A NEW CHAPTER IN INDIA’S
TRYST WITH DESTINY
India beats the drums on War Paraphernalia

By Ankit Malhotra*

The talk on the Indian airwaves is of war with Pakistan. Again last week a suicide bomber killed 40 Indian soldiers in Kashmir. A militant group based in Pakistan Jaesh-Mohammed has claimed responsibility for the worst such attack in more than 70 years. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government in New Delhi has accused the Pakistani government of backing the group and many Indian news outlets have gone further calling for a crackdown on so-called anti-Nationals at home, who they describe as terrorist sympathizers. The social media side of this story also deserves scrutiny on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp.

The messaging there can be out of control and ugly. India is just months away from a general election, the stakes are already high for the ruling BJP and for its primary challenger, the Congress party, the bombing in Kashmir and the way it has been covered could well affect the outcome of the biggest electoral exercise on the planet. Every time an incident like this happens, and before the government or the army can respond, the media immediately jumps the gun demanding for war on Pakistan. There are two parts to it, one is the anger which is justified and the demand for just all of us trying to figure out what is the next step. But this narrative then evolves into a call for war against Pakistan.

There is no denying where the demand for justice comes from or the news value of the story on the 14th of February when an SUV packed with explosives rammed into a convoy carrying Indian soldiers and detonated. It was the deadliest peacetime attack on the armed forces since India won its Independence in 1947. The coverage on 24-hour news channels has been a wall to wall coverage, which is editorially defensible but descends into under realistic rant especially during Primetime news. There are anchors calling for more Studios populated with former Military Generals talking military tactics. This is because for the Indian news media this story ticks so many boxes. Kashmir, Pakistan, the Army and the attack came just as campaigning begins for a national election.

Just months away from elections, the attack has provoked a kind of a national outpouring of grief on mainstream media channels and the spewing of lots of venom against various targets, particularly against Pakistan but also against Kashmir. The people in the country assume who is responsible and make Muslims collectively responsible. The plethora of many English language and vernacular channels with the exception of a few sane voices what you have is a completely absurd and very dangerous competitor of jingoism that is perennially on display from all these anchors in India. They are demanding justice and accountability. The anchors actually play an impressive role in shaping public opinion. In the present moment their reaction is all the more dangerous. This makes Indian news channels unique is that there are so many of them, far more than any other country.

Media boom in India began in 1998 and news channels have since seen growth that is exponential. Indians can watch national news channels, regional or vernacular in various languages. More than 400 of them in all pumping out coverage 24/7, the competition for viewers has an intensity like nowhere else. Many anchors feel the need to shout louder more radically just to be heard or seen. The debate in India has grown more polarized and often over Prime Minister Modi’s brand of Hindu nationalism. Television output has grown more debased. When that kind of coverage is fed into the Indian social media messaging machine, the effect can be dangerous.

What is interesting is how social media and television have actually been complicit in setting the narrative for the current mood of the Hindu right-wing nationalist. More broadly the BJP as a political party, has very effectively campaigned using the Internet. In general and social media in particular, they have now achieved the ability to mobilize their forces to hammer it into a kind of their classic narrative of Hindus Versus Muslims. The Muslim as the figure of the outside and the Congress Party as a weak party of Liberals, a collegium of anti-national traitors. The narrative takes on a visual form and reinforces the notion that Congress is soft on Kashmir, terrorism and Muslims in general.

The probe BJP messaging online offers the flip side of the same basic narrative vote for Modi and his party outlining that they do not want terrorists on our doorstep. Among the most disturbing social media material now being spread is the calls for attacks on Kashmiris living outside of Kashmir and many of them studying in cities to the south of Kashmir. The single most disturbing aspect is the attacks on Kashmiri students, which have been fanned by this kind of hysteria. Ironically it is a government sponsored scheme which is meant to draw Kashmiri students into the so-called mainstream of India, but these are the students who are now being attacked.

There are 200 million users on WhatsApp alone, making the country with a apps largest domestic market. When WhatsApp changed its rules recently placing new limits on the forwarding of group messages, it did so after first field testing those changes in India as an implicit admission of the social and political problems of the app. It has exacerbated them with elections. BJP leading the way, now want to make the most of the social media resources at their disposal.

They are doing so without voters necessarily realizing they are being played. It is very difficult to track down who really is making these claims on the app or who really is running them but information about who these people are sharing are in some of these groups, are run by party sympathizers. Sometimes they are associated with leaders of different political parties. National parties the Congress and the BJP have both very actively made efforts to try and grow their base on social media.

This has become crucial in the of mainstream media which does not always do the job that it should be doing partly through fear, partly through pressure and partly through political allegiance. If we had fewer ‘fake news’ making it through mainstream media then the role that social media plays would be far less. It is not just that one exists as a parallel universe to the other. It is a symbiotic relationship.

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