

## *September 11 and After*

K.Balagopal

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It is an unhappy country that finds itself in position where people say, when tragedy strikes it, that the country deserved it. The more balanced among the commentators may be saying that the perpetration of the act of 11<sup>th</sup> September was inexcusable, for whatever purpose, and inexcusable it certainly is. But there are few who are saying to the US the kindest words that can be said in times of gloom: you did not deserve this pain.

Reduced to its essentials, the killing of 11<sup>th</sup> September sends this message: the most effective way to get at a government is to get at its people. But this should be a very familiar message to the US. Fifty five years ago, the populous habitations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were atom-bombed by it to get at the Emperor of Japan. About three decades later the US devastated the lives of the Vietnamese peasantry with the instruments of chemical warfare to get at the communist guerrillas. And in contemporary history, the Iraqi people are being strangled by the US – and this is in the present continuous: before, during and after 11<sup>th</sup> September – to get at Saddam Hussain. No building comparable to the World Trade Centre has been bombed, but half a million have been killed by the invisible process of being denied medicines whose import is barred by US-imposed sanctions. The same logic was pursued in Yugoslavia: to get at Milosevic, get at the Serbian people; and in Libya: to get at Gaddafi, get at the Libyan people.

Perversity breeds perversity. And the teacher is at least as guilty as the taught.

There will be many who will find this mode of argument objectionable. It will be said that in the face of such vile acts that wantonly extinguish innocent lives in their thousands, nothing that even remotely tends to justify the acts should be said, even if it is true in the abstract. Let me state unhesitatingly that no human rights activist worth the name would justify the destruction of even one innocent life, whatever may be the excuse. But that is not the same thing as saying that one closes one's eyes to what preceded it and what is likely to succeed it, for the simple reason that after the dreadful event, life goes on for the survivors. And it raises questions of consequences which cannot be answered if one's thought is forcibly closed to avoid seeming complicity with evil.

And what is the consequence whose imminence stares us in the face? It is this, that the US wishes to do the same thing again that it has done again and again, and that the attacker of 11<sup>th</sup> September repaid in kind: attack Afghanistan and its civilian population to get at Osama Bin Laden. The very exodus of the frightened people of Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran is proof that we cannot be blind to America's habits of thought while analyzing the horror of 11<sup>th</sup> September.

The need of the hour, to use the cliched expression, is to force the US to realise at least in this tragic moment, that its assumption of a superior moral position that entitles it to be the police, prosecutor and judge of the whole world is indefensible. Instead it has reacted exactly the way it ought not to have: it has become more aggressive than ever in the past in arrogating to itself the adjudicatory role of sitting in judgement over the world's bad men. And it will not even divulge the reasons for its conclusion that Osama Bin Laden is guilty. It says 'we are satisfied, and that is that', a process of adjudication that no civilized society accepts.

The US now appears all set to repeat an Iraq in Afghanistan on perhaps a much worse scale. It needs no prophet to foretell that such a reaction will only make things worse, and even if India is not concerned about the immorality of the US reaction, it should have sense enough to realise that if things go out of hand, India will be at the centre of the holocaust. In the politics of nations as much as in the politics of individuals, violence has never taught any body to give up violence. Reinventing the idea of the United Nations may.

For many in India, there is an even less defensible reason for wanting to egg the US on: the muslims should be taught a lesson. It is even being said by influential columnists that there is Islamic terrorism in the world because Islam is terror, and the faster the world realises this the better. One does not have to quote from the Quran to answer this. One does not have to argue abstractly that religion by itself does not make any body violent. It is a fact of history that organized violence to subserve their ends, noble as well as ignoble, has been perpetrated by armed groups of all communities. Hitler's SS consisted of Christians of mainly protestant persuasion. The fearsome LTTE cadre are Hindus. Latin American communist or ethnic guerrillas belong mostly to catholic Christian communities. Mao's red army cadre came from confucian-buddhist communities in terms of religious and social traditions. No community has a monopoly of violence. And yet, the image of violent Islam is so strongly rooted in the modern Hindu psyche, more particularly the minds of India's current rulers, that we are unable to look critically at the world-destructive rhetoric of the US. The danger is that this blindness may well lead the country into a position that is morally indefensible and physically dangerous.

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