

Mumbai 9/11

A friend of mine was registered at the Taj Hotel in Mumbai that night when the terrorists attacked and set it on fire killing many and holding others hostage inside. She was planning to spend that last evening in India there with her two little children, but *kismet* intervened in the shape of an enterprising young woman from a car company.

The lady convinced my friend to forego the luxurious hotel in favor of one by the Airport, from where my friend had to catch an early morning flight back to America. The argument- why fight the Mumbai traffic when mostly the things she wanted to do were in the direction of the airport anyway? Take our car instead, roam around and come back, said the lady, as she called the Taj hotel and managed to get the cancellation fee waived as well. My friend agreed: A simple decision that probably saved her as well as her children's lives that fateful night, which Indians are now referring to as their 9/11.

Why is this one incident so much different than all the hundreds of bomb blasts that have happened in various places in India over the past few years? Why has this shaken Mumbai and even the rest of the country that much more? Why is it different from the time when I went right back to work in that same commercial center of Delhi where the day before a bomb blast has occurred, not even concerned about my safety?

Perhaps, just like everyone else in India, my fatalism always kicked in at those moments: Whatever will be will be- why worry about it? Yesterday was yesterday and today is today. Like the Hotel-wallah told my friend as he gave her the car to go across Mumbai the next morning: That was last night madam. What's happened has happened. Go on!

And yet, there is something really different today in the psyche of the average Indian, than say it was a few years ago. For one, the India that settled comfortably on its *charpoy*s at nine or ten in the night with the lights out is now awake on a twenty four hour cycle. For another, the government controlled news station that broadcasted screened news at set times during the day is replaced by a frenzy of round the clock news channels all competing for attention.

Yes, disgustingly just like the sensational and sometimes hard-core press here in America, those Indian journalists are also sticking their microphones in front of people who have just been shot at or lost somebody to ask: So, how do you feel? And yet, revolting as it is, that same action is making an entire country become aware of actually what's happening on the ground, as well as what is not.

An entire nation watched the hotel burning live, and Mumbai-wallahs stood outside as commandos descended on its roof from a helicopter, but those same people were also well aware as to how late that action really was, and how many lives it had cost. They heard that only ten terrorists had brought an entire throbbing city to a standstill, killed more than a hundred people while the police and the government proved completely ineffective. They saw their government in action, or rather in inaction.

The press has put not just the terrorists but the Indian government in focus as well, and of course the victims, who are this time not just the Hindus or the Muslims, but of many different nationalities, including the American and the British. And that is the even more unfortunate part. For the first time in India, foreigners have been targeted, bringing outside wars inside the country.

And Indians have been attacked in the heart of their financial capital, in the middle of an economy that's bringing change to many, and they refuse to cower down. Despite everything that this incident intended, the spotlight is ultimately not on the terrorists or even the victims- it is on the Mumbai-wallahs and their old unbeatable spirit. And, it is on the Indians with a new sense of self, who refuse to become targets of either inept governments or terrorists, and are demanding accountability- a new phenomenon in this old country. And who are fatalists no more, choosing instead to define their own destiny.