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A Rally in Mumbai: "Remember 26-11!"

By Ishaan Tharoor / Mumbai

A week after 10 terrorists stunned Mumbai, tens of thousands of the city's residents descended on the main site of the attacks. They crowded the streets around the Gateway of India, the landmark arch the faces the historic Taj Mahal hotel, where gunmen had holed themselves up for three days. Amid the press of bodies were a few scattered pockets of space and light — either candle-lit shrines left by the public in vigil or camera crews surrounded by the vocal and vociferous crowd. They called for an inchoate assortment of things: the heads of bungling politicians, the end of taxes, the bombing of Pakistan. Similar rallies took place in all of India's major cities, echoing solidarity and outrage. "We're all Mumbaikars now," was a common refrain on both posters and lips.

Brought together largely by e-mail and city-wide text messages, Indians from across the country's religious and ethnic spectrum marched together in Mumbai. The rally's most conspicuous demographic, though, was of another sort altogether and one rarely seen massed in protest: the affluent middle class. "This is surreal," says Dhruv Wadia, a young advertising professional, pointing to a gaggle of middle-aged women, a few sporting Louis Vuitton handbags. "All the aunties have showed up." ([See a video of Mumbaikars taking to the street.](#))

The "two Indias" are intensely present here in Mumbai, a megacity where slums sprawl around the enclaves and high-rises of the wealthy and

powerful. But last week's attacks, aimed at some of Mumbai's ritziest sites, [brought India's cocooned elite to the streets](#). Smartly dressed families toting digital cameras came to the rally in waves of taxis. Venerable Parsi patricians, their spouses supported by maids, strolled down the old Strand Road flying mini-Indian flags. Outside the Cafe Leopold, a 19th century bar that was hit by the terrorists, there was a roaring trade in "I 'heart' Mumbai" T-shirts. Each cost 100 rupees, more than what many Indians earn in a day. ([See pictures of the days of terror in Mumbai.](#))

"These people feel fear, they feel anger," says Milind Deora, the young and energetic member of parliament from South Mumbai who has openly criticized senior figures in his own Congress Party for not better managing the crisis brought on by the terror attacks. "Now is the time for these feelings to be channeled into some positive direction," he says. But much of the frustration voiced by the crowd has been aimed at the entire political establishment. Viral Shah, a Mumbai college student, wore the same t-shirt that many others did; it read in deep red letters on the back: "No vote, no taxes." "I believe the government has completely failed," says Shah. "The politicians are so corrupt that they can't even protect a place as important as the Taj."

The shock of enduring the three-day siege of its most famous hotels has jarred Mumbaikars — and fired [media hysteria](#) — in a way that, curiously, the city's long history of terror bombings and violence never has before. However, lost in the eulogies to those trapped within the Taj Mahal hotel and the Oberoi-Trident, are the 56 people shot on the same night at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, a central rail station for the transiting working class. It was the highest death toll for a single site during the three days of chaos. Many of the dead there were laborers. "For whom is the [Taj Mahal hotel] iconic?" asks Gulan Kripalani, the executive director of the Mumbai-based NGO, Citizens For Peace. "My maid has lived in Mumbai all her life and she has never seen it."

Kriplani's organization was set up in the aftermath of bloody religious riots in 1993 to help build dialogue for a more secular and tolerant India, and to make the government more accountable when its treatment of marginalized groups comes into question. "If this is a tipping point, then good," she says. "The privileged have woken up. They have influence and the ability to make a difference."

But what change can be fashioned at this moment is still unclear. At the rally, talking points were raw with emotion and patriotism. Cries of "Death to Pakistan!" were frequent refrains in the chorus that now accompanies New Delhi and Islamabad's testy wrangling over the pursuit of terror suspects living in Pakistan. Lines of well-wishers snaked by the windows of police vans to shake the hands of the security personnel inside. Men with guns seemed far more popular than those with electoral mandates, though many in the crowd did not favor war. "We want real action,"

says Radikha Varma, a schoolteacher. "But there are good people on both sides of the border. The same thing that happened here should not be happening there either."

It's likely that the jumble of frustrations and anxieties being aired by India's citizens may lessen as Mumbai picks itself up after "26/11." But with the affluent classes riled and focused on the country's problems, maverick politicians like Deora and others in civil society hope for a reinvigoration of Indian politics. "If the informed and educated don't lend a voice of unity and strength now," says Deora, "who will?" Farzeen Barucha, a 21-year-old Mumbaikar, agrees. "Some people may think there's not much value in me standing here," he says. "But this is the start of something — at least it's better than sitting at home."



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