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# The centre may not hold: how public rage may hurt India

I feel for Akhilesh Yadav. There was a short period of time, somewhere between his coming to power and the point when the growing shadow of Narendra Modi blotted everything else out of the media landscape, when he almost became the flavour of the month. It did not hurt that he was young and foreign-educated, with an attractive and articulate wife, but what really got him going was the genuine organisational triumph of the Kumbh Mela — the fact that the population of a small European country could flow through the ramshackle town of Allahabad each week, for many months on end, without a major disaster — which culminated in the invitation to speak at Harvard. But then things just went haywire.

The riots in Muzaffarnagar and the mauling in the elections were bad enough, but things really spun out of control with the rash of rapes and gang rapes that don't show any sign of letting up.

Why would a state that could handle the mela find itself entirely incapable of carrying out what ought to be one of its most routine responsibilities? A part of the answer comes down to the identity of these rapists.

The striking fact is that the victim or their families almost always claim to know exactly who did it, and it is always someone local — which is why there are usually immediate arrests.

Accusation is no proof of guilt, but I would be very surprised if it turns out that any real outsiders were involved in the actual crime (as against the cover-up). But why would local men, who must know that they are likely to be recognised and therefore end up being accused, take on the risk, especially given the recent publicity around death penalties for rapists? None of them seem to be rich or well-connected enough to expect to be above the law — so why adopt this rather suicidal course?

A part of the answer is no doubt the usual lethal combination of lust, machismo, alcohol, drugs and bad judgment. But that cannot be the whole story, since it would not explain why they are all happening at once.

My guess is that it comes down to the fact that rape is a political act, a horrific act of immense symbolic power within a system where the ownership of women's bodies is equated to honour.

This is revenge — against uppity lower castes and sneering upper castes, against brazen women and a generalised sense that the world is moving ahead without them — at its most brutal and naked.

This is why they strung up the girls after they were done with them for everyone to see — as a public expression of their pride and rage.

There are a hundred thousand inhabited villages in Uttar Pradesh, and in each of those there is probably

someone with a reason, real or imagined, to feel aggrieved. Some fraction of them will one day take out their anger in this particular inhuman way, but there is no way for the government of UP to anticipate where and when that will happen next, which makes it hard to stop it from happening.

Posting a policeman in every corner of every hamlet might help — though given that policemen are often among the accused this is not entirely obvious — but it would require a massive expansion of the police force — right now we only have one policeman for about every 700 people.

The police could also try to gather better intelligence and try to predict where some conflict is about to come to a head — but our police force is still mostly the colonial institution it used to be (it's still governed by the India Police Act of 1861), inspiring more fear (and derision) than trust. People, as a number of police reform commissions have noted, don't see the police as their friend and are unlikely to open up to them.

I don't know how it will all end: Perhaps the community will eventually wake up to the horror of what is happening to it and step in; perhaps the men will find less monstrous ways to express their rage. Whatever it is I suspect it will have very little to do with Yadav's policies.

There is an important lesson for us all of in Yadav's discomfort: Widespread anger, whether warranted or not, can be hugely destabilising. Destabilising of course does not have to mean rape — it could mean terrorism, or armed insurrection or even self-immolations.

But whatever it is, the result can be an administrator's nightmare, as we saw before in the 'Naxal' areas, in Kashmir and the North-East (though in all of those cases the cause had more legitimacy).

It is worth keeping this in mind as the central government launches itself on a path that will surely generate a lot of anger.

A few days ago the Union home minister announced that the UPA's UID, which, in my view wisely, was granted to all residents, would be replaced by a card that only citizens will get. The National Population Register (NPR) will go door to door to inspect and verify citizenship.

This is the kind of thing that nightmares are made of: I imagine millions of Muslims (and no doubt many non-Muslims) who have to produce documents that they never had (who got a birth certificate 30 years ago?) or had misplaced and could not replace (I recently spent three years trying to get a duplicate copy of my marriage certificate), at the pain of losing all access to benefits and governments jobs, and potentially risking expulsion.

I imagine the abuses of authority that this will undoubtedly bring forth, as the NPR employees harvest the power that this gives them.

And I imagine hundreds of thousands of angry men and women across the country, many of whom have been refused something that was theirs by right because they could not produce a document or pay a bribe, waiting for their chance, planning revenge.

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