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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **The Vulnerability of Heritage Spaces: Lessons from Mumbai**

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*As citizens of Mumbai pick up the pieces, the horrific attacks provide lessons for governments and security forces, specifically so for Singapore. However, instead of juxtaposing it within the issues of terror or inter-state tensions, the Mumbai event is telling of the value heritage spaces play in anchoring the community's identity as well as their sense of security.*

AS CITIZENS of Mumbai pick up the pieces after the horrific attacks, the event provides instructive lessons for governments and security forces, specifically so for Singapore. While the issue has become entangled with the tenuous India-Pakistan relationship, it has also become the latest case study for security forces around the world. Professor Bruce Hoffman from George Washington University was quoted: "I believe this will become the new popular terrorist tactic since no police force in the world is prepared for ... such an attack." Others have likened the Mumbai attacks as "India's 9/11", and not surprisingly so, due to the similarities involved. One example would be the unexpectedness of the methodical attack on important urban landmarks.

### **The Value of Heritage Spaces**

However, the Mumbai attacks should not only be juxtaposed with events of the past or within the domains of terrorism and political rivalry. The strategically-planned attacks were intentionally meant to invade the esteemed domains of the The Taj Mahal Palace and Tower Hotel. The Taj, as it is commonly referred to, is an iconic structure in the Mumbai landscape. Opened in 1903, it is steep in historical value and represents India's opulent heritage to the inhabitants of Mumbai. It is in essence, an embodiment of Mumbai located within the heart of the city.

Spaces of heritage are valued sites for nation-states. Preserved in their former glory to demonstrate old-world charm, their iconism takes a prized spot in the citizen's imagination. Harvested as symbols of pride and identity, they are used as vital nation-building tools to facilitate the linearity of the nation's history, linking its past, present and future. The Taj hotel was one such symbol. Preserved and restored to its former glory, it stood majestically at a central corner of Southern Mumbai, a towering figure in the city centre and a distinguished icon amidst the new-world developments in Mumbai.

Likewise for Singapore, the government has invested good money into the preservation of heritage spaces because of their functional contributions to the aesthetics, texture and flavour of the nation. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the National Heritage Board (NHB) and the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) are examples of the broad network put in place to ensure the preservation of historical sites, such as the Joo Chiat and Chinatown precinct, and structures such as the Raffles Hotel, City Hall and the Istana, to name a few. The PMB lists explicitly that the aim of preservation is to safeguard monuments as enduring historical landmarks because they provide a vital link to Singapore's past. It is the preservation of history within these national 'totems' that anchors our concept of our nation and our national experiences.

### **Wounded Spaces and Psychological Resilience**

Here it is interesting to note how the despair expressed by citizens as they watched the roofs of The Taj Hotel burn, quickly shifted to an expression of strength and resolve. Headlines declared The Taj as a "rallying symbol of defiance", as it stood its ground and held firm while explosions shook the building to its core. It became the symbol of Mumbai's resilience, and eventually of the nation as the home minister declared "how the idea of India will triumph".

Thus, the simple existence of a symbolic building and how it remains standing in times of crisis has incredible effects on the psychological resilience of the community. This is because of our visually-inclined nature and aesthetically-intensive culture which require the presence of visual totems to ascertain our sense of security in sights and environments that are familiar to us. Thus, our environment and the presence of these heritage spaces are markers which we absorb in the construction of our identities as citizens. The mind so accustomed to familiarity and comfort of 'the everyday' environment, experiences a severe sense of loss if these structures were to vanish from sight.

Here, 9/11 is instructive: as the two mammoth twin towers fell, the devastating sense of *loss* was indescribable among citizens. The subsequent display of *Tribute in Light*, a memorial by various artists consisting two pillars of light shining vertically up into the night sky where the Twin Towers once stood, was an ethereal and aesthetically comforting image to reproduce and refresh the presence of the towers to mitigate the sense of loss. Thus, the fact that the Taj remains standing, together with the parallel sentiments from the streets, demonstrates the relationship between the concept of a national community and structures as a rallying symbol.

Therein lies the apparent conundrum - the very spaces that are preserved to enhance the existence of the 'nation' has been placed in a vulnerable situation. 9/11 was the watershed event for the securitization of 'soft targets'. Now, after the siege of The Taj Hotel, security forces will have to face new questions and challenges concerning civilian targets. As more is invested into the creation of heritage spaces with high visibility and patronage, the greater the increase in their vulnerability as perfect 'soft targets'. While utilitarian spaces such as transportations hubs and places of high pedestrian volume will remain potential targets, the carnage of Southern Mumbai reminds us that the sensational effect of seizing or attacking an important site of value and heritage is extremely tempting.

### **Rising Above the Challenges**

Does this mean that the existence of the nation hinges on these structures? Of course not, but the impact on the society's health should definitely be considered. On the other hand, the point here is also not to urge a complete revamp of security approaches to secure all possible 'soft targets' – this is unrealistic and impossible. Instead, the emphasis here is firstly to recognize the sway symbols and iconic structures have on the citizen or community's psyche.

Secondly is the need to focus on building a resilient community as the trend of civilian attacks shifts

from one of mere attrition to one that combines *both* attrition and symbolic value, with a strong message that undergirds the acts of terror. The concept of security today, while dynamic and ever-changing, still tends to overlook the facet of psychological security.

Hopefully, the case of The Taj Hotel will provide additional compelling reasons why the social resilience of a community is also necessary in the increasingly suffocating climate of fear. A nation that will rise above this climate is one that will be able to withstand shocks even if the very symbols or icons of the nation fall or are desecrated.

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