

EIGHT MONTHS ON – NONE REALLY THE WISER OVER MUMBAI

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***Has Asia been Resilient to Natural Disaster Events and/or to Terrorist Attacks?
A Debate on the Issues.***

At the height of the terror attacks in Mumbai last November, one of the assailants, Fahad Ullah, rang reporters of India TV from the Oberoi Hotel using a hostage's cellphone. "What are your demands?" enquired two journalists during their conversation, at which point Fahad asked them to wait a minute before being heard having to consult about this with someone in the background.

This vignette sheds some important light on what is new about terrorism today. In the past terror groups, such as the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), used terror as a means to achieving a broader political ends. They understood their use of terror against the authorities to be just a tactic in the battle to win the hearts and minds of a wider constituency, who they also had to appeal to ideologically.

Today, terror has become the end in itself – a pointless gesture of destruction, rarely targeted at those in power. There are no claims of responsibility made on behalf of the perpetrators and rarely any specific demands. Eight months after Mumbai no-one is any clearer as to what those who directed those attacks really want. Certainly, there is no programme to refer to.

In this regards it is similar to the London bombings of 2005, and some others before it, where groups of young men, for no evident reason, and certainly none that they are able to articulate coherently, beyond an evident rage, lash nihilistically against a society they appear to feel repulsed by.

These individuals are not poor or poorly educated. They are not schooled in Madrassas or inspired by the inflammatory rhetoric of radical mullahs. Some have benefited from private and university education. They may use religious rhetoric and reference points, but these just act as a cover for their absence of agenda. There is precious little evidence that they are particularly pious or politically engaged.

Those who committed the atrocities in Mumbai may well have been somewhat different to the London bombers – all coming from Pakistan and having been trained there – but the incoherent rage that drove them seems universal. Those who sent them have failed to identify themselves or their purpose too.

In that regards, a significant danger can come from our doing this for them. Far too many analysts and commentators have jumped to their own preferred interpretation as to who the masterminds were and why they did it. We impute meaning where there is none. Maybe the silence speaks volumes.

Mumbai stands for all that is best about India today. It represents the aspiration for change and development. It is the home of Bollywood and banking, trade and industry. But in an age when many have come to view ambition as arrogant, development as dangerous or divisive, and success as selfish, Mumbai has also come to represent the contradictions of capitalism.

It is this sense that society is beyond their control that connects the mass murderers of Mumbai to the self-styled Islamist fantasists in London and beyond. Rather than articulating their concerns and appealing to a constituency, they have been encouraged to strike out at the world in their self-righteous, individual indignation.

This prioritization of personal moral certainty over collective civic engagement is a consequence of the failure of those political movements that sought to change the world collectively over the last hundred years. Both their followers and the elites they opposed now seek intellectual refuge in the doom-laden preaching of mystics and misanthropists alike.

In Britain, just as in Mumbai, the list of intended terror targets – young women in nightclubs, fans at football matches, travelers at airports and shoppers in major retail centers – appear somewhat more related to the caricatured fears of social and ecological breakdown promoted by various political, academic and media commentators, than anything remotely connected to Islam.

The terrorism we face today is new. It feeds off the pessimistic and apocalyptic views of many – including the cultural elites – as to the futility of aspiring to change and progress. These doom-mongers in their turn, and in a cowardly way, then often use those attacks that do happen to confirm the supposed support for their anti-modernist theses.

Now countless security parasites have descended on Mumbai to advise of the need to turn the city into a fortress. They claim that terrorism is the single largest threat that India faces. At a time when 2,000 children under the age of one die every day across India this seems like a bad joke. Never has the need to progress and develop seemed more evident.

Whilst civilization can never be bombed out of existence from the outside, we will have to ward against the infliction of some serious damage upon it through the corrosion of our values from the inside. A starting point may be to clarify what those values are and to note that today it is the enemies of freedom, democracy and progress who are everywhere the real terrorists.

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