

The Needle's Eye



Chaitanya Kalbag

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In his 2011 book 'Target 3 Billion', APJ Abdul Kalam wrote about returning across the Rajasthan desert after India's Pokhran nuclear tests in May 1998. The temperature was around 50° C. A fellow scientist suggested they stop at a village called Bhadariya. There, Kalam was astonished to find a

lush and green ashram. The head priest, Baba Sri Bhadariya Maharaj, led Kalam and his colleague down steps to an underground library. It had a natural cooling system and over 200,000 books. The two scientists were plying with large glasses of cold milk. Behind the ashram the Baba had built a huge cowshed where the area's discarded cattle were fed and nursed back to health. The milk and butter they produced was given away to the villagers. The ashram had started out with a detoxification drive to rid the villages nearby of their tobacco, liquor and drug addictions. Now the entire desert area was carpeted with trees and herbs that yielded both medicine as well as fodder for the cows. Where did the Baba learn to do all this, Kalam asked. From the underground library, the Baba said, his eyes shining.

The scientist-statesman's passing was mourned very widely: it had been a very long time since so many of us felt the loss of a person who brought a considerable moral force to everything that he said and did. In the eight years since he vacated the presidential palace, I had heard him more than once, unbundling his message that India might be a great power if it could figure how to unleash the potential of its young and restless. Three billion of earth's people

lived in villages, Kalam said, and their lives would change with his mantra of PURA (Provision of Urban Amenities in Rural Areas). He was characterised by his relentless, cheerful and slightly naive quest for an idealistic vision of an India that would be lifted towards an Utopia of sustainable development.

President Kalam had already won India's three top civilian honours including the Bharat Ratna before the Pokhran nuclear tests. He took office a few months after the Gujarat riots. Many of the tributes paid to him after his death this Monday have made a point of noting that he played the rudra veena, read the Bhagavad Gita, and could recite stanzas from the Tamil epic Thirukkural.

These virtues in a man who came from a humble background in farthest Tamil Nadu were juxtaposed in this week's headlines with endless narratives about Yakub Memon, the only death-row convict found guilty of helping perpetrate the serial bomb attacks in Mumbai in 1993.

During his term, President Kalam rejected only one mercy petition from a convicted murderer. He sat on a number of others, including one from Afzal Guru, found guilty of involvement in the December 2001 terror attack on India's Parliament. Kalam wrote to the government's Law Commission opposing the death penalty, noting that most

crimes punishable by death were committed with a social and economic bias. Guru was executed in February 2013, nearly six years after

NO DEATH PENALTY



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Kalam left office.

Yakub Memon will be only the fourth person to be executed in India since 2004. Three of them are connected with three of the worst terrorist attacks in India so far this century: Guru for the parliament attack, Ajmal Kasab for the November 2008 killings spree in Mumbai, and now Memon for the 1993 serial bombings in Mumbai. Of them all, Memon has spent the longest—21 years—in prison waiting for the final verdict. India does not like to think of itself as a bloodthirsty nation, although there are hundreds of people languishing on death rows. There is a raging debate about continuing with capital punishment, on which the Law

Commission held detailed consultations earlier this month. The consensus among the politicians, legal experts and scholars invited for a full day of debate was apparently that the penalty ought to be abolished.

Such agonising would have been academic if justice had been even-handed in all acts of terrorism and abuse of state authority in India. This is not so, and day after day we are assailed by examples of prosecutions being thwarted or prosecutors going easy in selected cases, people who have already been convicted of grave crimes being bailed out, key prosecution witnesses suddenly turning hostile, and activists who have sought a just closure in some cases being systematically hounded by an unblinking and ruthless state machinery.

You wouldn't know any of this was going on if you were watching the bedlam in Parliament. I had written that Parliament's budget session had been one of the most productive in recent years. As if to prove how credulous I am, the monsoon session has been washed out by the opposition baying for the blood of Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and the BJP chief ministers of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has started using his stentorian voice and commanding oratory in the battlefield of Bihar, could

have used his prerogative to intervene and offer an olive branch or to read the riot act in Parliament, but he continues to let the storm rage around him while he goes about his daily business, unperturbed.

It would be sad if the Goods and Services Tax Bill were smothered by the heat and dust. Modi has an economy to run, and we could get on with our incessant politicking if we somehow got the economy's wheels moving faster, but that does not seem likely.

A few days ago I chanced upon a 1958 television interview by the inimitable Mike Wallace with the starkly predictive 'Brave New World' in 1932. Interestingly for those of us fixated on Hindu mythology, Huxley wrote about a substance called 'soma' which was "a very versatile drug... it would make people happy in small doses, it would make them see visions in medium doses, and it would send them to sleep in large doses."

And in warning presciently—several years before George Orwell's 1984—about authoritarian governments, Huxley had this to say: "This is the danger; that actually people may be in some ways happy under the new regime, but they will be happy in a situation where they oughtn't to be happy." So please, let's get the dosage right.



ANIRBAN BORA