

After terror, polarizing politics in India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi seems to be exploiting the deaths of paramilitary soldiers in a terrorist attack for political gains.

Hartosh Singh Bal

On Feb. 14, a 19-year-old drove a vehicle filled with explosives into a convoy of Indian paramilitary forces in Indian-administered Kashmir and killed 49 soldiers. Jaish-e-Muhammad, or the Army of Muhammad, a Pakistan-based terrorist group, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Over the past five years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party has governed India and been part of the local government in Kashmir as well, thus controlling India's policy approaches to the disputed, conflict-torn region. Mr. Modi embraced a militaristic approach and shunned a political process involving dialogue with the separatists in Kashmir. Consequently, the number of civilian and security personnel killed in the region have increased, and a growing number of young Kashmiris, like Adil Dar, the 19-year-old suicide bomber, joined militant groups.

These are inconvenient facts for Mr. Modi, who has continually attacked India's opposition parties for being soft on terror and compromising national security. As the deaths of the soldiers come three months before a general election, an honest evaluation of Mr. Modi's failed policy should have led to him to being held accountable.

Such questions, naturally, receded into the background in the immediate aftermath of the Kashmir bombing, in a

national outpouring of grief. Before those pertinent questions would return to the national conversation, Mr. Modi spun the bad news to his advantage by turning the grief into an emotive and prolonged commemoration of the deaths of the soldiers.

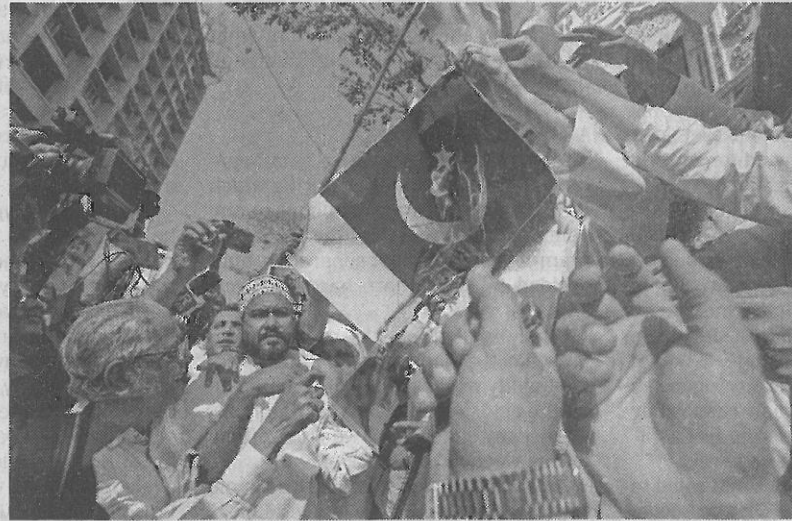
As Indian television networks followed the coffins of the slain troops draped in the Indian flag on their final journey home, Mr. Modi's party directed its senior leaders to attend the cremations, which were telecast live. The funerals became occasions for patriotic avowals, some genuine, some orchestrated, as politicians sought to ensure they were part of the frame.

Mr. Modi ratcheted up the rhetoric against Pakistan and suggested that India would retaliate militarily. "Security forces have been given complete freedom, the blood of the people is boiling," he said.

On social media and television networks, retired military generals, such as G.D. Bakshi, echoed Mr. Modi's words and described the bombing in Kashmir as an act of war. "They started it but we will finish it," he said.

The venerable Cricket Club of India, a colonial institution founded in 1933, decided to do its part by draping a portrait of Pakistan's prime minister, Imran Khan, which had been put up to honor his cricketing feats in the last century.

The mourning took on a more sinister note as gangs of young men started parading the streets of many Indian cities, including New Delhi, shouting slogans directed at Pakistan and "anti-nationals" — the preferred term of the



DIYAKANT SOLANKI/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Indian Muslims burning posters of a Pakistani flag in Mumbai, India, this month.

Hindu nationalists for perceived foes and undesirables ranging from liberals to Muslims.

Several Hindu nationalist affiliates of Mr. Modi's party led a campaign that targeted students from Kashmir studying in educational institutions across India. They managed to extract promises from a few colleges that they would not admit Kashmiri students.

The tone and tenor of the marches and the threats to Kashmiri students were not lost even on Mr. Modi's own allies. In an editorial in its party newspaper, Shiv Sena, the Mumbai-based Hindu nationalist party, cautioned the

prime minister that "there were political allegations that Prime Minister Narendra Modi could wage a small-scale war to win elections. . . . The rulers should not behave in a manner that these allegations gain credence."

Mr. Modi's political use of the deaths of "martyrs" is not new to India, but we haven't seen it at such a scale since India and Pakistan fought a limited war over Kashmir in 1999. In the past two decades, Indian security forces have periodically been targets of violent insurgent attacks, some causing even larger numbers of casualties, but the grief has run its normal course.

Mr. Modi and his party seem to be working on a template of exploiting calamitous deaths that they have used before. In February 2002, soon after he took over as chief minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat, a train carrying Hindu religious volunteers was allegedly set on fire in the town of Godhra by a group of Muslims. Fifty-nine people died. Mr. Modi ensured the bodies of the dead were taken to the Ahmedabad, the largest city in the state, and paraded through the city. Violence broke out soon after. Hindu mobs fueled by incendiary rhetoric from leaders of organizations affiliated with the Bharatiya Janata Party, targeted homes and businesses owned by Muslims. Over a thousand people were killed, over 700 of them Muslims.

In his campaign for the state elections held a few months after the violence, Mr. Modi barely disguised his hatred and contempt for the Muslim minority, describing them as a demographic threat to India and seeking to connect them with Pakistan. The insurgency in Kashmir, which is the only Muslim majority state in the country, is often invoked in the same fashion by Mr. Modi's Hindu nationalist party.

Mr. Modi is at his political best with an electoral campaign run on sectarian and polarizing themes. Before the attack in Kashmir, he was facing an opposition campaign dominated by questions about unemployment being the highest in 45 years and distress in Indian villages. His party had already lost state elections in Madhya Pradesh

Politics after terror

SINGH BAL, FROM PAGE 8

and Rajasthan, partly as a result of an acute farm crisis in India.

This was the campaign that the Congress Party and other opposition parties were looking to fight; this is the campaign that Mr. Modi is seeking to avoid with the emotive call of martyrdom. Ironically, a vast majority of the soldiers who died were drawn from India's lower and middle castes with largely rural backgrounds, a far cry from the upper-caste, urban Hindu voters who are Mr. Modi's most ardent and hawkish supporters.

What has largely gone unspoken in the aftermath of the Kashmir attack is that the C.R.P.F., the paramilitary force these young men joined, is heavily understaffed and underequipped, a stark contrast to Mr. Modi's bluster on national security.

In 1999, I was working as a reporter in the northern state of Punjab. I covered the cremations of soldiers who had died in Kargil in the war between India and Pakistan. Each body draped in the Indian flag was accompanied by a soldier from the fallen man's unit.

Those men were angry with the government and willing to speak on record with their names and ranks about being sent to battle in the icy Himalayan mountains without proper equipment to shield them from the cold and the snow. When I wrote their stories, my editors refused to publish them and argued that it was not the time to report such things because they were damaging to the "national interest."

In the rhetoric of martyrdom that prevails in Mr. Modi's India, editors across the country are making similar calls and leaving out inconvenient facts and questions. It may or may not be in the national interest, but it certainly is in Mr. Modi's interest.

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