

Preface

I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.

—John Lennon

WHENEVER THE SUBJECT OF ALIENATION COMES UP for discussion, it is common and fashionable to talk only of India's 140 million Muslims. The scale and intensity of alienation is much more—Dalits, Schedule Castes, Schedule Tribes, other backward classes, those living below the poverty line and, not to forget, people living in one-third of India's districts that are affected by insurgency in some form or the other. While it is not possible to put down an exact figure, on a conservative estimate, the alienated population in India would be a staggering 500 million. Alienated sections of society are like dry gun powder just waiting to explode. The nation ignores them at its peril.

This book is about conflict-prevention, hope and peace for the oppressed and the alienated, and the effective use of soft power to win back estranged communities into the social and political mainstream. Past strategies in managing alienated societies have been derived from two extreme ideological positions. The first position is of the view that those who take up arms are enemies of the state and should be thrown into jails or destroyed. The second position is that of ultra-liberals who believe that individual rights are more important than national security. This lot, usually denounced as the loony-fringe, is meant to be ignored. This book suggests an alternative strategy on how to reconcile these two extreme positions.

What follows is not a lengthy treatise on Operation Sadbhavna, a successful sociopolitical strategy in conflict-prevention in one

of India's most sensitive and remote regions—Ladakh. Sadbhavna is the inspiration to find an explanation on why we succeeded, and then to extrapolate an overarching concept for preventing conflict, by de-alienating large sections of society who strongly feel that the state has been unfair to them.

As soon as I assumed the command of 14 Corps in northern Kashmir in June 2000, there was an urgency to set out the strategic vision and operational objectives for the field forces. The military vision had to take into account the aspirations and perceptions of the people of the region. Above all, we wished to win popular support in order to synergize military efforts to defend the borders against infiltration and prevent a repeat of Kargil, 1999.

Ladakh is strategically located between Pakistan in the west and China in the east. Life for its 300,000 Muslim and Buddhist people is tough, to say the least. Most of their waking moments are spent in fighting the cold and the claustrophobia of isolation. While nature is awesome and breathtaking, oxygen in Leh is 20 per cent less than Delhi, and temperatures during winter vary between minus 20 and minus 50 degrees Celsius. Dras is the second coldest inhabited place in the world after Siberia, and becomes even more unliveable because of the wind-chill factor. To make matters worse, the mountain desert of Ladakh, about the size of Kerala, is cut off from the rest of the country for seven months every year due to snow-blocked roads and passes. The entire population, along with about 65,000 troops and airmen, is air maintained. All necessary food supplies such as eggs, tomatoes and bread are flown in. Just like the Eagles' famous song, Hotel California—'...you can never leave!'

At the start of the new millennium, the situation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir was grim. Insurgency had spread to every region and was knocking hard at the gates of Ladakh. The red lights were on; it was only a matter of 'when', and not 'if' that this strategic sliver of India would be aflame. The signs of incipient insurgency were staring us in the face. The numbers of public meetings were rising by the week, and demands from every speaker included either secession from the Indian Union or complete autonomy. On my very first visit to the border town of Dras, almost no one waved

back at me. Those who obliged did so reluctantly. My enthusiastic greetings were received by sullen looks and dejected expressions. I remember telling the divisional commander that the body language of the people was disconcerting. Clearly, the people were not on our side. Children had fear writ large in their eyes as they scurried hurriedly on seeing our approaching vehicles. Women turned their heads away and the elders stared back with vacant faces. A feeling of alienation and hopelessness pervaded that cold summer day.

Only a year back, in June 1999, the Dras sector had been the scene of fierce fighting. Indian troops counter-attacked Pakistani forces that had intruded across the Line of Control on a wide frontage of 120 kilometres. Given the degree of defence preparations, entries found in captured diaries, the sighting of heavy calibre guns that could only have been heli-lifted, and the availability of logistics dumps supported by a clutch of helipads well within the Indian territory, the Pakistanis had probably intruded sometime in February or March. Their presence on the mountains within small arms range of the villages astride the strategic national highway could not have gone unnoticed by the locals of the area. Still, no one informed the army of any suspicious movements atop the snowy heights. Such was the appalling scale of alienation we had to contend with. The Indian army had disregarded a vital lesson in national security: Military power is not a sum total of guns, tanks, aircraft, frigates and nuclear bombs. Rather, the armed forces derive their strength from the people. Clearly, the people were not on our side. So far.

Prior to my arrival, a large arms cache had been uncovered in the area of Turtuk. The day before I was to visit the village, two crude bombs were set off and intelligence officers recommended that the visit be called off. Ignoring their advice, I took a helicopter into Turtuk, overlooked by Pakistani military picquets. Local commanders were denied permission to cordon the villages and search houses, a most natural response to such incidents. Such reactions have been largely responsible for alienating the Kashmiris in the ongoing proxy war in the state. I assured the locals of our complete faith in their loyalty to the country, adding that there would

always be the odd black sheep in every community. In the same breath, local army units were directed to take on the responsibility to develop the area and take care of the families of the 24 persons from Turtuk, jailed for their alleged complicity in the discovery of a large arms cache near the village during the Kargil war. Local Buddhist leaders, as well as most army officers, were aghast at these decisions. They perceived this as an encouragement to insurgents and appeasing anti-national elements. However, it did not take more than six months for everyone to realize the wisdom and logic of this decision.

We went to great lengths to explain at all military forums the fundamental difference between criminals, psychopaths and terrorists. Criminals kill for personal gain, and therefore must be dealt firmly by the laws of the land. Criminals are social beings, psychopaths are sick, whereas terrorists are political animals.

Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by violent acts of amorality and lack of empathy. Psychopaths are devoid of grief, remorse, hate and love. Guiltlessness and lovelessness are their typical traits. Psychopaths come in all varieties. One woman allowed her boyfriend to sexually abuse her five-year-old daughter because she was tired of sex. Another woman (on Oprah Winfrey's show on 26 September 1988) confessed she murdered her three children and slashed herself to provide evidence for a story of an attack by a stranger. Asked about her feelings, she replied, 'I couldn't tie my damned shoes for two months...I think my kids were lucky.'

The psychopath kills for pleasure as Carlos the Jackal had done. He killed because he enjoyed the very act of killing; for him, the more helpless the victim was, the greater was the kick. Recall Susan Atkins' participation in the chilling Manson family killings. She describes the sweetness of tasting human blood after murdering Sharon Tate. 'Wow, what a trip!' she exclaimed to her cellmate Virginia. 'I thought to taste death is to give life. Have you ever tasted blood...it's warm and sticky and nice.' Even the Chechen insurgent leader Dudayev exhibited psychopathic traits. When asked whether he regretted that 30,000 people had died in the three-year war, he replied, 'None at all. Never felt better in all my life.'

Unlike psychopaths, the psychodynamics of the traditional insurgent are quite different. He is a political animal; he kills for a political cause or an ideology. He is not a fanatic; he is as rational and reasonable as the daily postman or the neighbour next door. When a political process fails to deliver, people are often left with no choice but to either pick up the gun or blow themselves up. Marginalization soon turns into defiance, with the oppressed saying, 'Enough is enough!' When governments become insensitive to their people's aspirations, the masses raise the flag of revolt. There are 100 flags for every one flag and the belief soon takes hold that it is better to die on one's feet than to live dishonourably on one's knees. Albert Camus in his book *The Rebel* dwells on the psychology of dissent in all its forms. If life has no meaning, death (for a cause) certainly does. Having thrown away his chains, the rebel is prepared to seek a new identity and even defy the gods, should that become necessary. The men, who were voiceless till yesterday, now stand up and cry out, 'We rebel, therefore, we exist.'

What is the insurgent saying? His acts of terror are desperate cries for attention and identity, 'I kill, therefore, I am...Listen to me for I have a problem...You ignore me at your peril...Look what I can do...There is yet more to come.'

Killings by terrorists and insurgents are not criminal acts; they are political. No emotions are involved. During his trial in Guantanamo Bay, the Al Qaeda leader Khalid Sheikh Mohammad justified the killings of September 11, 'I am not happy that 3,000 had been killed in America. I feel sorry even. I don't like to kill children...But the language of war is victims.'

The psychological and political bottom lines for insurgents are patently clear. As insurgents are not criminals, enforcing the laws of the land does not help in the long run. Their dreams are political, and political dissent can never be resolved by legal or military means. Killing terrorists as an objective is counter-productive; it only intensifies the struggle and reinforces their will to die. The only effective way to manage an insurgency is to try resolving the root causes, and accept, even if grudgingly, that the problem is political and one of law and order. Alongside, genuine attempts ought to be made to motivate the insurgents to drop the gun and then help them

to rehabilitate and rejoin the mainstream. Incarcerating terrorists and insurgents indefinitely in prisons only hardens alienation and keeps their ideology alive.

Back in Turtuk, with the passage of time, sceptics and dissidents were gradually won over. Army-hired buses brought the wives and children of those in jail for periodic meetings. We also used our influence with the state's Chief Minister to hasten the release of all those jailed. On being set free, every person was given a helping hand, including grants to rehabilitate him. Our efforts paid off. We were vindicated. The patriotism of those freed from prison still remains absolute and the detainees are living happily as free and honest citizens.

Visions arise either from an inner calling, and come rather effortlessly to leaders who are reasonably self-aware, or come to those who seek a higher purpose in life. Subordinates cannot help very much at this stage. A vision is the leader's mental picture of what tomorrow should be, and what may happen if tomorrow does not come. The arrival of the Information Revolution has sent all the clocks into a tizzy. Life, jobs, habitat and relationships are all a one-day cricket match. One has to start drawing road-maps from the very first over. When the leader gets the vision wrong, the penalties are often severe. On the other hand, where there is no vision, as the Biblical Proverbs say, the people shall perish.

Right in the beginning of Sadbhavna, some of the early lessons in conflict-prevention began to emerge. Propaganda and manipulation of the media in an open society is counterproductive. Nation states have started losing their monopoly over information and are no longer in a position to mislead their citizens. Besides, brain-washing and thought reform are ideas that belonged to the days of the Cold War; they too had lost their relevance in course of time.

The writings on the wall were clear but the officials failed to read them. The army and the government-controlled radio and television continued to propagandize zealously, spending millions of rupees without positive results, failing to understand that propaganda fundamentally operates in the black and grey zones. Trust begets trust, and since we are in the business of winning the hearts of an angry and sullen populace, this was the last thing we ought to have

been doing. This explains why billions of rupees spent in the last 641 years conducting psychological warfare have come to naught in winning the trust of the people in India's conflict zones.

Modern research in human behaviour reaffirms that it is very difficult to change the moral, religious and political beliefs a society has grown up with. Only fence-sitters can be influenced. There had to be a different way of genuinely winning the trust and confidence of an alienated society. In our search to find a way out, we became conscious that the hard power of guns and money was not the final answer. Rather, the key lay in empowering citizens politically and providing them human security through human development. The broad contours of operation Sadbhavna as a sociopolitical ideology had started to take shape.

The concept of Sadbhavna was not the outcome of conscious thinking or scientific inquiry and analysis. Rather, it was an intuitive and spontaneous response to a rapidly disintegrating situation, a response founded on studies of past conflicts, a firm belief in the goodness of human nature and an ability to always keep the big picture in mind. Societies that lack a strategic culture are often carried away by their obsession to score tactical victories. History teaches us otherwise. One can win all the tactical battles in life and in relationships and yet lose the war. Vietnam and today's Afghanistan and Iraq are striking examples.

Sadbhavna had been in existence for a few years as a form of civic action. In northern Kashmir, we went well beyond this traditional hierarchical approach. Civic action aims at humanitarian assistance and fraternization with the people to present a human face of the military—a public relations exercise, implemented in a typically condescending attitude handed down to us by the British and as seen in the American experience in Vietnam and Central America. Governments and militaries employ civic action as a tool to increase the legitimacy of the military. In times when civil institutions are weak, these programmes are also intended to send the message that 'to get things done', the common person should turn to the military. Our model of Sadbhavna was very different, it was a sociopolitical ideology at the strategic level for conflict prevention.

If civic action was village-level cricket, we were playing the World Cup. *Sadbhavna* was a strategy for long-lasting peace.

The people of Ladakh, as elsewhere in Jammu and Kashmir, were governed from the state capital Srinagar in a patronizing manner. Failures in rural development had made matters worse. Development was feudalistic and dispensed as part of political patronage and largesse. Seventy per cent of state budgets in India are still spent in paying salaries to a bloated bureaucracy; another 15 per cent goes in kickbacks, leaving just about a paltry 15 per cent for development. Given the worsening ground conditions and the race against time, there was no option left except for the army to reinforce rural governance and assist in human development in militancy-prone areas. A beginning could be made along the border belt, as the best antidote to infiltration is border development. Consequently, human development and intense dialogue with the locals formed an intrinsic part of the army's policy of border management and de-alienation. The two were indivisible.

Feudalistic attitudes, an administrative legacy of India's colonial past, gross corruption and the inability to empower the common masses have been largely responsible for the lack of adequate success of developmental programmes in most Indian states. The key lies in having a bottom-up and need-based philosophy to restore human dignity, make people stakeholders in their destiny, uphold human values and enforce accountability in public life. At least the basics of this approach had to be cranked into the emerging concept of *Sadbhavna*. *Sadbhavna* did achieve this power shift to a fair extent and raised the level of people's hopes and happiness.

With the sudden rise in empowerment of the Ladakhis and the breathtaking success of *Sadbhavna* in a very short span of time, there was a growing concern that the campaign would lose its momentum and fold up like a pack of cards soon after its prime mover left the scene. This was the million-dollar question on everyone's lips, from common villagers to government ministers. Despite the optimist argument that reforms provide solid moral foundations and that people's support was unlikely to fail, such concerns could not be dismissed outright. Indeed, these apprehensions only doubled our efforts to ensure the sustainability of the

campaign. Seven years after my departure, insurgency had been completely foiled in the region of Ladakh. Not a single rifle shot has been fired by either side! Not a single case of armed infiltration across the border has been reported.

Given the magnitude and scale of the proposed model of Sadbhavna, as also to ensure its sustenance, it was clear that the campaign would have to be institutionalized and structured. We raised an experimental unit under a handpicked team to plan and oversee the running of various social programmes and for attaining information-dominance. Scaled-down cells were set up, down to field-unit levels to implement programmes and maintain wide-front contact with hundreds of villages scattered in remote and inaccessible areas along the Line of Control. Unquestionably, information-dominance was an essential condition for bringing about a substantial change in hearts of the populace and even amongst the soldiers. Real-time attitudinal surveys for gauging perceptions, calibrating education and awareness programmes and making mid-course corrections as the campaign rolled on became a regular feature. The unit was also required to prepare re-education packages for changing military mindsets from war-fighting to war-prevention and nation-building, interacting with the media, establishing community relations, dealing with misinformation and double talk, policy formulation, budgeting and providing real-time feedback.

A specialized unit of this kind requires a lot of techno-hardware for the production of information material, video and audio aids for editing, education and awareness. Internet facilities are also essential for emailing and creating web pages. Regrettably, despite sustained efforts, the response of the higher headquarters was less than enthusiastic. This was only to be expected, and so without awaiting official sanction, we went ahead full steam and raised an ad hoc but efficient unit under a competent Colonel. For rapid response and real-time management of the Sadbhavna projects, the unit operated directly under the Corps Commander. Even our critics accepted that the success of Sadbhavna owed a lot to this unit and its dedicated staff.

To arouse the social sensitivity of the military as well as the locals and to ensure the sustainability of Sadbhavna, a structured institutional approach was necessary. In order to develop grass-root social entrepreneurs and generate social initiatives for change in Ladakh, the Centre of Social Management was set up. Its vision was aimed at raising the levels of empowerment, social consciousness and commitment of citizens, with the purpose of improving the quality of human life and facilitating change in Ladakh. The three-week-long course aimed at developing social entrepreneurs with requisite leadership and management skills, who would improve the well-being and human capacity of the people and win their trust. The vision was based on the premise that a social entrepreneur is a facilitator and a catalyst for social change.

An allied challenge that had to be tackled was selecting thrust areas in human development in the border region. Initial thoughts were somewhat hazy. But with better understanding and deeper study of development economics, as put forward by the likes of Amartya Sen and the late Mehabub-ul Haq, the way ahead could be envisioned.

Most literature on development economics focuses on raising human development indices and per capita consumption levels. Minimal emphasis is laid on happiness as an objective of development, or the criticality of empowering the poor and giving human development a human face. These key features were incorporated into all Sadbhavna programmes. Five thrust areas in human development were selected: primary education, health care up to tertiary levels, women's empowerment, information technology and community development.

While engaged in sociopolitical change there will often be suggestions to seek expert help from government and non-governmental organizations. Our experience was different. We knocked at all the doors; some opened but most remained closed. In the process we were reminded of one age-old message: the *Ekla Cholo Re* (walk alone) song composed by Rabindranath Tagore is still universally valid. At the end of the day, everyone has to walk it alone. In leading social change, any help from government agencies should be treated as a bonus. We also learnt that with sheer common

sense, backed by commitment and the wealth of information available on the Internet, it does not take long for amateurs to deliver like professionals. In the process, mistakes were inevitable; even 16 months later, there were no perfect solutions. Herein lies another lesson. An imperfect solution in time is better than a perfect solution that comes too late. Too much analysis usually leads to paralysis. When time is running out and the danger lights are on, change-leaders move first and make corrections later. In the manner that great leaders have failings, so do campaigns that direct change. Criticism from all quarters will be levelled, some of which are issue-based but most of it are born of envy. Virtue lies not in the absence of faults, but in the speed, sincerity and grace with which they are recognized and corrected.

As the campaign on conflict got underway, the Buddhists alleged that the army was appeasing the Muslims and precious little was being done for the development of their area in eastern Ladakh. Some even went to the extent of saying that we were pampering anti-national elements. This was not true, of course. The army was not responsible for the economic development of Ladakh; there was a district commissioner and the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council for that purpose.

Moreover, it was unfair to accuse Muslims along the border as being 'anti-national'; they have remained loyal to the core. Undeniably, they had been ignored in the past and it was upon us to atone and redress the earlier wrongs. *Sadbhavna*'s focus was on human development in militancy-prone areas only; it was not a general-purpose programme for the entire region of Ladakh. We also had to contend with snide remarks made by some irresponsible civilian officials asserting that the army was meddling in governance. We realized that winning the war was more important than getting distracted by criticism. We were winning the war and that is what mattered.

For the first four months or thereabouts, there prevailed a general air of confusion and scepticism amongst the people, and even within the army. What the people saw, they found difficult to believe. The common man wanted assurance that there was no hidden agenda. There was a wait and watch attitude. On our part,

we steered well away from politics and stuck only to matters of the heart. Even the slightest suspicion or provocation could derail *Sadbhavna*. Army doctors were therefore given strict instructions to not even breathe the words 'family planning', as it was a taboo with the local Muslim culture and would have made them suspicious.

In those early days, the Shia community was divided into two camps, one belonging to the Khomeini Trust and the other known as the *Islamiya* Trust. Differences had sharpened over control of the main mosque in Kargil. We maintained a strict neutral stance and ensured balance while seeking the cooperation of both. We offered education to the *Islamiya* Trust and health care to the Khomeini Trust. Moreover, we were aware of the tight control exercised by the clerics and village headmen. To convert the elders into allies and partners in human development, we made it a point to seek their advice at every stage.

Every step was thought out and the military had to be taken into confidence as the campaign gathered momentum. Throughout we were conscious that if peace had to be given a chance, then peace had to start at home—just like charity. The army had to move away from a culture of war to a culture of peace. As a senior military commander, I realized that a key task would be to restrain the use of military force and to hold a steady focus on war-prevention as opposed to war-fighting. Consequently, human security in Ladakh was placed on top of the military agenda. This was by no means an easy task as it involved a complete U-turn in the military psyche—how to act as citizens first, and then be soldiers.

This book is a milestone-by-milestone account of how the idea of *Sadbhavna* developed, the challenges we overcame and the lessons we drew in how to win over alienated communities. The beginnings were intuitive, and by and by as the vision unfolded itself, the concept matured and refined on its own. While the idea was right, as subsequent events were to prove, the plan was imperfect to start with. With time and experience we fine-tuned it as we went along. The intellectual rationale and the moral foundations followed much later.

More often than not, this is how the human mind operates. There are ideas that lie embedded in our subconscious, waiting for the

right opportunity and exposure to surface. Carl Jung describes this phenomenon brilliantly and with a lot of conviction too. According to him, the self of an individual is different from the conscious personality—a personality we live with every moment of our lives. The true self resides in the unconscious and often reveals itself through dreams analysis or when suffering is experienced. Carl Jung describes the process of the unconscious surfacing itself as individuation. In a cognitive and spiritual sense, the notion of Sadbhavna was its manifestation in a social context—a remarkable shift in re-rolling the military for peace, for preventing conflict.

This book is not about Sadbhavna although it is inspired by it. Rather, it is an intellectual extrapolation of a successful socio-political experiment to effectively deal with an incipient insurgency. By itself, Sadbhavna was constrained by the military's inexperience in how to manage a social experiment. Added to this was the severe limitation on the availability of time. Unlike Dr V. Kurien, who spent the better part of 40 years to lead India's milk revolution, time was running out on us. I barely had 18 months to bring peace within a region simmering with discontent and political violence that threatened to destabilize the security of the country. For medical reasons, tenures for senior military officers in high altitude areas seldom cross the 20-month mark.

The 'time' factor was a serious challenge we had to contend with. Several of our critics and sceptics threw the time-dampener at us. There was some logic in their misgivings, but in a moment of escalating crisis we could not waste time debating over the pros and cons of less time versus more time. We had to act quickly.

As events turned out later, we were able to overcome the time barrier and sustain the movement by the moral foundations of our vision, the empowerment of the citizen and the clever use of the Internet.

Sadbhavna is not designed to be a miracle cure for social and political alienation as it cannot be replicated. Every conflict situation demands a local response within a broad philosophical framework of dialogue, of patient listening and the ability to step back from the brink. While writing this book, it was important to lean back and avoid getting too close to the events. So I deliberately chose to

put away the original draft of the manuscript of this book for more than seven years. This has given me a clearer perspective and the conviction that conflict-prevention will be determined to a great extent by local conditions and diversities of situations. But there are certain broad strategies that may help.

Market forces in a global economy are sharpening socioeconomic and human inequalities. Urban violence, xenophobia, hate, religious fundamentalism, rising crime and widespread militancy in India and its neighbouring countries are symptoms of these inequalities. One-third of India is affected by Naxalite violence, then there is insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir and the North East, and to make matters worse, there is the whole debate on reservations for the disadvantaged. In a country where 65 per cent of the population is below the age of 35 and nearly 260 million people live below the poverty line, the Sadbhavna experience has great relevance.

We must remember that India's vision of becoming the world's fourth-largest economy by 2020 cannot become a reality till there are endurable answers to mass alienation that has occurred due to lack of opportunities or sheer inequalities. These conditions are the prime sources of conflict.