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A wannabe nation

If you are a frail child, prematurely goggle-eyed, you get bullied a lot. The bullies I had a certain grudging admiration for — even at 10, they had natural authority — it was the wannabes I truly despised.

They were the ones who would stand behind the bully and egg him on, all the while pretending that they were just letting him have his fun, and would otherwise have happily finished the job themselves. Bully wannabes, fascinated by a hardness that they knew they didn't have.

I fear that we are turning into a wannabe nation. Whatever the truth of the case against Afzal Guru, the way it was handled, all the way up to the early morning hanging, has the aspiration stenciled all over it: we want to be a hard State.

Like China, which according to Amnesty International, executes more people every year than the rest of the world taken together. And North Korea, Yemen, Iran plus the southern states of the United States, all paragons of liberal humanism.

I suspect very few people will be fooled. Hanging a man who is in a maximum security prison without telling anyone is the moral equivalent of squealing that Abhijit has his churan hidden in his back pocket — even cowards can do it.

The real challenge is now — what about the body, and the anger in the Valley? And there I sense a certain ambivalence — we want to be friends again, or if not friends (we haven't been friends for a while have we?), back to the truce.

We could ignore the family and quash the protests, at least for now — God knows we have enough guns and men there — but that's not what we want. Indeed it has to be said that despite the bursts of inexcusable brutality that punctuates the history of our relationship with the Valley, we have never seriously contemplated the ultimate step of turning it into our Tibet or our West Bank — repopulate the whole place with Hindu settlers from the northern plains — protected by our guns and barbed wire.

Pakistan notwithstanding, I think it was and remains an option for us — but we have elected not to go that way. If anything we have probably gone much too far in the opposite direction — permitting an ethnic cleansing of the Valley that Rahul Pandita's recent heartbreaking book documents.

This forbearance (but not the tacit collusion with the ethnic cleansers) is appropriate. The framers of our nation conceived us in a state of idealism, and however distant be our reality from it at any point of time, it is that ideal (and an occasional cricket team) that defines us as a nation. Without that we will just be a nation that once had Tendulkar, Sehwag and Laxman.

But forbearance does not have to mean weakness. We can be a strong State built on principle, without being a hard State that glories in violence. There will be times when violence will be unavoidable and times when it will turn out to be arbitrary and wrong, but what is important is that the State leads the conversation about it, and that conversation is based on questions of principle.

I abhor the death penalty, but my reaction to what happened to Guru would have been much more muted if the State could claim that it had bent over backwards to ensure that his legal rights were protected. As it is, the judicial process was infected by the same — “let us see what would upset the least number of loud and visible people” — populist spirit that inspires so much of our policy-making and public discourse, and the State, probably rightly, did not encourage much discussion of the case.

As it is, the State mostly avoids discussion of principles. Its reaction to the public outcry when it turned out that one of the Delhi rapists was in fact a juvenile and, therefore, entitled to some degree of lenience, was not to explain to the public why any civilised legal system should have special protections for juveniles but to look for some loophole in the law so that he could hang with the rest.

Unpopular or awkward issues, like rapists who get off lightly, are ideal for engaging the public in a discussion about values and principles, as Gandhi taught us, precisely because they confront us with a choice between what we want and what we should.

This, more than anything else, is the reason why he made the national movement take a deep breath after Chauri Chaura. Yet how many times these days have you heard a civil society member defend the legal rights of a mining company, a women’s organisation worrying about the rights of the rapists, or a politician from the Left ranting about the rights of Kashmiri Pandits? When people talk of principles in public life, it is all too often a way to mask their true preferences: mentioning the rights of Hindus in Kashmir, for example, has become a way to signal anti-Muslim sentiments.

As long as we avoid the discussion of principles, every policy will always be up for grabs — we can never be quite sure that if enough irate voices complain it will not come back to bite its sponsors.

Everybody is in a constant guessing game — businessmen want to know what politicians are thinking, while politicians try to guess how to stay out of civil society’s line of fire. My sense is that this is an important reason why investment has slackened and reforms (and by that I don’t just mean pro-market reforms) are stalled. And I doubt that hanging more people would get them restarted.

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