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## Mumbai Attacks Politicize Long-Isolated Elite

By [SOMINI SENGUPTA](#)

MUMBAI, [India](#) — Last Wednesday, an extraordinary public interest lawsuit was filed in this city's highest court. It charged that the government had lagged in its constitutional duty to protect its citizens' right to life, and it pressed the state to modernize and upgrade its security forces.

The lawsuit was striking mainly for the people behind it: investment bankers, corporate lawyers and representatives of some of India's largest companies, which have their headquarters here in the country's financial capital, also known as Bombay. The Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the city's largest business association, joined as a petitioner. It was the first time it had lent its name to litigation in the public interest.

The three-day siege of Mumbai, which ended a week ago, was a watershed for India's prosperous classes. It prompted many of those who live in their own private Indias, largely insulated from the country's dysfunction, to demand a vital public service: safety.

Since the attacks, which killed 163 people, plus nine gunmen, there has been an outpouring of anger from unlikely quarters. On Wednesday, tens of thousands of urban, English-speaking, tank-top-wearing citizens [stormed the Gateway of India](#), a famed waterfront monument, [venting anger at their elected leaders](#). There were similar protests in the capital, New Delhi, and the southern technology hubs, Bangalore and Hyderabad. All were organized spontaneously, with word spread through text messages and [Facebook pages](#).

On Saturday, young people affiliated with [a new political party, called Loksatta](#), or people's power, gathered at the Gateway, calling for a variety of reforms, including banning criminals from running for political office. (Virtually every political party has convicts and suspects among its elected officials.)

Social networking sites were ablaze with memorials and citizens' action groups, including one that advocated refraining from voting altogether as an act of civil disobedience. Never mind that in India, voter turnout among the rich is far lower than among the poor.

Another group advocated not paying taxes, as though that would improve the quality of public services. An e-mail campaign began Saturday called "I Am Clean," urging citizens not to bribe police officers or drive through red lights.

And there were countless condemnations of how democracy had failed in this, the world's largest democracy. Those condemnations led Vir Sanghvi, a columnist writing in the financial newspaper Mint, to [remind his readers of 1975](#), when Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi](#) imposed emergency rule. Mr. Sanghvi wrote, "I am beginning to hear the same kind of middle-class murmurs and whines about the ineffectual nature of democracy and the need for authoritarian government."

Perhaps the most striking development was the lawsuit because it represented a rare example of corporate India's confronting the government outright rather than making back-room deals.

"It says in a nutshell, 'Enough is enough,' " said Cyrus Guzder, who owns a logistics company. "More precisely, it tells us that citizens of all levels in the country believe their government has let them down and believe that it now needs to be held accountable."

In India's city of gold, the distinction between public and private can be bewildering. For members of the working class, who often cannot afford housing, public sidewalks become living rooms. In the morning, commuters from gated communities in the suburbs pass children brushing their teeth at the edge of the street. Women are forced to relieve themselves on the railway tracks, usually in the dark, for the sake of modesty. The poor sometimes sleep on highway medians, and it is not unheard of for drunken drivers to mow them down.

Mumbai has been roiled by government neglect for years. Its commuter trains are so overcrowded that 4,000 riders die every year on average, some pushed from trains in the fierce competition to get on and off. Monsoons in 2005 [killed more than 400 people in Mumbai](#) in one day alone; so clogged were the city's ancient drains, so crowded its river plains with unauthorized construction that water had nowhere to go.

Rahul Bose, an actor, suggested setting aside such problems for the moment. In [a plea published last week in The Hindustan Times](#), he laid out the desperation of this glistening, corroding place. "We overlook for now your neglect of the city," he wrote. "Its floods, its traffic, its filth, its pollution. Just deliver to us a world-standard antiterrorism plan."

None of the previous terrorist attacks, even in Mumbai, had so struck the cream of Bombay society. Bombs have been planted [on commuter trains in the past](#), but few people who regularly dine at the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower hotel, one of the worst-hit sites, travel by train. "It has touched a raw nerve," said Amit Chandra, who runs a prominent investment firm. "People have lost friends. Everyone would visit these places." In any event, public anger could not have come at a worse time for incumbent politicians, who were at their most contrite last week. National elections are due next spring, and security is likely to be one of the top issues in the vote, particularly among the urban middle class. It remains to be seen whether outrage will prompt them to turn out to vote in higher numbers or whether politicians will be compelled to pay greater attention to them than in the past.

"There's a revulsion against the political class I have never seen before," said Gerson D'Cunha, a former advertising executive whose [civic group, A.G.N.I.](#), presses for better governing. "The middle class that is laid back, lethargic, indolent, they've been galvanized."

For how long? That is a question on everyone's lips. At a memorial service on Thursday evening for [a slain alumnus of the elite St. Xavier's College](#) here, a placard asked: "One month from now, will you care?"

"It's helplessness, what do we do?" said Probir Roy, the owner of a technology company and an alumnus of St. Xavier's. "All the various stakeholders — the police, politicians — you can't count on them anyway. Now what do you do?"

Tops, a private security agency, has plenty to do. It is consulting schools, malls and "high net individuals" on how to protect themselves better. Security was a growth industry in India even before the latest attacks. Tops's global chairman, Rahul Nanda, said the company employed

73,000 security guards today, compared with about 15,000 three years ago.

Mumbai is not the only place suffering from official neglect. Public services have deteriorated across India, all the more so in the countryside. Government schools are notoriously mismanaged. Doctors do not show up to work on public health projects. Corruption is endemic. In some of India's booming cities, private developers drill for their own water and generate electricity for their own buildings.

Political interference often gets in the way of the woefully understaffed and poorly paid police force. Courts and commissions have called for law enforcement to be liberated from political control. Politicians have balked.

The three-day standoff with terrorists was neither the deadliest that India has seen, nor the most protracted; there have been other extended convulsions of violence, including [mass killings of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984](#) and [of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002](#).

Yet, the recent attacks, which Indian police say were the work of a Pakistan-based terrorist group called [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#), were profoundly different. Two of the four main targets were luxury hotels frequented by the city's wealthy elite: the Taj, facing the Gateway of India, and the twin Oberoi and Trident hotels, a few miles west on Nariman Point. They were the elite's watering holes and business dinner destinations. And to lose them, said Alex Kuruvilla, who runs the Condé Nast publications in India, is like losing a limb.

"It's like what I imagine an amputee would feel," he said. "It's so much part of our lives."

Last Wednesday, on the night of the candlelight vigil, Mr. Kuruvilla's driver made a wrong turn. A traffic policeman virtually pounced on the driver and then let him go with a bribe of 20 rupees, less than 50 cents. Mr. Kuruvilla is not optimistic about swift change. "Our cynicism is justified," he said.

Ashok Pawar, a police constable from the police station nearest the Taj, entered the hotel the night the siege began. It was full of gunfire and smoke. He could not breathe, and he did not know his way around. "It was my first time inside the Taj," he said. "How can a poor man go there?"

In The Indian Express newspaper on Friday, a columnist named Vinay Sitapati wrote [a pointed open letter](#) to "South Bombay," shorthand for the city's most wealthy enclave. The column first berated the rich for lecturing at Davos and failing in Hindi exams. "You refer to your part of the city simply as 'town,'" he wrote, and then he begged: "Vote in person. But vote in spirit, too: use your clout to demand better politicians, not pliant ones."

"In your hour of need today," he added, "it is India that needs your help."

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