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ESSAY

## Speaking Truth to Power: The Indian Media's Descent from Sharp Hawks to Screeching Parrots



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*It was heartening to see the media collectively stand up to the Narendra Modi government, when with characteristic bluster, it accused The Hindu of relying on stolen documents for its articles on the Rafale deal. The government backtracked in the face of this stunning unity but in other cases it has acted vindictively, a trait made worse by the loud support it has received from the bulk of the TV media. In this context, it is instructive to revisit the past and examine how the media treated the previous governments. In a 'now and then' comparison, Vidya Subrahmaniam, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, New Delhi, concludes in the second of her two-part essay on the media, that "not only did the previous governments rapidly lose their popular appeal, they were brought down, among other things, by a robust media that kept a hawk-like watch on their scams and scandals...without a shadow of doubt, the press played a stellar role in exposing the misdeeds of the government of the day."*

**W**ith a history of browbeating and muzzling the free press, the Narendra Modi Government attempted a replay of its bully-boy tactics in the Supreme Court on March 6, 2019, only to meekly backtrack in a couple of days: In the course of a hearing on a review petition in the Rafale deal, it bizarrely argued that *The Hindu* had relied on *classified documents "stolen" from the Ministry of Defence* for the stories it had published on the deal. Further that *The Hindu* and N. Ram, former Editor-in-Chief of the paper and the author of the reports, were liable for criminal action under the Official Secrets Act<sup>1</sup>.

In a series of evidence-based investigative reports published in the newspaper on the purchase of the Rafale jet by the Modi Government<sup>2</sup>, Ram, also the Chairman of The Hindu Group, had shown that parallel negotiations by the Prime Minister's Office under Modi had not only raised the cost per aircraft compared to what was negotiated by the previous United Progressive Alliance Government (UPA), it had also led to several safeguards being dropped. The Government, represented in court by Attorney General K.K. Venugopal, retaliated in the way it was habituated to: By aggression, bluster and threat of criminal action.

What happened next was what happens when bullies are stood up to. A government that for nearly the whole of its term in office, had lied and blitzkrieged its way through serial blunders and disasters, that had brooked no criticism from the media, found itself making a U-turn faced with the wrath of the collective media. In the past any media group critical of the government or the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), or even a corporate associate, would typically be slapped with gag orders and defamation suits running to 1000s of crores of rupees. In *The Hindu* case, though, almost the entire print and digital media, non-partisan TV channels such as *NDTV* and *Mirror Now*, the Editors Guild, and a united political Opposition, stood up for the paper's right to report and write without intimidation. Undoubtedly as a result of this, Venugopal had to change his story and admit that no papers were stolen but that the documents used by *The Hindu* were copies of the original in the Defence Ministry.<sup>3</sup>

*The media solidarity is remarkable because this is perhaps the first time that this Government faced the power of a hostile media.*

The media solidarity is remarkable because this is perhaps the first time that the Modi Government has faced the power of a hostile media. What's more this unity has happened in the backdrop of an India-Pakistan conflict which fact Prime Minister Narendra Modi has wielded like a weapon in his fight with Rahul Gandhi, the Opposition and liberal sections daring to doubt the official narrative. Modi has argued that the absence of Rafale jets had hampered the Indian Air Force (IAF) in its confrontation with Pakistan following the killing of 40 Central Reserve Police Force jawans in a terrorist strike in Pulwama in Kashmir. By implication any questions on the Rafale deal was 'anti-national' and amounted to helping the 'enemy' country.

Would *The Hindu* example be a wake-up call for journalists to shake off their fears and recover their instincts to investigate and report fearlessly? Or would the government use the threat of a war with Pakistan as a leverage to fetter and silence them? With days to go for the general election, and

campaigning soon to start in full force, the need to confront Modi's hectoring and his government's claims of achievements, assumes significance.

### To question is treason

Even as this was being written, Indian TV studios were echoing to war cries, and shrilly arguing that the Opposition and the media were bound not to question the government's claims on the air strikes in Balakot, and if they did so they would be guilty of treason<sup>4</sup>. The cue for this came from Modi himself: In his rallies he has been pitching it to the audience that those interrogating the official version on the Balakot air strikes could not be forgiven. Worse, in a gross distortion of facts, and violation of the sacred rule about not politicising the armed forces, he has blurred the distinction between himself and the IAF: "*Pakistan ro raha hai ki Modi aa kar maar ke gaya* (Pakistan is crying that Modi came and hit us)."

*For the entire period of its first four years and some more, the government carried on as if no scandal had touched it.*

For the entire period of its first four years and some more, the government carried on as if no scandal had touched it. On the contrary, the BJP made the alleged incorruptibility of Prime Minister Modi, the centrepiece of his governance record. This nonchalance was in the face of a slew of allegations that had emerged from stories investigated and published mainly by niche magazines and digital media. Typically, these stories and exposés – among them one by *Caravan* magazine insinuating foul play in the death of Judge Brijgopal Loya who had been hearing a case against BJP President Amit Shah, and many by *TheWire.in* on the financial dealings of Amit Shah's son, Jay Shah, the Rafale deal and other official improprieties -- would make a splash in the social media, where they would be voraciously consumed by people driven to the alternative media by their frustration with not finding adequate anti-establishment news in the conventional media.

In the case of the TV channels, ironically with a record of aggression against the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government, there was not just an eagerness to bed the Modi government, but this fealty had also morphed into a full-time preoccupation with attacking the Opposition, and questioning the loyalty of journalists and civil society persons inclined to be critical of the government. Of course, in both print and TV media, there have been honourable exceptions. Among newspapers, *Business Standard* has stood out for its trenchant reporting on the dire state of the economy and threats to the livelihoods of poor people from environmental violations. With its investigative series on Rafale, *The Hindu* has shown that neither *faux* nationalism nor threats of criminal action will deter it. *NDTV* and *Mirror Now* have refused to join the TV chorus against the Opposition and civil society. Within channels, individual anchors, among them Rajdeep Sardesai of *India Today TV* and Priya Sehgal of *News X*, have risen above the war-mongering in their newsrooms to maintain a modicum of objectivity.

*It is a measure of the depressing state of the media that all the sycophancy shown to it by TV have not been to the government's full satisfaction.*

**Rahul Kanwal (RK):** Sir, as of now there are two different narratives that are at play. One is that we struck with immense precision, we did significant damage – numbers

However, it is a measure of the depressing state of the media today that all the sycophancy and obedience shown to it by TV have not been to the government's full satisfaction. At a conclave held by *India Today*, an important central Minister, Piyush Goyal, publicly shamed and humiliated the group's anchor, Rahul Kanwal, because he seemed to be questioning the number of deaths in the Balakot strike. Kanwal had barely started speaking when Goyal drowned him in a tirade of accusations and charged Kanwal and his colleagues with propagating the "Pakistan theory in India".

A shaken Kanwal, who has more often than not toed the government line, was forced to tell the Minister that he didn't need lessons on patriotism from him. The following is the relevant transcript of the interaction:

that 300, 400 terrorists have been killed have been bandied about. The Air Force itself hasn't confirmed. International media is being taken to the zone where the missiles fell. They are saying that only one person was injured. That the missiles that we threw fell into open forest. Do you believe, then, that this puts some pressure on India to convince the world and the public and the opposition that 'yes, indeed the mission was successful.'

**Piyush Goyal (PG):** "Are you convinced first?

**RK:** I believe...

**PG:** I mean...

**RK:** I'll answer it...

**PG:** ...are you a part of this narrative that is trying to belittle our armed forces. Are you, any of you in this room, subscribing to what Rahul Kanwal is saying, trying to belittle the armed forces...

**RK:** Minister...

**PG:** ... and try to prove that they are lying. Is that what your intention is, Rahul.

**RK:** Absolutely not. Let me just clarify

**PG:** I wonder where this world, where this country is going if we have this kind of [pointing towards Rahul] thinking also. That you are going to accept what Pakistan says and colleagues of yours are going to propagate Pakistan theory in India. I think it is a matter of shame.

**RK:** Minister, my job as a journalist is to ask a question and the fact is...

**PG:** Are you questioning our armed forces and what they have said

**RK:** Sir, I am...

**PG:** I have no answer. I have not been there. I was not the pilot who was firing at Pakistan. I was not the pilot who was taking revenge. But if you have any questions and you suspect that our armed forces have not done their job right... I actually feel that it is a very, very, sorry position for a senior journalist like you coming from a very reputed media house where I am sitting here today, even willing to consider that kind of a narrative.

**RK:** Minister, I am an army officer's son. I grew up in the midst of a lot of olive...

**PG:** I believe your father must have always said the truth..

**PK:** My father is one of India's foremost military experts. I need no (PG interrupts) lecture on nationalism or patriotism.

**PG:** ... so are all those people who attacked Pakistan, who went across the Line of Control, and protected India's unity and integrity.

**RK:** Minister, neither me nor anyone else sitting here need any lessons on nationalism from you or from anybody else. And this is not a simplistic binary. It is not as if we don't believe you we are anti-national.

**PG:** Not me. It is the Army and the Air Force. I haven't said anything.

**RK:** Sir, the Army and the Air Force haven't said anything. They haven't said that they took down 300-400 targets. We had Sambit Patra from the BJP first say 300, then he said 400. I am now beginning to wonder if there is need to demonstrate evidence. Nobody is questioning the Army. A question to a BJP Minister does not become a question to the Indian Army, Minister.<sup>5</sup>

That an atmosphere of threat and intimidation hangs over media outlets, in particular those operating with a small capital base, is evident. *TheWire.in* was rewarded with a criminal defamation suit and a Rs. 100 crore civil suit for its story on the "sudden jump" in the turnover of the companies run by Jay Shah. The story did not allege any wrongdoing on the part of Shah junior but only put together facts from the company's balance sheets, annual reports and other documents already in the public domain. The digital website also faced injunctions from further publication with respect to several other stories. While *The*

*Wire.in* creditably stood its ground despite being harassed, hounded and slapped with injunctions and law suits, it should have been obvious to anyone watching this unprecedented assault on a tiny digital outlet that this was meant as a warning to the media as a whole.

No government or any of its cohorts, at least since Indira Gandhi, has so brutally suppressed the media.

The digital website, *Scroll.in*, examined court records to note that in all 28 defamation suits had been filed in 2018 by just the Anil Ambani group of companies:

"Eight cases are against politicians from Opposition parties, while 20 cases are against media organisations and journalists. The defendants include international news outlets like *Financial Times* and *Bloomberg*, and a wide range of Indian publications like *The Economic Times*, *The Financial Express*, *The Week*, *The Tribune*, *The Wire*, and the news channel NDTV."<sup>6</sup>

There have also been instances of published stories being taken down post haste. Sevanti Ninan who edits the media watch website, *The Hoot*, wisecracked on this phenomenon in her article, "A brief recent history of media self-censorship". She said: "Since May 2014 when this government came to power, the 404 error page on media websites is showing up rather more frequently than before."<sup>7</sup> *The Huffington Post* ran a trenchant column, 'Creeping Quiet in Indian Journalism', by Rasmus Kleis Nielson, Director of Research at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Professor of Political Communication at the University of Oxford. The author wrote: "This is an environment where some journalists and news media are increasingly opting for anticipatory obedience and self-censorship to avoid trouble."<sup>8</sup>

So with the 2019 general election announced, an inescapable question arises about the state of the media: Is it any worse today than it was under the previous governments? Indira Gandhi brutally suppressed the press and other institutions during the Emergency<sup>9</sup> but paid for it with a stunning defeat in the next general election. Rajiv Gandhi, who was under relentless media attack on Shah Bano, Ayodhya, and Bofors was beaten back by a feisty and independent media on the infamous Defamation Bill of 1988<sup>10</sup>.

"The fact is that the Congress organisation is in utter disarray and must be put back into shape if the party is to enter its second century with the confidence that it will be there to celebrate its second centenary in 2085."<sup>11</sup>

"Those who expected something different, now that Rajivji is in charge, went away disappointed. Those who were looking for organisation, discipline, austerity, debate, the lost world of decades ago, went away alarmed. Only the cynics were laughing and told-you-soing."<sup>12</sup>

"Nothing else that Rajiv Gandhi has done in his 16 months in office has earned him so much opprobrium. The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill has



**Media leaders, Arun Shourie, H.K. Dua, N. Ram, Hiranmay Karlekar, Kushwant Singh, Ramnath Goenka, and Kuldip Nayar, protest against the Defamation Bill in New Delhi in 1988. Photo: The Hindu Archives.**

### **When hysteria blinded the watchdog**

In the course of writing this essay, I took a broad look at how the media fared under four preceding governments, starting with the one Rajiv Gandhi headed between December 1984 and November 1989. The four governments were chosen because, leaving aside Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, who were extraordinary Prime Ministers in extraordinary times, these four were the only ones to have completed a full term each. And I reached the conclusion that not only did the four governments rapidly lose their popular appeal, they were brought down, among other things, by a robust media that kept a hawk-like watch on their scams and scandals. To be sure, there were attempts to silence and arm twist the critical media, but without a shadow of doubt, the press played a stellar role in exposing the misdeeds of the government of the day.

Each of the four governments had a severe early to mid-life crisis but only one, the government of Manmohan Singh, weathered the storm and went on to get a second term. Ironically, much of the trouble the Singh-led UPA faced in its second term originated in the first, and came to be revealed by a progressive Act of Parliament that UPA-I had enacted: The Right to Information Act.

A legitimate question could arise at this point: Could it be that the previous governments were more corrupt and blundered more often compared to the relatively 'scam-free', 'incident-free' Modi Government, and were therefore more deserving of the media-bashing they received? The answer to this has to be that perceptions about the Modi Government might have been very different had it not

whipped up hysteria and intolerance against the media and created an impression of unofficial censorship. The chilling effect of this has been to prevent the media, the mainstream media in particular, with its dependence on government advertisement, from playing the watchdog role expected of it.

Under Narendra Modi, India's social fabric has been damaged to an extent where repair seems impossible. The Government has pursued a policy of aggressive majoritarianism that has seen participation at the highest ministerial level. In his *Truth versus Hype* weekly show, the *NDTV*'s Sreenivasan Jain showed that there had been a 400 per cent rise in hate crimes since the coming of Modi. Lynch mobs have acted with impunity while conscientious civil society members have been jailed on untenable charges.

*A dismal jobs scene, rural distress and a sinking economy have all escaped deeper scrutiny in the noise generated by a jingoist TV.*

The BJP has emerged as the richest party with little transparency about the source of its funding. Funding has in fact become more opaque with the introduction of the Electoral Bond. The Government has stonewalled questions on the Rafale deal, and papered over the internal disputes in the Central Bureau of Investigation that clearly pointed to corruption and complicity at the top levels of government. A dismal jobs scene, rural distress and a sinking economy have all escaped deeper scrutiny in the noise generated by a jingoist TV media's war cries and its loud approval for the government's actions in general. What is worse, it is TV with its enormous reach, that has set the national agenda.

### **Short-lived joy for Rajiv Gandhi**

When Rajiv Gandhi took office, he seemed the perfect antidote to his mother, the arrogant and widely regarded as corrupt and venal, Indira Gandhi. He brought immense hope with him. He was "Mr. Clean," and initially the press was rapturous over his elevation. Ramnath Goenka, the all-powerful owner of the *Indian Express* group who later became Gandhi's worst adversary, felt the country was finally in safe hands.

*Rajiv's joy was shortlived. The press had already begun to doubt his capabilities in 1986.*

But the joy was short-lived. Rajiv is often remembered for the tough-talking he did at the Congress party's January 1986 centenary celebrations in Bombay. In truth, the press had already begun to doubt his capabilities. Girilal Jain, editor of the then pro-Congress *The Times of India* wrote:

India today covered the centenary celebrations with these words:

The following months saw Rajiv facing intense criticism for his handling of the Shah Bano verdict, his attempts to play the Hindu and Muslim cards alternatively, and most of all for the perceived mistreatment of then Minister of State for Power Arif Mohammad Khan who had defended the Shah Bano judgment in Parliament. In its issue of March 31, 1986, *India Today* was severe on Rajiv. In an article titled, *The Gathering Storm*, it said:

already provoked the resignation of a Central minister, Arif Mohammed Khan, triggered unrest in the Congress (I) and set off an avalanche of criticism in the press.”<sup>13</sup>

*India Today* also carried an interview with Khan.

In the *The Times of India*, Arun Shourie wrote two articles where he accused Rajiv of going over the advice of his law ministry and home ministry to overturn the judgment. He said Rajiv had betrayed and humiliated Khan by first fielding him to defend the judgment and then making an about turn.

Harsh as the indictment was, it was a soft blow compared to the sledgehammer assault that was to come in 1987 in the form of revelations that there were kickbacks in the purchase of the Bofors gun. N. Ram, who along with Chitra Subramaniam in Geneva, investigated the allegations, writing a series of stories for *The Hindu*, called Bofors a game-changer in an interview published by the paper on April 13, 2012. He said:

“Bofors became a byword for top-level political corruption, even entering the vocabulary of some Indian languages as a synonym for sleaze and skulduggery. Bofors, I believe, was a game-changer, politically and for Indian journalism.”

Ram recounted how the story was meticulously pursued and coordinated:

“The Swedish Public Radio fired the opening shot in April 1987, alleging kickbacks and hinting at names before switching off; other newspapers, notably *The Indian Express*, were competing actively to get at the truth. Arun Shourie, a formidable journalist, and Ram Jethmalani, the ace criminal lawyer with his many interrogative questions hurled at Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, were in hot pursuit.”<sup>14</sup>

*The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* fearlessly investigated the Bofors story but the rest of the media too was unafraid of reporting it, often paying handsome compliments to *The Hindu* for its scoops.

In a comment piece titled, ‘Sensational revelations’, written for *India Today* on July 15, 1988, senior journalist T.N. Ninan said:

“For some years now, the Government of India has worried about the Islamic bomb. Now it is coming to terms with *The Hindu* bomb. The conservative Madras-based newspaper has, for the last several months, been coming out with one explosive report after another on the Bofors scandal. And just when the dust seemed to have settled, and the Government seemed to be getting away with its stand that there was nothing wrong with the howitzer deal of 1986, the newspaper came out last fortnight with another series of devastating exposes that blew the Government's case sky-high.”<sup>15</sup>

“Bofors exemplified the new role. It wasn't Parliament or even the Opposition that

Just how much journalism was benefited by the Bofors investigation was summed up by Salil Tripathi in an article he wrote on January 15, 1990 in *India Today*. In the article titled, 'Newspapers become aggressive moulderers of public opinion', he said:

kept the issue alive. It was the press - with a series of incisive exposes by the crack *Hindu* combine of Chitra Subramaniam and N. Ram and the *Indian Express*... The desk-bound editor pontificating on the state of the nation gave way to a new breed of editor – one who'd roll up his sleeves, get his hands dirty, and come up with a great story."<sup>16</sup>

Looking back it seems incredible that Bofors and other incisive journalistic works were published at a time when the government of the day enjoyed unprecedented brute power, commanding the biggest majority in India's electoral history.

*The media hit back with all the force at its command when Rajiv Gandhi attempted to enact an Anti-Defamation law.*

Not just this. The media hit back with all the force at its command when Rajiv Gandhi, in an evident reaction to the Bofors stories, attempted to enact an Anti-Defamation law that would keep the press embroiled in legal cases. Introduced in July 1988, the law was withdrawn within three months. As Prabhu Chawla noted in *India Today*:

"It is a dish that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is increasingly - if inadvertently - getting addicted to. But last fortnight's must have been the humblest pie he has had to taste in his 44 months in office. Barely few days after Rajiv announced, during a visit to Assam, that he was "totally convinced" his controversial Defamation Bill was the right recipe for the country. He meekly caved in and announced its withdrawal..."

"Rajiv had little choice. Faced with a show of unprecedented defiance from the media, and growing opposition from his own partymen, anything short of withdrawal was clearly going to damage the ruling party's sagging fortunes at a time when the next general elections are looming large on the political horizon..."<sup>17</sup>

### Narasimha Rao – vulnerable from day one

Against this background, it was no surprise that the press hammered away at P. V. Narasimha Rao who had neither Rajiv's disarming attractiveness nor the parliamentary majority that his predecessor commanded. The circumstances of his elevation, coinciding with Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, rendered him vulnerable almost from the day he took charge.

On April 22, 1992, *The Statesman* broke a sensational story where it claimed that then Union Minister for External Affairs, Madhav Sinh Solanki, had carried a letter to his Swiss counterpart, Rene Felber, suggesting that the Bofors investigation be dropped from the Swiss side. The story rocked Parliament,

and Rao's claim that he was not involved in the matter cut no ice with the Opposition and the press. *India Today* raised a series of doubts in a story titled, "Dubious denial."<sup>18</sup>

The media, especially *The Statesman*, also had the knives out for Rao on the 1992 Harshad Mehta-led securities scam. The scam itself was broken by Sucheta Dalal in *The Times of India* edition dated April 23, 1992. *The Statesman* zealously followed this up, covering in detail the proceedings of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the securities scam, and writing stories to the effect that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Rao government had colluded to deliberately allow the manipulation of the market as the bull-run gave the impression of a booming economy. A September 9, 1992, story headlined, "Dr. Singh implicated in scam cover-up" alleged that then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh had been fully aware of the magnitude and extent of the securities scam.



Journalists and others protesting outside the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) headquarters in New Delhi in 1992 against the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Photo: The Hindu Archives.

### An outpouring of condemnation

The December 6, 1992, demolition of the Babri Masjid saw the media explode in anger at the Hindutva groups; the press, without exception, took the view that the violent dispatch of the mosque had shamed India and shattered its claims to be a tolerant, multicultural country. Most newspapers had front page editorials attacking the BJP and the Sangh Parivar. But in all this Rao's avoidable inaction was not forgotten. In a front page editorial, *The Hindu* said:

"The Narasimha Rao administration will face the criticism that it did not adequately forestall Sunday's development. In retrospect, it was a mistake to have put any faith

in the sincerity of the Uttar Pradesh Government's assurances that it would uphold the rule of law. Thereby the Centre had jeopardised the safety of the Babri Masjid. The Government should not have taken this risk, given that the disputed mosque had come to be a symbol of the fate of India's commitment to secularism..."<sup>19</sup>

*India Today's* December 31, 1992, issue carried a savagely critical editorial that said the BJP had exposed itself

"as but one shade of a kaleidoscopic grouping of fanatics and lumpens who do not believe in the social fabric that has knitted this nation together. They thrive in an atmosphere of anarchy, polarization and hatred."<sup>20</sup>

*The media was also unforgiving of Rao, pointing out that he had ignored warnings from several quarters, his own attorney general and ministers.*

But it also lashed out at Rao, pointing out that he had ignored warnings from several quarters, his own attorney general who apprehended that the *kar sevaks* were likely to defy the orders of the court, and ministers who were negotiating the Ayodhya dispute and who had sought immediate intervention fearing mob violence: "Rao seemed to be fiddling while the heat was being turned on by the BJP all over the country."

The most devastating attack on Rao came from the now defunct *Sunday* magazine. It ran a cover story, headlined, Shame, which mocked Rao thus:

"On Black Sunday Narasimha Rao's position was in tatters ...One senior minister was appalled to be greeted in the Lok Sabha by a Congress MP, who asked, 'Where is the president of the RSS, Mr. Narasimha Rao?'

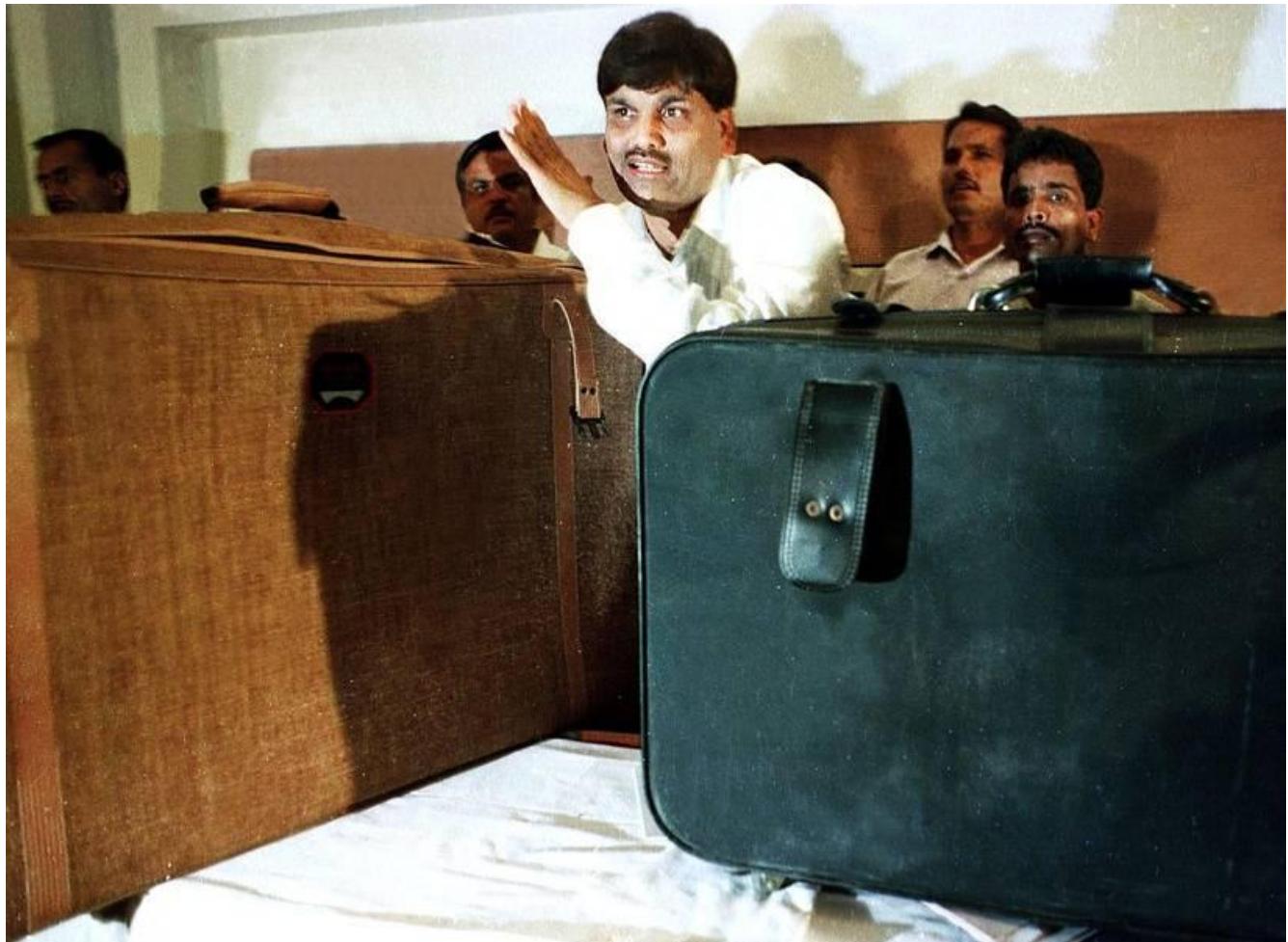
"Meanwhile, reports of widespread rioting came streaming in, and still the Prime Minister did nothing. Anger spread among Congress MPs. 'The old man in paralysed,' said one loudly in Central Hall. 'No,' said another, '*rigor mortis* has set in.'"

By 1993, the media's contempt for the Prime Minister had reached its zenith. In January 1993, *India Today* ran a report titled, "The Prime Minister: Simply Surviving", where it taunted Congresspersons for their cowardly backing of a Prime Minister whom they excoriated in private:

"So what else is new? Your backyard is burning. Your enemy is rattling sabres under your very nose. Your leader is shaken and under attack for indecisiveness and bad judgement. Your traditional vote banks are spewing venom on him.

You're excoriating him in private. So what do you do? You call a meeting of your party men and swear unswerving allegiance to him. After all, you belong to the grand traditions of the Congress Party."<sup>21</sup>

On June 16, 1993, Harshad Mehta addressed a widely attended and covered press conference where he alleged that he had paid Rao a bribe of Rs. One crore to get him off the securities scandal. Mehta was a known scamster and Rao was a serving Prime Minister – two reasons for the press not to touch the story. But back then it was open season on Rao. *India Today* ran a long article which examined the allegation and its possibilities, including the mechanics of carrying Rs. one crore into the Prime Minister's house. Mehta followed this up with a live demonstration of how he fitted currency notes making up Rs. one crore into a suitcase. The press meet and demonstration were held in a five star hotel filled to capacity.



**Harshad Mehta at a press conference in Bombay in 1992 where he displays the two bags allegedly containing a bribe of Rs 10 million which he claims he presented to then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao.**  
File photo: AP

*From today's perspective, it might seem implausible that any court could entertain a PIL against the Prime Minister, and at that too filed by a little known organisation.*

The JMM bribery case took its time to unravel but when it did starting February 1996, it was more than anything the media could have asked for. From today's perspective, it might seem implausible that any court could entertain a PIL against the Prime Minister, and at that too filed by a little known organisation called the Rashtriya Mukti Morcha. The CBI – now “the caged parrot” – went ahead and pursued the case against the Prime Minister and Buta Singh and charge-sheeted both taking only four months to complete

the investigation. On September 29, 2000, CBI special judge Ajit Bharihoke convicted Rao and Buta Singh with the following words: "Their act in my view is a crime of a grave nature because the accused Rao, with the help of Singh, tried to purchase the right to remain in power and rule the country..."<sup>22</sup>

Rao and Buta Singh were subsequently acquitted by the Delhi High Court but by then Rao, was too broken even to rejoice.

The media attacks on Rao were unrelenting. Some of the reporting against Rao was sensational and almost below-the-belt with little evidence to back the charges. For instance, on December 8, 1994, *The Times of India* front-paged a scoop on Rao's health. Headlined, "PM may be more unwell than he looks," the report alleged that Rao had been diagnosed with emphysema, a lung complication linked to increased chances of a heart attack, and said the Prime Minister had been advised to "undergo a heart bypass surgery in the next three months." The newspaper went on to suggest that Rao's medical condition had caused him to curtail his official engagements, and threw liberal hints about him being unfit to continue as Prime Minister. Ironically, the correspondent who filed the report died soon after while Rao went on to live for another 10 years.<sup>23</sup>

### **Intelligence failure: A "terrible price"**

Atal Bihari Vajpayee is considered a favourite of the media but he had his share of bad press. More importantly, there were no taboo issues at the time judging from *India Today's* cover story of June 14, 1999. "Terrible Price", the magazine cover screamed referring to the intelligence failure in detecting the Kargil intrusions. The edition came out even as the Kargil war was being fought, and the main cover story was titled, Kargil war: Shocking lapses, intel goof-up see India failing to anticipate Pak offensive. The text of the story said: "Clearly, all three principal agencies – Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), Intelligence Bureau (IB), and Military Intelligence (MI) – must accept their share of the blame."<sup>24</sup>

*Stories such as those on Kargil speak to the freedom available to the media at the time to take the line they wanted.*

The story shocked military analysts who said by convention intelligence failures were not discussed when a war was being fought. Of course, the tone of the magazine as well as the rest of the media changed and became more deferential, once India had managed to wrest the advantage from Pakistan. Yet stories such as the one cited above speak to the freedom available to the media at the time to take the line they wanted.

Contrast this with the gush and hype that accompanied the media coverage of the 2016 surgical strike on Pakistani territory with little critical follow up on the fact that the strike had achieved nothing. *NDTV's* Sreenivasan Jain did do a couple of stories pointing to the sharp spike in the deaths of army personnel in the wake of the strikes but by and large the original story – which TV breathlessly covered 24x7 – was not sufficiently scrutinised or followed up. The same hesitation has been visible in the media's coverage of the terrorist strike in Pulwama and its aftermath more because an array of TV channels has since been available to act as stout bodyguards to the government.

## A forewarning from 2002

The media's fearless coverage of the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim violence was a watershed moment. TV cameras forayed into nooks and crannies of Gujarat's towns, graphically capturing the brutalities in real time. *NDTV*, then part of *Star News*, broke the conventional bar on naming communities caught in communal wars, thereby establishing the anti-Muslim character of the violence. *Zee TV* and *Aaj Tak* (Hindi TV arm of *India Today*) didn't lag behind in reporting the excesses on Muslims. Reporters risked their lives to document the violence amidst verbal threats by the Gujarat Government and mob attacks on them. Narendra Modi himself attempted to ban *NDTV*.

Rajdeep Sardesai who led the coverage for *NDTV* recorded the intimidation in his own words in a 2003 article in *Seminar* magazine:

"Right through last year's incessant coverage of Gujarat, journalists were targeted. The television camera in particular became a soft target. Somehow, the fact that this was the first riot in the full glare of 24-hour news channels created a siege syndrome within the state establishment and its supporters. Not surprisingly, the media was accused of 'inflaming passions' and 'instigating mobs'

"On March 1, two days after the violence began, the state government sought to ban the Star News channel because the Modi government claimed that the channel was guilty of 'incitement'. Nor was the concerted attack on the media confined to one channel. Reporters of both Zee News and Aaj Tak were at various stages warned of dire consequences if they persisted with their coverage of the violence. Other print reporters and photographers were also issued similar warning...

."Perhaps the most graphic example of the mindset of the state machinery was provided on 8 April 2002 when the Ahmedabad police assaulted two dozen photographers and reporters at the historic Gandhi Ashram. Their 'crime': they were covering two peace meetings, including one attended by Narmada Bachao Andolan leader Medha Patkar...".<sup>25</sup>

In the same article Sardesai also mentioned a conversation he had with Modi soon after his victory in the 2002 Assembly election.

"We asked him about the feeling of insecurity and anxiety that still prevailed among Gujarat's minorities. Basking in the afterglow of the triumph, a stern chief minister remarked: 'What insecurity are you talking about? People like you should apologize to the five crore Gujaratis for asking such questions. Have you not learnt your lesson? If you continue like this, you will have to pay the price.'"

"A fettered and fearful media is the first step towards fascism... If the police in Narendra Modi's anarchist Gujarat set upon a peaceful assemblage of journalists and

Print media was equally brave, both in covering the violence and taking editorial positions in defence of the freedom of press. *The Times of India* responded to the April 8, 2002, police attack on media personnel assembled at the Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad (mentioned by Sardesai), with a strongly-worded editorial headlined, 'Modi's Muzzlemen'. It said:

sent many of them to hospital, that must be treated as part of the script penned by Mr. Modi considering the media's role in exposing the unspeakable excesses of his government... All we can say is: Hats off to the courage of the press, which for once named names instead of hiding behind the safety that anonymity so easily provides ... Today if the country looks resilient despite the savage attack on its fundamental character, surely we have the media to thank for it..."<sup>26</sup>

*The Times of India* ran stunning editorial page articles, among them one by a serving IAS officer, Harsh Mander, that shook the corridors of power. Mander's piece chillingly laid bare the brutalities inflicted on the Muslim community, in particular its women, and if there were red lines for reporting communal violence, he crossed them – the paper allowed him to cross them. Mander wrote a similar piece for *Outlook* magazine, which he called, 'Cry, The Beloved Country'. Lamenting that he would never be able sing 'Sare jahan se achha Hindustan hamara' with pride again, he wrote:

"What can you say about a woman eight months pregnant who begged to be spared? Her assailants instead slit open her stomach, pulled out her foetus and slaughtered it before her eyes. What can you say about a family of nineteen being killed by flooding their house with water and then electrocuting them with high-tension electricity?

What can you say? A small boy of six in Juhapara camp described how his mother and six brothers and sisters were battered to death before his eyes. He survived only because he fell unconscious, and was taken for dead."<sup>27</sup>

Another stand out piece in *The Times of India* was by Siddharth Varadarjan who titled it, 'I Salute You, Geetaben, From the Bottom of My Heart'. Dated April 19, 2002, the piece traced the heart-breaking story of Geetaben who had died defending her Muslim boyfriend. The mob came for him but finding that she had allowed him to flee, it stripped her naked and killed her. The article said Geetaben, in her death, had proven to be more courageous and more Hindu than Vajpayee:

"I salute you, Geetaben, from the bottom of my heart for your one brief moment of defiance, For even in death, with your helpless innocent body bloodied, and your clothes ripped apart, you showed more courage, humanity and dignity – and more fidelity to your Hindu religion –than Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has done in the past month..."<sup>28</sup>

*Vajpayee's volte face was unacceptable considering just days earlier he had asked Modi to follow the "Raj dharma" in running the State.*

More than Modi, Vajpayee was left scarred by the Gujarat violence. For the press, Modi was the acknowledged villain in contrast to Vajpayee who was perceived as reasonable and decent. But not after Gujarat 2002, especially not after the BJP's national executive meeting in Goa, where Vajpayee asked, "who lit the fire?" (a reference to the Godhra train carnage), and shockingly accused Muslims of creating trouble wherever they lived. The *volte face* was unacceptable considering just days earlier the Prime Minister had asked Modi to follow the "Raj dharma" in running the State.

In its issue dated April 15, 2002, *India Today* declared that the party was over for Vajpayee and the BJP.

"A string of electoral defeats, inner-party tensions, splits in the state units, tensions within the Sangh Parivar and a leadership crisis have contributed to an impression of imminent collapse. The leading party in India's ruling coalition is worried, demoralised and resentful. There is a feeling that unless the trend is reversed, the BJP could face another round of electoral reverses next year, setting the stage for the deluge in the Lok Sabha elections due in 2004."<sup>29</sup>

#### **"The Hero of Hatred"**

*India Today*'s April 29, 2002, issue came after the BJP's Goa national executive where Vajpayee had acquiesced in the celebration of Modi and it pulled no punches. The cover had Modi in RSS gear and the title was "Hero of Hatred". The inside pages had several related stories and a powerful column by Tavleen Singh. One story, by Shankar Aiyyar, titled, 'The Modi Effect: How Vajpayee ended up as the Hindutva choir boy', said:

"Departing from his prime ministerial grandeur he delivered a speech that could have been a replay from his heady Jan Sangh days. "We don't need lessons in secularism from anyone," he thundered. "India was secular even before the Muslims and Christians came."

"There are two faces of Islam," he continued, "one, pious and peaceful, and the other, fundamentalist and militant. Wherever there are Muslims, they are unwilling to live in peace."<sup>30</sup>

In her column, ominously titled, 'Prelude to Partition', Tavleen Singh, now a staunch supporter of Prime Minister Modi, accused Prime Minister Vajpayee of lacking in courage and turning into a "pathetic foot soldier" of the RSS.

Said she:

"Vajpayee has always been a moderate -- by BJP standards a bleeding-heart liberal -- and has been loved for this by Indians of all caste and creed. Muslims, who have feared the BJP and its mother ship the RSS, believed -- it turns out wrongly -- that as long as Vajpayee was prime minister he would not allow the sort of communal killings they live in dread of..."

"So, had Vajpayee the courage to resign and make it clear to his party that he was not with them when they insisted Modi was a hero and not a repellent villain, he would have returned from Goa as India's leader. Instead, he has come back as a pathetic foot soldier, a camp follower who marches even under banners he does not believe in.

"In his desperation to be accepted back into the Sangh Parivar fold he went to the extent of justifying the violence in Gujarat- "*Godhra mein aag kisney lagay?*" You tell us prime minister, that is your job, as it is your job to heal Gujarat's wounds and your job to set the country's agenda. Judging from the BJP National Executive's meeting, it is the party (read RSS) that has set the agenda and the prime minister who is being made to follow."<sup>31</sup>

### **Before *Acche Din*, there was 'Shining India'**

By early 2004, the media had forgotten the Gujarat chapter and was now immersed in praising the Vajpayee Government's reform initiatives. Media reports were incomplete without the catch phrase "feel good". *India Today*'s cover story of February 9, 2004, reported an "Atal Wave" in the general elections that the Vajpayee Government had called early in hope of scoring a hat-trick. Said this issue of *India Today*:

"what appeared to be a tiny wave in August 2003 seems to have crystallised into a tsunami. The country's most exhaustive election tracker, the INDIA TODAY- ORG MARG Mood of the Nation Poll, predicts 330-340 seats for the NDA, almost 30 seats more than the 304 it attained in 1999."<sup>32</sup>

As it turned out, the magazine had jumped the gun. The Gujarat 2002 effect had been more lasting than the pink papers, in their enthusiasm for Shining India, were willing to accept. Vajpayee's partners in the NDA left him one by one, all citing the Gujarat anti-Muslim violence. The NDA was reduced to a rump.

So much so, two months after predicting an 'Atal wave' *India Today* ran a pre-election opinion poll that predicted a close contest between the Congress alliance and the NDA: "... the Congress-led alliance has begun closing its yawning gap with the presumed winners, the over confident NDA."<sup>33</sup>

The Congress-led alliance in fact overshot the NDA. The Congress's own Lok Sabha seat tally was 145 to the BJP's 138.

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### **The "Manmohan meltdown"**

**T**he Manmohan Singh led-UPA Government started brilliantly with a raft of progressive, rights-based legislation, including a Right to Information Act that opened up classified files to public scrutiny and the world's biggest guaranteed job programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

*The UPA lost some early assembly elections and was called out for trying to manipulate the popular mandate in some States.*

Yet the political alliance was unstable thanks to the unnatural pact between the reformist Singh and the pro-welfare Left parties. The alliance lost some early assembly elections and was called out for trying to manipulate the popular mandate in States such as Goa and Jharkhand through the instrument of the governor. *India Today's* March 21, 2005, cover had Sonia Gandhi on it with the headline, 'Is the halo slipping?' The cover story spoke of setback in the assembly elections, topped by "Bad vibes with allies and blundering strategies and asked: "Is Sonia Gandhi losing the halo of sainthood she gained by renouncing the prime minister's post in May last year?"<sup>34</sup>

By end of 2007, Prime Minister Singh was in a host of trouble over the India-United States Civil nuclear deal – both within the party and with the Left allies. This had Singh commenting stoically that even if the nuclear deal was put on hold, he wouldn't see it as the end of the world. *India Today* lit into him, calling the development a 'Manmohan meltdown' in its issue of October 18, 2007:

"It was marketed as a deal authored by a statesman but the prime minister's brazen somersault has exposed him as a leader who did not stand by his conviction.... There he was, **Manmohan Singh** the tough-talking prime minister with a missionary zeal, ready to take on his antediluvian tormentors for the sake of his idea of India in the 21 century. Today, it is no longer a big deal, and the prime minister has taken a giant leap from unwavering idealism to humiliating pragmatism. Apparently, as the vicissitudes of an accidental political life go, a nuclear pact should not be allowed to leave you unemployed..."<sup>35</sup>

Strong words indeed for a serving Prime Minister.

On July 8, 2008, the Left parties quit their alliance with the UPA protesting the nuclear deal and the Samajwadi Party moved in as the UPA's new ally. The shortfall in the numbers meant that Singh would need to muster a majority and face a confidence vote in the Lok Sabha. Obviously this wasn't going to be easy and *India Today's* mocking headline for the upcoming numbers chase was 'It's deal time folks.' The story text said: "Indian politics, it would seem, has been delicensed and a free market to prop up UPA has been created.... Ideology is at a discount and support is at a premium."<sup>36</sup>

The Manmohan Singh Government also came under attack for provocatively sending the draft "safeguards agreements" to the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency disregarding the fact that it was now in a minority and had yet to win the confidence vote.

Calling it "A Highly Improper Step", *The Hindu's* editorial of July 11, 2008 said:

"The indecent haste with which the IAEA secretariat was instructed to circulate the draft agreement to the board of governors offers a fresh basis for the charge that the Manmohan Singh dispensation is concerned more with fulfilling its commitments to the Bush administration than in looking after the interests of the Indian people.

What is more, paranoiac non-transparency has been the hallmark of the government's handling of the nuclear deal since March 2005.”<sup>37</sup>

The Singh Government's first term looked perilously close to ending prematurely following the October 26, 2008 terrorist attacks on multiple sites in Mumbai. In a fire and brimstone piece, 'Betrayed and Savaged', *India Today* said:

"Our politicians never get the message. The fury of a nation betrayed by its political class knows no bounds. When India erupted in rage, predictably, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, instead of facing the people as a war-time ruler, took refuge in tokenism."

The magazine said the Manmohan Singh Government after much dithering had sacked the, Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, and the Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh. But this was hardly enough:

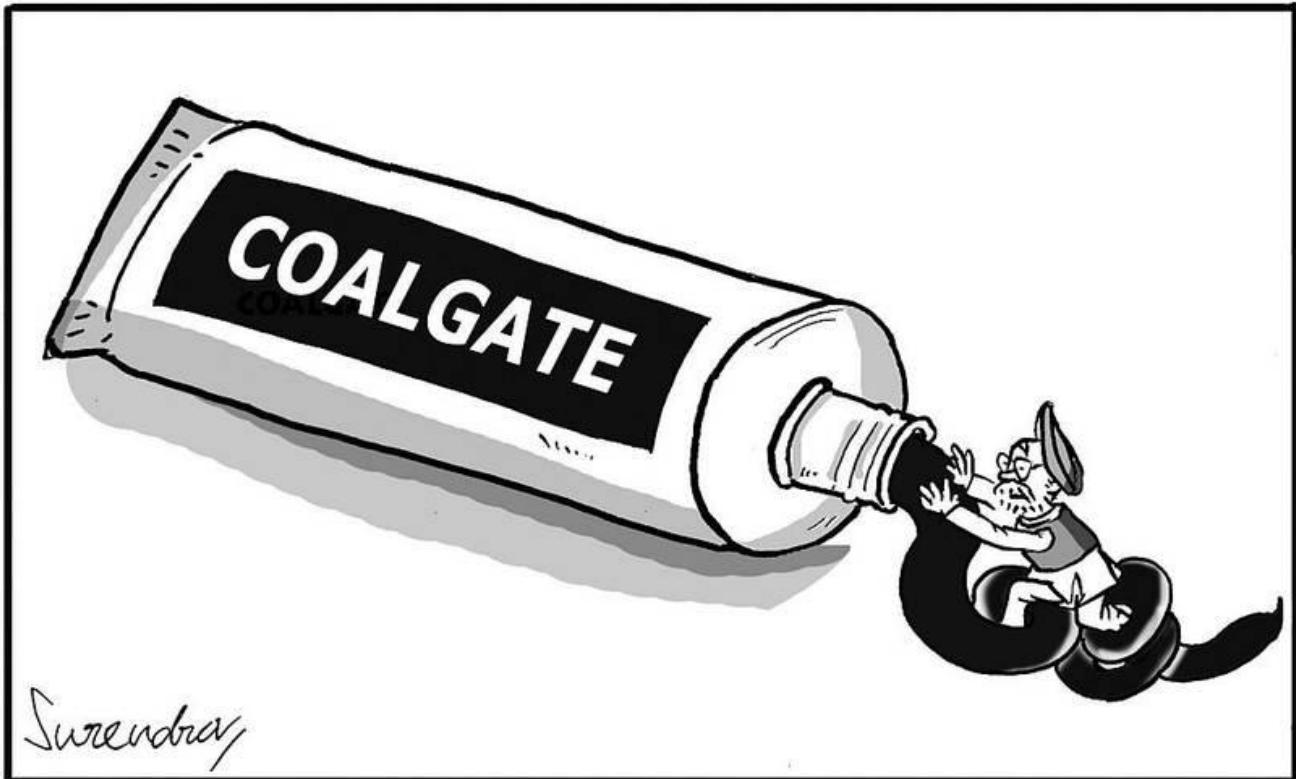
"There should have been more. Why were the powerful National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan and his intelligence cabal consisting of the IB chief, the R&AW boss and the home secretary spared? Maybe their duties were more 'political' than 'national'. Why were the top navy brass and the state's senior bureaucrats and police officers let go unpunished? Because this Government is only interested in finding dispensable scapegoats."<sup>38</sup>

### **UPA-II's misery and the arrival of Narendra Modi**

Despite the 2008 fiasco, the UPA returned with bigger numbers in the 2009 Lok Sabha election, surpassing the most optimistic predictions. But the happiness did not last for Singh and Sonia Gandhi. The media cut short the honeymoon period and went straight for the government's jugular. Within two months of returning to office, Singh was pilloried for entering into agreement with Pakistan at a summit meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh. The agreement was seen as going in Pakistan's favour without any reciprocal concessions for India at a time when the 2008 terrorist strikes were still fresh in people's mind.

**Free Speech and Media**

**Politics**



#### File cartoon of the coal scandal. The Hindu Archives.

After this, it was a deluge, as the government lurched from crisis to crisis, scam to scam. From Anna Hazare's 'people's movement' to the CAG report on the alleged 2G scam to a dozen other scandals, it was virtually media Raj, as newspapers and Television combined to train their guns on a government that had no ally in its fight. After 2G and CWG, it was the turn of Coalgate, a term coined by *The Times of India*, which scooped the draft CAG report on the scam and ran a series of stories against the government and its beleaguered Prime Minister. Each story was amplified by TV that hammered and hectored and remained in combat mode till the government's exit and Narendra Modi's arrival in 2014.

[Click here for the first part of this Essay: **Subrahmaniam, V. 2019. "Fatal, not Funny: Nationalist Outrage & Journalists against Journalists"**, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, March 05].

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