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VIEW: Mr Gandhi's terror sermon

By Shubhankar Dam

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Short of turning India into a garrison state, one where people morph into micro-chips that leave behind a perfect trail, terror cannot be wished away. And even that may not be enough.

A day after the recent blasts in Mumbai in which 27 people have been killed so far, the usually reticent Congress heir-apparent, Mr Rahul Gandhi, defended the Indian government's record on terror-related violence. "Ninety-nine percent of the attacks," he claimed, "have been stopped," while suggesting that "it is difficult to stop any single terrorist attack." And as if to contradict himself immediately, he added: "We must stop 100 percent attack."

These comments are galling, especially when it comes from those who enjoy Z+ security the privileged few for whom public travel and the everyday chaos is a choice, rather than a compulsion. But it is also strange coming from a person whose father, and India's former prime minister, was assassinated in a brazen act of terror. Surely, the junior Mr Gandhi knows what it is like for the unlucky one percent.

The comments are also disturbing from a policy point of view. It suggests, impliedly, that the state has excelled in preventive and intelligence measures, put in place a robust response system and overall achieved the best that it can. And any remaining terror threat is something the people must learn to live with.

This assessment of the Indian state is, to put it politely, surprising. For a state that is chronically dysfunctional, adheres to skewed priorities and is unable to learn from its mistakes, Mr Gandhi's enthusiasm seems highly misplaced. Voluminous reports after the 26/11 attacks in 2008 remain ignored in large measure; intelligence gathering on the ground is nearly non-existent, and even the 'grand' anti-terror institutions are yet to get their act together. And here we have a Maharashtra chief minister, a Congressman, who is more concerned about dance bars and drinking age in Mumbai.

And yet, for all that is wrong with Mr Gandhi's comments, there is a grain of truth that must be confronted not wished away. An open, liberal, democratic state is strong, but also vulnerable. If it is to remain even mildly committed to basic liberal values of freedom and dignity, terror is a reality the state must come to terms with.

Do you want that authorities eavesdrop into every phone or e-mail conversation you have? Do you want that authorities track every association you make, every book you read or every transaction you enter into? Short of turning India into a garrison state, one where people morph into micro-chips that leave behind a perfect trail, terror cannot be wished away. And even that may not be enough.

Those who point to the apparent success of the US and the UK in keeping their territories safe from attacks since 2001 and 2005 respectively, conveniently forget the security costs. In the US, the perceived success has come on the backs of warrantless wiretaps, so-called enhanced interrogations, renditions, and an ever-increasing range of government intrusions. Would you rather that India walked down this path?

Britain's security too has an Orwellian aura to it. A 2009 report by a privacy watchdog claimed that Britain has 4.2 million CCTV cameras, approximately one for every 14 persons. How many cameras would be needed to police 1.2 billion people?

The price of a liberal society is to live in the knowledge that people, at times, will do wrongs horrible wrongs. We may put in place a system of retribution that expresses our collective disgust. But to pretend that the state can make people 'right' or their actions 'perfect' at all times is both naive and wishful.

Take the case of freedom of speech. The exercise of that freedom invariably comes at a price: one's speech is often another's insult. To some, the insult is grave enough to inspire them to violence; this story is all too common in India. And yet, we do not, or ideally should not, turn ourselves away from our belief in the importance of free speech. When we do give in to the violent demands, as India often does by banning books, movies, art and thought, we undermine our collective commitment to that freedom.

Ideally, a person insulted by a book would write another book not use a bomb. But the exercise of free speech comes with no such guarantee. Speech-related violence is a common occurrence, and India too often capitulates to this mob fringe. Unfortunately, something similar is taking hold in our responses to terrorism. And we must guard against our impulses to turn into automatons or forsake our liberal commitments in pursuit of some probably elusive security.

To be sure, the state must act. It must act to prevent, and if necessary, prosecute. Deciding how far it should go in securing its people is never easy, and always contentious. But even after all that can possibly be done is done, a residue of terror will remain, and that is something we will have to live with. Mr Gandhi is not entirely incorrect.

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