

Lessons from 26/11

The darkest cloud with a thick silver lining

Mumbai is a symbol of the incredible energy and optimism that defines India in the 21st century . . . The Taj has been the symbol of the strength and the resilience of the Indian people . . . The resolve and resilience of the Indian people stood in stark contrast to the savagery of the terrorists

President Barack Obama

On 26 November 2008 (26/11), 10 terrorists representing the Pakistani extremist outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), travelled over 500 miles through the Arabian Sea from Karachi to Mumbai, and laid siege to parts of India's 'maximum city' with nearly two crore residents. The attack, planned with military precision, killed 166 innocent people and injured over 300. Amid resounding gunfire in the heart of South Mumbai, Operation Black Tornado, led by the National Security Guards (NSG) of the government of India, neutralised the terrorists. Nine of the terrorists were killed, and one, Mohammed Ajmal Kasab, was caught alive while trying to escape.

Of all the places targeted in Mumbai, the one where the fight with the terrorists lasted the longest was at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel. Like Opera House to Sydney, and the Eiffel Tower to Paris, for over 113 years, the Taj has been a prominent symbol of Mumbai. Even before the Gateway of India was built in 1924, the hotel was the most outstanding structure on the Bombay coastline. In attacking the Taj and trying to destroy its century-old heritage wing, especially the historic dome, LeT wanted to leave a visible scar on the success story of India Inc that was epitomised by one of the oldest institutions synonymous with Mumbai and its history. Over 1,200 guests and 600 employees were inside the hotel for functions as diverse as a high profile wedding reception, a Bohra Muslim wedding, Unilever CEOs Global Meet with 30 senior leaders from Unilever worldwide, and two other corporate meetings. The Indian, Chinese, Japanese – indeed all the restaurants – were full that Wednesday evening, when the first gunshots were heard.

There are three lessons that companies and institutions can learn from the Taj in the light of their response to the terror attack. Firstly, the way in which Ratan Tata and the entire management of the Taj, handled the aftermath. It was the most mature response to an event of that magnitude. What left most people spellbound was that within three weeks of the attack, the Taj once again opened its doors to welcome guests. It was symbolic of defiance coupled with courage. Secondly,



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the response towards their employees. Typically, when two-thirds of a hotel is closed down, any organisation would retrench some part of its employee-base, as large as 1,800 people. However, the Taj didn't. Not a single person was retrenched. Instead, the period was used to further train the employees and raise service levels. Many were transferred to other Taj properties so that they could continue their good work. Lastly, the manner in which the Tatas decided to take care of the families of the deceased, not only the employees but also from the public at large, was beyond normal expectations.

These lessons go far beyond a win-win solution or strategy. They were far beyond any economic or even ethical considerations. They were in the realm of morality, and bordered upon spirituality. An acknowledgement of this came from a person no less than the President of the US. In 2010, during his historic 10-day visit to India, President Barack Obama chose the Taj as his residence in Mumbai to show his solidarity with victims of 26/11. During the visit, he said, "To those who have asked whether this is intended to send a message, my answer is simply, absolutely!"

Beyond the call of duty

The employees of the Taj went way beyond the call of duty to save as many guests as possible. Krishna Kumar, then VC, Taj Hotels, remarked that all employees knew the exit routes. However, it was beyond his comprehension, that in spite of that, not a single employee gave in to the natural survival instinct and left the premises. Karambir Kang, then GM, Taj Mumbai, called them the real heroes of the Taj. Even before the NSG commandos could formulate a strategy to safely evacuate the guests out of the premises, the employees had used their prudence and ensured that they were in safe areas, until help arrived.

Chef Hemant Oberoi's valiant team formed a human chain to protect 60–70 guests while escorting them from Wasabi, the Japanese restaurant, down the spiral steps into the kitchen, and out. Thomas Varghese (head waiter), Vijay Banja (executive chef), Hemant Talim, Kaizad Kamdin and Zaheen Mateen (chefs), and Rajan Kamble (engineer), employees serving the hotel in different capacities for many decades, voluntarily faced the line of fire while evacuating guests through the exit routes of the labyrinthine Taj. They laid down their lives by blocking the gunmen's path, and were spewed with bullets from those vengeful weapons.

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Mallika Jagad, the 24-year-old banquet manager for the Unilever event, and her team, used their extraordinary presence of mind, switched off the lights and bolted the doors of the banquet room where the event was on. For over a dozen hours, she and her team took care of the guests who were ducking and squatting below the tables. Finally, in the early hours of morning, they were rescued by the fire crew through the windows. And who can forget Karambir Kang, the 40-year-old GM of the Taj? His heroic leadership of the hotel, not only got it the Best Overseas Business Hotel Award, but also universal appreciation for making the best possible efforts to save the lives of thousands of guests, even when his own family, wife Neeti and sons Uday and Samar, were getting asphyxiated on the sixth floor of the Taj. "You know, at that time, we didn't know the magnitude of the attack, and the number of gunmen. Were they four or 10? But in spite of that, in the given circumstances, we just took the right decisions with whatever knowledge we had. We all felt responsible for each other and for our guests. It's not that somebody was telling them to do whatever they did. But, independently, in different pockets of the hotel, they all acted the same way. It was remarkable." He believed that what happened that day was a tangible expression of the employees' belief that the Taj was their family. The place had given them livelihood, made their lives, educated their kids, and enabled them to build their homes. "The Taj is like a temple. It's revered by the staff."

"The reason my people created those human chains and essentially put themselves in between the terrorists and the guests was that they considered this hotel as their home. You cannot come to my house and you cannot harm my guests because they are my family. It was a direct manifestation of the Indian philosophy that the guest is God," said Raymond Bickson, then group MD, who was himself stuck inside his office for nearly 16 hours. Ratan Tata, Krishna Kumar, and all the senior people from the company were standing helplessly on the pavements outside not knowing what was going on inside, or how many people had been killed. Hundreds of employees from other shifts had flocked to the venue, and were squatting on nearby roads.

Like family

Post 26/11, a lot of requests for help came in from people, in hospitals, and the Taj was

paying for this. There were some people who had nobody to pay their bills. There was this dilemma as to whether the patient was connected to the tragedy at the Taj in any way. At that time, Krishna Kumar walked into the crisis room set-up to handle emergencies with a message from Ratan Tata: the Taj should not distinguish while helping people, whether security forces, police, fire service, hotel employees, guests of the Taj or the general public, whether killed or wounded. Tata had decided to form a trust to pay for everybody injured in the city during 26/11.

The Taj Public Service Welfare Trust was announced on 15 December 2008, only 17 days after the disaster. Besides IHCL, the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and Sir Ratan Tata Trust committed a significant initial contribution to the newly formed trust. Ratan Tata himself was a part of the board of trustees that included Krishna Kumar and Raymond Bickson, among others. Tata instructed the team to go to every hospital where the injured were being treated. If the hospital hadn't taken care of the bills, the Taj would do the needful. Besides a number of other relief measures, the company decided that the families of the Taj employees, who died during the attack, would be paid their deceased members' salaries for the rest of their lives, as well as all medical benefits, and education for dependents up to the age of 24.

"We may have been knocked down, but not out," Ratan Tata avowed. To communicate a message resonating this spirit, Taj ran a three-part communication campaign 'Taj Forever', which aimed at healing, moving forward, and for communicating to the world that 'Taj is Forever'. The weekend before the Taj was reopened, a staff-only programme was organised where spiritual leaders from all major faiths conducted prayers and healing rituals. For 45 minutes, the names of all 1,700 employees of the Taj Mumbai were read out to appreciate the unity with which they stood behind the company. "Just to hear all our names echo in that hall was so reaffirming. It united us in a way that went deeper than the usual team-building programmes," reminisced Bickson. The next day, 1,000 people, including guests, friends and family applauded for 15 minutes, tears streaming down many faces, as the 540 Taj employees who were on duty on 26/11 strode proudly through the lobby on a red carpet. They were the real heroes of a real adventure – the game called life. ♦

