

When the Centre Cannot Hold...

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India boasts some of the best strategic brains in the world. But have we come up with a national consensus on how to tackle terror?

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Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.

W.B. Yeats, The Second Coming

The siege of Mumbai — how counter-intuitive can we get! We had hundreds of soldiers and policemen laying siege to three hostage sites, and we had hundreds of ravening TV journalists laying siege to the terrorists, the hostages, the commandos, the policemen, and the nation. Our television reporters are taught to speak with no pause, shouting breathlessly, breaking news bite by shrill bite. So many times during those endless hours viewers felt we were giving away too much to the terrorists — down to how many commandos had been flown in and which sides of the hotels they were probing. And we had the sickening sight of wild celebrations when Nariman House was “liberated” — only to have officials say it was not over, and in the end of course everybody, hostages and terrorists, were dead many long hours after the commandos were helicoptered to its rooftop.

Many of us are coming off a slow boil after watching far more television news during the days of action than we did

for several years, and the overwhelming feeling is of rage and helplessness — and many questions. How did the terrorists get into Mumbai, and then into the five locations they hit with such impunity? Why did the National Security Guard take so long to get to the hostage sites? Why did it take the NSG so long to finish off their job? How come there were no survivors at Nariman House after prolonged commando operations? Why have we focused so much on foreign hostages, and not on the ordinary Indians who were mowed down at the train terminus?

We Indians are really “full of it”. We have an answer for everything, but we are also easily paralysed by the tiniest smidgeon of poisonous crisis. We are secretive, scheming and slippery. We believe we are one of the greatest powers on earth, but we treat our individual citizens with scant respect. Individual freedom, and information, and the kind of secure contentment that breeds innovation, creativity and civility are rare concepts if you have bucketed along Delhi’s dug-up roads for the past few years, waiting for this great sporting event or that flyover or this magical new Metro line or that better tomorrow while missing a bad smash-up, or even death, by centimeters, then watching those symbols of Mumbai’s Belle Epoque burst into flame while “well dressed” diners and dreamers were being massacred, room by banquet hall, brought home the kind of psychotropic sensation that makes you light-headed and in denial of the worm-hole you are hurtling down. (I was struck by how many reports referred to “well dressed” guests at two of India’s most expensive hotels. Almost as incongruous as a rag-picker’s torn singlet in the slums of Dharavi, I guess).

All this happened just as voters in the national capital were getting ready to elect — or eject — a Congress government, and the BJP in particular excelled at bad-taste advertising. It took out large front-page ads about tackling terrorism by electing a BJP government. There has been too much of effete

hand-wringing by the UPA government at the centre, but how quickly we have forgotten the humiliation of Kandahar, when our foreign minister personally escorted top terrorists to freedom.

Thin-skinned as always, we are also quick to claim the dubious honour of having suffered terrorist attacks going back nearly 30 years. We boast some of the best strategic brains in the world. But have we come up with a national consensus on how to tackle terror? We have one NSG in the nation’s capital and the only way to transport the commandos is in a Russian plane parked in Chandigarh. It took our home minister — he of the natty suits — nearly 96 hours to resign. Our dear president couldn’t even be bothered to interrupt a trip to Vietnam and Indonesia and rush back to her beleaguered nation. Indeed, if you discount the fact that schools and the stock exchange in Mumbai were closed on Thursday — in a cruel twist, Thanksgiving Day — life hummed along just fine just miles away in Dadar, where Raj Thackeray kept a very low profile, and in Mahim, Bandra, and the vast hinterland of old and Navi Mumbai.

So we get blown off our feet by the latest terrorist outrage, and we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and carry

on as if nothing had happened. We have a huge law and order apparatus and a criminal and penal jurisprudence that is fattening day after day with case law built on the backs of a quarter-million undertrials in our prisons. Law and order is in any case a “state” subject, and the Centre can conveniently blame regionalism for things that go wrong — unless the state is ruled by the central ruling party or coalition. In which case you have a phalanx of lynx-eyed, designer-khadi clad politicians leading the mourners at a top cop’s funeral after offering the customary cash compensation.

Amidst the bedlam, it was interesting that few television channels dared to field politicians. Do our politicians not notice that Bollywood very rarely makes a movie where a politician is a good person? Was it so hard to notice that there were crowds of citizens cheering and thanking the NSG commandos and jeering politicians?

There are so many follow-ups to do, it takes one’s breath away. What sort of counter-terrorism training do our senior most counter-terrorism policemen get? Did it make the slightest operational sense for Hemant Karkare, Ashok Kamte and Vijay Salaskar to drive off in

the same vehicle — only Kamte armed with an automatic rifle, the other two only with revolvers — right into a terrorist ambush? With blueprints of both hotels available, why could one section after another of the Oberoi, or the Taj, not have been sealed by the commandos and the terrorists squeezed into a corner, instead of the obviously free-ranging “battle” that just three men waged up, down and across the huge warren of the Taj?

There was a lot of poor TV reportage, and some of it was downright crude and Goebbelsian. Now that is a word too far, you will say. Well, how else do you react to more than one channel implying that Amar Singh Tandel, the skipper of the trawler apparently hijacked by the ten terrorists, had aided and abetted them? Was his beheaded body, hands tied behind his back, a reward for treachery?

The rage and the helplessness are underlined by a rare piece of good television I stumbled on Sunday — one channel did dare run a nearly three-year-old investigation where two journalists transported fake contraband, wooden crates that could easily have contained hundreds of kilograms of explosives, from the high seas past derelict Customs posts, bringing them ashore and driving through Mumbai all the way to the Gateway of India. It was a shocking

story, and it speaks of criminal neglect of both our coastline as well as strategic targets like the Bombay High oil rigs. There has been no follow-up, and I’m sure the authorities did not even notice the report. It’s true, folks — we have a cartoon Coast Guard struggling with self-righteous little men who have the power to paralyse our defences.

So where do we start? We need a national security apparatus with highly-trained counter-terrorism troops armed to their teeth with 21st-century arsenals, stationed in every Indian state and answerable to our version of a Homeland Security administration. We need intelligent men and women capable of piecing together the thousands of bits of intelligence that can be gathered by more feet on the street. We need to be less impatient with security measures. We do not need nastier laws that confer huge power — with scant accountability — on an ill-equipped police force. We have enough laws to tackle terror. But security demands a fixity of purpose, and a determination to out-think the terrorist. It is easy to shrug off the fact that there has been no terrorist attack on the soil of the United States after September 2001, or complain about the fingerprinting and overt security you see there; but safety carries a price tag. That has not happened without huge expenditure, and a sophisticated vigilance apparatus.

And I am waiting for the follow-ups — the hundreds of suppliers and small merchants whose livelihoods depended on the two devastated hotels, on the brave announcers at CST who warned commuters to flee when they spotted the gunmen, on the hotel staff who hid terrified guests in safe areas, on the bloggers who had so much information, and so many opinions. Every act of terror triggers many acts of courage. We must celebrate them, quickly.

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Business as Usual

A foreign national shops at a market on Colaba Causeway in Mumbai on Tuesday. Mumbai returned to normal to some degree, with shopkeepers opening their doors for the first time since the attacks began. — AFP

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