



Manufacturing nationalism

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Highlights

- The wag in India would be forgiven if in a reference to political practice here he were to replace 'patriotism' in the bon mot with either 'nationalism' or 'secularism'.
- Right now, however, it is the observation on the uses to which the former is often put that is all too relevant for this country.

Commemorating an action

- Even as we have grown accustomed to election time being turned into silly season by rival political parties scrambling for attention, nothing could have prepared us for the latest missive from the University Grants Commission (UGC), a body originally conceived to nurture our institutions of higher education.
- It is reported that the UGC has issued notice to the universities that they should prepare to commemorate the 'surgical strike' on India's north-western border which we are informed had taken place on September 29, 2016.
- Public universities in a democracy are to be allowed independence from the government of the day and, equally important, its individual members must be assured freedom from the dictates of the majority within them.
- Two questions arise when we reflect upon the action that is to be commemorated.
- How significant was it and is it a wise thing to do to bring details of a military action into the limelight?
- In the history of India's defence engagements on the western front since 1947, the action in question is hardly the biggest or brightest.

War years and response

- Surely, India's response to the infiltrators from Pakistan who had invaded Kashmir in 1948 was more impressive.
- While, of course, the wars of 1965 and 1971 were far bigger, in 1948 India not only was struggling to find its feet after the trauma of Partition but also was a fledgling country beset with economic hardship.
- That in the midst of all this the Indian armed forces air-lifted to Srinagar were able to achieve what they did is remarkable, especially given the terrain.
- Only the political leadership of the time is accountable for why the action did not fully secure India's borders.
- But whatever is the truth, nothing that could have been achieved at the border in 2016 can match the action of 1948.
- Surely the people of India can see this, arousing scepticism over the motive for the commemoration of a mere 'surgical strike'.

- None of India's Prime Ministers had gloated over victory in war.
- In their dignified silence, India's former Prime Ministers had followed the practice of great leaders who refuse to glory in aggression.
- Can it be said that they love their country less for merely wearing a flower for a day, not requiring their great universities to celebrate victory in war?

Undermines any advantage

- A second reason for avoiding public remembrance of the 'surgical strike' of 2016 would be that it undermines any advantage that may be possessed by India.
- While it may at times be necessary to pursue infiltrators to their lair, it can be strategically unwise to keep advertising your past actions.
- Politicians reveal their amateurishness in matters military when they boast in public of the deeds of our soldiers and are unable to make common cause when it comes to national security.
- Something of this kind is much needed in a matter that is being aired in our television debates right now.
- In a relatively rare moment of sanity emanating from them, an anchor suggested that henceforth defence acquisitions be made through bipartisan committees so that there is transparency.
- Above all, dragging our armed forces into a jingoistic nationalism to serve some narrow political end stems from an ignorance of India's eternal tradition.

A national spirit

- Nations are imagined communities.
- They first arise in the minds of the people.
- The state can only tap into this national spirit; it cannot create it.
- By the 21st century, Indians imagine themselves as a community, it may be said, of diverse nationalities.
- They must view with amusement the ersatz nationalism being manufactured over a routine action somewhere along India's north-western border.

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