

THE assassination of Rajiv Gandhi on May 22, 1991 near Madras in Tamil Nadu came as a severe shock. His untimely death and the brutality with which he was killed deeply saddened and upset even those who stood opposed to his politics.

The government first appointed an enquiry commission to find out whether any lapse on the part of the security setup was responsible for his tragic death. Later on it conceded the demand made by the Congress Party and others that the scope of the inquiry commission be expanded to include other aspects of the assassination as well. Both enquiries should be undertaken. At the same time we must turn to matters far more urgent and those that have much larger implications. What is required is a far more serious evaluation of our political 'leaders' at all levels to understand the important part they play in the increasing criminalisation of the social and political life of our country. If the 'leaders' are unwilling to participate in such an enquiry, the people of this country have to find ways of compelling them into it, while at the same time examining closely how we ourselves have contributed to the problems.

It is high time our political leaders gave up the illusion that their lives are safe if they have enough gunmen around. The logic of relying on guns is that it doesn't take long for the guns to be turned against those who seek their protection. Let us not forget that Mrs Gandhi was not the only leader to have been shot dead by her own security men. Many other world leaders have recently met similar fates, were assassinated by their own security apparatus who provided covert or overt support to the killers.

Guns Can't Fight Guns

Even if they could miraculously devise a foolproof security apparatus, our 'leaders' need to bear in mind that it is no more possible (if ever it was!) for even the most

The Assassination of Rajiv Gandhi

Some Lessons

authoritarian state to have a near total monopoly of possessing weapons. Not just guns, but even sophisticated explosives and other lethal weapons are easily available in the international arms bazaar. What is more, the proliferation of technology makes it easy to manufacture fairly lethal weapons in a small, home-based workshop. Therefore, countering guns with more guns will only lead to further escalation of violence. The only effective way of preventing the proliferation of guns and countering the culture of violence is to make them socially abhorrent and to make other ways of settling disputes more effective and attractive.

Unfortunately, we in India have been moving in the contrary direction. Our ruling elite seems to have developed an unhealthy faith in the power of guns and bullets. For example, one of the latest status symbols among our political elite is to flaunt a large number of gunmen

and security guards posted outside their homes and offices and accompanying them wherever they and their families go. It is a fairly common sight in Delhi for "VIPs" or their wives and children to walk into public restaurants, theatres or shopping centres along with a horde of gunmen. "VIPs" are known to compete with each other in measuring their political importance in terms of the number of gunmen assigned to them. We can no more dismiss this as childish vanity. It has acquired all the symptoms of a serious social-political malaise.

Fear of People's Disaffection

This malady is related to the fact that our ruling elite is presiding over a system of governance which is shamelessly unresponsive to the aspirations of its many people in addition to being parasitic and tyrannical. Forty years after Independence, the people of India have no illusions left about this system's capacity to deliver social justice. It is not

even functional enough to meet the requirements of the privileged upper crust. Disaffection against the government is universal. It has hardly any defenders left. Not even those who are in positions of power care to defend it. For instance, Rajiv Gandhi, even when he was himself the Prime Minister, was openly and scathingly critical of the functioning of the government machinery. This disaffection is spread across all classes, segments and regions of our society. Whether in a village *chaupal* or in urban elite drawing rooms, the theme that dominates conversation is the incompetence, corruption and tyranny of the



bloated government machinery.

Yet, those in power find it convenient to let things steadily deteriorate because setting things right would inevitably involve curbing their own power. However, they are aware of the contempt in which people, by and large, hold them. People may come before them as grovelling supplicants but inwardly they are angry enough to want to, deal with politicians and bureaucrats the way an Amitabh Bachchan type of hero deals with them in Bombay films. Our ruling elite recognises that given their track-record they cannot aspire to ideological hegemony; they cannot base their claims to rule on the basis of winning respect for their ideas, administrative skills or political performance. Therefore, they have given up the pretense of being caretakers of the people's interests and have come to be unashamedly open about their real motivation - quick loot and plunder. They have come to accept that they cannot and dare not measure their self-worth and importance in terms of the amount of social respect and affection they can command. Therefore, with their low self-esteem, they have come to perversely delight in measuring their social worth and importance in terms of

their harm-doing ability, and the amount of enmity and hatred they inspire. One indicator they use is whether or not they are "hit-list" worthy. They compete with each other for more guards and more gunmen outside their doors—even if it makes them virtual prisoners in their own homes.

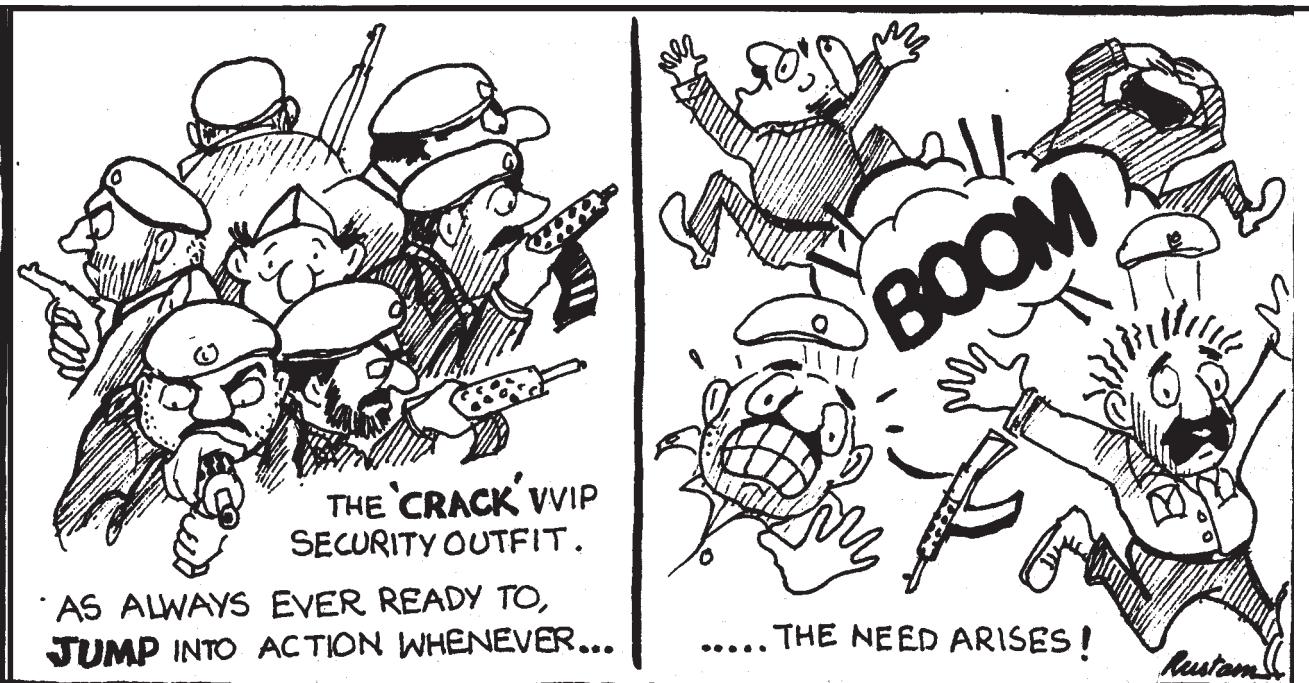
Goondas as "Leaders"

The culture of violence and guns has been legitimised by our ruling elite with a suicidal determination in many other ways too. It is too well known to require any proving that every political party, whether of the right or left, has for long relied on goondas and dacoits for their political ends — both routinely and at the time of elections. But it doesn't any more stop at that. Almost every political party this time has actually fielded known criminals as their candidates. Since over the years all political parties became so crucially dependent on criminals, it was to be expected that at some point the criminals and goondas would begin to feel: "Why should we be used by the politicians? Why don't we run the whole show ourselves?" In any case, in the meantime, the dividing line between politicians and criminals slowly disappeared. And today the two are

indistinguishable.

Consequently, our political scene today has all the ingredients of gang warfare, with hardly any ideological trappings left to distinguish one set from the other and without the restraints and norms that even gangsters observe. For instance, even criminals have a better sense of group loyalty. They don't change gangs at the rate at which our *netas* change political parties. No one, not even the *netas* themselves, knows, who will be in which party after the elections or a few months thereafter.

If the bureaucrats and politicians confined themselves to loot and plunder, things would still not be as bad. Far more serious a social threat is the legitimacy they have provided to the use of violence and repression in dealing with political demands of various disgruntled segments of India's population. They have failed to evolve civilised policies and well-established democratic norms and procedure to deal with demands for decentralisation of power. People controlling the *Delhi Durbar* are too enamoured of their imperial role and are much too often unwilling to make space for even legitimate aspirations of various regional and ethnic groups, let alone



having the skills to deal with more extreme, sectional demands.

Failure of Imperial Model

In the absence of any well-worked out policy and norms for power sharing they tend to deal with all such political challenges as 'law and order' problems and quickly let guns take over in dealing with political movements. The manner in which the government dealt with the grievances of Kashmiris, Sikhs, Nagas or Assamese, to name just a few, was nothing but destructive.

There is a similar pattern of response running through these diverse conflicts. A regional linguistic or religious group makes certain demands, to begin with, well within the framework of our Constitution, often asking for no more than that the central government adhere to the rules and guidelines laid down in the Constitution and allow some space for a federal polity. The government pays no heed for a long time nor do they initiate a timely process of negotiations. Instead, sporadic and mindless repression is let loose on the particular movement. This compels the aggrieved group to mobilise more large scale mass-support and build militant agitations in order to compel the central government to pay attention to its demands. At such key moments when mass sentiment is sufficiently aroused, the central government invariably tries various devious means to defeat the movements. Apart from large scale repression, the targeted movement is sought to be destroyed by a divide and rule policy. With the help of intelligence agencies, agent provocateurs are let loose, certain new leaders are propped up to inject and abet terrorism and engineer splits. This is how Bhindranwale came to play such an important role in destroying the Akali movement. This is how Ghising was sought to be used against the Left Front government in Bengal and also how certain militant outfits in Kashmir provided help and encouragement to put down political opponents of the Congress in Kashmir.

Movements Made Berserk

As the movement gets more and more violent, it keeps getting more split. Murderous battles come to be waged between different factions for the leadership of the movement. To outdo each other, leaders start making more militantly crazy and unreasonable demands so that they can emerge as the "true and genuine" representatives. And then the government acts even more hamhandedly (for example Operation Bluestar, imposition of President's rule in Kashmir accompanied by mindless large-scale repression, alienating the population at large). After much bloodshed, at some point the central government initiates accords with this or that section - accords which are seldom honoured, thereby destroying the little that is left of their own credibility as well as that of those who arrive at those accords with them. At such points all the more viable demands, such as ensuring a measure of regional autonomy, are abandoned by movement leaders and more militant ones like wanting a total secession—a Khalistan or Azad Kashmir—take over. The genie once let loose cannot be controlled or put back into the bottle at will. Both sides fight each other with no holds barred and no conception of what a mutually acceptable settlement might even look like. The intensity of government repression gives a fillip to more and more deadly forms of terrorism—each feeds on the other. The guns of the government provide legitimacy to the guns of the terrorists and vice versa. This becomes a handy excuse for suspending all democratic rights and processes. When people at large are denied for long periods all democratic channels for expression of their discontent, it begins to appear that guns provide the only viable means of dissent.

Lawlessness Becomes Norm

Thus the means employed to deal with these political conflicts by our ruling elite at the centre come to be accepted as general political norms. For instance,

those who believe that Kashmir should remain territorially an integral part of India even at the cost of killing any number of Kashmiris and those who think that they should 'liberate' Kashmir no matter how many fellow Kashmiris and others they have to eliminate in order to achieve their goal, are two sides of the same coin. They are not genuinely opposing forces.

As though this deadly game was not doing enough harm within our own country we exported it to Sri Lanka. Whatever the lightness or otherwise of the cause of Tamilians in Sri Lanka, it was stupid and immoral to have armed and trained the LTTE to lead a secessionist movement in Sri Lanka, as the Indian government did.

It is time our political 'leaders' and other sections of the ruling elite woke up and recognised that the violence they have for long unleashed on others to serve their own petty power games, now threatens to destroy them as well—as was inevitable. Witness the number of candidates murdered during this poll due to political rivalry. Thus, its no more just the poor, Dalits and Muslims, who are victims of poll violence. Guns and weapons are no more just instruments for controlling the people, especially those seen as "intractable". Today the "leaders'" own lives are as unsafe as that of ordinary citizens. The best of gunmen cannot protect them from other determined gunmen. Like health, peace and security are indivisible. You cannot build little islands of security, cordoned off by guns if, there is a sea of violence raging all around. The latter is bound to engulf the little islands.

Security of life and limb is too serious a matter to be left to the police and armed forces. It is well known to be higher in societies where there are fewer guns available, where possession of guns is not considered socially honorable, where guns are despised, not revered. The more the proliferation of guns and guntoting policemen in any society, the less safe and less peaceful it is going to



be. Our political leaders cannot any more afford to ignore this correlation between the two.

Some Remedial Steps

To move in the direction of changing the growing domination of violence in our society, some of the steps required are:

1. Halt the increasing militarisation of our society and learn to minimise the use of *danda* and guns when dealing with social conflicts. An important step in this direction would be a severe curtailment of police and military budget as well as a resolve not to use them when other means are available.

2. Work out meaningful, promptly invoked, implementable rules for conflict resolution when dealing with new demands put forward by different segments of our society.

A dysfunctional government cannot make and keep promises. Adherence to a due process in governance involving known and easily implementable procedures and rules on which a social consensus has been evolved is the hallmark of a democratic policy. This works more effectively in reducing social violence than the most effective police force.

Our leaders have to be made to understand the difference between viable and non-viable alternatives to settle social and political disputes; they have to recognise that keeping good faith when dealing with political opponents

and following due processes in reaching acceptable resolutions of disputes is the only effective way of ensuring their own safety and establishing social harmony.

3. Give priority to making the government machinery behave lawfully. For this it has to be made truly accountable to people in order to restore people's confidence in it. This will make it necessary for politicians to win people's respect and support on the basis of their performance rather than rule over them with the help of arbitrary and tyrannical power at their disposal. A lawless government inevitably begets lawless citizens. This can change only if the government establishes and enforces better norms of conduct of its own behaviour.

4. Do away with the Licence-Permit Raj so that the bloated hordes of bureaucrats and politicians can't tyrannise people and extract bribes out of them.

5. We need to work out meaningful ways of decentralisation of power allowing for effective community control over all institutions of governance at the local level so that a measure of social accountability is imposed not just on the government functionaries but also on other powerful groups such as business houses.

6. Introduce state funding of elections and strict adherence to the realistically determined expenditure limit on elections.

7. Institute procedures to recall leaders who perform badly.

The results of the recent Lok Sabha and assembly elections indicate that today people are not willing to impose trust in any one party. In most states, ruling parties have been defeated, be it the BJP in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, Samajwadi Janata Party in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, the Left Front in Kerala, the DMK in Tamil Nadu the AGP in Assam or the Janata Dal in Orissa. The Congress has also received severe jolts even while getting enough Lok Sabha seats to form the government at the Centre. By denying the Congress even a simple majority the electorate seems to be giving a clear message: 'We want you to behave with restraint and responsibility and learn to govern through working out a consensus.'

However, the people of this country have to find even more effective ways than available currently, such as the power to vote bad governments out periodically, to get this message across to politicians. We cannot leave to the politicians alone the initiative to work out urgently required institutional reforms. It is as much the responsibility of all concerned citizens to create new forums and revitalise old ones to evolve a worthwhile programme of institutional reforms and act as pressure and vigilance groups vis a vis political "leaders" and parties.

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