

A NATION OF NUMB PEOPLE

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Recently, several bombs blasted the lives of scores of people in the city where the government of a nuclear capable nation sits. The city that will play host to the commonwealth games in 2010 and the city whose political leadership assure us swift detection and relentless retribution of the perpetrators. As a former soldier I appreciate that for every one that goes off – there are often several attempts that are thwarted and intercepted. So this is not about the security agencies preventing attacks from happening.

It's about a nation of numb people.

A friend from Delhi told me about a dilemma he faced that evening. He had been invited to a party but it seemed insensitive to celebrate when countless families waited outside hospitals or searched for missing loved ones. Nonetheless he was already near the venue so he pressed ahead. My friend found the party in full swing, music blaring and revelry all around. Some people extol this as the 'spirit of Delhi'. The ability to distance oneself from the shock and pain of burnt flesh and charred bodies, destroyed lives and the injustice of it all - and carry on life as usual. I am not so sure that this is a laudable quality.

Terrorists kill indiscriminately. That is their calling. But a society which celebrates apathy as a virtue is no better. True spirit is not impotent surrender to a bunch of thugs. It is dealing with an outrage as an outrage should be dealt with. Because next time around the bang will have to be bigger to draw attention and no one realizes this more than the terrorists.

Let's look at the report card. The US had 9/11 in 2001 and then – nothing. Madrid got bombed in 2004 and then - nothing. London had 7/7 in 2005 and then no other incident. With India – we are not quite sure where to begin and when to end - except that the frequency, lethality and the audacity increases each time.

Let's face it. Security forces are stretched. With four belligerent and two troubled neighbours (and internal aid to civil authorities thrown in) the defence forces don't have any bandwidth to spare. J&K, Naxalite problems and the North-East keeps the paramilitary forces occupied. Internal security is falling apart and the bureaucracy and government know this.

It's time for the corporates to step in. The idea is not as radical as it sounds. And there are three good reasons why the corporates should do this.

Firstly, the concept has successful precedence elsewhere in the world. Israel has private armed security and response for establishments ranging from public places, residences to

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schools. Australia outsources substantial parts of its law enforcement and both the US and UK have used private security contractors to free valuable combatants in conflict zones.

Secondly, the state doesn't have the capability to raise additional resources even to keep up with the responsibilities it currently has. The quality of leadership in the Army and paramilitary forces has been deteriorating. There are more soldiers dying of suicides and fragging than in skirmishes – a sure sign of stress. The much needed India Reserve Battalions – supposed to be raised exclusively for Naxalites (along the lines of the Rashtriya Rifles) has remained on paper. The army is doing the paramilitary's job, the paramilitary is doing the police's job and the police, more often under tremendous political pressure, are finding it difficult to do their job. Besides, the state's performance in dealing with any crisis – natural or man-made is sub-optimal. This is not a critique; it is simply a SWOT analysis. Depending on the state to resolve the issue by itself would be naïve.

Corporate must take the onus of securing their physical, people and information assets.

Thirdly, and most importantly, it is in the corporates interests of survival to get involved. It is the responsibility of corporates to manage risks. Whether they are financial, operational or environmental in nature. Far sighted corporates have created and nurtured their production bases. Jamnagar, Jamshedpur, Bhilai etc are controlled and secured environment. Isn't it time that corporates also started protecting their customers? The fact that the customer happens to be the Indian citizen and the protective zone happens to be the Indian state does not change the fundamentals of risk management

Businesses – large or SME's – have aspirations of long term growth. Bureaucracy and politicians have visions limited by tenures. Voters have short term agendas, few options to choose from and often contradictory interests. Stakeholders on the other hand, demand performance as the unified agenda; and have the ability to punish non-performance. Market forces encourage efficient functioning and quicker response whereas politics encourages vote bank manoeuvring and populist measures. Simply put – corporates as organizations have the efficiencies and the motivation which the situation needs.

Corporate involvement needs to come in three stages. To begin with – they must realize that business rivalry aside – they need to stand together and work in concert to beat the secessionist forces. The ability of the top 100 business houses to lobby and demand better security “or else” – is much higher than each business looking to protect its own turf.

Secondly – corporates would have to raise awareness levels in their own risk matrix and begin including physical security as a significant threat. They need to realize that they are the next wave of targets of terrorists and hostile states. With that awareness would come the mindshare and resources to combat the threat.

Thirdly – enterprises would need to raise their own protection units. The idea may sound outlandish but in fact most of urban citizens do pay for private security for their homes and colonies. So do corporates. The idea is to take it to the next level and have private protection units that can work in close cooperation with law enforcement agencies. Think of it as a private territorial army.

15 years ago the enemy was in the distant Kashmir and North-East. Five years ago, the enemy was at the gates hitting cities from outside. Now the enemy is inside the gates! If the commercial czars don't begin protecting their empires now, they may find the lines of control cutting across those very empires.

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