



The Immanent Frame

Secularism, religion, and the public sphere

Mumbai 11/26:

Attacking Mumbai

posted by [Faisal Devji](#)

The attacks in Mumbai presented us with the extraordinary spectacle of terrorists adopting the methods of counter-terrorism, with highly skilled “commandos” deploying rapidly to “secure” an entire sector of the city by the use of small arms, explosives and the controlled movement of crowds of civilians. Apart from the indiscriminate killings involved it was difficult to tell the difference between such militant acts and the practices of anti-terrorist squads. For unlike the attacks on India’s parliament in 2001, or the seizures of mosques and other buildings in Srinagar during the 1990s, the Mumbai attacks were not focussed on a single site or meant to result in a drawn-out standoff with hostages threatened, demands made and negotiations proffered. Instead a portion of the city was cordoned off and traditional victims of terrorism like hostages and commuters utilized only as ruses, since the former were not in fact held but murdered as quickly as possible and the latter killed at a railway station as if to divert security forces from the two luxury hotels that served as redoubts for the attackers.

Despite the fact that more people died at the railway station and a hospital that was also attacked, it was hotels and other sites of elite and international interest, including a tourist restaurant and a small Jewish centre, that accounted for the majority of militant targets, hit as they were during prime media time in Europe and America but at an hour when Mumbai’s streets and public transportation had emptied out, thus allowing the terrorists to move quickly across the city avoiding the crowds of ordinary people whom they would otherwise have encountered. Reactions to the attacks have also been internationalized, not only because of the worldwide media attention they garnered, itself made possible by Mumbai’s accessibility, amenities and profile, but also by the fact that its middle class residents are themselves describing what happened to them as “India’s 9/11” and paying their respects to those killed by setting flowers, candles and notes in public places or holding candle-light vigils practices previously unknown in this city that has been ravaged by terrorists so often but familiar to television audiences from events in other parts of the world. These protests, directed against a political class seen as cynical and corrupt as much as against the terrorists or their Pakistani backers, occupied a public arena that had remained ominously vacant after the attacks, with many fearing that it could be filled only by those calling for violent retribution against Pakistan or even India’s Muslims. To my knowledge the only precedent in India for such a mobilization and its “international” practices were the equally middle class demonstrations, also directed primarily against politicians who failed in their duties rather than criminals as such, that marked the outrage in Delhi over the acquittal of a politician’s son in 2006 of the very public murder of a model named Jessica Lall.

Whatever the global elements involved in these brutal events, from militant methods to media coverage, crucial is the fact that they were plugged into a local history of religious violence in Mumbai and elsewhere in the country, if only to scramble and so utterly transform this past. For instance a hospital was targeted by the gunmen fleeing a killing spree at the railway station, and though there appears to be no rationale for this attack apart from it constituting yet another diversionary tactic, the recent history of hospitals being subject to violence tells another story. In the Gujarat riots of 2002, the majority of whose victims were Muslims, with some two thousand killed, those taken to hospitals in Ahmedabad were sometimes attacked and murdered in their beds. In July of 2008, when crude bombs were set off in that city by a little-known outfit calling itself the Indian Mujahideen, hospitals to which the wounded were taken were also hit with explosions. Whether intentionally or not it appears as if a new tradition of violence has been created in this way.

The most recent terrorist outrages in Mumbai belong in fact to a tradition inaugurated by the first attacks on the city in 1993, a series of bombings across almost the entire length of this vast metropolis that followed upon extensive riots the year before in which hundreds of Muslims and dozens of Hindus had been killed and some two-hundred thousand of the former forced to flee their homes. These blasts, which were carried out by elements in the city’s Muslim underworld, probably with assistance from Pakistan, represented a radical departure from India’s long history of terrorism. Departing from the old-fashioned claims of responsibility and political demands that had characterized earlier forms of militancy, the serial blasts of 1993 were voiceless, including no claims or demands and thus exiting from politics altogether. Of course everyone knew that the bombs were retaliation for the riots of 1992, which had followed the destruction of a medieval mosque in the north of India claimed to have been built upon a temple by Hindu nationalists. And in this way the attacks constituted a silent dialogue of violence.

Since colonial times the practice of religious violence had possessed a mirror-like character, in which the defilement of a temple was repaid by that of a mosque or the murder of three Muslims by that of an equal number of Hindus, often leading to a spiral of violence as the stakes were incrementally raised. Such tactics lend a measure of control and predictability to tribal feuds as well as gangland conflicts in many parts of the world. The 1993 blasts, however, departed this logic for the first time to provide a different kind of “retaliation”, one that not only stepped through the mirror of religious violence but also exited the political arena because it was unattached to any political claim let alone to a political party, creating only a sense of existential self-respect and agency for ordinary Muslims that was much-remarked upon at the time. A consequence of the disparity of numbers between Hindus and Muslims, or between the firepower of militants and the state, terrorism effectively removed the mirror that had for so long been set between the two communities, with “Muslim” bombs and “Hindu” riots following each other until very recently, when it appears as if explosions at mosques and other places of Muslim resort indicate an attempt to “balance” mutual violence again.

Whatever its nature Hindu militancy remains within the political arena, supporting as it does established political parties and tied as it is to electoral struggles in different parts of the country. Outside Kashmir, however, and unrelated to the struggle for autonomy and secession there, Muslim terrorism lacks a politics. As if recognizing this lack, such bombings have never provoked Hindu retaliation, since according to the anthropologist Vjayanthi Rao they appear to come from nowhere and cannot be linked to any particular Muslim population. Indeed these forms of violence indicate the increasing helplessness and even irrelevance of traditional Muslim authorities, both secular and religious, something of which they are well aware, being no longer in a position either to control militants or act as mediators and stop conflict between communities. All of this only proves Gandhi’s dictum that religious violence is a form of luxury because its combatants’ lack of political responsibility allows them to rely upon the state to reassert order. In the Mahatma’s day it was the colonial state that denied political responsibility to its subjects, thus making violence into an immature jockeying for power. If such a condition persists in independent India it is because Muslims have never regained the status of a political interest with institutions and a leadership of their own since the subcontinent’s partition in 1947.

The history of terrorism in India is lengthy and diverse, beginning with anarchist-inspired assassinations and bombings of British officials in both the east and west of the country at the end of the nineteenth century, and turning into incidents of shooting and bombing in the civil war type conditions that prevailed in the north and east with the end of colonial rule. After independence terrorism against the state and its agents emerged among communist-inspired peasants in eastern India during the nineteen-sixties and seventies, followed by separatist violence among a variety of religious and ethnic groups in places like Punjab, Kashmir and the north-east from the nineteen-eighties. Muslim terrorism outside Kashmir began with the 1993 Mumbai blasts, together with the resurgence and spread of a Maoist insurgency among peasants in large swathes of the country. The political psychologist Ashis Nandy has pointed out that for much of

this time terrorist practices bore a resolutely Indian character, not simply because they were dedicated to local causes but also by reason of their amateur qualities and cultural peculiarities. The “world class” professionalism of the latest attacks in Mumbai has changed all this.

As a professional activity, terrorism emerged with Pakistani attempts to sponsor militancy in Kashmir, and from this base throughout India. Since Indian Muslims proved unresponsive to such sponsorship for many decades, Pakistan had to create, support or tolerate militant outfits from among its own citizens, who were infiltrated into Kashmir, and from the nineties the rest of the country. In recent years Bangladeshi groups have also started operating in India. The politics of Kashmiri secession, however, have remained resolutely regional, with little interest or sympathy subsisting between those in the valley and India’s Muslims more generally. It is only from 1993, in the aftermath of riots accompanying the destruction of a mosque by Hindu nationalists, that Indian Muslims have started forming their own terrorist outfits. Of these there are two important ones, the now inactive Students Islamic Movement of India, which had earlier existed as a study group, and the recently formed Indian Mujahideen, who carried out a number of crude bomb blasts in different cities including Jaipur, Ahmedabad and Delhi earlier this year. Amateurish and deadly at the same time, these outfits have been exclusively concerned with domestic issues, the latter even warning Pakistan’s Lashkar-e Taiba not to claim responsibility for their attacks in a recent communiqué where they call themselves “home grown”.

Though they deploy some of the jargon of the Global War on Terror, as do the Hindu nationalists who claim to be their greatest enemies, the Indian Mujahideen are so focussed on their country as to represent a perverse form of Indian nationalism. So they expend great efforts, in statements emailed to the press, to demonstrate an awareness of Muslim oppression by describing examples of it throughout the country—even if some of these instances, like insults and land grabs, seem too minor to justify the mortal punishment promised in retaliation. Furthermore these texts are written in English, precisely a national rather than regional language, at least for the Indian middle class. The great difference between Indian Mujahideen operations and those of the immediate past is their voluble accompaniment. Not only does this group release lengthy statements, it proves its claims to responsibility by sending emails to the media just before or during attacks. Unlike the deadly silence of their predecessors, the Indian Mujahideen’s violence gives voice to Muslim grievances and constitutes in this way the closest thing to political speech among Islamic terrorists outside Kashmir. But their distance from any political party or institution is revealed by the Mujahideen’s concern with purely existential forms of agency and self-respect, for example in their condemnation of the secular and leftist Indians who sympathize with persecuted Muslims, and who uncover and publicize instances of this persecution by Hindu militants still at large following the Gujarat riots of 2002. These sympathizers are berated for portraying Muslims only as victims, given that their pity does not usually result in justice being done.

With the latest attacks in Mumbai terrorism has again lost its voice and therefore its capacity to enter the political arena. After all the probable reasons of those who planned the attacks, such as fomenting war-like conditions between India and Pakistan to divert attention and resources away from the Afghan border, thus allowing the Taliban and Al-Qaeda a respite there, constitute a gambler’s gestures rather than a set of political calculations that might result in securing the terrorists some advantage in future negotiations. Moreover the violence deployed was taken to an entirely new level by the kind of highly professionalized Pakistan-based outfit behind the carnage of Mumbai, one whose traditional preoccupation with Shiite and Hindu enemies is now augmented by experience in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s tribal territories, fighting alongside the Taliban and Al-Qaeda against the Coalition forces from which it seems to have learnt the most. For this new kind of terrorism resembles a military operation more than it does the amateur and individualistic militancy of Al-Qaeda, to say nothing of the tribal warfare of the Taliban. Whatever its larger aims, in other words, the terrorism that revealed itself in Mumbai represents Al-Qaeda’s displacement from the cutting edge of militancy. Indeed the world’s most celebrated terror network appears to have been swallowed whole and fully digested by the Pakistani outfits that protect its leaders, which is the same thing as saying that the global has disappeared into the local to animate it from within. Having fitted itself into a long history of militancy in the region, these attacks were quickly bogged down in purely local concerns, however global their aims may have been. And indeed if it is the Lashkar-e Taiba that was behind the terrorism in Mumbai, then this entrapment by history is even more pronounced, since what the group says it wants is neither any military or political advantage for Pakistan, nor a global Islamic caliphate, but rather some version of the British Raj—given that its ideologues imagine a South Asia pockmarked with “Hindu” and “Muslim” countries that largely coincide with the princely states of colonial times. Bizarrely pluralistic in conception, and much like some British plans for the subcontinent, this vision of India’s future represents a profound failure of the militant imagination, one that in fact possesses no future of its own.

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