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[News](#) » [National](#)

Ratan Tata recalls sacrifice of staff on anniversary of the Taj

Staff Reporter

“Selfless help rendered by employees of the hotel on 26/11 has become the symbol of Mumbai's strength”

A second beginning to the story of the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower hotel in Mumbai was written three years ago when it became the site of the ghastly terrorist attacks. As the hotel rose, literally from the ruins, the selfless help rendered by the hotel's employees has become the symbol of the strength of Mumbai itself, Tata Group chairman said here on Friday.

“The Taj, despite its solidarity, its majestic being, could never be what it has turned out to be without that spirit, without the selfless spirit, embodied in the staff and the management. They stood by at great risk to themselves and in some cases at the cost of their lives to protect the people who were here. And that became the symbol of the strength of Mumbai, the strength of the city. They did get hurt, but they did not fall. I [pay] my tribute to the edifice and the people of the Taj who are the light and spirit of this great institution,” Mr. Tata said at the release of the book *The Taj at Apollo Bunder* by historians Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi.

The event marked the 108 anniversary of the hotel.

Raymond Bickson, Managing Director and CEO, Taj Hotel Resorts and Palaces, dedicated the book to those who lost their lives in the 26/11 attacks.

“During the tragedy of 26/11, the Taj and Mumbai demonstrated unprecedented heroism to emerge stronger than before. I have witnessed how the Taj has come to reflect the resilience of the island city of Mumbai. Rising from the ground to stand tall again. This book salutes that determination of the Taj family.”

So have the guests come back to the hotel with resilience.

“I may not visit the same room, but I continue to be a patron,” a hotel guest, who was held hostage that night but managed to escape, told *The Hindu*. His name has been withheld as he is an eyewitness in the case.

“The whole world knows the critical moment when the staff stood up. Being a periodic occupant I feel a sense of pride when I see the renovated Taj. It is as though it has come back with a vengeance. I have tried to erase my memory, but the deep-rooted bitterness remains. When you think of the raging tower and all the burning floors and you are running through the fifth and the sixth floors all alone. Those memories keep reverberating,” he said.

The 336-page hardbound book, replete with pictures and the story of the hotel since it opened its doors to its first guests on December 16, 1903, has a chapter on the 26/11 carnage.

“To walk away from this memory [of 26/11] is to forget reality,” Bhisham Mansukhani, another survivor who escaped that night said. While others are trying to erase the tragic past, Mr. Mansukhani wants to keep it alive.

If he is alive and safe today, it is thanks to the extraordinary courage and sense of duty demonstrated by the hotel staff.

“They were just kids. Young boys and girls. Two girls in their early 20s, couple of kitchen staff. Those brave girls had their phone on charging and were guiding the NSG to our location. They were remarkably great. One of them, Rajan Kamble, who was in front of us, was shot in the stomach while helping the guests escape.” Mr. Mansukhani recalled.

Mr. Mansukhani had gone to the hotel with his mother to attend a friend's wedding reception. “We were in the banquet hall for about ten minutes when we heard what sounded like firecrackers. At that moment, had the staff not shut the door, the terrorists would have got all of us. Over the period of 11 hours, the staff saved my life several times.”

When the National Security Guard knocked on the door at 3.30 a.m. it was with the help of hotel staff that we escaped who had come right back inside the hotel to help. “They guided us to the lobby and outside. There was such chaos around us, blood and glass was scattered all over. The firing started again. The cops ran away, but the staff formed a human chain around us. I take serious offence when someone says the place is not safe.”

Historian and co-author Mr. Allen in a video message said it was “no ordinary history book.”

“It is a spectacular Indian success story. A story which transcends race and country.”

Ms. Dwivedi said Jamsetji N. Tata built the hotel in the middle of a plague in the city to draw tourists back to the city.

Various well-known personalities read excerpts from the book at the event. They included filmmaker Shekhar Kapur, actor Juhi Chawla and historian and writer William Dalrymple. Sales from the book will go towards the Taj Public Welfare Trust, Mr. Bickson said.

Keywords: [26/11](#), [Mumbai terror attacks](#), [Taj Mahal Palace](#), [Ratan Tata](#)