onslaught.

The cost of the Mumbai–Ahmedabad High-Speed Railway (HSR) project is estimated at USD 17 billion (1.1 lakh crore) of which, 88,000 crore is coming as a yen-denominated loan from Japan at 0.1% interest rate, with a moratorium of 15 years.
payable over a 50-year period. Obviously, 22,000 crore is to be contributed by India to create this white elephant. This money could have been better spent to improve the safety of the railways for common people or providing with 140,000 bio-toilets in 55,000 trains to do away with the national shame of having manual scavengers in the employment of the government, that paradoxically spends crores of rupees on hiring Amitabh Bachchan to canvass for the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. It surely exposes how the BJP can jeopardise national interests to score brownie points for petty electoral gains.

Any public mega project of such magnitude has to have a competitive bidding, backed by a feasibility study. Neither have been undertaken for Modi’s bullet train. The BJP shamelessly dodges the question by saying that the Japanese, being the smartest investors, must have done it before investing into this project. A study by professors of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ahmedabad almost concluded that the project was infeasible. Prima facie, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India should object to it as irregular.

Modi, on the other hand, bragged to the public that the bullet train was coming free. Really? It is well known that the Chinese have an edge in producing HSR technology at the least cost. As the data in Table 1 shows that its unit cost varied between USD 18.66 million and 13.5 million per km (m per km). As against this, the cost of the Japanese bullet train works out to USD 27.44 m per km. That means the investments are inflated by a factor of 1.45 to 2.0 Indians are being misled by the low interest rates.

What they are not being told is that the Japanese domestic interest rate has been sub-zero. Therefore, from the Japanese standpoint, 0.1% interest is quite profitable. The effective rate, moreover, would be substantially high in view of the expected appreciation of the Japanese yen against the Indian rupee.

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For example, the yen appreciated by 64% against the rupee in the last 10 years (from yen–rupee exchange of 0.3517 on 17 September 2007 to 0.5786 on 15 September 2017). With the Japanese economy expected to look up, this appreciation may still be higher.

Additionally, Japanese strategic interests need to be taken into account in selling their “Shinkansen” for which there has not been any taker for years. Notwithstanding the technology transfer embedded in the agreement, there shall be demand for their wares for many years to come. It may be simply summed up as follows: We bought a thing of questionable value to us for ‘88 that may just be worth ‘44 and we will spend ‘22 upfront to be paid by future generations with uncertain escalation.

Modi-led BJP maintains a studied silence over the bullet trail of the Hindutva fringe as though in tacit approval of their project of slaying “demons” to establish a kingdom of angels, a la Hindu rashtra, but turns overly vocal over “development” that is rightly depicted by the “bullet train syndrome.” Both are hugely adverse to the people of India.

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REFERENCES:

IMAGE CREDIT: URMI KENIA