

Return of the assassins

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The killing of twenty-four Kashmiri Pandits at Nadimarg, a remote village in Southern Kashmir, has shattered a somewhat tenuous tranquillity that of late had transcended the violent ridden vale of Kashmir. The massacre, coming on the heels of the killing of Hizbul Mujahideen leader, Majid Dar, has finally sounded the death knell of the 'healing touch' charade touted by Mufti Sayeed as electioneering slogans, ostensibly to lure in the wary Kashmiri electorate.

Exactly three years and four days after 35 Sikhs were slain at Chattisinghpura in IOK, twelve men wearing olive drab uniforms of Indian army, armed with assault rifles and putting on bullet proof vests and helmets, descended on the remote village in the early hours of the night. In the bloodbath that ensued 11 Kashmiri Pundits, 11 women and two infants were ruthlessly shot to death. It is ironical that this Hindu hamlet had a police picket to protect the Pundit populations. Out of nine policemen detailed to guard the village, three were absent while the other six were asleep. The assailants locked the policemen inside their room, where they remained till completion of the gory act.

'Nadimarg' has become the latest addition to the blood soaked benchmarks that have dotted the freedom struggle of the Kashmiri population with a persistent regularity. These grisly incidents have come to define the regulating mechanism, used by

Indian politicians to ratchet up the tension as per dictates of the situation. Indian have proved themselves past masters at calibrating the timings of these stage managed incidents to yield maximum dividends in pursuing their policy of coercive diplomacy vis-a-vis Pakistan.

Chattisinghpura (March 2, 2000) coincided with President Clinton's visit to Pakistan. The hijacking of Indian airliner (October 4, 2001), just preceded Tony Blair's visit to the Sub-Continent on October 5-6 (the caper couldn't sustain itself due to inept handling of the engineered plot). US Chief coordinator on terrorism, Fancies Taylor's visit to New Delhi was welcomed by a terrorist attack outside American Centre at Kolkata on January 22, 2002. The attack on the Indian parliament precipitated on December 13, 2001, and triggered Operation Parakram, the largest and longest sustained, military mobilisation against Pakistan. The attack on Kalu Chak Army Camp on May 14 occurred when US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca was visiting New Delhi and virtually pushed the highly explosive situation beyond the brink. Her visit to New Delhi on September 24 saw the Akshardham Temple in Gujarat under attack. Experience has shown that timings hold the key to high profile acts of violence in IOK and India and bloodbath of Nadimarg lends itself for ascertaining the method in this abhorring madness.

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Firstly, aborting Operation Parakram in October 2002 without accomplishment of any political or military objectives has placed the Indian political leadership in a tight spot. Senior military and political Indian leadership has repeatedly blamed the Vajpae-Advani led government for seeking confrontation with Pakistan without any clear-cut attainable objectives, questioning the wisdom of mobilising the Indian armed forces, which achieved little, if nothing at a staggering cost to the state exchequer. Indian political leadership is visibly under pressure and Nadimarg incident provides an opportunity to self-righteously claim that they were justified in seeking a war with Pakistan to overcome the festering problem of 'cross-border terrorism'.

Secondly, the invasion of Iraq may hold the key for understanding the Indian motive for staging Nadimarg. In the aftermath of September 11 attacks, Indians have tried to emulate US, albeit unsuccessfully, to settle scores with Pakistan. The US adopted unilateral policy of pre-emption in 2001 has seen Indians stage-managed a 12/13 of their own and launch deployment of troops to browbeat Pakistan. As the US Operations unfold in Iraq, Indians may find the precedence tempting to revamp their policy of limited war options restricted to Kashmir theatre alone. Indian strategists have been toying with the

hypotheses of limited strikes, hot-pursuits, limited use of air power against selected posts etc, for quite some time. Besides there is a strong lobby in the Indian military hierarchy which feels that Indians blinked in a contest of will and Nadimarg may help India re-attempt its discredited doctrines of an offensive restricted to Kashmir alone and yet again explore the limits of Pakistan's nuclear deterrence.

Third, some recent political debates by the BJP have forced her to up the ante on Pakistan bashing, which has emerged as an election-winning factor, in the sordid electioneering mechanics of India. Narendra Modi has successfully displayed in Gujarat elections that the communally polarised, Hindutva driven political dynamics yield positively to Pakistan bashing. Pakistan by extension has become an external manifestation of the oppressed and harassed Muslim Community in India. Nadimarg gives a handle to frenzied sloganeering of BJP leadership to keep the pot of communal hatred bubbling to shore up the chances of BJP remaining in power.

Fourth, the killings of the Pundits have sharpened the communal faultiness in the IOK separating Jammu, Kashmir valley and Laddakh Regions. RSS is already vigorously prompting the idea of trifurcating the IOK along the communally drawn lines. As described by the politburo of CPI (M), the killings are a 'sinister design to

give a communal twist and create further trouble' in the IOK.

Fifth, the killings have apparently demonstrated that the cosmetic changes by the incumbent government of Mufti Saeed has failed to bring in a positive change in the security milieu obtaining in the IOK. The incident has come as a blow to the state government's plans to bring back the migrant pundit population and has underlined deterioration in the security situation in the post election environment. The incident will come in handy in granting sweeping powers to the security apparatus, and help gloss over the flagrant human rights violations, committed by the centre controlled security forces conducting counter insurgency operations against freedom fighters.

Lastly, the incident helps to promote the Indian psychological offensive that freedom struggle in India is a terrorist driven movement which prevails through ruthless application of violence. Indian political leadership has shown itself adept at the practice of using such violent incidents to make policy statements and create favourable conditions for national policy objectives. Consequently, names such as Chattisinghpura, Kaluchak and Akshardham Temple have become buzzwords in projecting India as a victim of externally generated terrorism. Coinciding of Nadimarg with melting of snows in the Pir Panjal Ranges is a development, which seems loaded with sinister possibilities.