

1992 vs. 2008

## Mumbai's Charge of the Lightweight Brigade

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If you believe for a moment that the residents of Mumbai are angry about the recent terror attacks, then they have succeeded in fooling you. There is no anger; there is irritation. Their daily routines have been mucked up.

For those 60 hours when terrorists took hold of what have been constantly referred to as 'landmarks' of the city, they sat glued before their television sets. They saw the image of Indian wealth and power being destroyed by invisible men. They were not interested in those men. They were not interested in anything beyond the fact that these men- men who ate dry fruits, for pete's sake - had held five star hotels hostage.

No one was talking about the 58 people who died at the local train station or the 10 others who died at the hospital or the taxi driver whose vehicle was burnt and so was he. Or even the cops who took the bullets.

They may cry themselves hoarse at peace marches, they may cry themselves hoarse on panel discussions, they may cry themselves hoarse in petitions that sound like school essays, but their sensitivity is like froth on lager; it will settle down after a few sips.

They are basking in their newfound role as conscience keepers; the international press is watching global India in all its glory as they stand dressed as global citizens near the Gateway of India with black smoke rising over the dome of the Taj Mahal Hotel in the background. It is both symbol and saviour of their pathetic attempts at downward mobility. It is a counter-reaction. After all, the terrorist wore Versace, until now the uniform of their kind.

They audaciously claim that there is no time for resilience anymore; they won't take it. Resilience? They have been spitting it out, a sardonic sneer being the new expression. It is a sad sight, for the chauffeurs of the cars they drove up in, the person who ironed their clothes and the valet who waited on them till they were all set for their date with the candle-light dinner of sound bytes, all those minions had to show resilience. They had to travel by the local train to bring these people to the streets. This is resilience.

They can shudder as much as they want before that dome wrapped in smoke. Do they recall another dome? The one that was broken down with hammers by our own people, egged on by senior leaders?

Soon after December 6, 1992, and the demolition of the Babri Masjid, there was no such spontaneous expression of grief or anger. 900 people were killed in cold blood, hunted down because of the faith they were born in. Reports gave figures of more than 200,000 people, most of them Muslim, fleeing the city during the riots. Cops who took part in the death dance were promoted; no politician was asked to resign. In the subsequent revenge bomb blasts, orchestrated by an underworld don and not by the local Muslim population, unlike what happened in Gujarat in 2002, 250 people died.

Those who are railing against the government today had kept quiet then. Quiet at a time when the

government and the police had backed the local lumpens, our very own citizens.

They were not bothered because the areas targeted did not house their cocktail party circuit. Some did express disgust when they heard stories about the Muslim driver asked to remove his pants in the street to confirm his religion. They were disgusted by the sheer indelicacy but they had an ace up their sleeve - he was a mere driver.

Today, the people who would run down the elite are speaking up for them; they are all into rubbing shoulders and back-scratching. It is a limited edition utopia: our elite vs. their elite.

If you don't play their game, you are as bad as the terrorists. 'Condemn' is the catchword. I have refused to do so. One mainstream newspaper journalist wanted my opinion and said the same thing. He mentioned some liberals who were condemning. I said I condemn those liberals and I condemn the government of India. My views were not carried. I did not expect them to. I can hit out at the government only if I belong to one elite group. They are going to decide. They will constitute the citizens movement. Men and women who had never heard about such groups are now parroting the names of Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed.

One aging film star even said that this time India has become exposed to international terrorism. His utter ignorance did not strike anyone, for we have been blaming the outside hand, mainly Pakistan, for years. In effect, only because this time his people were the targets he has discovered such a phenomenon.

In 16 years nothing has changed. A week after this carnage, a flight attendant serving on a private airline was pointedly asked by a passenger what religion she belonged to. He spewed out, "Why the bloody hell are you Muslims doing this to our country?"

She calmly replied, "Sir, this is my country too."

He shot back, "I don't think so, because people from your community are behind these attacks."

She was on the verge of tears but said bravely, "Sorry Sir, they don't belong to India. They are not Indians."

I have had 16 years of practice, yet sometimes the tears flow; sometimes I am taken aback. We are being pushed into a corner unless we play the game of 'we are all one'. I call it a game because ever since that December there has been suspicion. My superficial elitism, an elitism I have fortunately never internalised, makes it easy for them to hit out differently. There is irritation that I am not the poor, illiterate Muslim that fits into their pigeonhole. There is disapproval that I don't dress up in standard Muslim clothes, or speak in a standard Muslim way.

I don't have a big business enterprise where I can flash secularism if I employ Hindus like Azim Premji does. I am not a film star like Shahrukh Khan who can happily claim a Pathan allegiance and will still be considered acceptable because he says cute things like he is a monkey entertaining people. I don't even have the good sense to join in token gestures of sympathy and denounce terrorism and talk about Islam as a religion of peace.

They are irritated because I do not quote anything from the Quran, but can bring up Shakespeare and Neruda and revel in Urdu poets like Faiz and Faraz.

In 1992-93, there were a few who had told me, "As truly secular people it is our duty to protect you Muslims."

I don't buy into their protection business. Therefore, the minute I open my mouth I become "that Muslim woman using the minority card". It does not strike them that I may not be safe myself, and it is rather dismissive to say I am having fun flaunting the minority status.

No paranoia here, yet I will be accused of it.

India's big legend, superstar Amitabh Bachchan, can show how disturbed he is and how afraid by saying that he has loaded his licensed pistol and keeps it under his pillow now. No prominent Muslim would be able to say that, so there is no question of someone like me even dreaming about a scenario of possessing a licensed gun.

Suketu Mehta wrote in The New York Times, "This is the problem, say the nativists. The city is just too hospitable. You let them in, and they break your heart." It is interesting that he uses a term like nativists at a time when he is hailing the wealthy 'outsiders' for the rich dreams they have sponsored.

He is buffering an exclusivist notion by showing concern about the cream of society. He is concerned about how the terrorists want people to keep out of Mumbai, which contradicts his nativist theory. He is concerned that cricket matches won't happen for a while. Does he remember that a local political party had dug the pitches and prevented any cricket match with Pakistan in the city?

He comes up with a rather insensitive analysis when he states, "In 1993, Hindu mobs burned people alive in the streets — for the crime of being Muslim in Mumbai. Now these young Muslim men murdered people in front of their families — for the crime of visiting Mumbai...Their drunken revelry, their shameless flirting, must have offended the righteous believers in the jihad."

For being a much-touted global citizen and an expatriate he seems to believe that it is kosher to make the Hindu-Muslim divide clear. (Incidentally, what is the connection between tourists and Hindus?) He ought to know there is a difference between Hindus and Hindutva groups and Muslims and Islamist goons. Somewhere it bothers him too, like it does the elite, that these goons were not bearded or wearing skull caps; they drank and made merry. They were so much like the young men in pubs in any part of the world.

Mumbai is a city of transaction but the free market can hardly be construed as breaking the barriers. If anything, it is most elitist. It is a thoroughly 'Show me the money' scenario and individualism prevails.

The privileged class is also a product, the creation of the 'manufacturing company'; we politely call it ethos.

Today's dissent is peripheral, not feral. It is cultivated in the factory of prototypes, assembly-line ideas that subsist on amnesia.

I shall always remember November 2008 and never forget December 1992. Surface scratches irritate, but don't last. I still have the anger from old wounds.

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## **P.S.**

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