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26/11: A Taj survivor's untold story

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There is not much to smile about post-26/11: the Indian government has got caught up in its strategy of exclusively pinning the whole blame on Pakistan, while ignoring the local jihadi support which had to be there in Mumbai [[Images](#)] (including inside the Taj Mahal and Oberoi hotels).

It also missed the chance to carry out quick surgical strikes against camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (thus giving itself a good chance to win the next general election).

The shame of a few terrorists holding to ransom an entire nation, its police, army and special forces has created too huge a gap in India's self-confidence.

Finally, the whole tale of 26/11 was never told: How many terrorists were there

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and how many escaped with the hostages?

Yet, here is a story about statistics that will not only make you feel better and positive again, but it is also the saga of a courageous woman whose gallantry has been unsung, post the Taj hostage drama.

Her name is Erika Mann, she is a member of the European Parliament from the Social Democratic Party of Germany [\[Images\]](#) and she was in Mumbai to conduct negotiations on trade relations.

When the first shots were heard, Erika Mann was having dinner on the ground floor restaurant of the Taj lobby with some Indian friends.

Everybody thought the first shots heard were crackers -- but not Erika, who had some knowledge about terrorism: "I thought perhaps this is the gun salute for a wedding," she recalls today. But what happened next, says Mann, was "pure horror", as she heard the terrorists burst into the lobby "shooting at everything that moved".

What we saw on television during the Mumbai attacks -- and subsequently heard -- was all about lack of leadership: the Maharashtra government was slow to react, the special commandos took nearly 12 hours to reach Mumbai, and nobody properly coordinated the action.

But inside the Taj Mahal hotel [\[Images\]](#), it was a different story: "We were 40 in the group that managed to run from the restaurant to the kitchen, and within 10 minutes four people had emerged as leaders," smiles Erika.

What is it to be a leader in such a stressed occasion? "Actually, in this situation one has to think -- collect information and then think again." Erika thus spent a lot of time on her Blackberry, trying to gather maximum info.

There was no gender or race discrimination in the group, which comprised about 40 percent Westerners, 60 percent Indians and had a 50:50 ratio of men and women.

"All listened as attentively to me as to the other leaders, whether they were Indian or Westerner."

And even among the other 36 people, it was not total inaction: "At least 15 were willing to be active, soldiers if you wish. Some even started searching for weapons and found the iron sticks used to grill kebabs quite handy."

So here are good statistics: 40 people in mortal danger, four emerged leaders, with 15 soldiers to implement ideas. And even among the remaining 21 people, "at least 10 were trying to get information by sms-ing their relatives or the hotel staff. And they were sharing this info with us."

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Is that the natural ratio which occurs when you have a good government which creates a system whereby people feel free to express themselves? "Maybe," smiles Erika.

What about the Taj Mahal staff? "There were 10 staff among our group," replies Erika. "Out of these, seven were efficient and did not seem to care for their own safety but only for our welfare." That's 70 pc, another good statistic. There was only one black sheep: "We had an MP in our group, whom I shall not name. He spoke later, as we had moved to the Chambers, to some TV reporter on the phone and gave our location -- we could all have been killed."

Under the supervision of the Taj Mahal staff, Erika and her group moved from the kitchen to the corridor that leads to the Taj Chambers and their group swelled with other hostages, thus becoming 100. Again the statistics were good: "Maybe only 10 percent of these," recalls Erika, "Were like frozen and had to be protected. The others were collecting information from relatives and others."

Yet, it was a very tricky situation: "We could have been shot any time."

Erika noticed a smaller group of about eight Arabic-looking people who were keeping to themselves: "I pinched myself, because immediately I felt suspicious of them. But I could see I was not the only one who looked at them strangely, although I am sure they were innocent."

Erika, as many other hostages, also felt that some of the Taj Mahal staff looked suspicious: "Some members of my group felt that an assistant, who acted as if nothing untoward had happened, was hiding something and whispered to the others not to tell him anything."

It is then that Erika noticed an exit door which had escaped the attention of others. With another leader of her group, a gentleman from Tyrol (*Austria*), they gingerly opened it, found a second door and suddenly they were outside.

"Our first reaction was 'let's check, can we take such a risk?'" They did not. But later Erika said: "Get out, think only of getting out. I made a mistake. If you see 9/11 in New York, it is only those who decided immediately to try to get out who made it alive. The others died."

They went back to the corridor and waited in a Chambers room till the soldiers came around 3 am. Here the statistics worsen: "There were about 32 soldiers, they were badly equipped, overburdened and nobody seemed really in charge."

>Erika was one of the last to escape from her group: "I helped an old woman who could not walk well and was afraid, and as I exited the door, a bullet ricocheted off the wall just above my head and plaster fell in my eyes. It still hurts today. I believe that most of the people left behind and many of these young soldiers got killed."

What does Erika say today? "I have been thinking so much about these 72 hours since then. What baffles me still is the youth element in this attack. True, they were manipulated, but how could they do this? I have no

sympathy for them, neither before or after."

She also has her doubts: "I am sure there were more than three terrorists in the Taj -- we ourselves saw quite a few." Also she feels that there may have been more victims than the government allows: "We saw so many bodies taken out."

Will Erika Mann come back to India? She already did. "I attended the International Women's Conference of His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in his Bangalore ashram and I had a wonderful time there. India is in my heart."

[Francois Gautier](#)

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