

# Making sense of loss: Situating the Mumbai attacks of 26/11 in the context of altruistic suicide homicide

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## ABSTRACT

*A peculiar irony characterizes the perception of global terrorism—in the strong penchant to flavor it with ethno or religious centric biases or in the disavowal of any auxiliary circumstance leading up to the sporadic incidence of violence. This paper analyzes the Mumbai attacks of November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from the context of altruistic suicide/homicide. The waging of war against anonymous targets in Mumbai was by all means impersonal. It could be connected to an aftermath of several factors: Kashmir, homegrown terrorism, backlash of sectarian groups or yet another manifestation of already hostile Indo-Pak relationships. The spectacle of terror that was life telecast by national and global media led to a sequel of reactions including a follow-up of Indo-Pak mutual accusations, evoking of national sentiments and analytical ruptures in south Asian intelligentsia in making sense of the loss. This paper situates the Mumbai attacks of 26/11 in the theoretical discourse on sociology of terrorism by (i) providing a scholastic definition of terrorism and its corresponding attributes that distinguishes terrorism from other sporadic acts of violence, (ii) reflects on the context of terrorism with reference to altruism as in the classical Durkheimian tradition and (iii) analytically moves beyond the classical paradigm to redefine the terror trails of 26/11 within the emerging definitions of altruistic-suicide-homicide.*

**Keywords**-Terrorism, Altruism, Altruistic Suicide Homicide, Kashmir

## 1. Introduction

Several years back in Kolkata, India in 1999, I had a very indirect experience with terrorism. I was acquiring training as a crime reporter for a vernacular and emergent television channel. As a part of my ongoing journalistic education, I interviewed the family members of Taupa Debnath, a flight attendant on Indian Airlines Flight 814, originally scheduled to land in New Delhi en route from Katmandu. The flight was hijacked and re-routed to Kandahar in Afghanistan. For the first time I was acquainted with the agony of a middle class Bengali family whose only affiliation to the entire political turmoil of the hijack (associated with the demand and subsequent release of three members of Harkat –e- Mujaheedeen) ("C814 Hijack", 2009) was by virtue of their daughter's profession. The negotiations later led to the release of the members of the organization from police custody, return of the passengers after an ordeal of almost a week ("C814 Hijack", 2009) and the untimely demise of the newly wed Rupin Katiyal, who stood out as somewhat defiant (Venkateshan & Subramaniam, 2000).

Almost a decade later on a pre Thanksgiving evening in Fort Worth, Texas the news flash of a South Asian Radio network absolutely changed the mood of an awaited dinner with international students. Mumbai, in India, was under siege by a group of militants and it was best left to everybody's guess what was at stake, the magnitude of the casualty or attribution of responsibility. Soon the international dinner turned into an indistinct experience of an otherwise delicious spread, small talk and a silent camaraderie with an Indian Muslim student from Mumbai. Both of us hailed from metropolitan India, were born into different faiths and were equally unable to grasp the real meaning of what actually happened back home. The only obvious was her reluctance to discuss the incident and given the fact I knew how soon religious-national sentiments would be attached to the attacks, preferred to talk to her about her plans for Christmas break instead. This is the peculiar irony that characterizes the perception of global terrorism—in the strong penchant to flavor it with ethno or religious centric biases or in the disavowal of any auxiliary circumstance leading up to the sporadic incidence of violence. This paper analyzes the Mumbai attacks of November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from the context of altruistic suicide/homicide.

### 1.1 26/11: A Brief Synopsis

On November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008 about ten gunmen initiated a sequel of violence in six different places in the city of Mumbai—The Taj Palace and Oberoi Trident (city's five stars), The Chatrapati Shivaji railway stations, Nariman House, Café Leopold and Cama Hospital ("Mumbai Attacks," 2008). The BBC provides a detailed account of the

sequel of events. The spectacle of terror was quite unique in its own way, analogous to a cinematic collage of juxtaposed occurrences. During dinner time at the Taj with about 450 residents, militants stormed inside the hotel open firing on the diners, while flames from one of the levels could be observed from outside ("Mumbai Attacks," 2008). The Taj is a 150 year old emblem of hospitality in the city. Simultaneously at the Oberoi, about 400 people with a seeming resemblance to 'tourists' were also rounded up. On a different occasion in the railway station at Chatrapati Shivaji, people waiting for the local commuter train were gunned down. Nariman House in Mumbai shelters Jewish residents ("Mumbai Attacks," 2008). The building was initially taken over by the gunmen and subsequent killings followed. Next in the sequel of attack was Leopold Café, frequented by foreign nationals ("Mumbai Attacks," 2008). The mayhem is unique in its character because of unprecedented feature—it affected individuals from all walks of life: passengers waiting for a train, middle and upper middle classes in a five star setting, tourists caught in the cross fire and religious denominations besides Hindus that have had hostile relationships with Islamic militant organizations. Comparable to recent acts of global terror, targets include places with a high population turnover during specific hours. The three day long operation resulted in the deaths of about 200 people from different locations and obtained media attention from all over the world. Besides Azam Amir Qasab whose Pakistani nationality has been confirmed ("Mumbai Attacks," 2008), all of the other nine gunmen were shot in the operation. The gunmen were all between the ages of 20 and 28 ("Mumbai Attacks," 2008). In a turn of events Indian Muslims refused to give a burial to the militants in strong rejection of terrorism in the name of Islam (Ahmed, 2008).

### **1.2 Responses**

The attacks led to a sequel of Indo-Pak accusations, evoking of national sentiments and repeated criticism of Indian government's failure to detect the terror plan or free the hostages in a timely fashion. There have been some linkages established between Mumbai terror attacks and Kashmir. In her (in)famous statement "9 is not 11" Booker prize winner Arundhati Roy maintains that '26/11' is not just connected to India's strong U.S. ally post '9/11', ("Arundhati Roy", 2009) but the entire history of struggle that has been a concomitant of the nation's recent political past. Ignoring the historical struggle that situates the attacks makes it artificially momentous, which according to the author is a dishonest portrayal of the situation. Roy also criticizes the Indian media's biased coverage of the glamorous aspect of the attacks and the relentless focus on the twin hotels under siege ("Arundhati Roy", 2009). Writers including Salman Rushdie (2009) retain a very distinct perspective. Rushdie, in a post analytical discussion of the Mumbai attacks, brings in other relevant issues including Kashmir. On one hand the author believes it is hard to ignore the plight of Kashmiri's in India-(in being forcible converts due to the efforts of radical Islamic organizations or in Indian government's routine vigilance which also probes into their alleged links to terror organizations). However Rushdie maintains, an act of terror is a class apart. In contrast to the perspective of writer/activist Arundhati Roy, Rushdie posits that it is important to disassociate the Mumbai attacks from social injustice issues experienced by minority population in India, including denizens of Kashmir ("Salman Rushdie", 2009). The author believes it is absolutely important to retain a line of distinction between a historic battle and sporadic act of terror which is an effort to 'mediavilize' the modern era and regress it into a stasis characterized by religious fundamentalism ("Salman Rushdie", 2009). The perspectives of these two important media personalities personify only one of the few analytical ruptures in south Asian intelligentsia, subsequent to the attack.

## **2. Theoretical Overview**

### **2.1 Contextualizing 26/11 within a Definition of Terror**

Terrorism can be defined as an act of violence perpetrated on unarmed civilians with a particular motive in mind. (Thio, 2010). Cronin (2004) discusses how providing a definition of terrorism is hard given its subjective orientation. The authors maintain that the targets of terror are not simply the immediate victims but "governments, publics or constituents among whom the terrorists hope to endanger a reaction" (Cronin, 2004 p. 3). Overall the author enumerates several additional characteristics of terrorism: for one it is politically motivated, second it is non- state endorsed in its apparent disposition irrespective of economic, political or military support. Third there is a rationale to attacking innocent individuals—thus it should not be equated with inadvertent manslaughter (Cronin, 2004). Other scholars argue that the presence of violence and a socio-political agenda are two essential attributes of terrorism (Enders & Sandler, 2009). Three additional aspects also characterize an act of violence as an act of terror—(i) the presence of the *victims* (innocent by virtue of their presence in the wrong place rather than an attack on a military base), (ii) involvement of *perpetrators*—these are individuals or groups but not the state (the idea of state sponsored terrorism is separate entailing direct or

indirect support to proliferate violence) and (iii) the notion of the *audience* who are not simply onlookers within the immediate periphery of attack but geographically dispersed readers of the situation (Enders & Sandler, 2009).

When put into perspective, the Mumbai attacks conforms to afore-specified characteristics. For one it is an act perpetrated on unarmed civilians with a particular sociopolitical agenda (though indistinct). Second, the reaction triggered was not specific to onlookers but by virtue of global media coverage dispersed the execution of carnage to a worldwide audience. The act in itself does not involve the role of a nation state even though Pakistani citizenship of the militants or the role of the state in its failure to curb the activities has been questioned (“India Urges More”, 2009). There was no unintentional motive behind killing the victims at the Taj palace, Oberoi Trident, Nariman House, Chatrapaji Shivaji station, Café Leopold or Cama Hospital. Those dead turned out to be at a wrong place at a wrong time. The agony of loss does not end with the victimization of those who perished but also those that survived to carry the burden of an appalling memory for the rest of their lives. The perpetrators do not represent a nation state but organizations including Lashkar e Taiba have been connected to the attack (Khan, 2009). Given that the Mumbai attacks conform to the widely accepted and daunting image of terror, the persistent question is what does it take for some twenty something’s to initiate a trail of terror with thorough cognizance of the fact that none might come out of the hostilities alive?

### **2.2 Situating 26/11 in the Context of Altruistic Homicide/Suicide**

The instance of Nasir, Soheb, Farad Ullah, Baba Abdul Rehman, Abdul Rehman Chota, Ismal Khan, Babar Imran and Nasir or the perpetrators who died during police combat (“India Police Name”, 2009) brings with it many unanswered questions. Pape (2005) provides a definition of suicide terrorism in order to distinguish it from ‘demonstrative terrorism’ (with hostage, hijacking or explosion announced in advance to warrant attention) and ‘destructive terrorism’ (coercing the opponent with the threat of death). Suicide terrorism is the most aggressive of all kinds since the attackers do not expect to come out of the attack alive. Such sporadic methods are employed in car bombs, suicide vests or colliding an aircraft into a structure (Pape, 2005). The Mumbai attacks could be compared to Goldstein’s 1994 attack on Muslim praying at a mosque where he continued shooting till he was taken down. Similarly, the Mumbai attackers persisted in their combat to hold up until they were taken down by law enforcement. In this regard there is a suicidal dimension attached to their act. Given that terrorism is armed attack inflicted upon unarmed civilians, individuals, who lost their lives in the cross fire between authorities and attackers, do not typically fit the profile of terror victims. Yet the hazy account of a ritualistic carnage makes it hard to enumerate who died from sporadic shooting or from the cross fire.

### **2.3 The Broader Context of Altruistic Suicide**

The concept of altruistic suicide or taking one’s life because of excessive integration and commitment towards one’s societal values could be traced to the works of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim provides a distinction between different kinds of suicide—egoistic, altruistic and anomic (Durkheim, 1897). Egoistic suicide is a consequence of an increasing sense of isolation from society as per say while anomic suicide is entrenched in the loss of a sense of purpose amidst chaotic and transitional social crises. Altruistic suicide is different from the aforementioned categories. Sacrifices which entail the loss of life are provoked from a sense of commitment to higher social goals (Durkheim, 1897). The origination of societies that exemplify this form of suicide needs to be taken into consideration. Individual personalities within these societies are of minimal importance. Collective life takes precedence to an extent that the individual life becomes absorbed in it (Durkheim, 1897). A certain degree of homogeneity in “ideas, feelings and occupations” (p. 238) needs to be retained which also calls for persistent collective supervision over ways of life. While in egoistic societies an individual is only compelled by his own feelings, under altruism, he is united with the social process. The social should not be looked upon as a continuation of the individual phenomenon, but that which is irreducible to an individual, and when reducible only at a very elementary level (Durkheim, 1897). However because the sacrifice of life associated with altruism is binding on an individual it is alternatively termed as “obligatory altruistic suicide” (p. 239). Such obligatory recourse to ending one’s life is not the only form of altruistic death—it could also be indirectly attached to a sense of religious-cultural bravado beyond the realms of what is otherwise construed as petty existence. This would be an example of voluntary altruistic suicide. In yet another context the decision to end one’s life might be propelled by a sake of sacrifice only (Durkheim, 1897). This third instance situate the act of suicide in a religious and metaphysical context. However Durkheim maintains that religion should not be looked upon as an ultimate source of origination of these ideas but is often the product of social environment. Thus if a religious tenet of thought nurtures group identity over individual life, the social environment or sub-environment in question does

not place optimal value on the individuals. Durkheim disassociates the military from direct altruism although personnel lose their lives in line of duty (Durkheim, 1897). As the author puts it-- "Death had to be imposed by society as a duty, or some point of honor had to be at stake or at the very least, some unpleasant event had to make life worthless in the eyes of the victim" (Durkheim, 1897, p. 241).

In the context of our current project, the linkage between altruism and societal *hara kiri* is more direct. It has to be reiterated that the real rationale behind Mumbai attacks is still open to controversy, but there have been obvious linkages established between the situation in Kashmir and the current attacks as a continuation of the long standing strife between India and Pakistan (Wikinson, 2008). The state of Kashmir sits at the center of a struggle between India and Pakistan over which 40,000 lives have been lost since 1980. Most young Kashmiris prefer an independent Kashmir rather than being a part of either of the two nation states. Some of the recent surfacing of militant insurgencies in Kashmir could be attributed to the resignation of Pervez Musharraf and Zardari's taking over the office (more so because of his liberal stances in trying to improve Indo Pak relationships) (Wikinson, 2008). Beyond the immediacy of any political rationale, it is important to reiterate that the Mumbai terror perpetrators were tied to an intense sense of social crusade that propelled their violent agenda.

The waging of war against anonymous targets in the Mumbai attacks of 2008 was by all means impersonal. It could be connected to an aftermath of several factors: Kashmir, homegrown terrorism, backlash because of India's recent U.S. allegiance, Pakistan's recent conciliatory stand with India after Zardari or yet another manifestation of already hostile Indo-Pak relationships. Overall Mumbai attacks can communicate a potent sub cultural message against diplomatic appeasement. Irrespective, unless the intent in the attacks can be clearly delineated, and one singular organization or amalgam can be held responsible, the 'commitment' toward the higher end which situates Mumbai attacks in the context of altruism cannot be adequately articulated. If it were to be an amalgam of all the aforementioned concepts put together, Mumbai attacks could be situated in the context of a cosmic war which translates the crises into the realm of higher conflict between good and evil. This transcendence of terror to a higher realm in general has important consequences—it creates a very interesting dichotomy between presence of faith and lack thereof, cultivates the imagery of the nemesis in human minds and ideologically exploits global religious histories to justify what would otherwise be an insular philosophy ( Juergensmeyer, 2000).

#### **2.4 26/ 11 and Altruistic Homicide – Suicide**

Sadri (2007) applies the Durkheimian concept to provide a detailed analysis of altruism in the context of recent world terrorism. The idea of altruistic sacrifice and subsequent social praise, while absent in western cultures, can still be observed in parts of the non west. An example of this would be the Buddhist self immolations in Vietnam in 1963. Altruistic suicide includes the forfeit of a human life (one's own) for a societal purpose and thus employs "communicative suffering" (Sadri, 2007 p. 35).

Sadri (2007) extends the concept to include altruistic homicide, which he believes can be applied to both Western and Non Western parlance in the context of war, execution and ideological assassinations. There are numerous instances where the enemy is exterminated and yet one's own life is not lost in the process. "Killing without dying" (p. 36) according to the author, stuns the enemy with optimal damage (Sadri 2007). This is what distinguishes altruistic suicide from altruistic homicide. While altruistic suicide includes components of martyrdom, heroic suicide and self sacrifice-- altruistic homicide entails ideas of war, execution, ideological assassination and terrorism both in western and non western context (Sadri, 2007). The idea of altruistic 'suicide-homicide' combines the two ideas to include military suicide missions and terrorist suicide operations. The former include the Japanese Kamikaze attacks on allied forces during World War II and the other more explicit face of global terror can be observed in the Tamil Tiger Bombings, Chechnan attacks and Al Qaeda involvement 9/11 (Sadri, 2007). Altruistic suicide homicide thus provides a theoretical framework for comprehending violent operations where the perpetrator while pledged to a social cause might commit indiscriminate killings, but does not intend on emerging from the designed massacre alive. The act might be hailed as martyrdom by a subsection of population but by virtue of its assault on individuals other than the perpetrator, is not an act of valor typically associated with altruism and in this case pure altruistic suicide.

It is inconclusive whether the militants in Mumbai attacks expected to come out of the cross fire alive. Yet given that they planted themselves in hotels which were rounded up by Indian authorities, nurturing expectations of a release seems dismal. In a peculiar turn of events Qasab was the only gunman who was arrested from the attack alive. In an unpredictable turn of events, Qasab fled the scene of crime and was caught at a checkpoint, when he

shot two policemen (one of whom died later from injuries) (Shot Mumbai Policeman, 2009). Prior to this dramatic turn of events the gunmen open fired on the media and the civilians after which they were taken over at a nearby Mumbai beach (Pinglay, 2008). Despite Qasab's initial claims of no involvement in the killings, photographer Sebastian D Souza identified Qasab as one of the gunmen at the hotels (Pinglay, 2009). The imprecise classification of Qasab's action as an act of attempted escape or possible re-initiation of a killing rampage until death, makes it hard to classify the action as either pure altruistic homicide, or altruistic suicide-homicide. In addition the fact that there could be potential allies of the attackers who were probably still operative on Indian soil, and who would have aided the get away of the perpetrators contributes to the analytical doubt.

There is yet another important aspect to the idea of altruistic suicide-homicide applicable to the Mumbai attacks of 2008—the less discussed aspect of terror combat which includes several of the police authorities who had to initially intervene prior to the Indian military's involvement. This includes anti-terrorism chief Hemant Karkare, who along with other key officers in Mumbai police also lost their lives (Pinglay, 2008). Of the 26 that were injured during the initial night of the attack, 14 succumbed to injuries—that ironically is a higher number than the number of gunmen taken down. In stark contrast to the 'named' gunmen who were refused a decent burial, Asok Kamte, Vijay Salaskar or Sandeep Unnikrishnan were hailed as local and regional heroes (Pinglay, 2008). Irrespective of the high stakes involved, the BBC reports that "Many of Mumbai's police officers and constables have not taken a break or gone home since the attacks began on Wednesday night" (Pinglay, 2008). This relentless commitment to save other lives at the cost of endangering one's own is also a classic example of altruistic suicide homicide.

### 3. Conclusion

#### 3.1 And thus making Sense of Loss

Altruism makes partial sense in the context of the Mumbai attacks. For one Durkheim maintains that religious origination of altruism should not be misinterpreted because religious conviction in itself is a product of the host environment or sub environment. It is very important to embed this message in the consciousness of political and religious labeling. The host setting that has buttressed the terror plan, is a representation of a exclusive thought process that transcends terror to the level of a cosmic struggle. It does not correspond to a broader religious stance (even though religion is misplaced to justify terror). This sense of altruism where collective cause is given eminence over individual life depicts a belief sub-system where individual distinctiveness is inconsequential (unless escalated to martyrdom). Yet the context of altruism and 26/11 is half explored because of the nebulous nature of the political message, refusal of responsibility or the half realized intent of attacks.

Mumbai attack of 26/11 is indeed an elaborate ritualistic exhibition of terrorism. It involves a multitude of innocent victims erased in a matter of minutes. The perpetrators are not directly state endorsed—in the post attack scenario Pakistan was reluctant to be associated with the magnitude of the incident, amidst allegations from the Indian government (Plett, 2008). Counter allegations from Pakistan include Indian government's failure to detect the plans of the attack or failure to adequately address factionalism within its own demographic (Plett, 2008). Interestingly, in 2012, Zabiuddin Ansari was arrested in India in being the mastermind of the attacks—Ansari was initially resident of Maharashtra, India before leaving for Pakistan and then Saudi Arabia ("Mumbai Attacks Planner", 2012). Escalating attacks to 'state' based involvement has two possible outcomes: it either intensifies an already volatile situation to a potential wartime crises or trivializes its importance by being subsumed into yet another chapter of already existing trail of hostilities.

Violence within the nation defines some of India's recent political turmoil including issues related to Khalistan, Gurkhaland, ULFA upsurges, LTTE and then Kashmir among others. Since the early 1980's more than 40,000 have lost their lives from violence in Kashmir (Wilkinson, 2008). Yet it is 26/11 that captivates global attention since the attacks epitomize the recent pinnacle of atrocities condensed within approximately 72 hours (and reproduced repeatedly on virtual time).

There are few important themes that emerge from this analytical discourse. For one an attack of terror warrants global condemn and cooperation (even when national prejudice and sentiments of nations including Pakistan might be at stake). Or yet the spiral of violence and mutual allegations reinitiate the cycle of terror. Second, the

broader context of politics needs to be taken into account. In this regard the voice of the subaltern Kashmiries, in their rebuff of terror and experiences of atrocity needs to be heard and attended to: For now the onus of responsibility also lies with the Indian government, since Kashmir is officially a part of the nation. Second the Pakistani context beyond recent reference to terror needs to be examined. The agony of a Pakistani national in expressing "Everybody's out to get us" (Plett, 2009) obviously should evoke understanding if not empathy.

The role of the media in its biased coverage of facts also creates additional queries. For one, no one reports a count on the possible number of Muslims who were military personnel, policemen or victims of attacks who fought relentlessly to save lives or died from the killings. Cornish (2008) notes that one of the most important agendas of the gunmen was to get noticed through their spectacle of bloodshed--the round the clock coverage by the media almost aided the objective. The author reiterates that recent times of "celebrity terrorism" is what provides more meaning and intent to the action of the perpetrators than anything else (Cornish, 2008). This trend of biased media coverage or selling of hard news has qualified to be one of the recent channels of communicating terror.

In a recent visit to India in December, the flight was rerouted through Mumbai. I met an educated and young voice of the nation whose resentment at the Indian government's failure to step up and take military action following the attack, was apparent. It would be hard to look beyond the immediacy of the situation--since the recent memories were disturbingly entrenched within Mumbai's denizens. This ran a caution in my mind--terror accomplishes exactly that. It triggers reactive exercise and failure to comprehend the broader perspective.

It has been four years and a different thanksgiving since the Mumbai attacks. A few days back Qasab, the only surviving perpetrator of the Mumbai killings was executed in India amidst controversy of overwhelming support for the hanging as reported in the social media on one hand ("Indian Twitter Users", 2012), and India's stance on death penalty on the other (Biswas, 2012). Since 2004, Qasab's was the only execution.

With respect to those lost forever and those who survived to recall the dreaded memories, here lies an afterthought: just like a universal definition of terror is an imperative, it is equally important to articulate the importance of human life. In this regard, it is essential to understand that the social is an amalgam of individuals and therefore either mass killings with/without suicidal sacrifice cannot be justified under any pretext. That undermines the value of life even when the perspective of otherness/minorities/marginal, both within a nation and in the global continuum are taken into account.

For Indians the death through execution of the only surviving perpetrator of Mumbai massacre was a closure to the horrors experienced. The loss of a pivotal life seemed like a timely appeasement in exchange of the loss of so many more. Retributive justice thus celebrated its triumph and social psyche made its peace.

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