

BROOKINGS

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India's Materialist Middle Class Needs to Wake Up

By: Navtej Dhillon

The terrorists in Mumbai didn't just hit the epicenter of India's economy and culture. They struck the collective psyche of the country's emerging middle class. As millions of newly prosperous Indians watched the carnage unfold, they were reminded that no matter how wealthy their country grows, they cannot escape the regional conflict with Pakistan and domestic sectarian divides.

India now confronts two critical, and existential, challenges: how to maintain stability in the face of persistent Pakistani instability; and how to openly address the grievances of its large and marginalized Muslim population without being soft on Islamic extremism.

For decades Indian officials had bemoaned their "hyphenation disorder" where the West saw India mostly in terms of its relation to Pakistan and the conflict over Kashmir. But recently India had imagined itself free from the Indo-Pak concept. It boasted sound economic growth, luxury spas, cutting-edge hotels, and thriving shopping centers, even as Pakistan slipped further into chaos.

The Mumbai attacks have been called India's 9/11. But the horror that visited the city was not unknown to most Indians. It was remarkable because it struck at a moment when the burgeoning middle class deepened its faith in the country's ascendance. However, with recent bomb blasts in Jaipur, Delhi, Bangalore, Ahmadabad and Mumbai, and glaring weaknesses in the country's intelligence and security abilities, confidence in the political system is at a low.

But the privileged class has had a hand in sustaining ineffectual leadership. In national and state elections, voter turnout in urban centers has been declining as middle-income voters distance themselves from the electoral process. As former Indian diplomat Pavan Varma argues in his book "The

Great Indian Middle Class," for decades economically advanced Indians have been preoccupied with material gain. Whether it was the subversion of democracy under Indira Gandhi, or acquiescence to communal riots and corruption, the middle class is accustomed to overlooking the fault lines in Indian society.

The Mumbai attacks point to the need for a new politics. This will mean accepting that India's future is tied to Pakistan -- neighborhoods matter and India cannot emerge as an economic powerhouse as instability spreads in the wider subcontinent.

This will require a shift away from anti-Pakistan sentiments and toward building popular support for resolving India's seething conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir. Given that Pakistan and India are both nuclear powers, this is truly an existential issue, and the middle class must demand more than just the status quo.

At the same time, the middle class must be a progressive beacon for addressing the country's Muslim problem -- not out of altruism but because their security and prosperity hinges on a more inclusive society. The majority of India's 150 million Muslims suffer relative deprivation when it comes to education and access to public employment. To date, most policies have focused on India's lower castes. But little consensus exists regarding how to address the cleft between Muslims and the rest of the country.

With national elections looming next year, the easy path is to return to the blinkered policies of the past. The old politics are already at play. The Hindu nationalist party, or BJP, is now blaming the ruling Congress Party for being "soft" on terrorism -- code for not clamping down on Indian Muslims and Pakistan. Indeed, it appears as if Congress is being goaded into a contest over who will be toughest on terrorism.

India's middle class must demand more. After the Mumbai attacks, it's clear that an economic ladder is not enough to escape regional and sectarian tensions engulfing South Asia. The time has come for the middle class to exercise its political and social responsibilities for a greater India.

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