As the smoke lifts from Mumbai, skepticism must prevail over those conjectures which support the official state narrative. It is crucial to increase the pressure for transparency and accountability at this moment to ensure that India doesn’t slide into the same state as post-9/11 USA.

The deaths continue even as I write this. The death toll stands at 195. And of the several hundred injured some may not survive. It is now official. The siege is over. The last of the gunmen inside the Taj Hotel has been shot dead. The Oberoi/Trident hotel was cleared earlier today and the Nariman House Jewish Center at the corner of Third Pasta Lane on the Colaba Causeway was stormed close to 24 hours ago. The other targets - the Leopold Cafe (a popular tourist hangout), the CST railway terminus (also called the Victoria Terminus), the Metro Cinema, the Cama Hospital, all seem to be targets the gunmen attacked as they zoned in on the hotels and Nariman House. In the end this has become a story of two sets of men with guns.

The human story of the innocents who died, the hotel staff who kept their cool and moved guests around the hotel through the service entryways and exits, those who helped each other escape, will not really make it to the headlines. The maintenance worker at the Oberoi who shielded guests and took the bullets in his stomach will remain unsung. The hospital orderlies who ran in and out with stretchers carrying the wounded - each time not knowing if they will make it back themselves to the ambulance, will not be noted. The several trainee chefs at the Taj who fell to bullets even as other kitchen workers escorted guests away from the firing and hid them inside a private clubroom will not be written up in the book of heroes. The young waiter at Leopold who was to leave to work in a Cape Town restaurant will soon be forgotten. The two young men who dragged an Australian tourist shot in the leg away from the Leopold entrance and carried her to a taxi will not even identify themselves so that she can thank them. These stories, in as much as they are told, will remain on the lips of only the workers, the guests and the tourists who helped each other. The officials will try and produce a clean story to tell the world. And we know the clean story is untrue.

The official story that has already begun to emerge is one that may have some facts embedded in it. But we must remember that between every two facts is a lot of conjecture. The conjectures that unite the few facts (16 gunmen, AK47s, grenades, passports of multiple nationalities, boats on which at least some of them arrived, a dead Anti-Terror Squad (ATS) chief, Hemant Karkare, who was heading the investigation against the Hindu Right wings’ terror campaign, the gunmen trying to identify British and American citizens) makes the story. The story then is as much a product of the conjecture as it is of the facts. And there are certain stories that we are already oriented towards. The conjectures that create that story - the story we are already prepared for - is the one the State will dole out for our consumption. Already the conjectures that will serve the State, are out there in great profusion.

Several reporters have noted that the gunmen were clean-shaven, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. The silent conjecture is that they were expecting and were surprised by the fact that these men did not have beards and did not sport the Muslim prayer cap. Every newspaper worth its salt - the Times of India, the Jerusalem Post, the Independent from the UK, among scores of others - have already run commentary on the unsecured coastline of India. The conjectural subtext is that securing the coastline is possible and if India had done so, this attack would have been prevented.
There is also a quick labeling going on — India’s 9/11. The subtext is that India could and should act as the US did after 9/11 - decisively and with great aggression. There is also the subtext that the Indian State is soft on terror that adds to the US-tough-on-terror contrast. Sadanand Dhume, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, has castigated the Indian government for withdrawing the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and for preventing states like Gujarat from passing their own version of the draconian worse-than-Patriot Act legislations. Neither Mr. Dhume, nor the several reporters who will now write stories about how the POTA repeal represents the Indian State’s soft attitude towards terror will ever feel the need to explain how POTA could have prevented this attack.

The dead are on the floor. The vultures are moving in. The conjecture will try to unite the country into a series of unexamined positions. That POTA must be recalled. That States must be allowed to pass even more draconian laws. That Hindu terror is not a big issue and must be forgotten for now - especially now that we may not find an honest policeman or woman to head the ATS. That the defense budget must go up. That the coastline must be secured.

None of the well educated masters of the media will write that the 7000 odd kilometer coastline cannot be protected - that all it will translate to is billions in contracts for all and sundry including Israeli and American consultants. Nobody will write that a hundred POTAs will not prevent a terror attack like this one; that Guantanamo Bay has not yielded a single break through. Nobody will write that higher defense budgets have been more often correlated with insecure and militarized lives for ordinary citizens. Nobody will write that almost without exception all of US post-9/11 policies have been disasters. Bin Laden is still around, I am told and so is the Al Qaeda. The number of fundamentalist Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews have probably gone up over the last decade. So much for good policy. But the conjecture will go on.

The foreign hand and its internal partner will be floated without ever naming anything precise. But the country will read it just as it is meant to be read - Pakistan and the Indian Muslim. Everything will rest on the supposed confession of the one gunman who has been captured. A Pakistani from Faridkot, I am told. Why should we believe it? Didn’t the same Indian State frame all the supposed accomplices in the Parliament attack case? Didn’t the same Indian State claim that the assassins of Chattisinghpura were from across the border until that story fell apart? And more recently, didn’t the same Indian State finally agree that all the accused in the Mecca Masjid bombings were actually innocent? And even if Mr. Assassin supposedly from Faridkot did say what he did say - why should we believe him? Why is it so difficult to believe that he has his lines ready and scripted? If he was willing to die for whatever cause he murdered for, then can he not lie? Oh the lie detector test - that completely discredited science that every militarized State trots out. And the media love the lie detector test because it is the best scientific garb you can give to conjecture.

I certainly don’t know the truth. But I do know that there is more than enough reason for skepticism. The problem is that we need a new theory of the State. We need to re-understand the State.

There is such unanimity when it comes to analyzing the Pakistani State - that the ISI, and if not all of the ISI, at least a segment of it, is a rogue element. Furthermore, that its bosses may not be sitting in Islamabad, but perhaps elsewhere in the country or even abroad. If we can accept that about the Pakistani State, why is it so difficult to accept it about the Indian State? We all know that Colin Powell was a kind of a patsy - a fall guy, who trotted out some lies on behalf of a segment of the neo-conservative movement firmly entrenched within the American State (which Obama will not touch). We also know that if the ISI has a rogue element in it, it was in good part created by the CIA. Then why do we think that the same guys couldn’t render another State - such as the US - itself hollow from the inside.

The contemporary State is a different being. For every story of money-corruption you hear, there could just as well be one of political-corruption. Every vested interest who locates himself inside the State apparatus is not just a vested interest going after money but could just as well be securing the space for creating a certain politics. The RSS has a long history of trying to take over the bureaucracy, doesn’t it? So do the neo-cons and so do the jamaatis. Then why do we believe in a theory of the State that is unified and with liberal goals?
The history of the liberal State and its relationship with capitalism of all types is a simple one. The longer that relationship persists the more corrupt and hollow the liberal State gets, leaving the space open for political ideologies to occupy its very insides. The logic for this is inherent in the very system. If profit is above all, then given the power the State has, it must be bought. Cheney is no different from Shivraj Patil, and Ambani is no different from Halliburton. They are both part of the story of hollowing the State out. And once the hollowing process begins, every ideological force can find its way in, as long as it has resources. The archetypal bourgeois liberal State is over. It never really existed, but what we have at the end of four decades of neo-liberalism bears no resemblance to the ideal formulation whatsoever. What we have instead is a series of hollowed out States with their nooks and crannies, their departments and offices populated with specific neo-conservative ideological interests. The US has its variant. India has its. And Israel its very own. It is incapable of delivering the truth, and not just the truth, it is only capable of producing lies.

If this story of skepticism makes sense then we have only one choice. To understand that it is crucial to increase the pressure for transparency at this moment, to be relentless in our demand for openness and detail, in our call to ensure that no investigation or inquiry that was in place be halted and that every one of these be subjected to public scrutiny. It is our responsibility to reject the discourse of secrecy based on security and demand specific standards of transparency. What we should demand is that every senior minister and every senior intelligence officer be examined and the records be made available to the public. What we must demand is that an officer of impeccable record be found to replace Hemant Karkare. What we must demand is that we get explanations of how a POTA clone would have stopped this crime. What we must ask is how POTA or the Patriot Act could have ever helped prevent terror? What we must do is support the Karkare family in their demand for a full investigation of his death in the company of the encounter specialist- Salaskar. What we must have is an open debate on every single case of terror over the last decade in India.

When I am in Bombay, I always stay at a friend’s on Third Pasta Lane. Each afternoon I would walk out and see the Nariman House. I have wondered what the decrepit building was. I have always contrasted the drabness of the building with the colorful sign on the next building that announces Colaba Sweet House. The next time I won’t wonder. I will know that it was one of the places where the drama that inaugurated India’s renewed march towards fascism unfolded. Unless we act. Unless we act with speed and determination demanding transparency and accountability and a careful rewriting of the story of terror in India. Only a renewed movement can ensure that India doesn’t slide into the same state as post 9/11 USA.

P.S.

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