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An Interview with Vamsee Juluri

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Juluri is interviewed by John Nelson, co-editor of *Asia-Pacific: Perspectives*. Recorded July 14, 2009 in Albany, California.

John Nelson (Nelson): You've written in *The Huffington Post* about the distortions of the Western media discourse on Indian-related incidents of terrorism. Could you explain a little about both the sources and the persistence of these journalistic tendencies?

Vamsee Juluri (Juluri): The really tragic thing about the attacks on 26th November in Bombay was the way they were framed in the U.S. Press. Obviously it was very big news, it was horrifying, it was shocking, it was a terrorist spectacle. The way it was being depicted here in the U.S. pained me almost as much as the actual violence that was unfolding in India. In time it seemed to me that there were a couple of things really wrong with the way the press here was framing terrorism in Mumbai.

In the article that you just mentioned in *The Huffington Post*, I focused on one particular issue which had to do with how the attacks were domesticated in the western media discourse, not in the same way that the article in this volume talks about domestication, but they were domesticated in the sense that they were framed as "terror in India," "terror in Mumbai." That really made me wonder why the discourse wasn't reporting the truth of what was happening, that this was an attack carried out by foreign nationals, by a militant group based in another country, with possible patronage from the government, the state arms of that country. That admission was so slow to come and it seemed so reluctant, I thought it was an injustice. It was poor journalism and a

disservice to truth and, in a sort of sentimental way--perhaps being an Indian myself--I felt it was a disservice to the victims of those attacks.

Nelson: So for you the nuance of that one word, the preposition "in," implies that somehow the terrorism or the violence was domestic rather than coming from outside India, as suggested by the phrase, "terrorism imposed on India"?

Juluri: I think it works on two levels. One is the reality that this was an attack by members of one nationality against members of various other nations, on the soil of one particular nation. I think the national dimension was important and that could be conveyed by the preposition "on," as in "attacks on India." But this also suggests a sort of discursive distancing of those who perpetrate this kind of violence. When you say there has been an "attack on something," maybe the language is also suggesting that this is bad, this is abnormal, this is outside the scope of acceptable humanity. So in that sense, I think both those implications of fact and motive were absent in the reporting, particularly in the first few hours and days after the attacks. Finally it was summed up very aptly by Christopher Hitchens who likened the reporting to an "ingenuous failure to state the obvious." The fact that the media completely avoided naming names at this very important time I think was a failure.

Nelson: Do you think that there could been have some reluctance on the part of the U.S. media to "connect the dots" back to Pakistan? After all, Pakistan was being heavily subsidized by the United States, which was providing military intelligence and weaponry and funding, and that somehow the U.S. would be held complicit in these attacks simply because of the support provided to Pakistan…

Juluri: It is interesting, but nobody really put it in quite that way, so bluntly!

Since the 1990s I think there has definitely been an effort within the United States to recognize certain realities about its relationships with India. The US perception of India till the 1990s was so clouded by the Cold War, and even before that by certain kinds of religious and cultural prejudices stemming from the times of colonialism.

So perhaps there is certain degree of unspoken embarrassment that the U.S.—which has no enmity with India and perhaps even friendship at personal and governmental levels—is actually the financier of a state which, at least some parts of it, seem to have involvement in very terrible and violent actions. So I think basically there is a Cold War framework that is waiting to change in the State department. But when these attacks happened, the press was still in 1955!

Nelson: One of the other things that you wrote about in *The Huffington Post* article is a reference to how the global media responds to terrorist incidents as a kind of a global spectacle, and how media outlets around the world frame these events through the concept of a spectacle. That's a very compelling idea and I'd like to hear your thoughts on that topic. Is terrorism a spectacle? Isn't that kind of media coverage playing into the hands of the terrorist and giving them what they want?

Juluri: At a very general level that is perhaps spiritual or

metaphorical I have been very fascinated of late with the idea of silence. I don't know whether it's a spinoff from something of Gandhi I've been reading, but it seems to me that truth is served as much through silence as it is through words or images. Maybe we can think about that idea in the context of your question about terrorism essentially being a spectacle. So much of terrorist activity appears to be about image, about effect, about publicity. And look at the way different groups take credit every time there is an act of theatrical violence, presumably to improve their social standing within their underground circles.

I keep thinking if only it would be possible for the media to deal with it in a completely radical fashion. Since we are in the Berkeley vicinity as we speak, maybe I'm thinking a little tangently here—but I feel that, in a way, what you said is right. This kind of publicity does feed into the process of creating terror. Certainly there is a lot of speculation in the aftermath of the attacks about the role the news channels played. There is even speculation that the terrorists were watching TV, or they pretty much knew a lot of what was going on because it was all being broadcast.

So in that sense, we need the media to try and find more imaginative ways of dealing with this question. Maybe one of the things that could happen is for the media to examine the elements of its own response. A lot of that was addressed in the article by Mack (see this volume). It was almost like there was a protocol for the news media about how to deal with all these issues. They broadcast the human-interest story, then the what is-the-government-going-to-do story, and so on. In the case of the Indian media, one strange thing that emerged--which was in a way good because it avoided the "communal blame games"--was the media did not frame the attack as a Muslim -Hindu issue. But it did blame the government for its failures. It was almost like a populist whim where you blame the government for its inability to protect the people.

Nelson: But in this case, it wasn't just the common person that was not protected: it was the wealthy and the elite who patronized the Taj and Oberoi Hotels in that part of city. Given the nature of how quickly information travels, and the hunger of a global audience for information, breaking news takes precedence. It just seems like the more sensationalistic or dramatic the incident, the greater a network's ratings will be. I hate to reduce it to just an issue of money and corporate interests, but since the media is a corporation I can imagine that the bottom line drives some of the way reporting is carried out. We sometimes hear about journalists being a fourth pillar of a democratic society, but I wonder if that is really possible anymore. Should I be suspicious about the way media covers these events? Are we really getting a reasonable representation of "the facts?"

Juluri: We may be getting the facts at a superficial level, but it doesn't take much for a journalist to state that I'm standing here in front of the Oberoi Hotel and you can hear the sound of gunfire around me. Maybe the journalist can even show courage and sneak in under the barricade. But ultimately, what is being served when you have this global audience feeding on the phenomenon of breaking news? Are they able

to understand what is happening in the world a little bit better because of the reporting? Or does it become just one more spectacle offering audience participation in some kind of a furious public phenomenon, without really understanding the tragedy of what is going on?

Nelson: I think that's the key: to be able to understand the tragedy what's going on.

Juluri: I think in the case of the Bombay attacks, one of the reasons I was particularly adamant about trying to write about it here in the United States is because this was probably the first news item on India that got three or four days live coverage, 24 hours a day, here in the U.S. I mean, Mother Teresa's funeral (in 1997), since we're talking about global spectacles, came almost as an afterthought a few weeks after Princess Diana's funeral. That was the last time there was sustained media attention to India.

And so I saw the reality of this tragedy, this massacre, taking place within the framework of the commercial media system, which plays up various angles such as, "can it possibly happen here?" But then, they subtly play another angle that, you know, look, of course its going to happen in India; they've got all these problems, they've got the plague, they've got Hindu-Muslim conflicts, they've got class conflict (emphasized by the film "Slumdog Millionaire" which happened to come out a few days before the attacks). So don't worry about the call center, the message seems to be, these guys are always doomed to their own miseries.

So I think at a subtle level one could hope that at the end of some spectacle like this the media contains it in a way.

What the media and journalism could do is to say, all right, this is a tragedy and a massacre and then maybe the next step could be to reel it in somehow, not in an opportunistic way (you know the way Cheney and Bush did after 9/11) but do it a way that some justice to reality, to humanity. And in the U.S. particularly I think that the way that ought to have been done is for the thinking about terrorism in South Asia to acknowledge certain realities.

Nelson: Could you elaborate on these "certain realities?"

Juluri: I think now we get to the "rice of the matter" and may also lead into your next question about nationalism. The way I see the attacks on Bombay is a human issue: violence being committed on innocent people. Let's not forget that, sure, the Taj and Oberoi, the Jewish center and the rabbi, corporate big wigs, Americans visitors, it was very tragic and unfortunate. But there were a lot of ordinary people who were killed. When I saw the image on TV of the people standing at the railway station in Bombay, it was so full of semiotic significance. I remember talking about this to students in my media and violence class and I think some of them have been to India and could understand what I was saying. And when you look at the swarm of bodies, the crowd, the Indian reality which everyone sees the moment you go to India, you see this humanity clearly.

The people in the railway station were working class and lower middle class people. They probably get up at four or five in the morning, commute towards town hanging on the train by a fingernail, held together by the crowd. They go to

work and then come back to see their kids for an hour or two in the evening. I don't mean to romanticize the humanity there, but these were the people who were massacred. The point I made in my class was that the bullets the terrorists used to kill them probably cost more than how much money these poor people make in a day and this is ironic.

So for me it is absolutely important to recognize in whatever way we can the humanity and tragedy what happened, and then maybe we will try to move to analysis. We are trying to talk about why it is happening in South Asia, why is it "on" and not "in," the U.S. Cold War biases, and all these things. Recognizing the humanity of the problem does require us to address the question of postcolonial nationalism. So for me I really did have to see this as an issue of an attack on India, but not necessarily as a Pakistan-India conflict. I don't really buy into the idea of essential conflicts between billions of people, or even states for that matter.

The story of Bombay is one more chapter in the story of India which goes back to colonialism. They don't go back to a Hindu-Muslim conflict lasting thousands of years, or even hundreds of years. At the same time I don't think it began with the BJP toppling the mosque in 1992. Colonialism created a fairly concrete frame for the ways things have developed in this region.

And how did the effects of colonialism play out in India and Pakistan?

I think the reality (which has not been fully recognized over here because it is often too politically contested) is that to a certain extent, the creation of Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims in the 1940s was elite driven. I think it was a demand made by a certain section of Muslim elites who had this separatist feeling which, presumably, a lot of other Muslims did not have, Muslims who were perhaps confident enough to be in a democratic, secular India. Given the fact that Pakistan began in that sense, as a modern nation it was entitled to its own sovereignty, its own story, its own dreams--all those things. I would not begrudge anyone or any nation that chance.

But soon after that it got caught up in the calculus of the Cold War.

This is now a well-documented fact that a lot of the cozying up between Washington and Islamabad, brought about at the height of the 1950s and 60s, took place for cultural reasons. At that time, the American view of India was not much of a view, Gandhi notwithstanding. India was a nation of Hindus, cow worshipers, vegetarians, and wishy-washy people used to being conquered in the American view. You know, supposedly "realistic" finger wagging.

Nelson: But at that time they were also allied with Soviet Union, or does that comes a little bit later?

Juluri: That comes later. Very frequently, we tend to think that India allied itself to the Soviet Union and Pakistan with the U.S., and it was all Cold War politics. But looking at the work of some historians of that period, like Andrew Rotter or Ramachandra Guha, it seems that there was already a greater cultural bond between the generals in U.S. and generals in Pakistan. You know there were always these stories about

friendships developed over cigars, golf courses, and F86 sabers. So all this stuff is going on and of course it reached a whole new level in the 1980s with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A movie which I saw recently was "Charlie Wilson's War" and it was incredible that (going only by the movie) a tyrant from one nation and a Texan-Christian socialite saw a convergence of interests.

So I think in that sense, I tend to take the view that if you look at all the bombing attacks and the violence going on around the world, or in South Asia, it goes back to colonialism, because in a way, terrorism began or at least is formed from the seeds that were sown by Vasco Da Gama over the years.

In a way terrorism is a successful business model. Maybe it sounds radical, but it worked for the East India Trade company, and it worked for a lot of people at that time. Around the time India got its freedom, there were attempts to change that business model. I think Gandhi was the most radical visionary who saw the whole world and modernity as a manifestation of the terrorist business model having gone too far, and of course, politics had moved far beyond him.

I don't think he could've imagined the India of today. There were people like Nehru who, although he did not share Gandhi's whole critique on modernity, were humanist and universalist in their own right. So at that time, even if there weren't attempts to think through something different in post-colonial India, it was already an ample task for two reasons: an international reason was the fact that Pakistan already formed an elite full of ideas that they were natural rulers, an idea not shared by the large majority of Muslims who stayed in India. So there was an international angle and a domestic angle to this post-colonial reality. The situation in India in the 1940s and 1950s essentially was that the Hindu-Muslim conflict was not the only axis of divisiveness in the country. It was an extremely culturally diverse nation, and still is. Ultimately what we need to remember is that India is far more complex, diverse, and democratic by virtue of its existence, as Sunil Khilnani would say. It is simplistic for us to assume that the Bombay attacks were the continuation of age-old rivalries between Hinduism and Muslims, or even India and Pakistan.

Nelson: Then this would lead to the criticism that you noted about the strategic expert, K. Subrahmanyam, saying that the American establishment, which I guess would include the media, does not "have the mental equipment to help India." So what could the establishment do to acquire or develop the so-called mental equipment that would be helpful to portray an India in all of its complexity, diversity, and democracy?

Juluri: I'll try to find the original line in K. Subrahmanyam's article. It's a great quote and to tell you the truth, I think he actually referred to Americans in general, but I took it to mean the American political establishment. As to what could be done to improve the mental equipment, this ultimately needs to be seen as a humanitarian issue. When we think about the Bombay attacks, or those in other parts of India, Pakistan or elsewhere in the world, one should try to think about these incidents on a universal human level as much as

possible. It is important to do that because until the 1970s, the American apparatus for political thinking was very biased. It was all Orientalism and Cold War thinking, and very ethnocentric in many ways. Then in the 60s and 70s, things changed a fair amount at a human level. Recognizing multiculturalism and cultural differences became common practices, but some of the old political habits still persist--which is why I'm saying we need a more universal kind of humanitarianism in understanding terrorism. It's a tendency now to think that it's all about cultural differences, or once again about Islam and Hinduism. We perhaps feel guilty about conflicts after 9/11, so we tend to assume that it's a cultural conflict between Muslims and Hindus in India as well.

There are all these dimensions, but at a very general level, if we can try to think (without making too many assumptions) about what other people's cultures are like and that everyone is human, as well as how these messes were created and how can we get past them, then maybe we will begin to realize there have been many specific gaps or shortfalls in the Americans political establishment's conceptual apparatus, particularly on South Asia.

I think the American view has changed a great deal since the 1990s, ironically, from the time India became a power and conducted its first nuclear test. What has changed is that the US realized it cannot look at its relationship with India through the lens of the Indo-Pak rivalry, so it has changed a little bit, perhaps in the State Department. But this change has not followed in the public consciousness and that's where my whole issue with the U.S. media on Bombay attacks really comes from.

I remember talking to a friend of mine, an American-born Indian who grew up in the U.S. When he was growing up, apart from the usual, occasionally funny comments, like "Do you worship cows?" and that kind of stuff, he told me that he always heard people asking, "Why do your people hate the Pakistanis?"

For a lot of people in the U.S. at that time, the Pakistanis were friends and good people, and there was awareness that Indians were the Pakistanis' enemies. So it was always weird when ordinary Americans suddenly find the Indians here as largely nice and occasionally loud folks. So maybe there is a need to start thinking about India a little more objectively and not just through the lens of Indo-Pakistani rivalry.

One of the points that I made in an article (Juluri 2008) was that I noticed all the articles in New York Times and Washington Post would inevitably say that the Indians and Pakistani are rivals who have gone to war four times. I know it sounds very juvenile, perhaps even childishly nationalistic, but I want to ask who started these wars? At the risk of sounding simplistic, I think the fact was that this kind of writing was part of a political and conceptual framework here in the States. When people write journalistic articles they have to literally find something to say, so these are the familiar clichés. Unfortunately these are real issues which have turned into clichés: the traditional rivals, the nuclear arms rivals, mutual animosity, the Hindu-Muslim enmity, Kashmir, all of these usual things.

I think the last part I want to say is to recognize that

India is a secular, democratic, multi-cultural, multi-religious, multilingual country. It is not a utopian vision as we seen in Gandhi, and neither is it the nasty barbaric place that Katherine Mayo and the Indiana Jones movie made it out to be.

One of the things that occurred to me is at what point does the idea of conflict in India get labeled as a Hindu-Muslim conflict? When you think about it, it was only in the last one or two hundred years that the category "Hindu" became widespread. In a way, Hinduism did exist and people were Hindus, but they just didn't see themselves that way, which also meant that they did not think of Muslims and Christians as separate religions. So in that sense, these lines of religious identity were blurred and flexible.

Coming back to a point I wanted to make about changing American thinking…in India, religious identity started to become important politically under British colonialism through what Sudipta Kaviraj would call "census, map and museum." Then of course you had the separate electorates and the "divide and rule" policy in India and Pakistan, among other things. I think that a practical solution to try and arrive at a more universal understanding of the Indo-Pakistan situation is to recognize that the general way American people think about the world in terms of religious identity is inaccurate. So for example in the case of India, we see Hindus and Muslims fight during partition, which is true and was a total tragedy, but if you look at the different regions in India, there were only two regions where the conflicts were the greatest.

Nelson: Of course there were other issues that came to the surface and exploded in that particular political context.

Juluri: There were all the princely kingdoms. Hyderabad and Kashmir had their own story and struggles at that time. So I think that the reality of India today is that Hindu-Muslim is not necessarily the sole dimension in which conflict plays out. If we look at the rise of Hindu nationalism in media in the 1980s, it was a very important development, no doubt about it. But then the eighties were also the time when as one group was trying to supposedly unite 80% of Hindus, a lot of other Hindus were uniting politically under caste-based political parties, or language or region-based political parties. Again the diversity is so extreme in India, one way to try and understand Indian politics would be to reduce the dependency on thinking in terms of religious identities alone.

Nelson: Excellent ideas. I don't think the U.S. is as diverse as India, but the way that we understand religion to inflame certain ethnic, racial, and even class rivalries has been a huge part of the history of this country. In part, the stability of this country has been getting religion out of the mix of politics and government as much as possible. So we should be able to recognize that same pattern in the affairs of another country, if only the media would help us out by providing more accurate analysis.

Juluri: My thinking on all these issues has been informed largely from teaching classes on media and violence over the last few years, and reading Gandhi. I want to make a couple points on what Gandhi taught because I think here in the San Francisco Bay Area, people respect him and a lot of us follow some of his ideas. What is important for us to remember is

that for Gandhi, violence wasn't simply turning the other cheek. We often tend to think that *ahimsa* simply means that if a terrorist attacks you, you do nothing. Or if someone goes to war against you, that you just smile, or if somebody hits you, you don't hit them back. Simon Harak says that defining non-violence as not hitting back when someone hits you is like defining marriage as not sleeping with anybody but your wife. There is a lot more to the philosophy of non-violence. I think the central idea is that there is a connection between non-violence and truth. For Gandhi non-violence was more than just a behavioral code. Non-violence was something that you had to find in your thoughts, words, and actions. In order to do that, you have to recognize the truth. Conversely, if you wanted to understand the truth, you also had to learn to reduce the violence in your thoughts, words, and actions. So in some way, I see this idea as a necessity for improving the media discourse on terrorism. What I felt following the Bombay attacks was that there was so much violence there, it's hard to get to the truth. But as we get closer to the truth, it is my belief that violence will diminish. We need to go from untruth and violence, which is what this world has been built on, to non-violence and truth.

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