

faith and development

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WAGING WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

Swami Agnivesh*¹ and Valson Thampu

On the 11th of September, 2001, we were all thrown into the cauldron of history. The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington have re-exposed the possible existence of an omnipresent international terrorism which remains elusive and unfazed by any obstacle, certainly not by any appeal to good sense, to negotiation or to compassion for innocent victims. In any case, there is no such thing as "innocent" in the eyes of a terrorist. For him, "the other" is only a superfluous creature, useless and harmful.

On the American side, its need for immediate vengeance does not differ from the often confused policies of the United States, in the last decades. Now, the most powerful nation in the world finds itself in the position of peoples it has betrayed, starting with the Talibans' Afghanistan which was strongly supported by the White House in the years 1995-1997, only to be abandoned to the hands of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. This confusing strategy has prolonged the civil war in Afghanistan as well as the sad fate of civilian Iraqis, victims of the American embargo since 1991. Even more tragic, and a major consequence of U.S. policy, is the deterioration of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

Stunned, America now knows the fate of humiliated nations. It constantly fears the next

possible blow to its flesh and pride. As the saying goes, "Might is right". Deprived of "might", the Americans find themselves "rightless". Since the end of the "cold war", the U.S. has never been so helpless. Time is a precious ally of revolted men. They shall wait. And, they shall strike, when they will want to...unless there be a radical change in strategy on the part of Americans and their allies. For, "As long as double standards and injustice continue to plague the global community and vitiate the rhetoric of peace, terrorism will continue to bedevil the human race.", thus concludes Swami Agnivesh, Indian Brahmin and chairperson of the U.N. Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, and his compatriot, Valson Thampu, a protestant theologian who is involved in the protection of minorities.

Their article is timely written, only a few days after the terrorist attacks of the 11th September. The document is original as it is written from the point of view of India, Pakistan's neighbor with whom it disputes Kashmir. While profound in sentiment, it invites to reflection. It insists on the absolute need to eradicate the endemic causes of violence, for this is essential to the attainment of world peace.

Albert Longchamp

¹ * Swami Agnivesh participated in the seminar *Spirituality and Globalization* organized by Centre L.-J. Lebretri in Yogyakarta (Indonesia) in July 2000.

We could respond to the latest and unparalleled outbreak of global terrorism in two ways. The first is that of opportunism. It could be turned to our advantage, say, in reinforcing the case against cross-border terrorism and maneuver the US into an anti-Pakistan stance with a beneficial spin-off for our Kashmir agenda. Or we could see escalating international terrorism as a pointer to the pathology of the world order that is being crafted almost exclusively from a Euro-American perspective, with the rest of the world as mere pawns on the chessboard of orchestrated social, cultural and economic expropriation.

MIGHT IS RIGHT

The essence of terrorism is not the violence it unleashes. It is the unilateral imposition of the will or agenda of one interest group over the rest. The use of force is integral to this simply because this is not a process that can be mediated through dialogue. All through history, dominant groups have enjoyed the right to slant policies and value systems in their favour. To struggle to keep the 'little traditions' alive is to run the risk of being discredited as subversive or anti-national elements. Those who resist the coerciveness of the State are labeled terrorists, while the supporters of their cause glorify them as freedom fighters and martyrs. The issue is settled, in the end, by the volume of violence a party is able to bring into play. This point was well made by a pirate who was captured and presented to Alexander the Great. Asked by the king as to how he dared to disturb the peace of his seas the pirate replied that he was called a pirate only because, unlike the king, he had only a small boat and a few seamen. If, on the contrary, he had commanded hundreds of ships and thousands of seamen he would have been called a king, not a pirate. After all, do not both function on the same principle: 'might is right'? This is the heretical truth that the polite are obliged to exclude from public discourses. But the pattern has subsisted for centuries.

President Bush is right in terming the terrorist carnage in New York and Washington as 'acts of war'. That is truly what it is. Terrorism is war of the unequals. That is no call to romanticize or condone it. Terrorism is, on the contrary, more reprehensible than war because it targets innocent civilians much more than war does. The use of

civilian aircrafts as missiles that bring down the behemoths of commerce tells that truth in an evocative fashion. Terrorism lacks, hence, the saving grace of valor, for all the desperate recklessness that terrorists exhibit. Terrorism is a tale of depravity in the idiom of violence. It needs to be combated at all costs. But the campaign against terrorism needs to be situated in a larger war against the cult and culture of violence in all its myriad forms. Selective targeting of the 'terrorist outfits' inconvenient to oneself can only degenerate into yet another project of terror, no matter in what ideological or rhetorical costume it is draped and displayed.

As Indians we are inclined to be sentimental. Sentimentality involves a distortion of sentiments and an avoidance of truth. It constructs a one-sided version of reality, leaving out the disturbing aspect of the situation. Many of us are likely, hence, to feel strongly that this is not the time to take an objective view of terrorism as a global phenomenon. Especially in the wake of the terrible Tuesday, the image of the US as the grand victim of global terrorism haunts our imagination so powerfully that any attempt to see the dialogue of terror objectively could seem blasphemous. The truth must be spoken, nonetheless, lest the colossal human sacrifice witnessed in New York and Washington goes waste. And that would be a tragedy worse than the collapse of the World Trade Center itself.

MILLIONS OF LIVES SACRIFICED

Our world subscribes to the unwritten dogma that loss of life is more tragic in some contexts and some countries, whereas it is treated as a routine matter in most others. For decades the American foreign policy, especially the war against Communism, has involved the sacrifice of millions of lives in far away lands. Prolonged and poignant suffering has been inflicted on entire nations in order to break down the will of the people. Somehow it was deemed legitimate to sacrifice peoples at a distance to secure the foundations of American hegemony over the world.

At the same time, the loss of a single American life has been a matter of hyper-sensitivity. We have all been bought into this specious logic for too long.

We could respond to the latest and un

It is a mark of the greatness of the American society that not every one there subscribes to this hypocritical dogma. Denouncing the barbarity that was rained on New York, Robert Jensen, a professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, writes, "But this act was no more despicable than the massive acts of terrorism, the deliberate killing of civilians for political purposes, that the U.S. government has committed during my lifetime. For more than five decades throughout the Third World, the United States has deliberately targeted civilians or engaged in violence so indiscriminate that there is no other way to understand it except as terrorism. " Only think of the hellish sight that the highway from Kuwait to Basrah (Iraq) presented after the liberation of Kuwait. A day after the war had ended, thousands of Iraqi soldiers were retreating, virtually fleeing in fear, from Kuwait commandeering whatever vehicles were available. US B52 bombers rained cluster bombs on them killing thousands all along the highway, clearly after the hostilities had ended. That was not branded terrorism, as the pirate who confronted Alexander would have sneered, only because the US had irresistible firepower.

Predictably, Bush has exhorted the democracies of the world to unite in this war against terrorism. Who can dispute that this needs to happen? But who can, at the same time, hope that this would result in the eradication of the cult of violence, as symbolized by this mega terrorism, unless there is an honest understanding of the need to abjure violence as the means to attain one's goals. How can a nation that sits on stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and so is in a position to blackmail and terrorize the world have the moral right to lead a campaign against terrorism? The exclusive right that a few nations claim to use nuclear and hi-tech violence at will is in itself a terrorist idea that needs to be seen for what it is. As long as double standards and injustice continue to plague the global community and vitiate the rhetoric of peace, terrorism will continue to bedevil the human race.

Most people are carried away by the magnitude of the havoc that the terrorists have wrought in New York and Washington. Mind-boggling as that really is, what speaks even louder is its carefully choreographed symbolism.

This is, by far, the most vicious blow to the American presumption of impregnability at home. The only other comparable event in terms of its symbolic resonance is the sinking of the Titanic that, according to Joseph Conrad, humbled the pride of an entire civilization and burst the bubble of Anglo-Saxon arrogance. The terrible Tuesday has served notice on the nation that American muscle power may not necessarily translate itself into security for Americans either at home or abroad. America needs to combine her awesome firepower with an inspired commitment to justice and compassion for all. And that should include those miserable wretches who are doomed to groan under the 'dictators' that the US detests.

ERADICATE POVERTY AND INJUSTICE

That is possible only if this great nation learns to temper its geo-political calculations with a sense of universal responsibility and compassion for all in distress. American pre-eminence must not be founded exclusively on American firepower or economic clout, but also on a global commitment to end poverty, destitution, and injustice of every kind. President Kennedy's stirring words to his countrymen, "Ask not what America can do for you; ask what you can do for America and what we together can do for the world," are far more relevant today than they were then.

The symbolism of the event -trade towers collapsing and the nerve center of the mightiest war machine in history folding up in panic- has not been lost in the torrent of sympathy that people all over the world felt for the victims. The twin towers symbolized a whole civilization that allows wealth to flee from the people at large and accumulate in the hands of a few. Never before in history have mechanisms of affluence left so many destitute as they do in our globalizing world today. Death by starvation, the brooding ferocity of hunger, is the ultimate terror.

It is time the Americans came to terms with the irony of their affluence and pre-eminence in a world of escalating inequalities and explosive grievances. They have most to lose. Consider, in comparison, the Afghans and the Iraqis. How much damage could a few terrorists have inflicted on these countries with a few passenger planes? That is why the idea of an American retaliatory

strike against Afghanistan looks so unexciting, even pathetic. Are we about to witness a re-run of North Vietnam? It was the rare resolve bred by poverty that humbled the US there. History is moved by those who have nothing to lose. Marx knew this, and so cried out, "Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose except your chains". Only those who have nothing to lose could have turned themselves into missiles and displayed the suicidal recklessness that portended Domsday in Washington.

The second thing that the people of America need to note is this: the trigger happy approach of the US to policing the globe bespeaks a crude unconcern for the cost that this exacts from other people. The mastery of electronic warfare that seems to guarantee negligible loss of life to oneself has been the main reason for the cavalier posturings of the US in this respect. One wonders if rockets would have rained on Sudan and Afghanistan in the wake of the attacks on American embassies, and the average American endorsed this effrontery, if the horror of Black Tuesday were anticipated then. The gaping intelligence-and-security lapse writ large over this humiliating event is proof enough that the prospect of a massive terrorist attack in the nerve center of American finance and defense establishment was never taken seriously by the US.

All on a sudden it is as if Vietnam, Iraq, Cambodia, Nicaragua, Chile and Laos have all come home to roost. For a change, the victims are no longer 'the demonized other', but men and women one has seen and known. And that is a different order of experience from the CNN coverage of hi-tech war at a distance. Ironically, it is the apocalyptic scale of the devastation in this event that makes retaliation both unavoidable and unthinkable. This explains why a subterranean tremor of popular anger is now sweeping through the American people, for all the outward tokens of solidarity they display. To an extent unimaginable a few days ago, more and more American are beginning to see an emerging link between American foreign policy, studded with distant proxy-wars, and the hell that broke out in their own backyard.

FEAR PSYCHOSIS

Third, the American people need to ensure that the seeds of terror that the enemy has rained over them do not

penetrate and sprout in their collective psyche either as fear psychosis or as irrational hatred against all and sundry. Terror's first casualty is the capacity for sound judgment. Panic robs people of their capacity for subtle distinctions. Yet all that we cherish -truth, justice, compassion, love, and beauty- stands on this very foundation. The sporadic outbreak of violence against people of Asian origin, especially mistaking the Sikhs for terrorists, is pathetically ridiculous. Unless this is contained at once, the terrorists will have the last laugh of having infected the mind of America with the virus of terrorism. That is a reward that would exceed by far the wildest of dreams that the authors of this crime against humanity would have entertained.

There is a lesson in this for India as well. Our precipitous haste in boarding the American bandwagon is clearly based on a naïve over-exaggeration of the benefits that can be harvested thereby. In this purblind fixation, we seem to become unmindful of the cost that is sure to come in the wake of this misadventure. What is the proof, as yet, of the genuineness of the American resolve to contain and eliminate global terrorism in a dispassionate and consistent fashion? Have we forgotten how the massacre of 37 Sikhs by pro-Pak terrorists in Kashmir did not deter Clinton, the defender of democracy, from calling on Musharraf in Islamabad at a time when that upstart General was still a political pariah? More importantly, if the US is not able to protect its own assets and people from the enemy who strikes as if from nowhere, how will Uncle Sam shield us from such afflictions, even if he wants to?

Also, consider the way the US saved Kuwait. Kuwait continues to pay the cost of that luxury, and will continue to do so for the generations to come. Does anything come without a price now-a-days? And, are we not far more vulnerable to global terrorism than the US is? Whatever short-term advantage is anticipated through this diplomatic opportunism will be as nothing compared to the long-term mischief this would herald.

WAGING WAR AGAINST VIOLENCE

We cannot afford to be carried away by the moment. The truth of life and history is that issues have to be

faced and justice upheld, sooner or later. The alternative is to walk an unending trail of death and devastation in the foolish hope that a higher degree of counter-violence will bring our adversaries (nee, terrorists) to their knees. While it is true that hardly any terrorist movement has succeeded in attaining its goal, it is also true that very few terrorist movements have been crushed by brute force alone. Look at Sri Lanka, the bleeding island paradise, where sorrow blossoms instead of flowers; no further argument will be needed.

As if to add a touch of comedy to what is otherwise is a tragic scenario, the irrepressible Ashok Singhal now thinks that the collapsing trade towers will unite Hindus and Christians and they, together, could re-invent, may be, the one-time enemy of the nation. Funnily, those who were till the other day busy terrorizing everybody else also want to be on the anti-terrorism

bandwagon. The terrorism that burns alive a sleeping man and his two innocent sons is not a lesser evil than that of airplanes plowing through trade towers. Terror is evil, no matter whom it targets and under what ideological pretext it is unleashed. It needs to be condemned as such. The terror of dalit women gang-raped, of dalit youths lynched for daring to love girls above their caste status, of landless poor massacred by the private militia of zamindars, the terror above all, of brooding death due to starvation: these are issues of no less gravity for their victims than the collapsing trade towers and punctured Pentagon pride for the US.

Those who believe that terror can be treated or targeted selectively, live in a fool's paradise, as the American did till the other day. Black Tuesday was, in that sense, a moment of truth. But a moment of truth need not necessarily

become a moment of enlightenment. For that, the truth encountered has to be internalized and upheld in the hard choices that a nation makes. President Bush could get it all wrong if he persuades himself to believe, against his own better sense, that the war to be won is the war against a particular brand of terrorism. The war of this century must be against the rising cult of violence that turned the last century into a cauldron of cruelty and an abyss of human suffering. The story of man's cruelty to man continues, co-authored by the power-brokers of the world, penned in the blood of the innocent, punctuated, as one would expect, by hypocritical cries of dismay and denunciation. Still the quest for sanity must go on in a world where high priests of violence pontificate from the pulpits of peace.

**Swami Agnivesh and
ValsonThampu**

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