

Perceptions and Realities: Terrorist Strikes and Indian Response

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Gurcharan Das, in his book *Difficulty of Being Good* uses the *Mahabharata*, the famous Indian epic to debate why at times it is so difficult to be good. He illustrates his views by giving the example of the disrobing of Draupadi in the full assembly of kings, queens, gurus, warriors and family sire Bhishma Pitahmah. He argues that not one is able to act and help her as the tenets of *dharma* come in the way of any act of rescue. Presently, the common man in India is facing a similar dilemma. He/she is unable to decipher the true from-false. Every day, the newspapers carry articles about the wrongdoings of public figures, politicians and national leaders and no sooner do facts comes out, there is a rebuttal or another story appears in the media. It may be appropriate to argue that all sides of any story must be told, yet it would be hard to deny that truth must come out in the end. The public perception is that in the battle of right and wrong, truth is the biggest casualty. All this could be acceptable if it didn't affect the national security, but when incidents which have grave implications on national security or national interests are drawn into the intense media debate, then the lessons to be learnt for preventing their recurrence are easily lost in a futile public din.

The attack on the Pathankot air base in the last week of December 2015 has drawn enough media attention and seen intense media debate on the rights and wrongs. In the aftermath, the electronic and press media were agog with speculation on how the operation was bungled up and how the attack should not have taken place in the first place, considering the amount of intelligence that was available.

That brings us to the important question of how public perception is shaped in matured democracies after terrorist related incidents. All nations have their share of incidents or accidents that are potentially embarrassing to the governments. The natural instincts of any state are almost human, and the first reaction is to avoid undue publicity. It is the gravity and the spread of the incident that, most often than not, compels governments to accept the occurrence. There is no common practice that defines how governments should deal with such situations. It would be easy to gag the information and the media in a state controlled environment like China, yet these incidents manage to reach the local population in some form or the other, given the nature of technology that exists today. So, whenever there is an incident like 9/11 or the Paris attacks, the dilemma for the state is: how much to share with the public? Let us examine how Western democracies have dealt with the sharing of information with the public after terror attacks on their soil to get an understanding of how we are faring in India.

Paris Attacks

On November 14, 2015 (Saturday), Paris saw the worst terrorist attack on its soil. The casualty figures: 129 dead and scores of citizens wounded. It drew widespread condemnation from one and all. The Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) or Daesh, as it known in the Western press, claimed responsibility. The French government was quick to respond in a counter-offensive. The first measure was to impose a state of emergency. *In the aftermath of the deadly attacks in Paris, the French government has taken three major actions: declaration of a state of emergency, implementation of border controls, and convening of Congress.¹ All the three measures were extraordinary and gave sweeping powers to the law enforcement agencies, including putting restrictions on the press. Some of the positives of the French handling of the situation were:*

- The government was quick to respond to the situation and emergency measures were put in place in quick time.
- The security forces were in control of the situation, and action to apprehend /flush out the perpetrators started well within 24 hours. French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said that the police conducted 168 raids on Sunday night and early Monday morning, and 104 suspects were placed under house arrest.²
- The media was kept informed by a central agency of the government. The information was released to the public from a central source.³ Also, the government did not issue contradicting statements about the attack.

- The opposition parties did not exploit the situation and were supportive of the government actions, in spite of an impending regional election campaign.
- Finally, the neighbouring country, Belgium, from where the terrorist are supposed to have trained for, and mounted, the attack, did not go into a denial mode, and helped actively to apprehend the members of the group involved in the Paris attack. *Belgian prosecutors have confirmed that two of the seven people detained on Saturday are being held on terrorism charges.*⁴

Calibrated and coordinated response is a must after terror attack.

9/11 in USA

9/11 defined the ultimate threat to US sovereignty. It would surprise the readers to know that the reaction of the US federal government after the 9/11 attack was the same as we would find in Third World state. It tried to use all means available to make information scarce and even misleading at times. Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman, at that time said: *“The press is asking a lot of questions that I suspect the American people would prefer not to be asked, or answered. Is the White House staff going to keep secret sensitive or classified information? I certainly hope so.”*⁵ The US government not only tried to influence and gag the domestic press but also tried to influence some of the foreign networks such as Al Jazeera. On the basis of information provided to IPI, Qatar’s Emir, Sheikh Hamid bin Khalifa al-Thani, confirmed that he was asked by the US State Department, during a recent visit to Washington, to use his government’s influence to soften the reporting stance of the independent Qatari-based television station Al-Jazeera.⁶

To the credit of the American print and electronic media, they did resist the government efforts to impose restrictions. To its credit, the *New York Times* apparently resisted such requests, even editorialising (10/11/01) that the “White House effort is ill advised.” In an official statement, *CNN* declared: “In deciding what to air, *CNN* will consider guidance from appropriate authorities”.⁷ On December 02, 2015, a married couple opened fire at a holiday party at the Inland Regional Centre in San Bernardino, US. This was one the worst terror attacks in the US after 9/11. By now, the line of approach to terrorist acts in the US is clearly laid down, and that’s why the initial confusion was very quickly overcome. The initial response came from the local police, then, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) which is the second responder, came onto the scene to decide the nature of the attack. It took them three days to pronounce the San Bernardino attack as a terrorist strike. During this time, the press was dissuaded from drawing any

inferences or any information about the suspects⁸. Thus, it can be surmised that in the US, terror attacks are now dealt with a certain amount standard operating procedures where each agency has a definite role to play. However, it must be taken note that President Obama lost 9 percent of his popular rating due to his handling of the terror attacks after the San Bernardino attacks. In a new CNN/ORC poll released on Sunday, 60 percent of Americans disapproved of Obama's handling of terrorism—up nine points since May.⁹ Thus, political parties and the heads of states of governments of the day are always afraid of the political fallouts of the true picture of the incidents, specially terror attacks.

Terrorist Attacks in Turkey

On January 12, 2016, there was a terrorist attacks in the Istanbul's central district of Sultanahmet near the famous Blue Mosque of Istanbul. Ten tourists, all foreigners, died.¹⁰ Another terror strike had taken place on October 02, 2015, in Ankara, the capital town, which was the deadliest single terror strike in the history of independent Turkey, leaving over 96 dead and over 200 wounded. Both these blasts are symptomatic of the terror threats Turkey faces on account of its problems with Syria, the Kurds and the ISIS. The government's dilemma was evident as it had multiple issues to account for. With rising protests across the country, both political and demographic, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, adopted a policy of banning media reports of the terror attacks. *"As epic clashes between anti-government protesters and riot police turned downtown Istanbul into a battle zone last weekend, the country's two main news channels had, well, not much to report. One ran a documentary on penguins. The other, a cooking show."*¹¹ Barely one hour after a suicide blast ripped through an Istanbul Square packed with tourists, the Turkish government imposed a media blackout. However, some media agencies overlooked the ban and kept reporting. *Many journalists ignored the ban, including most international journalists in the country. "Really, the best way to ensure the global media covers a bombing is to impose a broadcast ban on it,"*¹² This showed that bans are rarely effective in today's technologically connected world, as multiple media can be used to disseminate news and for media coverage.

Pathankot Attacks in India

On January 2, 2016, there was a terrorist strike at the air force base in Pathankot. The strike was believed to have been carried out by five/six men of the Pakistan based Jaish-e Mohammad (JEM). The Indian media reported the event faithfully

throughout the three days that the encounter continued. There was intense debate on the TV channels on where these terrorists had come from, and what the significance of the timing and their real motives was. Yet none of them

**Indian Media
must be sensitive
to credible
reporting.**

really knew what exactly was happening in the situation, as there was no agency which was responsible for giving a brief. Barkha Dutt tweeted about the lack of information, "*Unsettling, unanswered questions piling up over #Pathankot - would be good for @manoharparrikarto maybe have a press conference at least?*"¹³ Due to lack of clarity on the operations, the questions started coming in fast about the chain of command, the effectiveness of the National Security Guards (NSG) over the Army, etc. Some media channels seriously started doubting the abilities of the force fighting: as to why it took 60 hours to eliminate five terrorists? The lack of control over the media during 23/11 and its concomitant effect on the ongoing operations is a well known fact but in Pathankot, there was an added dimension: while the operations were going on, the three seniormost ministers of the government, the Prime Minister (PM), Home Minister and Defence Minister were attending to business away from the capital and the scene of operations, leaving a perceived void in the chain of command at the highest level. This added to the government's woes and the media had a field day while reporting the incident. The man in charge seemed to be the National Security Adviser (NSA) to the PM, whose claim of complete success after 60 hours of operations was torn apart by the media. Somewhat like Turkey, the Pathankot incident in India's case is a sign of the larger malaise that exists in India while reporting about critical terrorist incidents, where truth seems to become the first casualty.

Conclusion

Having seen four countries and their methodologies of dealing with reporting and handling of terror incidents, it becomes apparent that each country deals with the situation as it suits it best. It would, however, be safe to assume that all governments are very sensitive to reporting the truth in time. France as a mature democracy, does not get fazed in the light of a threat to its sovereignty, to impose emergency, and allows maximum latitude to its security agencies to neutralise the terrorist elements. France's example, within a certain latitude, is applicable to all Western democracies in Europe. Confronted with a situation, they would all behave similarly. Most importantly, the press is sensitive to national security and can impose self-censorship. The US is unique and, hence, different from Western Europe: the press is more demanding and more independent. The government

is equally rigid about matters of national security and, hence, could go to any extent to impose curbs on the press if it feels the same are essential. Yet processes are streamlined and there is a standard operating procedure which comes into play, thus, making reporting easier and more effective. Turkey, on the other hand, is like any Third World country in the midst of perpetual crises. At the hint of trouble, the government would try and gag the media and press, thus, making reporting more difficult and more speculative. In such a case, the truth becomes a casualty. Finally, in India, the press is fierce and hungry. They want it all instantly. Given the fact that any terrorist situation takes time to unfold and analyse, the lack of patience in the media gives rise to speculative reporting. Speculation is based on hearsay and may be far from the truth. Added to this is the lack of any central agency to handle the crisis and for dissemination of timely information. This leads to confusion and delay. India would do well to see how the French and the US systems work and evolve an appropriate mechanism to suit its own requirements.

Pathankot was not the first and nor would it be the last terror strike in India. Given the shape of things in the neighbourhood, India is bound to face terror attacks in the future too. A robust handling mechanism and a robust dissemination system would be in the best interest of the nation. For in the aftermath of any attack, time would not be wasted in debating the same things again and again. We would be able to concentrate on better mechanisms to fight the menace of terrorism in our country and our countrymen would have more faith in what the government or what the news agency says. The dilemma of understanding the truth would diminish.

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Notes

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