GUN CULTURE IN AMERICA: A SOCIO-POLITICAL RIDDLE

Srinibas Barik*

ABSTRACT

Excessive inclination of Americans for possession of weapons, predominantly firearms, is a veritable teaser to the members of civilized society anywhere in the world. There are many in the U.S. itself who have expressed dismay and shock over the consequent losses that the reckless use of lethal weapons have wrought among a sizeable section of their population. Most shocking of those has been the penetration of the gun culture in the minds of young school children, who in many cases, have become the victims as well as the accused in numerous dastardly acts of misuse of such weapons. The Sandy Hook school shooting was a powerful shocker which did not only move the president of the U.S. into tears, it marked a new low in the morality of whole of humanity.

When such shockers shatter the harmony and peace in society anywhere they pose more questions as to the future of human civilization than they answer on the status quo. Was it ordained for mankind that ascending the steps of gradual progress and development at some point of time they would use their inventions against each other both within and outside the geographical confines? Was this the goal that the best of species among nature’s creation ever dreamt of? Sanity and civility were the resultant offshoot of a long journey that took mankind along continuous quest for order in place of disorderliness, cooperation in place of conflict, law in place of chaos, peace and harmony in stead of mutual hatred. But after a few thousand years of the progress of human civilization, a dangerous drift has been conspicuous which portrays a pathetic apocalypse that the whole of humanity seems destined to approach. Degeneration of societies and their members is ubiquitous and universal and its severity poses a big question mark on the very survival of human civilization itself.

The history and culture of society going against a possible turn-around in the prevailing gun culture in the U.S., it would be an uphill task to teach people to forgo arms. But the price (in terms of precious human lives) that has been paid (by Americans), it is high time for a serious engagement with the problem (of gun culture) which may benefit not only Americans but many others in the world.

*Department of Political Science, Shailabala College, Cuttack
Introduction

The pervasive gun culture in America is one such big dilemma which has compelled intellectual enquiry because such a social menace has gone against the very tenets of humanism and democracy. A leading democracy with at least 89 out of every 100 of its population boasting of lethal weapons (guns) as a matter of right, accounting for a homicide rate of at least 4 per every 100000 of its own people is a major failure of the experiments that mankind made in order to escape barbarianism, savagery, insecurity and to enter civil society. A comprehensive analysis of the gravity of the problem and a comparative assessment of the gun control measures by taking cue from some of the better performers (like Japan) can go a long way in tackling a major crisis that the Americans are confronted with.

Loss of human life in any form, if artificial or premature, ought to be profoundly deplored in every civilized society. Science of evolution assumes that humans are the culmination of the highest endowments in the physical and mental sphere that is ordained for any species. Spiritual or religious belief also ascribes supreme value to the manifestation of human beings as a stand alone. God created human beings as His closest approximation on earth. Eminent evolutionist Ernst Mayr believes “Man is indeed unique, as different from all other animals as has been traditionally claimed by theologians and philosophers”¹ (Mayr 2001). Christianity presupposes, as elaborated in Genesis 1, humans were created on the sixth day along with other land animals. God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky. Over the livestock and all the wild animals, [a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground”. ²

Almost all great religions in the world including Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or Jainism and other hail human kind as the highest embodiment of physical and mental faculties. Because of the unique attributes of ego and altruism, self-love and sympathy, language, speech, rationality human beings have been distinctly different from and have managed to master over the other species of living organisms.

Besides, the distinctiveness of humans lies in their instinct for gregariousness, it has been so powerful that philosophers have described man as a social animal and if anybody claims to make do without society he/she would have been either a beast or God. Mini hamlets to metropolis or megalopolis with teeming millions are testimony to such instinct which have come up as insurance against odds that the cohabitants are likely to encounter at different stages of life. Gradually, with the rise in their number, geographical, religious, linguistic, cultural barriers transformed the prevailing cooperation among them into competition and confrontation; artificial barriers were erected at different vistas so as to serve the parochial needs of some particular denomination. Millenia old human civilization finds itself ruptured into centuries old nation-states competing with and confronting each other on myriad issues. Cooperation also has taken
the upper hand among them in some instances in respect of international trade and commerce due to globalization or military and strategic cooperation on perceived threat perceptions.

International or inter-state animosity leading sometimes into full scale war may be justified in modern international law and politics. But full blown violence among the members of a geographical or national unity is no less than a scourge which must be analysed and attempted to be averted at any cost.

Numerous issues these days have been found to polarize the members of a single political or geographical unity. People have tended to be at each other’s throat on issues like religion, language, culture, caste, creed and what not! Resort to violence and criminality has been the easiest option at the slightest provocation. The lowest denominator of violence in interpersonal interactions constantly keep shifting, shifting for the worse. And this symptom has assumed global dimension. No society now-a-days seems to be free from the menacing tentacles of violence and hatred. Neither the Scandinavian countries ranking at the top of the World Happiness Index nor the ones like India, a country since long preaching the principle of ‘vasudhaiva kutumbakam’ (literally, the whole world being like a family) coming under the influence of a pacifist ‘sanatana Hindu dharma’ (or Hinduism), have escaped the murderous march of crude animalism in the mindscape of (so called) human beings.

The 2011 Norway shooting by Anders Behring Breivik that claimed 77 lives 3 or the cold-blooded shooting by Rocky Yadav, 4 the ‘illustrious’ son of a more illustrious Bihar goon father (Bindu Yadav) and an MLC (Member of Legislative Council) mother (Manorama Devi) of a Class-XII student (Aditya Kumar Sachdeva) son of a businessman when latter’s Maruti Swift car overtook the Range Rover SUV of the former are nothing less than the dangerous social disease of miscalculating one’s own limitations and the pervasive nature of prompt recourse to violence in inter-personal interactions. Such dastardly activities are not only outrageous assertions of false sense of pride (that violate the right to equality) but also an affront to authority of state because the very basis of the validity of state is the protection of the life of its people. Hence the violators of laws of the state anywhere have to be dealt with a renewed approach with decisive and exemplary actions against them if peaceful social life is at all a priority. Passivity and callousness by state authorities in dealing with such enemies of civility and civilization will catalyze the exponential growth of such elements thereby inducing their silent detractors to rise in revolt for a regime change. Such a dangerous apocalypse may sound far-fetched but not impossible. Sustainability of society and democracy can be possible by adopting a one-point action, primarily rule of law in strict sense of the terms.

Not a single day passes when different sections of any national or international media do not report about previously thoughtof, unimaginable ignominies unleashed by the members of some society against the fellow member of the same or any different one. The brutal butchering
by the ISIS or Boko Haram, not sparing even women and little girls (forcibly turning them into sex slaves or killing them in full public view in case of defiance) human bestiality (as different from bestiality proper) repeatedly breaking new barriers as happened to a nursing student in the so-called fully literate and developed in many barometers southern Indian state of Kerala even at the recent backdrop of the much publicized Nirbhaya case in the Indian capital New Delhi; the heart rending picture of a little child with the lifeless body being caressed by the relentless waves of a grieving Aegean Sea as uploaded in the social media; countless cases of mass murder even of school children as happened in Pakistan; bombings in crowded places like railway stations (Mumbai massacre), bus bays or airports; hijacking and bombing of passenger aircraft; countless corruption cases involving the so-called high and mighty in many authoritarian or even democratic societies; the so-called people’s representatives across democratic societies scaling new lows in their words and deeds with every passing day or even the common people showing the scantiest regard to the law-and-order system of any civil society; truck loads of cash being seized in the election-bound states in the largest democracy in the world (India); and above all the rampant gun culture in the other proud democracy (the US) that boasts of the burden of propagating democracy elsewhere in the world, more so the menace taking in its embrace young school children who should have been given the utmost attention by the society as well as the state as they are the future members and citizens – the list of shockers is endless which have brought the entire human civilization to the door steps of doom. It is not that the cancerous growth of malignity is only visible in some pockets of the world, rather the whole of human civilization in the 21st century is breathlessly approaching the nadir of negativity whose end may be nothing less than complete annihilation of civilization.

The gravity of the matter of taking up one aspect of human proclivity to anarchy and violence, the dangerous American gun culture, is that it appears as an anathema to those who subscribe to democratic values and culture and basically goes against what a civil society should stand for. The United States of America ever since its independence has caught the attention of others – friends or foes, democracies or autocracies – in the world because of its spectacular achievements in economic progress, military might, international politics, education, space exploration etc. that have a bearing on the assessment of a modern political entity. As a leading developed economy the U.S has successfully managed to occupy a dominant position across parameters of international comparison. “The United States has long been a wealthy, democratic, and well-educated nation, so the fact that its rates today rival those of the poorest nations makes no sense and contradicts the experience of other well-off nations. Only sub-saharan Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and probably Russia have higher levels” opines Eric Monkkonen while making a comparative assessment of the rising trend of homicides in the country. Here only three countries have been taken for comparison (T.1) because the status of the U.S. has to be assessed in light of the two recently performance-wise impressive economies of the world, besides an Indian insight being fit for judging from the standpoint of a democracy.
Table 1. Key indicators of development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population Millions</th>
<th>Gross National Income $ billion</th>
<th>$ per capita</th>
<th>Gross National Income ppp $ billion</th>
<th>$ per capita</th>
<th>GDP per capita growth %</th>
<th>Life expectancy at birth Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Adult literacy rate % ages 15 and above</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1237</td>
<td>1890.4</td>
<td>1530</td>
<td>4749.2</td>
<td>3840</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>15734.6</td>
<td>50120</td>
<td>15887.6</td>
<td>50610</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1351</td>
<td>7748.9</td>
<td>5740</td>
<td>12435.4</td>
<td>9210</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* ppp – Purchasing Power Parity

Figures are for the most recent years available.

It should not be mistaken that an outsider’s opinion or assessment is based on a self-assumption that such aberrations (such as the U.S. gun culture) do not take place in India or other democracies. There are problems galore in almost all types of systems but the exceptional ones anywhere are obvious to draw the attention of an inquisitive world where boundaries or barriers have turned insignificant due to the ICT revolution. Churning of public opinion on sensitive issues may sometimes lead to positive outcomes benefiting mankind as a whole.

A superficial glance at the key indicators of development on a global basis would show that the U.S has the largest economy (in terms of gross national income) in the world. The high standard of living of an average American can be gauged from the gross national per capital income which is almost ten times that of an average Chinese or almost fifty times that of an average Indian. Though during the heyday of the Chinese economy during the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the communist giant was galloping at the rate of almost 10 or 10 percent of GDP growth, some expressed apprehension that it would surpass some of the leading economies, including that of the U.S. But experts are convinced it would be a miracle if China catches up with the present standard of living and would take decades, if not centuries, to level that standard of development to catch up with the U.S. Besides, an average two percent of annual growth rate of the American economy is a significant leap forward which would push the benchmark much farther for the lower or middle income countries.

Others from outside America hailing from democratic or authoritarian regimes, should not forget that the high standard of living, better opportunities for education and employment, a democratic environment have enticed others to throng to its shores or even some of them from the other parts of the world have emigrated never to come back. The ‘Big Apple’ or the ‘Melting Pot’ that America is, has been possible due to a mutual give and take that has taken place
between the natives and migrants over a significant period of time. It is the collective responsibility of all constituting the society there to preserve the progress and promote harmony further for the benefit of all. Some acts of sabotage, sedition, terrorism are quite shameful and unforgivable at the altar of humanism. No doubt, American interventionism and hegemonism in the last century for the promotion and preservation of its own commercial and strategic interests have caused irreparable damage to international peace and stability. But there is no substitute for dialogue on any nagging issue involving bilateral or multilateral stakeholders.

The genesis of the dangerous gun culture in America can be attributed to a complex web of factors as has been shown by different scholars. Understanding or definition of gun culture has been restricted to mean the penchant of Americans for possession of firearms of different types which they intend to flaunt or have used to settle personal scores. The dangerous and disturbing consequences of such a social malaise can be assessed from nearly 1.4 million deaths which have taken place only in the 19th and 20th centuries\(^\text{11}\) a grim and unaccounted legacy.

By another account, a somewhat incomplete total of firearms fatalities in the U.S. as of 1964 shows that in the twentieth century alone the country has suffered more than 740000 death from firearms, embracing over 265000 homicides, over 330000 suicides and over 139000 gun accidents.\(^\text{12}\) This figure is considerably higher than all the battle deaths suffered by American forces in all the wars in American history, it is believed. If the constituent states of the American federation are taken into account, the five states with relatively strong gun laws the total homicide rate per 100000 population runs between 2.4 and 4.8 whereas the rate in the five states with the weakest gun laws is between 6.1 and 10.6.\(^\text{13}\)

The most unnerving aspect of the dangerous gun culture in America is the casualty that it takes from among the school children and youth in its population. In a 2011 nationally representative sample of school children in grades 9-12:

(i) 12 per cent reported being in a physical fight on school property in the 12 months preceding the survey;

(ii) 16 per cent of male students and 7.8 per cent of female students reported being in a physical fight on school property in the 12 months preceding the survey;

(iii) 5.9 per cent did not go to school on one or more days in the 30 days preceding the survey because they felt unsafe at school;

(iv) 5.4 per cent reported carrying a weapon (gun, knife or club) on school property on one or more days in the 30 days preceding the survey;

(v) 7.4 per cent reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property one or more times in the 12 months preceding the survey.
In matters of youth violence,

(i) in 2010, 4828 young people ages 10-24 were victims of homicide – an average of 13 each day;

(ii) homicide is the second leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24;

(iii) among homicide victims 10-24 years old in 2010, 86 per cent (4171) were male and 14 per cent (657) were female;

(iv) among homicide victims ages 10 to 24 years old in 2010, 82.8 per cent were killed with a firearm;

(v) each year, youth homicides and assault-related injuries result in an estimated $16 billion in combined medical and work loss costs.14

Probable factors

On the whole, the CDC (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) puts all homicides at 16121 (5.1 per 100000) and firearm homicide at 11208 (3.5 per 100000) for the year 2016.15

So what comes to most of rational minds is what is it that makes Americans so fascinated about guns? Why does the most advanced democracy in the world that gives the clarion call of being a bastion of reason and civilization in an ugly and brutal world put up with such carnage in its own backyard? “Why does it tolerate the sea of blood that flows from gun incidents, with about 100000 people killed or injured every year? Why does it accept an annual murder rate by guns that is 13 times that of England and Wales? People tend to remember the low points, such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in 1968. But do they know that since those two men hit the floor more than a million people have been killed in the U.S. from the barrel of a gun?”16

Human deaths due to war by states or natural disasters may be much higher than those in homicides (illegal killing of persons by persons), but the act of killing of one human being by another is a socially disturbing aberrant behaviour which must be seriously viewed and taken account of because its implications usually have far-reaching social, economic, political, moral consequences on the society and its members. “The issue of homicide – the illegal killing of another person – is important because, as an individual violent act that tears at many social bonds, it is a social event with broad consequences. Homicide or murder…… has been treated very seriously for centuries. An individual murder may seem random and inexplicable or even foolish and trivial, but the outcome rips the social fabric, weakens the political power of the state, and echoes through neighbourhoods’ regions and nations”, writes Monkkonen.

Clayton E. Cramer’s (2009) account of American propensity to gun ownership can be traced to its colonial past. By 1740, all the American colonies were under British rule and
therefore colonial militia laws reflected both English traditions and royal instructions to governors. Those lacking arms and ammunition were fined thirty pounds of tobacco (equivalent to about £4 sterling or a month’s wages), payable to the inspecting militia officer. The commander could arm the unarmed and force the militia man to pay any “price.....not extending to above double the value of the said arms and ammunition according to the rate then usual in the country” 17. When the American revolution erupted, every colonial militia law required most free adult men as well as many female heads of the household, to own guns. Some categories of persons enjoying exemptions from militia obligations were the clergymen, a handful of colonial officials. For example, New Jersey’s 1703 statute exempted ministers, physicians, school masters, civil officers of the government, members of the legislature and slaves from ownership of arms and ammunitions.

The “virus of slavery” which has infested America for more than two centuries has also, to some extent been responsible for the spread of gun culture in that country. Authors like Sally E. Hadden (2001) Fox Butterfield (1996), Cooper contend that slave owners had to count on their own power because slavery was based on violence18. Slave owners, apart from using violence by themselves, were also instrumental in passing on that culture to the others of their ilk and their future generations. As such a practice flourished, the authors keenly visualized the retreat of the state, the spread of violence. Slave patrols were essentially extra-legal slave police forces which diminished the authority of the state further. Abolition of slavery changed the course of gun culture and the gun control laws decisively. Black assertiveness gave rise to the emergence of organizations like “Black Panthers” during the 1960s which openly flaunted weapons and the Fourteenth Amendment was primarily aimed at upholding the gun rights of the freed slaves. But state sponsored gun controls were aimed at suppressing the blacks. It is believed that the history of American gun control is a history of racism and prejudice. In the early twentieth century, the Sullivan Act in New York, banning the carrying of small arms was likely aimed at Italian immigrants. But for most of modern history, the major target was the blacks.

Beito and Beito wrote thus -.

“As black assertiveness [in Mississippi] increased whites came forward with proposals for tougher gun control. The sponsors did not hide the centrality of race in their concerns. White concerns about gun control for blacks was not new. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several southern states had enacted gun control laws that restricted access of cheap hand guns to blacks”.

20
Most of the advocates of gun rights and ownership in the U.S. defend their stand on the basis of the Second Amendment to the American constitution that enjoins on the people the right "to keep and bear arms". As the constitution of a country is the source of its law, the people in general and the agencies of the state including the judiciary interpret and justify their actions in the light of the constitution. During almost all elections, the electoral campaign speeches by the presidential candidates in America the issue of gun rights or its abolition has been a major plank to woo the voters. The latest campaign trail to the November 2016 presidential elections has also witnessed veritable verbal slugfest between the presumptive Republican candidate Donald Trump and the Democratic hopeful Hillary Clinton. "Hillary Clinton wants to abolish the Second Amendment, not change it", accuses Trump by asserting that the right of the people to keep and bear arms "shall not be infringed". In previous elections also gun rights have been a major determiner in the swaying of votes in America. The Don Mulford Act of 1967, the Brady Bill, the 1994 Assault Weapons ban have been some important milestones in the academic debate between the two groups representing the upholding or abolition of gun rights in the U.S.

What baffles others outside America is that the dominant popular mood in the country is in favour of ownership of firearms despite so many untoward incidents of gun violence claiming so many innocent lives. Repeated instances of school children falling into the trap of violence has also not been able to shape American public opinion in favour of banning of lethal weapons there. Rather persons aspiring for public positions in the country have hesitated to include such an issue in the electoral campaigns fearing possible disfavour from the electorate. Arms survey (like Small Arms Survey) reports have also found out that whenever debates have raised in favour of disarming the people, there has been a remarkable spurt in the weapons sale in the country. "More guns were sold in December than almost any other month in nearly two decades after Obama called for new gun-buying restrictions." 22

Gallup polls showed that 78% of Americans supported stricter gun laws in 1990, compared to 56% in 2006. 23 The democratic party once supportive of gun control, has changed its stance. Many Democrats believe that the assault weapons ban was a factor in their loss of the Congressional majority in 1994.

We do not know how America or Americans would have reacted to a tearful Obama, outpouring the painful anguish of senseless violence let loose by a misguided minority (such a band holds sway not only within the borders of a single state, surprisingly they have become a global menace). Among the believers in humanism, good will and benevolence, he has struck the right emotional chord. "In this room right here, there are a lot of stories. There is a lot of heartache.... There is a lot of resilience, there is a lot of strength, but there is also a lot of pain", Obama said in the White House East Room, flanked by relatives of those struck down in mass shootings, including former representative Gabrrielle Giffords of Arizona. "First graders.... Every time I think about those kinds, it gets me mad", he muttered hardly holding back tears,
referring to the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy.

Meg Mott, Professor of political science, Marlboro College, Vermont described such an image of Obama as “the power of powerlessness”. “He is supposed to be the most powerful person in the world … He is the leader of the free world. But he is crying as if to say there is nothing I can do but accept and admit the powerlessness of my situation”, stated Mott.25

Trigger-happy, materialist, Trump-toting Americans must not forget that Obama is the outstanding among all their presidents who could avenge the devastations by tracking down and terminating the perpetrator of 9/11 being a Muslim himself and the first black to head the (white) America. Even George Bush would not track America’s enemy number one though he was at the helm when World Trade Centre and the Pentagon were targeted and entire America was shaking at the roots. It would be wiser if the Americans could shed their hallucination with brute force that they believe only comes out of the barrel of guns. Heed the silent message of reason, hope and harmony. Now that Obama has righted another historical wrong by paying a visit to Hiroshima (Japan) after 66 years of the atomic bombardment, a first by any American president, he has unambiguously sent a powerful message to the world that humanism triumphs over all motivated considerations, however justified or unjustified it may have been. Mr. Obama may not issue any political statement or write any comment as a visiting dignitary because national policy is primary for a statesman. America must have every justification for its action in 1945. But Obama the person, not the president, would be doing no wrong if he silently shed two tear drops for the devastation that was wrought on a part of humanity by another. The hundreds of thousands of God’s own children in Hiroshima and Nagasaki who were killed or maimed by their fraternity from a far off place would at least rest in peace in the grave or at least forget the pain and stigma for a moment in the present for an action in the past. A few drops of tear can do what atomic weapons could not-win over not only the Japanese but many other in the rest of the world who yearn for nurturing what God or nature has bequeathed us, not destroying the same. The Nobel committee should be doing no wrong if it conferred the Peace Prize again on Obama for he is a man who has cared to take some unprecedented steps in honour of humanism.

The pervasive gun culture in America, according to some writers like David B. Kopel, can be attributed to two cherished American values: individualism and equality. As a Tocquevillian attribution, individualism seems to have long fascinated the Americans. Average Americans seem to have been indoctrinated with the idea that the act of self-defense is akin to taking law into one’s hands. “Using deadly force or the threat thereof to defend against a violent felony is legal in all 50 states,” writes Kopel. Inference of American legal ideology goes like this – when criminals use force they are violating the law, and thereby taking law into their own hands. But when citizens use or threaten force to stop the law-breaking, they are taking the law back from the criminals and restoring the law to its rightful owners. Self-defense and defense of property can justify any extreme by the citizens.
Though sovereignty of the people in a democracy is an accepted axiom, its interpretation is completely different in the American context. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, the term "Body of the people" was used to mean a majority of the people and the united will of the people. Legitimate sovereignty flowed not from the crown, rather from the body of the people. By reserving more power for themselves, the Americans have granted less power to the government. Kopel states that America is one of the few nations without a universal licensing system for all guns and the only nation not to license hand guns. "[Thus] the fact that current American gun laws recognize the right of individuals to use force for protection is consistent with the pervasive theme of American legal culture of leaving extensive power in the hands of the people, and distrusting the state to administer justice by itself. Simply put, Americans do not trust authority as much as most citizens of the British commonwealth and Japan do. Unlike the British who so easily acceded to their nation's Firearms Act, of 1920, many Americans do not trust the police and government to protect them from crime. They do not trust the discretion and judgment of police officers to search whatever they please. The first words of American national existence, the Declaration of Independence, assert a natural right to overthrow a tyrant by force". 27

The diffusion of physical power is the cause and affirmation of political power has also been associated with the American society can be ascertained from the views of authors like (Collins, 1975) and Ramsey Clark (1970). Former Attorney General of the US, Ramsey Clark believed that guns "make lions out of lambs" and that we could all be lambs again if only guns vanished. Collins also affirmed," The more reliance on cheap, individually operated weapons, the more of the able-bodied population may participate in fighting, and the greater the democracy of and decentralization of society". 28

There is a powerful political lobby, the NRA (National Rifle Association), a four million strong association 29 which enjoys tremendous clout in the power corridors of America. Their attempt to thwart every gun control measure in the country has found enough takers. "Don't blame the gun, blame the person who pulls the trigger", 30 is the naive NRA slogan that is laced with a potential appeal for the susceptible to fall in line. And its members do not hesitate to shed crocodile tears every time a tragic incident shakes the nation. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims of this (Tucson) tragedy, 31 was a prompt reaction of the powerful body that would not hesitate to go to any extent to sell its agenda: arming Americans at any cost. This time the reference was for the shooting down of a Congresswoman, Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona. But who takes account of the innocent common citizens when they fall to bullets? Josh Sugarmann, head of the Washington-based Violence Policy Centre feels that US regulations have become even more relaxed since Virginia Tech (April 2007). He also subscribed to the idea of the political lobby being responsible for neutralization of any measure in favour of gun control in the U.S. "The endurance of the gun in America is not about nostalgia for a golden past..... it's about
political fear. Politicians have abandoned their moral responsibility to ensure public safety because of the perceived power of the gun lobby,” states he.

There is something uniquely American as far as a craving for firearms is concerned as has been brought about in some writings. The popularity of the Hollywood movies and the glorification of the ‘cowboy’ American image have somehow succeeded in shaping the general American orientation towards a carefree approach to life. “Unlike the British knight (with extensive armour) or the Japanese samurai (with a hand-crafted, exquisite sword), or the Canadian mounted policeman (carrying government-issued hand gun which ordinary persons were not allowed to carry), the classic armed American hero – the cowboy – sported a mass-produced handgun, such as a colt .45, that could be bought at a hardware store for ten dollars.”

Such a madness afflicting Americans was also corroborated by senator Joseph Tydings (1968) when he made a futile appeal to have an effective gun control law in the country. He lamented it was just tragic that in all of Western civilization the U.S. is the only country with an insane gun policy. “Western or otherwise, the United States is the only modern industrial urban nation that persists in maintaining a gun culture. It is the only such nation that has been impelled in recent years to agonize at length about its own disposition toward violence and to set up a commission to examine it, the only nation so attached to the supposed “right” to bear arms that its laws abet assassins, professional criminals, berserk murderers, and political terrorists at the expense of the orderly population – and yet it remains, and is apparently determined to remain, the most passive of all the major countries in the matter of gun control. Many otherwise intelligent Americans cling with pathetic stubbornness to the notion that the people’s right to bear arms is the greatest protection of their individual rights and a firm safeguard of democracy – without being in the slightest perturbed by the fact that no other democracy in the world observes any such “right” and that in some democracies in which citizens’ rights are better protected than in ours, such as England and the Scandinavian countries, our arms control policies would be considered laughable,” remarks Tydings.

According to Adam Lankford, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Alabama, there are two quintessentially American factors gun culture and exceptionalism that are responsible for the increasing recourse to violence. “There is this notion that in general, America is exceptional in a variety of ways in terms of our history : the degree to which we fought for independence, being the first and most successful country of our kind…. If you teach your kids, ‘You can accomplish anything you want if you put your mind to it’ it might be setting them up to fail”, feels Lankford. He further adds that globalization, the dominance of Hollywood and entertainment in the lives of the young which is largely American and often violent have also taken their due share in homicide in American society.
In addition to these intangible factors, Lankford highlights another pertinent factor responsible for widespread mass shootings has been the large scale ownership of guns. American gun ownership rates are actually unparalleled. Max Fisher states that there are a total of about 270 million guns or almost 90 among 100 have guns in the U.S.\textsuperscript{35} With less than 5% of the world’s population, the United States is home to roughly 35-50 percent of the world’s civilian-owned guns\textsuperscript{37} which is a heavily skewed global geography of firearms by any relative comparison. Together with the density of guns, the laxity in the laws have also contributed to the large-scale gun violence in the country. As supply creates its own demand, the US, according to an estimate, accounted for nearly 31% of the world’s mass shootings between 1966 and 2012. There have been about 292 public mass shooters who have killed a minimum of four people between 1966 and 2012. When the shootings are narrowed down to those that occur at schools and work places, that amount to almost 62% of global cases.\textsuperscript{38}

The laxity in the gun laws in the U.S. has also complicated matters for those who have attempted to see some recession in the impending nature of gun related violence. Jared Lee Loughner, the accused in the Tucson, Arizona shooting of Gabrielle Giffords, was sold a gun despite showing signs of mental health problems and threatening behaviour. Arizona has recently passed a law allowing anybody to carry a concealed weapon in public without a permit if one was above 21. Loughner was 22.

It has been observed that every time a gun massacre takes place in America, the pattern of response or reaction seems to be the same: initial bewilderment followed by outrage, calls being made for renewed look at the country’s almost uniquely loose gun laws and then that characteristic social dementia. Rather it has been commented by observers that US regulations have become even more relaxed after Virginia Tech. “Each time we have a truly horrible incident involving firearms in this country like Virginia Tech, it merely raises the bar in terms of what shocks us as a nation. Now we can have what happened in Tucson on Saturday, and we will have moved on within a week,”\textsuperscript{39} commented Josh Sugarmann of the Violence Policy Centre.

There is abundance of supply of firearms in the U.S. which has gone hand in hand with the unique American inclination for firearms because 65% of the countrymen feel it is their right to bear arms. Jurgen Brauer in a study has found out that there were nearly 2288 distinct reporting agencies or ‘firms’ that were instrumental in the unchecked production of firearms. “…more than 98 million firearms produced and retained in the United States between 1986 and 2010 and identifies three firms that each have produced ten million or more firearms since 1986, for a total of about 41 per cent of all firearms produced. The paper also approximates the underreporting of firearms production in the order of 320000 weapons since 2001.”\textsuperscript{40}

Most Americans, taking recourse to the Second Amendment, seem to have been so overwhelmed that their notions of security and liberty appear absolutely misplaced to the
democratic word outside their system. According to them restrictive gun laws imposed by a well-meaning government deprive people of the means of self-defense. Stephen P. Hallbrook, one of the pioneers of the campaign supporting the Second Amendment and gun culture in the U.S. states that “Democratic governments that wish to protect their citizens by depriving them of firearms sometimes accomplish the very opposite – and leave the law-abiding at the mercy of those who will flout any statute, tell any lie, engage in any conspiracy to gain power over the innocent. Good people rendered helpless, are history’s victims.”

Resigning the responsibility of the state (as the caretaker of all) to the deprived (of arms) and tending them to take on the armed lot or their adversaries is similar to rejecting the idea of state itself.

At the present crucial juncture when Americans are approaching a new presidential election (in November 2016) gun policy has again come to the centre-stage. Much to the amusement of trigger-happy Americans and the bewilderment of the rational world, Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican hopeful has already made his intentions clear by openly announcing his approval of the Second Amendment. “I will protect every bit of the Second Amendment,” he has declared, thus neutralizing the hope that Obama’s tearful address in the White House might have created in favour of possible gun control measures. The world has seen his ‘bull-in-a-china-shop’ image on several occasions of his ‘trumpeting’ on sensitive issues like racism, Islam etc. that have a direct bearing on a multi-cultural society like America and a fragile global demographic system. Seventy per cent of voters realize he does not have the right temperament to be the president and sixty one per cent believe that electing him would worsen the country’s image in the world. It would be too premature now to comment on the outcome of the forthcoming presidential elections in the U.S. but the response received at the annual ‘Rolling Thunder’ (a young bikers’ rally in Washington, DC on Sunday, 29 May 2016) can hardly be wished away.

While groping for the probable factors responsible for the unique American gun happiness, Nick Haslam, a professor of psychology at the University of Melbourne believes that “concept creep” has shaped many aspects of modern society. In the research paper “Concept Creep: Psychology’s Expanding Concepts of Harm and Pathology”, Haslam argues that concepts like abuse, bullying, trauma, mental disorder, addiction and prejudice “now encompass a much broader range of phenomena than before”, expanded meanings that reflect “an ever increasing sensitivity to harm”.

Some critics believe that the fatalities in America have been brought about less by the prevalence of guns than by some intangible factors such as the wildness and carelessness of the American national temperament or by particular social problems, such as the intensity of the ethnic and racial mixture. Individual narratives of self-reliance, security, protection and defence linked with settler colonialism, whiteness, heteronormativity, enabledness and nationalism are
also believed by some writers to have been the American attributes aggravating the excessive inclination of the people for arms.

Gun fanatics and lobbyists take the American exclusivism further when they argue that

“...carrying a lump of mental in your hand is as American as cooking baked beans and sausages around a campfire. Invocations of the golden age of the Wild West are often heard at times like these, when people need reassurance that the cost of so much death and maiming is worth it.”

As democracy and freedom of the media go hand in hand, any unusual event is transmitted through the media with unprecedented speed to different parts of the world no matter where the event unfolds. The news may be positive or negative but news makers have found public attention to be quite intoxicating. The terrorists, racists, religious bigots and many other anti-social elements have taken media coverage in their stride believing that media attention gives them national or international fame. Some thinkers believe the idea of fame is predominant in the minds of most of the mass shooters. “The idea of fame is a repeating motif in public shooters’ confessions and manifestos. The media gives these attackers what they want, and they want fame.”

**Comparison with other countries**

Two words will describe India and the U.S. in terms of prevalence or ownership of guns – ‘restrictive’ for India whereas ‘permissive’ for the U.S. Indian laws, the Arms Act, 1959 in particular, is very stringent on the ownership of weapons. There is strict licensing system which makes it difficult for an eligible person (above 21) to register a specific firearm for self-defence. There is no way in which children, convicted persons, felons, and drug abusers can ever get ownership of firearms of any type. Gun ownership is a matter of right as per the Second Amendment in the U.S. but ownership is not guaranteed in India. Target shooting, personal protection, security, pest control, hunting are some activities on the pretext of which licenses can be granted after careful consideration.

But all is not well as it appears in India. Illegal weapons concentration in the society is emerging as a major contributory factor in the ever increasing criminality in society. Estimated illicit firearms in India amount to about 33,700,000 as against the registered guns (6,300,000) out of a total of nearly 40,000,000 weapons in the country.
Table 2.

| Total number of licit and illicit guns held by civilians in India | 40,000,000 |
| No. of registered guns in India | 6,300,000 |
| Estimated illicit firearms | 33,700,000 |
| Rate of registered firearms (per 100 person) | 0.53 |
| Rate of illicit firearms (per 100 persons) | 2.83 |

Source: [www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/india](http://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/india) (A.31-05-2016)

The most disturbing aspect is India ranks second in terms of privately owned guns among 178 countries in the world. In terms of rate of private gun ownership (per 100) India is 110th in the list of 178 countries. Such statistical triviality can be attributed to the density of population in the country. But the total fatalities from firearms at 3093 (for the year 2012) which account for about 7.6% of the totality of homicides in the country (Table 3) is not a cause for relaxation even though it may be overshadowed by the U.S and some other countries in the categorical comparisons. In this respect Japan’s record is worth emulating for most of the countries in the world.

Table 3. Gun murders and ownership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>% of homicide by firearms</th>
<th>No. of homicides by firearms</th>
<th>Homicide by firearms, rate per 100,000 population</th>
<th>Rank by rate of ownership</th>
<th>Average firearms per 100 people</th>
<th>Average total all civilian firearms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>3093</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>46,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>710,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9146</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>270,000,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Another worrisome factor in connection with India is the big difference between the rates of registered firearms and that of the illicit variety. The illicit firearms in the country constitute almost six times that of the registered category which must be paid attention to by the government and civil society organizations. Investigation of many criminal cases in the country has led to the huge haul of illegal weapons, including many country-made firearms. States like U.P. and Bihar have been found to be the hot bed of production of such illegal weapons. Other states also have contributed their bit to the manufacture of contraband weapons. A balanced
analysis of the Indian scenario would be another challenging task if a complete picture on the same is to be obtained. A few indicators from here and there have been taken only to highlight the gravity of the gun culture in the U.S. Further, it can be observed that the different sources of data cited here are at slight variance (say, for example, the total number of firearms including the licit and illicit varieties being 40,000,000 in one and 46,000,000 in another) from each other but they are avoidable errors.

The case of Japan, in other words, is decidedly the strictest in the world in terms of gun control measures. While in the U.S., the gun law begins with the second Amendment’s affirmation of “the right of the people to keep and bear arms”, Japanese law starts with a 1958 act stating that” no person shall possess a firearm or firearms or a sword or swords…” While the most developed, democratic state encourages its people to access arms, Japan, a small country, also a modern democracy believes in the premise of forbidding the same to its people. Japan’s past of suffering wanton destruction in life and property in the 1945 atomic explosion may have taught a lesson in shunning weapons and violence but there is no denying the fact that it is a laudable disposition in the 21st century marked by intense violence and hatred visible among people both within and outside borders. The Japanese campaign to forcibly disarm the ‘samurai’ may also have been behind the country’s stance against weapons.

A comparative analysis involving the ‘strictest’ (Japan) and the ‘loosest’ (the US) exponents of guns control laws would be appropriate here. In 2008, the U.S had over 12 thousand firearms related homicides whereas Japan had only 11, fewer than were killed at the Aurora shooting alone and that was a big year. The figure was only 2 in 2006, an astounding low by international standards. But when the casualty jumped to 22 in 2007 it became a national scandal. Almost no one in Japan owns a gun. Most kinds are illegal, with onerous restrictions on buying and maintaining the few that are allowed. Even the country’s infamous, mafia-like Yakuza tend to forgo guns; the few exceptions anywhere tend to become big national news stories. So far, Japan happens to be the envy of the world as far as gun control measures and its implementation are concerned.

Conclusion

American public opinion bolstered by its violent, antagonistic history of colonialism, racism, and ethnic tensions may have crossed many milestones but history is not unidirectional – moving from bad to worse in the weaponisation of its people. Voices of sanity, pitching for a firearms free country in a gradual manner is the need of the hour. Current history is much more important in the life of a people than their history. The leader in a unipolar world, making rapid strides in economy and offering ample opportunities of higher and quality education in various fields not only to its own people but also to others from different parts of the world cannot afford
to be a contradiction in terms of some anti-humanitarian overtures. When the leaders and the common citizens take pride in a demeaning behavioural tendency there is something missing in the culture and orientation of its people. If damnable and highly deplorable episodes like the Sandy Hook elementary School shootings cannot impact the mind of the people in taking a relook at the country’s existing gun laws then there is something seriously wrong, it can be said with seriousness, which does not augur well for a civilized, democratic nation. “It’s the only time I have ever seen secret service cry on duty”, Obama said of his visit to Newton, Connecticut after the Sandy Hook tragedy. “It continues to haunt me. It was one of the worst days of my presidency”, he went on to add.

It is not that the president of the U.S.A. and the kinsmen of the victims only have been affected by such heinous acts of derelicts among us. It is the collective responsibility of the whole of humanity to raise voice against such insanity. The outpouring of emotions on a global scale following the visual of Aylan Kurdi is proof enough that sanity, humanism are still alive with us. We will have to overcome our apathy and try our bit, whether in individual or collective capacity, to neutralize such enemies of humanity by taking decisive action (not only punitive but at policy level also) against them.

The Americans themselves also are not so helpless or clueless as to purge their society of the dangerous gun culture. The same history that they invoke to justify the prevailing popular inclination to arms / firearms can also be their potential source of inspiration for changing its course in favour of stricter gun control laws and shedding their ‘cow boy’ image in the eyes of the rest of the world. The abolition of slavery is one such example which was almost unthinkable during its heyday. Sporting a saviour’s image like that of Abraham Lincoln is not a big ask. There is a silver lining in president Obama’s words; amid his tears he made a subtle argument. He said that just as the constitution gave Americans the right to bear arms, it also gave them the right to peaceful assembly, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – rights that were robbed from victims of gun violence. Obama may have come to the fag end of his career but a task well begun is half-done, as the saying goes. Are rational Americans listening?

Notes / References
2.  www.philosopherkings.co.uk/theuniverseandplaceofhumans.html (accessed on 10.05.2016).
4. The Times of India (9 May 2016, Bhubaneswar), ‘JD(U) MCL’s son kills, Class 12 boy for overtaking his SUV’.


6. Physiotherapy intern Jyoti Singh Pande, latter hailed as ‘Nirbhaya’ (literally, the fearless) because of her prolonged, painful ordeal with six of her rapists who offered her a bus ride along with her boy friend Awindra Pratap Pande in a fateful evening on 16 December 2012 on a crowded Delhi street. The brutalities after serial rape by six persons – Ram Singh, Mukesh Singh, Vinaya Sharma Pawan Gupta, Akshya Thakur – on her were so serve (iron rods were forced into her genital and her intestines were out) that her transfer, due to severe public pressure, to a Singapore hospital proved futile. She succumbed to her injuries there. The incident shook the conscience of the entire nation and it dented the image of India in the world.

7. The lifeless body of 3 year old Aylan Kurdi, found on the Aegean Sea coast was a top trending picture on Twitter with the caption # Kiyiya VuranInsanlik (meaning humanity washed ashore). The boy along with his 5 year old brother and 12 others were the hapless victims of the deadly Syrian war involving the dreaded IS and the Kurdish forces. All were possibly trying to flee the war-ravaged northern Syrian town of Kobani, a site of fierce fighting between the rivals.

8. Seven Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorists attacked Army Public School in Peshawar, north-western Pakistan on 16 December 2014 killing 132 school children and 9 others. The attack was purportedly to avenge the Pakistan military’s ‘Operation Zarb-e-Azb’ in North Waziristan in the summer of 2014. According to TTP spokesperson Muhammad Omar Khorasani, “We targeted the school because the Army targets our families. We want them to feel our pain”.


11. ibid., p.7.


13. ibid.

27. ibid.
28. ibid.
31. ibid.
32. ibid.
33. constitution.org/211/2nd_scho/60dk-i.pdf (accessed on 27.04.2016).
42. The Times of India (31 May 2016, Bhubaneswar), ‘Trump gets, warm welcome at bikers rally’, p. 8 (AFP).
47. www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/india (accessed on 31.05.2016).