



UNIVERSITY of  
SAN FRANCISCO

*Educating Minds and Hearts  
to Change the World*

A publication of the  
**University of  
San Francisco  
Center for the  
Pacific Rim**  
Copyright 2009

**Editors**

Joaquin Gonzalez  
John Nelson

**Editorial  
Consultants**

Barbara K. Bundy  
Hartmut Fischer  
Patrick L. Hatcher

**Editorial Board**

Uldis Kruze  
Man-lui Lau  
Mark Mir  
Noriko Nagata  
Stephen Roddy  
Kyoko Suda  
Bruce Wydick

*Asia Pacific: Perspectives*  
Center for the Pacific Rim  
2130 Fulton St  
San Francisco, CA  
94117-1080

Tel: (415) 422-6357  
Fax: (415) 422-5933  
perspectives@usfca.edu

# Asia Pacific:

# PERSPECTIVES

*an electronic journal*

Volume IX · Number 1

December · 2009

*Introduction* >>.....John Nelson 1

*Grounding Terrorism on Ground Zero: How 9/11 Informs U.S. Press Coverage of Political Violence* >>.....Kevin Mack 2

*How the West Lost Us: A Critique of Media Coverage of the Mumbai Attacks* >>.....Vamsee Juluri 17

*An Interview with Vamsee Juluri* >>.....John Nelson 19

*Profile of the Artist: Shalinee Kumari* >>..... 24

*Gathering Reactions on the Mumbai Attacks, India's '9/11' on November 26th, 2008* >>.....Lotika Gulvadi 25

*Asia Pacific: Perspectives* is a peer-reviewed journal published at least once a year, usually in April/May. It welcomes submissions from all fields of the social sciences and the humanities with relevance to the Asia Pacific region.\* In keeping with the Jesuit traditions of the University of San Francisco, *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* commits itself to the highest standards of learning and scholarship.

Our task is to inform public opinion by a broad hospitality to divergent views and ideas that promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the dissemination of knowledge unreservedly. Papers adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach will be especially welcome. **Graduate students are strongly encouraged to submit their work for consideration.**

\* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.

## How the West Lost Us: A Critique of Media Coverage of the Mumbai Attacks

By Vamsee Juluri, Ph.D.

It started with what, in my view, was an inappropriate preposition. In the end, what Mumbai ended up looking like to viewers and readers in the West was something far removed from the magnitude of its loss, and from the realities of fact and perspective. From the first hours of the attack on the morning (Pacific Time) of Wednesday, November 26, until the siege ended, American television channels like CNN covered the attacks live. It was Thanksgiving holiday, and "Terror in Mumbai" became the background in innumerable homes that might have had their televisions on in between meals or naps. It was also on in homes where something like outrage was being felt, at the brazenness of the attacks, and at the vested ignorance tainting its coverage.

"Terror in Mumbai." The emphasis on "in" is not mine nor is it to make a point. That is how CNN presented its headline throughout the event. In the following days, even as the networks moved slowly back to their usual Thanksgivingish menu of inspirational and heartwarming stories, the follow-up reports all came back under the same headline. It was used on the local news stations in the Bay Area, and in time, even *The Economist* went with the same words on its cover. Normally, especially in the face of a tragedy of such proportions, one would not bother to fault the media for its choice of words. But the decision to frame the event as "Terror in Mumbai" rather than an "Attack on Mumbai" was not an isolated one. It was merely one part of the broader view with which the media approached it. Nor was it inconsequential. After all, within minutes of the events of 9/11/2001, the American media were calling it an attack "on" America and comparing it to Pearl Harbor, rather than a more recent act of terrorism, the Oklahoma bombing. If the American media rushed to internationalize 9/11, they seemed to be in an equal hurry in the case of 26/11 (as we would call it in India) to domesticate it, as if "terror" is something that happens regularly in India, like water problems, or sly airport touts. It was this prejudice that provided the locus for all else that emanated, from the awkward platitudes of inexperienced anchors filling airtime to even the more erudite writings of experts and commentators.

In the first few hours of coverage, the domestication of the attacks unfolded almost silently, by virtue of the fact that much of the concern seemed to be about the foreign nationals who were reportedly being targeted (see some of the comments posted on this website for SAJA, the South Asian Journalists Association). To a less attentive viewer, it might have well seemed as if the whole drama was about terrorists "in" India attacking hapless Western tourists. Although some

efforts were made in time to address the fact that most of the victims were indeed Indian, those efforts seemed lost in a deeper inertia that seemed to preclude the naming of victims as "Indian," or indeed, the attacks as "on" Mumbai, if not "on" India. Such a step would of course have implied that the media had started to seriously address what was already well established as the likely nationality of the attackers. Instead, there seemed to be something like reluctance in the actions of some of the correspondents. In one of the earliest mentions of the sea-route taken by the attackers, a reporter virtually cried out three times (or perhaps even four) that what she was reporting about the Karachi angle was only an Indian official's accusation. Nothing more. The same sort of journalistic delicacy was also poured on to higher government echelons when a "Counterterrorism Expert" on a news channel wondered if Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was having a "knee-jerk reaction" when he mentioned "outsiders."

Naturally, no one would like to see unsubstantiated allegations of such a grave sort reported as fact in the international news media in the middle of an unfolding attack of such unprecedented proportions. But all this hesitation was leading to something which in retrospect Christopher Hitchens would call a "disingenuous failure to state the obvious." Unfortunately though, it wasn't just the silence which was troubling. Even before the siege was formally ended, even as speculation and scrutiny grew, a rather strong group of voices converged in the international press on to what they saw as the obvious issue here: India.

In one of the first stories about the possible nationality of the attackers, the *New York Times* quoted one such expert, ironically named Ms. Fair, who insisted that "this is a domestic issue" and that it is "not India's 9/11." Interestingly, the same article also got its geography grossly mixed up, reporting that "Deccan" (part of the name that a group claiming responsibility used) was a neighborhood in my Hyderabad! And with erroneous geography, a history goof-up couldn't be far behind either. An article in the *Telegraph* asserted that Kashmir was gifted to India by the departing British. Perhaps geography and history weren't exactly high on the media's criteria for analyzing the event. After all, most of the experts being quoted were of neither academic persuasion. Instead, we saw mostly security and counter-terrorism experts, including one on television who had dealt with a hotel hostage crisis, somewhere in the United States, sometime long ago.

Trivialities aside, it seemed that the attacks on Mumbai were largely destined to be seen here as a part of "India's increasingly violent history," as the title of an article in the *Independent*, here, put it. As the days passed, that perception was somewhat complicated, but also, sadly, not really contested, by some of the op-ed pieces that followed in the august pages of the *New York Times* and elsewhere. Amitav Ghosh, Pankaj Mishra, and Suketu Mehta wrote op-eds which invoked in their opening paragraphs, respectively, the following: a BJP leader's attempts to label the attacks as India's 9/11, the attackers' phone calls condemning injustices in Kashmir and Ayodhya, and that "something" about Mumbai that "appalls religious extremists, Hindu and Muslim alike." In a similar vein, the *Los Angeles Times* published two op-eds in response

to the attacks. Martha Nussbaum's piece acknowledged that the attackers may have come from outside India, but leaps off from that into a critique of what she calls "Indian terrorism." I do not believe she used the term "Pakistani terrorism" anywhere there. Another op-ed in the *L.A. Times* by Asra Nomani expresses her sorrow while reading a newspaper report on poverty among Indian Muslims while residing in, and this seems to be being said without irony, "Room 721 of the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower Hotel."

The irony, it seems, is all elsewhere. All the New York Times op-eds which seem to turn a critical eye on Pakistan were written by non South-Asians, like William Kristol and Thomas Friedman. I don't find this ironic in a simply nationalistic sense though. I find the irony in the fact that even progressive critiques sometimes end up with the same effect as mainstream prejudices when not made in the right time and place.

I think that the Western media has persisted for far too long with a framework of reporting that is disconnected from reality, and this showed all too sadly in its approach to Mumbai. It continues an old imperialism, unreflectively enjoying its discursive overlordship over South Asia by presenting India and Pakistan as "rivals," as if that is what a billion and a half people think of all the time. It continues a selfish cold-war era framework of false moral equivalence between India and Pakistan, reporting that the countries have fought four wars without once naming an aggressor, chirpily discounting every Indian grievance with a clever Pakistani government retort (see this piece in Times of India). And it grants a voice it seems, to only one sort of South Asian and South Asianist opinion: one that finds fault in India, even when at least one cause lies elsewhere.

Published originally in *The Huffington Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/vamsee-juluri/how-the-west-lost-us-a-cr\\_b\\_151730.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/vamsee-juluri/how-the-west-lost-us-a-cr_b_151730.html)