

Heroes and Martyrs
Symbolism of the Kargil War
Funerals
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In the same way that “a history of political ideas [does not exist] independently of their performance,”¹ a history of war cannot be conceived in isolation from its setting. War, a murderous phenomenon *par excellence*, is indeed a very rich human activity in terms of the shows it puts up: march pasts, gallantry medals, the staging of military gestures on what is aptly called the *theatre* of operations, etc. This paper focuses on one aspect of this ‘show’: the funeral ceremonies organised by the civil and military authorities at New Delhi during the Kargil war² between India and Pakistan from April to July, 1999. It will not deal with the causes of this war, nor with the share of responsibility for the war between the two belligerent foes, but

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¹ G. Tarabout, “Au royaume des Brahmanes, les guerriers sont rois”, Paris, *Purusartha*, 13, 1991: 115.

² For an account of the Kargil war, see Manoj Joshi, “The Kargil War: The Fourth Round”, in Kanti Bajpai, Afsir Karim and Amitabh Mattoo, eds., *Kargil and After: Challenges for Indian Policy*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 2001, pp. 32-58.

will limit itself to a study of the war as a social phenomenon and a generator of norms in a specific domain: namely the funerals of the men who were killed in battle.

Two points are worth noting at the outset. The first relates to the war itself. War takes place in a particular political, strategic and tactical environment. This specific context is what makes the Kargil war unique and without it, the war would not have engendered the effects registered with regard to funerals. These effects were all the more abundant as, all said and done, relatively little blood was shed in the war. Even if the various statistics provided by the Indian Army to date are inadequate for a precise assessment of the number of men killed in battle, the information collected leads one to conclude that the number did not exceed the four hundred mark on the Indian side. Only an analysis of the context can shed some light on the difference between the grandeur of the effects and the relatively small number of those killed.

The second point concerns the arena of military funerals specifically, defined here as the space for the expression of the political and social transactions around the soldiers' deaths. It is on this funeral ground, suddenly crammed with bodies that the Indian government, led by the Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, chose to focus during the 1999 summer. Orchestrating the repatriation of the bodies of the *jawans* (troops) and officers killed to their families at the end of a long and methodic heroico-morbid choreography, India developed an actual funeral policy whose implications go beyond the framework of the sole instrumentalisation of an armed conflict by a nationalist government for political ends.

The paradigm of the hero

The context of the Kargil war is very special. The topography of the terrain and the political and strategic conditions that determined the nature of the military operations forced the men to fight and die in a manner that favoured the emergence of a particular imagination. The latter focused on the role of the individual fighting the war whose dual dimension – dramatic and tragic – paved the way for the highest glorification. This

exaltation constituted the ideological mould of the Kargil war in which the Vajpayee government shaped its funeral policy. Two paradigms were thus forged: the hero and the martyr.

In ancient mythology, the hero was a demigod. By extension, he became a legendary figure to whom great courage and super-human feats were attributed. But what constituted this courage and these exploits, if not acts so valorous that they allowed the person who had done them to impact upon his own destiny and that of the world? We may wish to recall that *drama* in ancient Greek was synonymous with *action*; the hero was a dramatic actor in the etymological sense of the term, that is to say, a being whose fate was never played out until the curtain fell on the last act of the play in which he was evolving, an act never revealed in advance and that the spectator by definition could not divine as long as the hero continued to play his role. In consequence, there was something profoundly voluntaristic in the hero's manner of proceeding in the sense that it was fundamentally individual and personal. It is within this frame of reference that India declaimed the different facets of the emblematic figure of the hero through the entire duration of the Kargil war.

The hero is first of all a fighter. He fights against the elements, and the value ascribed to his combat is a measure of the hostile terrain in which he evolves – the more difficult the terrain the more his combat gains in value. The topography of the battlefield constitutes the ground reality of this awesome stage, where life and death come face to face. In this regard, the Kargil sector with its row on row of jagged peaks, some as high as 5000 metres, and an average altitude where the fighting took place around 4000 metres, constitutes an extraordinary backdrop.³ With the Pakistanis, having taken the heights dominating the sector and secured their positions in solidly constructed bunkers, the Indian infantryman was required to dislodge them under extremely dangerous conditions. These conditions naturally favoured the

³ Kargil town is located at a distance of 204 km from Srinagar, almost midway on the Srinagar-Leh National Highway. Most of the villages of the district are located at an average height of 10,000 feet above sea level. It shares the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) in the north and borders with Leh in the east and the Kashmir valley in the west. The geographical area of the district is 14,036 sq kms.
Source: <http://www.jammu-kashmir.com/basicfacts/tour/ladakh.html>.

emergence of a powerful imagination, dramatically depicting the soldier dangling at the end of a rope, eyes fixed on the promontory above that he has to take, one hand on the mountain wall, the other on the trigger, the body exposed to the flying bullets of the enemy holed up in his bunker. It is precisely this image of superhuman progression on the rocky flank of a mountain, which, since May, when the gravity of the stakes represented by the Kargil war began to dawn on the Indian leaders, became the archetype of the popular representation of the war. It was extensively telecast in the news bulletins, while all the newspapers and magazines published photographs and articles. The cardboard cutouts carried on tanks during march-pasts also had the same objective. It was popularised through the innumerable posters and interviews. Political leaders constantly referred to it in their speeches. “Almost all our countrymen have seen on television glimpses of the impossible summits which our heroes overcame and pushed out the enemy... How can we forget such heroes?” recalled the Prime Minister on August 15, 1999, during his traditional Independence Day speech.⁴ The Army, on its part, was eager to project the topographical details of the area where its men had died. They laid down their lives, it said on its website,⁵ “on a difficult mission on the Jubar ridge”, while ascending “a sheer rock-cliff”, or clambering on “a narrow, treacherous ridge”, or on “a vertical cliff face, snowbound at 16,500 feet”, while “climbing the cliff face and fixing the ropes for further assault on the feature”, or while “crawling up on a mountain ledge”, etc.

Thus Kargil’s heroes also had to become mountaineers in their actions as well as their equipment. The Indian Army reported that some soldiers took the enemy by surprise with the aid of their “cliff assault mountaineering equipment”. This aspect reinforced the personal dimension of the heroic act, the mountaineer as the archetype of the sportsman braving nature single-handed. It conferred on the body of the Indian soldier its greatest intelligibility. It allowed the imagination to feed on a multitude of stories, fleshing out the plot of the drama. Heroes of

⁴ *The Times of India*, New Delhi, August 16, 1999.

⁵ The official Indian Army website on Operation Vijay, www.vijavinkargil.org.

flesh and blood, the Kargil hero became everyman's hero. "The war acquired a human face, with all the newspapers covering plenty of human interest stories", notes a report published by the New Delhi-based Indian Institute of Mass Communication, which asked if the media had played the role of victim or tool in the way the image of the war was projected in India during the conflict. More than one article out of six on the war focused on the human dimension of the conflict. The popular Press was particularly avid for reports and anecdotes; Hindi language newspapers by themselves had more articles on Kargil than all the English language dailies put together.⁶

Thus from May-June 1999, a Kargil epic was virtually created in India.⁷ However, without in any way minimising the courage shown by the combatants, it was partly a myth, for the Kargil victory, according to experts, was to a great extent the result of the intensive artillery strikes, sometimes described as the "unsung heroes of the Kargil war."⁸ Supported by the air force and stationed several kilometres away from the battlefield, the importance of the artillery has in fact never been denied. The efficacy of the cannons sold by the Swedish firm Bofors, whose name is linked to a politico-financial corruption scandal in the nineteen eighties, even came in for much praise. However, the individual commitment of the soldiers, clinging to the cliff face attracted much more attention than the actions of the artillery operators themselves. The legend of the Kargil hero, although it corresponded to a particular reality of the fighting, is part of a certain on-the-spot re-writing of history.

Above all the Kargil hero is a figure whom everyone can relate to. "When I went to Kargil and met our jawans", declared the Prime Minister on August 15, 1999, "I saw our entire country there: soldiers from Nagaland, from Assam, from Tamil Nadu,

⁶ Jaishri Jethwaney and Shivaji Sarkar, *Information War: Media a Victim or a Tool?*, New Delhi: Indian Institute of Mass Communication, August 14, 1999, p. 4.

⁷ For a chronology of events during the Kargil war, see Ayesha Ray, "Kargil and India -Pakistan Relations: A chronology of Events January 1999-March 2000" in Bajpai, et al., *Kargil and After*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 2001, pp. 421-442.

⁸ Gurmeet Kanwal, *Kargil '99: Blood, Guts and Firepower*, New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2000.

from almost every State were fighting for the country. There was not the slightest distance between them on account of caste or region.” In fact, the multi-regional composition of the men involved in the Kargil war corroborates these words, although the details may need some further clarification. These details can be taken from the Indian Army’s website, which lists 345 soldiers killed in the war with their names, home addresses as well as the list of medals awarded to them posthumously.

Firstly, the social origin of the Kargil hero is a composite one. The great majority of those killed in battle were infantrymen of rural origin whose parents pursued a range of professions (peasants, artisans, employees), although it is true that some districts, more than others, have for generations been sending their sons to the Army. However, one of the striking features of the war is the relatively high number of officers killed on the battlefield. The Indian Army is traditionally marked by class distinction between officers and conscripts, although for some years now officers are increasingly being recruited from the less affluent social strata. The Indian officer is generally from the country’s urban social elite. In the Kargil war, among the officers killed many were of the rank of captain and major. 21 of the 345 listed on the Indian Army’s website, that is approximately 6 per cent, were officers: 12 were captains, six Army majors and three lieutenants. The number of officers decorated posthumously indicates their physical commitment. Out of the ten officers awarded the highest military honours (the *Param Vir Chakra* and the *Maha Vir Chakra*), eight were decorated posthumously. This phenomenon reinforced the idea among the public that death on the battlefield was not reserved for the rank and file. The Indian government in fact officially proclaimed 1999 as “the year of the *jawan*.”⁹ This not only increased the respect for the Army as a whole and, therefore, for its myth, but also favoured the process of popular identification with the emblematic figure of the hero, who had laid down his life for the country. For all that, the media did not give identical coverage to officers and soldiers. In the

⁹ To mark the 50th anniversary of the ‘Indianisation’ of the Army, Army chief General Ved Prakash Malik announced on January 4th that year 1999 would be observed as the Year of the *Jawan*. See “1999 declared Year of the *Jawan*”, www.rediff.com/news/1999/jan/04army.htm.

photographs published by the media, the officer was often perceived from the death angle, whereas the soldier was frequently covered from the wounded angle,¹⁰ and was generally shown convalescing in a hospital bed. As if the specific destiny of the former was to die while the latter would have to make do with being wounded. In the split image thus created, the traditional figure of the warrior chief by nature destined to die, contrasts with the portrait of the simple recruit who, although he joins the Army voluntarily and becomes a *kshatriya* (a member of the warrior caste) in a manner of speaking, despite everything remains a mortal, a little closer to human reality than the officer. This difference in treatment renders the hero somewhat more human so that it is easier for him to find a place in the hearts of the people, whatever their class origin. The Indian Army is of course a professional army, but many felt a close kinship with the Kargil hero. The various types of donations from families that flooded the Army for the duration of the conflict are proof of this. So much so that the High Command felt obliged to put a stop to it especially when the donations took the form of gifts in kind, by reminding them that the Indian Army was a modern institution capable of meeting its needs.

Secondly, the Kargil hero can be considered a pan-Indian hero. In fact, most Indian States lost their share of men, even if the price paid by the States geographically closer to the conflict was definitely higher. From this point of view, it is significant that on August 15, 1999, the Prime Minister chose to illustrate the Indian-ness of the soldiers by citing precisely those States that were the least affected by the war (Nagaland, Assam, Tamil Nadu). It was as though the State-wise break up of soldiers killed did not fit in with the Indian leaders' idea to project the pan-Indian character of the war. The media coverage of each funeral made it possible to remedy the phenomenon in the eyes of the public.

The Kargil hero is also a secular hero, Indian secularism consisting of each State treating all religions on an equal footing on principle. True, it does not seem that the number of Muslims

¹⁰ The Care India Foundation launched an appeal to the public for donations in aid of the wounded and the mutilated of Kargil; all the ten photos are of soldiers. *India Today*, New Delhi, August 9, 1999, pp. 56-57.

killed on the battlefield exceeded 10 per cent, but in the absence of statistics on the religious composition of the Indian Army – a politically sensitive question – it is impossible to say if this modest ratio corresponds to the percentage of Muslims in the Defense services as a whole. Nevertheless, everywhere in India (even if in Kashmir the patriotic fibre remained partly untouched) the Press and political leaders were careful to stress that death struck everyone, irrespective of their being Hindus or Muslims and that the latter did not play any less a role in the defence of the motherland. Muslim funerals were especially reported by the Press, the Muslim minority's participation in the war constantly highlighted.

Lastly, the Kargil hero can engender a heroine. True, no woman died on the battlefield. But many women contributed to the war effort. The Press gave them a great deal of publicity. In June, one particular picture gripped India: the wife of an Army major, a captain herself, in full military regalia saluting her husband's mortal remains, biting back her tears.¹¹ The wives of high-ranking Army officers were very active. By honouring the memory of their husbands, they defended their own status and that of Indian widows. The question is obviously not insignificant in a country where a traditional stigma still clings to widowhood. At a seminar organised in the capital by the Guild of Services (a war widows association) one woman, ex-member of the National Commission for Women, formally proposed that war widows be henceforth called "war heroines". The idea was seconded by the former president of the Commission in the presence of the wife of the Indian Vice-President and the President of the Army Welfare Association, who is none other than the wife of the Chief of Army Staff. "The term widow brings with itself a social stigma", she explained, adding, "'heroine' is a dignified and respectful term. This will elevate their social status."¹² The Kargil hero is thus not sexist, he also relates to women.

Thus we can understand the identification process that India maintained with its heroes during the war. Except for very rare

¹¹ *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, June 17, 1999.

¹² *The Hindu*, Chennai, August 12, 1999. "There is no stigma attached in being the widow of a soldier. It is an honour", declared a soldier's widow. *India Today*, June 28, 1999, p. 27.

exceptions, the interviews of families who had lost a son showed how proud they were of having produced a soldier. "I am proud my son laid down his life for his country", declared a mother.¹³ "We shall not disrespect our hero by shedding tears", added a father.¹⁴ "I will not hesitate to send all my three sons to the front and I shall be proud if they die defending the country like their father," wrote the widow of a slain hero in a letter to the Indian Premier.¹⁵ The youth too was filled with military fervour. In normal times, the Indian Army does not constitute a very attractive proposition and when one decides to join, it is often in the hope that one will not be posted to the front. Thus many young officers opt for the relatively less exposed services.¹⁶ But the Kargil conflict sparked off a recruitment mania. In the State of Punjab, it "has rekindled the craze among young men to join the Army."¹⁷ In Gujarat, at the end of June, the number of candidates queuing up at the recruitment centres had increased by 30 per cent as compared to the preceding year and many were from families with no military tradition.¹⁸ So much so that there were times when the crowd got agitated and the police had to use force or as a former general noted, "Kargil has become a personal war for the whole of India."¹⁹

The paradigm of the martyr

Contrary to the hero, the martyr does not pertain to the register of drama, but to that of tragedy. He is entirely resigned to his fate and feels that there is no point in fighting it. If the hero can extricate himself from an exceptional situation, thanks to his exceptional faculties, the martyr by definition remains implacably resigned to the logic of sacrifice. In this sense, the martyr is the

¹³ *Hindustan Times*, June 29, 1999.

¹⁴ *Hindustan Times*, June 16, 1999.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Indira Awasty, "The Ethos of the Indian Army Today", United Services Institution of India Seminar, No. 2, Military and Society. Proceedings of a Seminar held at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi, October 20-21, 1986, pp. 46-58.

¹⁷ Here the journalist refers to the situation in the Punjab of the 1980s, when a major Sikh terrorist movement had developed.

¹⁸ *Hindustan Times*, June 25, 1999.

¹⁹ Interview with Lt. General S. N. Sharma, New Delhi, November 22, 1999.

antithesis of the hero. However, in mid-May, the Press simultaneously employed the two images of the hero and the martyr to describe the Kargil fighters, the martyr's image gradually overtaking the hero's, but never to the point of erasing it. It is necessary to understand the co-existence of these two antagonistic terms.

In the first place, the martyr is an oblation. The Kargil war offers him two sacrificial altars, government policy and geo strategy. The former scripts the national décor, the second the international. With regard to the latter, it appears that Pakistan caught the Indian government napping. Not only did it not expect the war but had not even envisaged such a scenario.²⁰ Since the beginning of year 1999, a rapprochement process had been initiated between New Delhi and Islamabad.²¹ Friendly symbolic gestures had been made, such as the launching of a bus service between New Delhi and Lahore – with the Indian Prime Minister himself going to Lahore on the inaugural day.²² This “bus diplomacy” was in keeping with India's agenda for it emphasised the bilateralism of Indo-Pakistan relations, which was Indian diplomacy's stock answer to the situation. It signified that the issue was the concern of the two countries alone, and they themselves would resolve their differences over Kashmir. It was in this context, to all appearances accepted by Pakistan, that India was pushing hard for the *de facto* recognition of the Line of Control (LoC) as the international border dividing Kashmir into Indian Kashmir and Pakistani Kashmir. India felt that Pakistan

²⁰ See *From Surprise to Reckoning. The Kargil Review Committee Report*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000.

²¹ Prime Ministers Atal Behari Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharief signed the Lahore Declaration on February 21, 1999, to usher in peace in the Subcontinent. For full text of the Declaration, see *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, Countries; India; Documents; Lahore Declaration; www.satp.org.

²² The bus service began on February 21, 1999 when the Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee himself travelled on the bus in its inaugural run, in what was described as a goodwill gesture. It was the first bus service of its kind to Pakistan since the independence of the two countries. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1731000/1731919.stm. In the aftermath of the December 13, 2001 terrorist attack on India's Parliament and the resultant tough diplomatic measures adopted by India, the bus service to Lahore was discontinued from December 28, 2001. See “India recalls High Commissioner to Pakistan: Samjhauta Express, Lahore bus service to be terminated”, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, December 22, 2001.

had been induced to renounce its traditional policy centred on the internationalisation of the Kashmir issue. In 1999, the Indian government, supported in this by all the political forces in the country, was convinced of having taken a decisive step towards peace. It was unthinkable that Pakistan was secretly gearing up for a military operation in Kashmir. However, this is exactly what it did. In fact, at the start of the 1998 winter, Pakistan had already started to position soldiers and terrorists (*mujahideens*) of various nationalities on the Indian side of Kashmir. In April 1999, when India discovered the scale of the manoeuvre, it was too late to come out of it with just a few skirmishes. The Pakistanis had fortified their position with the intention of staying put long enough to internationalise the war.²³

It must be admitted that the Indian government's position *vis-à-vis* public opinion must have, *a priori*, been very difficult. Had not the Hindu nationalists of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party in power, been affirming *urbi et orbi* their desire to transform India into a major world power? Did the BJP not have to face the challenge of the next elections scheduled for 1999? What could be more serious for a nationalist party than to be accused of having failed on the vigilance front, thus putting the country's security into jeopardy? May onwards, the government came in for severe criticism. The Defence Minister's resignation was demanded.²⁴ The Army intelligence services were taken to task. There was a bitter public debate between some generals. The military brass obliquely accused the government of having dragged the Army down with it. The Opposition (in vain) asked for the creation of a parliamentary inquiry commission to look

²³ As indicates a conversation between General Musharraf (former Chief of Army Staff, the present Pakistani dictator) and Lieutenant-General Aziz. This was intercepted on May 26, 1999, by the Indians, made public and diffused on the net by the Indian External Affairs Ministry on June 11, 1999. The then External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh on June 11, 1999 released transcripts of the conversations between Musharraf, who was in China, and Chief of General Staff Lt Gen Mohammed Aziz in Pakistan on May 26 and 29. See "Excerpts of the conversation between Gen Musharraf and Lt Gen Aziz", www.rediff.com/news/1999/jun/11talk.htm.

²⁴ See "Opposition guns for Fernandes over foot-in-the-mouth ailment", www.rediff.com/news/1999/may/29jvpe1.htm.

into the matter.²⁵ In short, the risk of a dangerous political climate for the BJP setting in was high.

Under these circumstances, the Prime Minister's hopes were pinned on soldiers who were quickly dispatched to the battle zone to launch their first strikes against an enemy ready and waiting for them. The men were not properly acclimatised to the high altitude and ill equipped for the terrain.²⁶ The first 'heroes' were destined to fall. But these men in fact represented the sacrifice. The word 'martyr' bestowed on them by the Press from mid-May was really in keeping with their mission. It was as if public opinion could portend, in the tense political climate that prevailed at that point, that these men were fated to die because the hazards they had to face were too great, making them sitting ducks, however skilful and brave they might be. This issue could obviously prove dangerous for the government, because it exposed its negligence. In other words, when the conflict started, the government was responsible for the martyrs' death. It was left to the family of a captain killed on July 5, 1999, to say loud and clear: "Why can't those who allowed the infiltrators to come so deep into our country be punished?", declared the father of the dead soldier. He further added, "the politicians are responsible for the situation created so far and for all the deaths."²⁷ The authorities' motive for wanting the hero theme to continue is therefore quite clear. The government's answer to the Opposition, who accused it of sacrificing the soldiers, was that the whole country must unite behind its heroes. Each side had its emblematic figure that it instrumentalised for the needs of its cause. Heroes and martyrs co-existed in the empty resonance of words that the popular and collective imagination, as far as it is concerned, began to use without distinction.

On the international front, the Indian government also found itself in a delicate situation. The heights had to be brought under control. But it could not shell Pakistani territory in order to cut off

²⁵ At least seven Chief Ministers - those of Orissa, Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala - urged the government to convene a Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Indian Parliament) session. See "Political echoes", *Frontline*, Chennai, vol. 16, no. 15, July 17-30, 1999.

²⁶ "Their weapons and equipment compared unfavorably with those of the Pakistani intruders", *op. cit.*: 231.

²⁷ *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, July 11, 1999.

the intruders from their base camp. Should it cross the LoC, the international community led by the United States, concerned by the risk of a major war breaking out between two States (officially nuclear since 1998) would have condemned the Indian attitude. This international concern was perceptible from May 26, 1999, the day India launched its Air Force, losing a MiG-21 with its pilot the next day.²⁸ India, therefore, could not use all its firepower to come to the aid of its ground forces. Caught in the vice of this geo-strategic logic, the Indian infantryman thus inescapably remained the designated victim of the conflict. But now, he was no longer the sacrifice offered by the Indian government. His martyrdom was the responsibility of Pakistan, whose duplicity constrained Indian soldiers to shed their blood for reasons of international policy; this, the country could understand. Nevertheless, none of the major Indian political parties called for a global front to be opened against Pakistan. From this perspective, the Indian authorities were justified in letting the martyr theme develop in the country. In the Indian Press, from the end of May, Kargil martyrology completely appropriated the discourse on the hero.

In the beginning of June, the return of six mutilated bodies of Indian soldiers contributed greatly to this.²⁹ The Pakistanis had

²⁸ Indian Air Force launched strikes on May 26, 1999, on Pakistani positions in Drass, Batalik and Muskoh valley. See Bajpai, et al., *Kargil and After*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 2001, p. 423. The Defence Ministry confirmed on May 27, 1999, that Pakistan had shot down two Indian aircrafts. Pakistan had claimed earlier that the aircraft violated its "territorial integrity." Air Vice Marshal S K Malik, additional assistant chief of air staff (operations), told reporters in Delhi that the incident occurred when an MiG-21 lost height as a result of mechanical problems. The aircraft's pilot ejected before it crashed. When a MiG-27 jet went in search of the pilot, Malik said, the aircraft was fired upon from the Pakistan side of the Line of Control. It is believed the MiG-27 pilot also ejected before his aircraft went into a tailspin. See "Two aircraft shot down; India won't attack Pak positions", www.rediff.com/news/1999/may/27kash5.htm.

²⁹ Pakistan on June 10, 1999, handed over bodies of six Indian soldiers who were killed in an attack on Pakistani positions along the Line of Control. The bodies were returned to Indian military commanders at the Kargil sector. See "Pak returns bodies of six Indian soldiers", www.rediff.com/news/1999/jun/10kash3.htm. An Army spokesperson said in New Delhi on the same day that the bodies handed over were mutilated and disfigured. See "Bodies of Indian soldiers disfigured, says Army", www.rediff.com/news/1999/jun/10kash8.htm.

taken these men alive. A wave of indignation swept the country when it was learnt in what state the bodies had been handed over to the Army. New Delhi lodged a complaint with Islamabad and several Indian human rights associations took up the matter. Pakistan denied the tortures.³⁰ The Indians invited the military attaches of several diplomatic missions based in New Delhi to examine the bodies. The fact of the tortures was undeniable,³¹ but it was not possible to certify the date on which they were carried out, as the autopsy results had not been communicated.³²

Whatever the case, this constituted a turning point in the psychological warfare. The martyrs, the sacrificed victims, had become the martyred martyrs, so to speak. Pakistan's image was considerably tarnished. But, against all evidence to the contrary, Islamabad continued to deny its Army's involvement in the conflict; claiming that, at most, it was helping the separatists in their fight for self-determination. Therefore it could not identify the bodies of the men killed. A veritable battle over bodies took place between the two nations. India buried and cremated its own men with pomp and ceremony. Pakistan abandoned its bodies on the battlefield and refused to accept those sent to them by India after identification.³³ So the Indians took it upon themselves to render full military honours and religious rites to the Pakistani soldiers killed in battle on Indian soil.³⁴ Photographs of coffins

³⁰ The then External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh said in New Delhi on June 11, 1999, "We demand of Pakistan that the perpetrators of this barbaric crime against uniformed soldiers be identified and brought to book." See "India hardens stand, puts murder of soldiers on talks agenda", www.rediff.com/news/1999/jun/11kash10.htm.

³¹ Interview with the French military attaché at the French Embassy in New Delhi, who had been invited to view the bodies, New Delhi, November 1999.

³² The family of one of the tortured soldiers, Lt. S. Kalia, posthumously promoted to captain, indicates on its Internet site that it had asked for the autopsy report but "the Indian Army has informed us that the Post-mortem report being a confidential document will not be released to us." The family thus only has a death certificate.

See www.indiaworld.co.in/home/skalia/profile/html.

³³ Pakistan finally agreed to take back five bodies, including one of a captain.

³⁴ The bodies of three Pakistani officers, recovered from Tiger Hill and Gun Hill, would be buried "with due regard to the honour of a fallen soldier", the Indian Army said on July 11, 1999. The Army had communicated to Pakistan the recovery of the bodies of Major Iqbal, Captain Kamal Sheikh and Lieutenant Imtiaz Malik on July 8, but did not get any response. Major General J.J. Singh, Additional Director General of Military Operations, said the three officers, two from the 12 Northern Light Infantry and one from the

draped in the Pakistani flag and placed before a guard-of-honour composed of Indian soldiers were circulated everywhere in India. The image of the Indian martyr, honoured, was compared to the Pakistani martyr, abandoned. Never did India appear more dignified and magnanimous before death, a death stage-managed as never before in its history. The LoC had become, according to the weekly magazine of the extremist faction of the Hindu nationalist movement, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), “the boundary between civilisation and barbarism.”³⁵

Beyond their differences, heroes and martyrs had one common characteristic: they remained men whose destiny is to fight for the nation. Their icon was not predicated on a religious mode. Apart from some rare exceptions,³⁶ the vocation of Kargil’s hero-martyrs was not to liberate or purify the Himalayan peaks, the birthplace of the gods. All the same, the philosophical suppositions of Hindu nationalism do not advocate the Messianic glorification of the martyr or the ‘romanticisation’ of the dead hero. “The martyr [is] great, but not ideal”, writes one of the principal ideologues of contemporary Hindu nationalism, M. S. Golwalkar, who feels that Hindus should focus on “worship of the victorious”, that is to say those who calmly and calculatedly equip themselves with the means to win in order to attain the designated goal.³⁷ The word used by the Hindi Press to designate the martyr (*shahid*) is in fact not of Sanskrit origin but of Arabic-Persian origin and belongs to the religious repertory of the Muslim world. This will not prevent it from being used any less to express the reality of the entire Indian martyrology, whether Hindu or Muslim. Whereas, on the Pakistani side, public opinion is mobilised around the religious concept of *jihad*, India plays upon the patriotic fibre. Behind the heroes and the martyrs, who the collective imagination does not antagonize, what India sees is simply individual bodies of soldiers, bodies of flesh and bone,

165 Mortar Regiment, will be buried in accordance with military customs. See “Pakistan refuses to take even officers' bodies”, www.rediff.com/news/1999/jul/11karg1.htm.

³⁵ *Organizer*, New Delhi, vol. 3, August 15, 1999, p. 11.

³⁶ For example, the Internet site of L. S. Kalia’s family compares his destiny with that of Abhimanyu, one of the gods in the epic Mahabharat.

³⁷ M. S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, Bangalore: Vikrama Prakashan, 1966, p. 261.

repatriated from the site one by one. It is not the heroes or the martyrs who are incarnated as men. It is each man who has become the incarnation of the hero-martyr when his body is brought back from the battlefield. And it is in the context of the process of 'individuation' of the heroes and the martyrs that the essence of Kargilian representation lies: the funeral policy dramatised by the Indian government.

Death eliminated

In the Hindu *Weltanschauung* of India, the *praxis* and rites occupy a central place. Within this context, the funerary ritual plays an important role. In ancient Brahmanic India, "its richness, complexity, and coherence is striking."³⁸ In modern Hindu India, it is simplified but still retains numerous references from its heritage. If one knowingly reduces "the funerary ideology in brahmanism" to an expression "of a death without a face" (to quote Charles Malamoud again), one could say that the Kargil funeral policy inverts the Brahmanic problematic. For the Kargil war gave a face to the dead, the vision of death in fact formed the very crux of the ritual. In this, the representation of death in India 'christianised' or 'semitised' itself, that is to say, it borrowed one of their significant aspects from the three major monotheist religions that are Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The least of the paradoxes of the Hindu nationalist government, which claims to look for its political ideology in the sources of tradition, was not to have systematically presented a biblical³⁹ image of death to the country, or if we prefer, an 'individuated' image.

For reasons linked mainly to the notions of sacrifice, impurity and reincarnation, the traditional funerary rites are centred around one imperative: the eviction of the body. The principal function of the funeral is firstly to expel the body outside the house and the village, secondly to remove all trace of

³⁸ Charles Malamoud, "Les Morts sans Visage. Remarques sur l'idéologie funéraire dans le brahmanisme", in *La Mort, les Morts dans les Sociétés Anciennes*, Paris: Cambridge University Press / Ed. de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1982, pp. 442-453.

³⁹ A soldier's funeral was reminiscent of "a biblical scene", according to *Outlook*, New Delhi, June 28, 1999, p. 58.

it through cremation and disposal of the ashes, preferably in a river. All the 'physical' traces, as it were, of the spirit of the deceased are removed from the view of the living. "The physical obliteration of the cadaver is accompanied by rituals aimed at effacing all memory of the dead person" and "the ceremonies do not include any reminiscing or reference to the deceased's life"; neither his 'exploits' nor his 'virtues' are invoked.⁴⁰ Not much lamenting or display of emotion takes place around the body: "the pathetic has little place in the ceremonies."⁴¹ When a burial mound – an optional rite – is erected above an urn containing the ashes of the deceased, "this monument, far from preserving the memory of the dead person, on the contrary, cannot be erected until he is consigned to oblivion."⁴²

The essential elements of these characteristics are found in post-Vedic India. True, there exist cenotaphs, especially dedicated to kings, but in general "the physical space allotted to human remains is nil" and "worship is not offered [to departed souls] in order to give them or to enable them to retain a face."⁴³ It is also true that we cannot under-estimate the influence of the Muslim and Christian minorities with regard to cemeteries and tombstones. But it should be noted that during the British period, the importance of ostentatious funeral rites, which had previously shown a tendency to develop with the addition of numerous customs (increase in the number of offerings, growth of holy cities such as Benares, etc.), now tended to decline under the influence of a certain "re-invention of [Hindu] tradition"⁴⁴ using European values as a yardstick. Accused of idolatry in the dominant discourse of the colonists, the Hindu nationalists of the early 20th century, in an effort to purge funeral rites, returned to the source of tradition and "reduced death ritual to a little more than a ceremony of commemoration."⁴⁵

⁴⁰ C. Malamoud, "Les Morts sans Visage. Remarques sur l'idéologie funéraire dans le brahmanisme", *op. cit.*, p. 442.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 447.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

⁴⁴ E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

⁴⁵ Cf. C. A. Bailey, "From Ritual to Ceremony: Death Ritual and Society in Hindu North India since 1600", in Joachim Whaley, ed., *Mirrors of*

The body of the warrior – if we omit kings and some great chiefs, particularly during the Mughal era from the 16th to the 18th centuries⁴⁶ – was not given preferential treatment. In a throwback to Vedic ritual, some considered as ‘renouncers’ or *sanyâsin* were buried with great pomp and provided with a final resting-place. But many were simply left on the battlefield, their violent death likely to be considered a ‘foul death’,⁴⁷ an accidental death considered more polluting than a natural death. “Though as a rule death by violence is always bad, over a soldier’s death in battle there is some uncertainty. Most of my informants unhesitatingly rate it as an *akal mrityu*; but most would also claim that the spirits of those who have laid down their lives in a just cause do not join the ranks of ordinary ghosts, but become *bvis* or ‘hero-ghosts’,” notes J. P. Parv.⁴⁸ The ambivalence of death on the battlefield thus does not *a priori* inform us of the instrumentalisation that it can subsequently motivate for political ends. General S.N. Sharma remembered the first death that he saw on the battlefield in 1946: “five or six men of my unit were looking at the body and discussing its wounds while drinking; they were peasants; they were behaving as if it was very normal; I, on the other hand, wanted to throw up.” He evoked a custom in vogue in the Second World War: “if we had time, we rendered the honours due; when one dies, from being a stranger one becomes an unidentified body that however one can identify from a bracelet or a chain. In the Libyan Desert all the bodies were thrown in the same ditch. We turned the Muslims towards Mecca if we had the time. On the chest of the Hindus we burnt three matchsticks, this was as good as a cremation.”⁴⁹ We could not do it more simply. The contrast with the Kargil war is striking.

Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death, London: Europa Publications Ltd., 1981, p. 176.

⁴⁶ Period when a “heroic tradition” developed : Georg Berkemer, “No Heroes in Kalinga? On Death in Kalinga Inscriptions”, in Elisabeth Schömbucher, Claus Peter Zoller (eds.), *Ways of Dying. Death and its Meaning in South Asia*, Delhi, Manohar, 1999 : 179-189.

⁴⁷ Gilles Tarabout, “Ancêtres et Revenants. La Construction sociale de la *malemort* en Inde”, Centre d’Etudes de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud, Paris, 1999.

⁴⁸ Jonathan P. Parv, *Death in Banaras*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 163.

⁴⁹ Interview with the author, New Delhi, November 22, 1999.

Death on show

The Kargil funerals provided an excellent opportunity to stage a spectacular extravaganza, a sort of meticulously choreographed national funereal ballet. According to the Indian Army's website, 259 bodies were retrieved from the battlefield, of which five were returned to Pakistan, which they eventually accepted; 47 seem to have been dealt with on the spot and were accorded only religious rites; 197 had the benefit of a military and religious funeral. It is these 197 bodies that we have considered here, even if it is impossible to confirm whether they were all sent back to their families.

Operation 'back home' began on the ground. The pattern followed was the same in each case:⁵⁰

- ? The bodies of the dead soldiers are brought back from the battlefield and photographs of soldiers carrying their comrades are published in the Press. The cadavers receive initial medical care in the field hospital where they are enveloped and placed in containers. The high altitude keeps the bodies relatively well preserved, making repatriation easier. Some of the more damaged bodies are sent to the morgue of the military hospital where they are patched up and made presentable. The bodies are now laid in the coffins, over, which are, draped the national colours.
- ? The body thus prepared is transported by plane, military or civil, to Delhi or directly to the capital of the soldier's home State. In Delhi, the coffin is displayed in a special area of the airport or of the Army cantonment, the latter being rapidly transformed into a 'transit' zone for most of the bodies. Press and television cameras are present. Top officials as well as political leaders and, when it is in the capital, sometimes even the Prime Minister or the Defence Minister, come to salute and place wreaths on the body or bodies that are lined up. The first military honours are rendered. The images will be presented on television later in the evening, while the national dailies will publish their photos the next day along

⁵⁰ The observations that follow are based on Press reports and the author's fieldwork in several villages in Hathras District, Uttar Pradesh, in December 1999.

with the journalist's report. The regional and local Press will carry photographs on the third day, and the weeklies will carry the story towards the end of the week.

- ? At the State level, the ceremonies organised for the reception of the bodies at the airport or in the military zone, follow the same protocol as in Delhi: military honours, Press coverage, presence of political and administrative authorities, publishing of photographs and Press reports in the local papers, this time relayed by the national Press. Members of the deceased's family are present when it involves officers, the journalists proceed with their first interviews. The soldiers' families are too poor to go to town. The first outpourings of grief and despair by the close relatives are photographed.
- ? The coffin is then transported to the family home directly or via the district headquarters; processions and parades may accompany the operation, which are also filmed and photographed. Generally, the family is informed of the arrival of the coffin either officially or by word of mouth. On its arrival, it is displayed at a location near the house (in town it could be a park). Hundreds, thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of people come to see it. Military honours are rendered once more. Gun salutes are sounded, with the Army organising its proper protocol. The regional and local political and administrative elite shows up. When they are absent (rare), the families protest. The Press films and reports. The first cheques are handed to the families by the political or military authorities. Politicians come forward with promises and announcements concerning the financial aid that the family will receive and future developmental projects that the soldier's hometown will benefit from.
- ? At last the body crosses the threshold of the house. In the countryside, the shattered family waits outside or in the house, the men come out, the women often stay inside. In some cases, the widow is permitted to bow before the body in public. Generally, the Kargil funerals show the increased participation of widows in the ceremonies taking place both at the time of the funeral as well as during the memorial service. Interested spectators stand with their faces pressed to

the windows, in the doorway, and even enter the courtyard of the house. The journalists manage to interview some of the family members. The family has already contacted the priests, who proceed with the religious part of the funeral. The body is taken out of the coffin. Now the outsiders can see it, come close to it. In some cases, including in very modest rural homes, the family has arranged for a camera and the photographs taken will later be displayed in the family album. Then the crowd begins to tire, the family can now get some privacy. Alone at last, it completes the religious rituals followed by the family. This is the brief moment when tradition takes over.

- ? Cremation for the Hindus and burial for the Muslims now remains, and generally takes place the next day. This is the occasion for another public ceremony, unless (rare) the family decides against it. Firstly, the body is carried in a long procession to the cremation ground. The procession can cover several kilometres and last several hours.⁵¹ Then comes the cremation on the pyre erected for the purpose or the interment, mostly in the place normally intended for this type of ceremony, but it can also be at a different site, selected jointly by the family and the village authorities. The officials lay wreaths, the political and administrative who's who stand elbow to elbow in the front row. The crowd cries out the martyr's name ('long live martyr so-and-so'). Sometimes the Press notes the presence of Hindu nationalist activists. Cheques may be presented to the family during the cremation.
- ? As for the memory of the hero or the martyr, it has to be cultivated. Sometimes, when it is a Hindu, a spot for the erection of a small mausoleum is chosen at the entrance to the village with the name of the deceased engraved on the facade. When it is a Muslim, a fresh grave is dug some distance away from the existing cemetery, sometimes in the centre of the village. The road leading to the village, anonymous so far, will eventually be named after the martyr.

⁵¹ Nine kilometres and four hours in the case of Commander M. Talwar in New Delhi. *Hindustan Times*, June 18, 1999.

A small ceremony will take place the day of the inauguration. An imposing rectangular tombstone in cement bearing the inscription 'this road is named after martyr so-and-so' will be put up at the intersection of the highway and the road leading to the village. In town, localities will henceforth bear the name of the hero-martyr. The decisions taken are rapidly implemented. Several Internet sites, of which one is significantly named 'Memorial', are created at the initiative of the Army, the government and the families concerned. Some want a memorial in honour of those killed in the war to be constructed. Although India as a country has no tradition of erecting monuments to the dead, a collective image of military death has been created, based on the western model. In this regard, a virtual image, published as a full page illustration in the weekly, *Outlook*, is significant: India is beautifully depicted in the form of a body lying down, with small tricolour flags stamped all over. Over it stands a huge funerary sculpture, complete with helmet and gun, bearing the inscription 'Roll of Honour' followed by a long list of soldiers' names engraved on the stone.⁵²

The traditional problematic of funerals is thus well and truly reversed. The new custom focuses on the body of the deceased. Right from the start, it is primed for its future display. This constitutes the leitmotif of the ritual, which will continue until it ultimately disappears, and even afterwards as the seeds of memory will be systematically sown across the Indian territory. Behind this body, the presence of the dead person is constantly visible. Neither this presence, nor that of his close relatives is unpleasant; on the contrary people crowd around the body. The visual contact is primordial; it is accompanied by a desire for speech with the family on the part of those who feel entitled (officials, friends, journalists). As highlighted in an innocuous article "soon after the body reached the village, residents gathered in large numbers to have a last glimpse of the martyr."⁵³ This 'glimpse' is the principal aim of the 'funeral policy' implemented by India from May to July 1999 and of its morbid media-oriented

⁵² *Outlook*, New Delhi, June 28, 1999, p. 59.

⁵³ "Havildar cremated", *Hindu*, June 18, 1999.

ritual. One of the most massive processions organised in New Delhi is filmed non-stop by a local cable television channel, *Siti Cable*, from the small hours of the morning.⁵⁴ These bodies, shown to millions of people, are at the centre of the 'process of individuation' of death for which the Kargil war acted as a catalyst and an agent of instrumentalisation.

The Kargil war: The Catalyst

No doubt the stage-management of the war represented as much the orchestration of a policy as a response to a societal demand. For some time now, the families of the soldiers had been expressing their wish to have the bodies of their dead returned to them by the authorities. Why? The answer is not so simple. Very few cadavers of Indian soldiers killed during the First and Second World Wars were sent home. The same holds for the conflicts during the initial years of Independence, the 1947-48 Kashmir conflict, the Sino-Indian war, the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965 and the 1971 Bangladesh war. The families of Indian soldiers began to get accustomed to receiving bodies in coffins in the 1980s. The Indian intervention in Sri Lanka (1980-1990) no doubt marked the turning point in this development. Several factors were responsible for this phenomenon:

? Thanks to television, the American model of the Vietnam War had become familiar to the world. A whole generation had been fed media images of GI's. 'returning home' in coffins draped in the stars-and-stripes. The personalisation of death on the battlefield, with which the spectator was confronted each evening while watching the newscast, brought a feeling of greater closeness to the bodies of the dead and their families. The Kargil war constituted the first 'live' war in India. In a sense, India had with Kargil the same kind of war show that the West already had with the Iraq war or the Yugoslavia's campaign. The old American model of 'individuated' death was what effectively emerged on this occasion.

⁵⁴ *Hindustan Times*, July 4, 1999.

- ? The terrible drain that border operations represented for India from the late 1970s and early 1980s had accustomed families to seeing bodies returned to them. This was not too difficult to do for the Army as they were bodies of soldiers killed one by one, which meant they could be treated and handled easily.⁵⁵ Indian regiments have a solid tradition of collecting their dead bodies on the battlefield and of organising the appropriate rituals.⁵⁶ The repatriation of the body constitutes, in a manner of speaking, just a simple supplementary procedure.
- ? The Indian Army had learnt its lesson in Sri Lanka. The Indian Peacekeeping Forces sent to the island had unhappy memories of the quagmire into which they were sent. They were left to bear the responsibility of Indian politics without any recognition of their efforts by the political powers or the country, while the losses incurred were heavy. In particular, the bodies of the Army's soldiers and officers (a relatively large number of officers were killed) were not repatriated with any great degree of enthusiasm when they were sent back. Neither pomp nor ceremony but rapid oblivion and absence of publicity: such was the motto of successive governments in Delhi during the intervention period. Disgusted, the Army therefore took it upon itself to repatriate some of its men killed in the operation, inventing new procedures to do this.⁵⁷ In doing so, it brought solace to the families of the dead, who were becoming accustomed to receiving bodies in this manner, the process now starting to become familiar. Recalling the manner in which the body of his younger brother (the first Indian officer to be given the *Param Vir Chakra*), killed on the battle field in November 1947, was repatriated, something which at the time was not common, the retired General S. N. Sharma, in 1999, thus

⁵⁵ Some people estimate that the Army could be losing on an average two men per day in incidents related to its deployment in the border areas.

⁵⁶ To pick up bodies is part of the culture of honour (*izzat*) of the regiments. 'Regiment culture' is a distinctive characteristic of the Indian Army. See Apurba Kundu, *Militarism in India: The Army and Civil Society in Consensus* New Delhi: Viva Books, 1998, pp. 24-25.

⁵⁷ Interviews conducted by the author of various high-ranking officers, New Delhi, November-December, 1999.

summarised fifty-years of repatriation history of bodies in India: “What was done for my brother is now being done in 1999.”⁵⁸ This was one of the keys to the success of the Indian government’s funeral policy implemented in 1999: the Army, satisfied with this policy which healed the wounds of war, repeated the procedures it had followed in Sri Lanka in Kargil. Whereas it had acted more or less anonymously in the earlier conflict, all that remained now was for it to perfect the methods used for publicising the funerals. This did not signify that all its members were happy with the ostentatious show put on by the civil authorities, as it could make the soldiers appear as mere puppets of government policy.⁵⁹

Death instrumentalised

The Kargil dead were instrumentalised for a variety of reasons. Some for purely commercial ends, such as a restaurant owner trying to attract clients by declaring that a part of the money spent on their meal would be donated to a charitable organisation in aid of Army widows – many such charities would come up during the conflict. Some were done for purposes of tourism. Even before the blood of the ‘heroes’ had dried, the Director General of the Department of Tourism introduced tours to the sites of the battles. “Kargil,” he declared, “has caught the public imagination due to non-tourism reasons (*sic*), but we hope to cash on the prevailing sentiments and woo both who are interested in paying homage to the martyrs and adventurers interested in exploring the great heights.”⁶⁰ Other reasons had to do with publicity: popular film stars also did their bit and visited the fronts before the cameras. Nor was the High Command far behind: “The Kargil campaign is a good tonic for the country and

⁵⁸ Interview with General S. N. Sharma (etd.), New Delhi, November 22, 1999.

⁵⁹ A retired high ranking Army officer, secretary general of an association of retired officers, wishing to remain anonymous, affirmed having handed a letter to the BJP Working Committee in which he protested against the manner “contrary to Hindu tradition” in which the Kargil funerals were organized. Interview conducted by the author, New Delhi, December 1999.

⁶⁰ *Hindu*, August 9, 1999.

the Army”, declared the Kargil victor, General V.P. Malik.⁶¹ This conflict, indeed, was particularly prolific in terms of the medal tally, whereas it was not – quite the opposite in fact – the most costly in terms of human life in the history of independent India. The highest award for gallantry, the *Param Vir Chakra*, has thus been awarded to four soldiers in for Kargil. This medal has been awarded very sparingly since Independence (1947): three times during the Sino-Indian war of 1962; twice during the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965 during which 2902 soldiers died; none during the Bangladesh war in 1971, when almost as many soldiers were lost as in Kargil (495 on the Western Pakistan border); none during the clashes in Hyderabad in 1948 (66 dead) and Goa in 1961 (22 dead); none during the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka, which resulted in approximately 1000 deaths; none during the insidious war on the terrible Siachen Glacier since 1984. Only the first Kashmir war (1947-48) saw four such medals awarded and it should be noted that it cost India 1,500 soldiers, that is, three or four times more than in Kargil.⁶²

Maximum instrumentalisation obviously takes place for political ends. Without the Kargil dead, would the Hindu nationalist government have won the autumn 1999 legislative elections? It is doubtful. Various opinion polls suggested that ‘the Kargil effect’ was clearly felt during the first round of elections in September. True, the Prime Minister took care not to solicit votes on the basis of the war sacrifices during his election campaign. But his party had no qualms about stating that the Opposition did not respect the blood shed for the country when it criticised the government for its war conduct. Above all, the Kargil events bestowed a charismatic dimension⁶³ on A. B. Vajpayee that enabled him to form a coalition of regional parties relatively easily. This was imperative if the government wanted a comfortable majority in Parliament.

⁶¹ Interview of General V. P. Malik by Major General (Retd) Ashok Mehta on July 27, 1999, www.redff.com/news/1999/jul/27kargil.htm.

⁶² Source: Indian Defence Year Book 1997-1998, Dehra Dun: Natty Publishers, 1997, pp. 263-69.

⁶³ See Monthly Public Opinion Surveys, vol. XLV, no. 11, August 1999, p. 19.

In the strictest sense of the term, the May-July 1999 India-Pakistan confrontation in Kargil was not a war. No formal declaration of war was made and the Indian Parliament did not meet on the occasion. Officially, the Army called it a 'campaign' and the Prime Minister a 'quasi-war'. However, it was called a war by the entire Press, and the public was under the impression that thousands of soldiers had died in the conflict. Some were even convinced that the government had concealed the real figure in order not to alarm the people. In fact it was the opposite. A relatively small number died in the conflict. However the government was not particularly interested in correcting the impression, as the imagined scale of the conflict – once victory was assured and the loss of heroes killed on the battlefield could be attributed to Pakistani duplicity – actually enhanced the image of the coalition. The first direct consequence of the 'Kargil effect' was to facilitate the BJP and its allies' victory in the national elections of September-October 1999. In this context, the funeral policy organised by the Indian authorities constituted a formidable instrumentalisation of military deaths for political ends. During some two months, it choreographed a sort of funereal ballet daily – explicated at a national, regional and local level, amplified and broadcast by all the media. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the quasi-war was seen as a full-scale war and the number of dead was spontaneously exaggerated by public opinion.

This undeniable instrumentalisation does not, however, represent the essential aspect of the Kargil events. After all, India is no exception in this regard: is there any government in the world that will demur from exploiting the deaths of its warriors when this is useful? Much more significant for understanding the present evolution of India's society seems to be the part of the events that escaped the control of its actors, civil or military.

With regard to the former, the most paradoxical phenomenon is that of a Hindu nationalist party that develops a funeral policy transgressing the fundamental practices of Hinduism. From May to July 1999, the BJP and its leaders, although fiercely committed to the defence of what they call Hindutva, 'christianised' the representation of death on a scale unprecedented in the history of independent India. In itself, the principle of the approach is not

new: in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Hindu current in the nationalist movement had already faced the difficult problem of modifying certain aspects of Hinduism under the influence of European values exported by colonialism. This was done at the cost of a restructuring of Hindu values, supposedly by going back to the source of tradition, but which in fact had been ‘re-invented’ through contact with the coloniser. What is new during Kargil is the apparent suddenness and media build-up of the phenomenon. A new icon of death was created, one that focused on the individual and his personal, thus specific, linkages, connecting him to each member of the different social groups to which he belonged: family, village, region, nation, etc. We have seen, for example, that the personal status of the widow of the deceased soldier was affected, which, moreover, is detached from the traditional conception. One can also take as an example the theme of the “weak territoriality [traditionally] characterising Indian culture.”⁶⁴ On this issue also, the Kargil funeral policy is a pointer to the evolution of perceptions. The construction of cenotaphs commemorating the dead in the Indian space, or the naming of streets and roads, impacts upon the manner in which India politically represents its geography as a nation-state today. Starting with its external borders, which it will now view in a more ‘sensitive’ manner, once they serve to delimit a country filled with carnal recollections, all the more perceptible now that each one can identify with the individual-hero or individual-martyr whose memorial he comes across. This phenomenon is obviously linked with the manner in which today’s India is no doubt creating a new way of conceiving history for itself. It is indeed true that there is no geography without history and that a monument to those who have died for the country, of the type now being demanded in India or designed on websites, is fundamentally favourable to the creation of a new concept of the nation-state, whose ideological and philosophical foundations are precisely those of the individualistic-universalist thinking that emerged from the Century of Enlightenment. One notes, perforce, that it is a Hindu nationalist party, claiming to be the best defender of Vedic tradition that makes this claim. Ironically

⁶⁴ C. Malamoud, “*Les Morts sans Visages...*”, *op. cit.* p. 449.

enough, its approach is the exact opposite of that of Nepal's current Maoists, also celebrating the death of their martyrs, whom they also call *shahid*, who discreetly but systematically present their commemorations in the guise of traditional Hindu practices, which they tend to re-ritualise.⁶⁵

With regard to the military actor, one of the most fascinating aspects of the Kargil funeral policy could be the important role the military institution may play in Indian society. Here too, the phenomenon is not new. Although very professional, for many years this 'silent partner' (the *Grande Muette* as the French say) has been intervening in diverse fields which were not strictly military, such as the repression of labour conflicts, law and order problems at the borders, helping the population during natural catastrophes, the last example being the Gujarat earthquake in February 2001 where its work was particularly appreciated by the people, etc. But what Kargil reveals is that the Army also plays a direct role in societal evolution. It is the Army that worked out the details of the Kargilian funereal ballet. It has been observed that this Army, especially after the Sri Lanka war, was able to precipitate, in the chemical sense of the term, deep-rooted societal evolution by responding to the aspirations of the families who wished to have the bodies of their dead repatriated. One needs to probe deeper and ask if the Indian Army, with its specific modernistic culture, does not play a greater role in national life than one believes generally. For the moment, one can point out that it was probably not mere chance if it was one of the most secular institution of India, which was able to play a meaningful role in the new perception of an 'individuated' death orchestrated by a Hindu nationalist government in the twilight of the 20th Century.

⁶⁵ Philippe Ramirez, Pour une anthropologie religieuse du maoïsme népalais, Paris, *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Relations*, no. 99, July-September 1997, pp. 59-60.