

The Mumbai Attacks – Lessons to be Learnt from the Police Response

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The devastating attacks perpetrated by terrorists in Mumbai on November 26, 2008 have added a new dimension to the threat faced by India's hard pressed security forces. Long accustomed to terror bombings, the Mumbai attacks were unique in the Indian context for three critical reasons:

- The attack was carried out against an entire section of the *city* as opposed to a single target as was the case with the 2001 attack on India's Parliament;
- The Mumbai police were thrust into the role of being the unsupported first responders to a major *fidayeen* attack;
- The Central Paramilitary Forces – the CRPF, BSF, etc., who have long borne the brunt of India's counter-terrorist burden—were not a part of nor in a position to be a part of the initial response to the attack.

It is not the intention of the author to determine the extent of intelligence and maritime surveillance failures that led to the attackers arriving unchecked, nor is it the intention of the author to examine shortcomings in the National Security Guards and Marine Commandos who eventually dealt with the attackers. Rather the focus of this article is on the shortcomings in India's urban police forces that ensured that the attackers were neither challenged on landing nor neutralized at the Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus before wreaking havoc on a population.

It is equally not the intention of the author to cast aspersions-as is the want of many-on the courage with which many policemen tried to do their job of safeguarding the population of Mumbai that night. The casualty figures speak for themselves.

The Indian Police: Tied to a Colonial Past

Before embarking on an analysis of the police response to the Mumbai attacks, it is worthwhile to summarize the historical roots of the Indian Police structure.

Following the upheavals of the 1857 uprising in North India and the upsurge in criminal activity that followed, the Police Commission of 1860 came into being on

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August 17, 1860. This Commission laid down for a complete overhaul of the internal security apparatus of the state.¹

The basic structure outlined and created as a result of Police Commission of 1860 has remained almost completely unchanged to the present. It should be noted that one of the ties of the British authorities was to relieve the army of many of its internal security tasks so that it could avoid contact hostile civilians.

In order to deal with well-armed insurgents, bandits and irate mobs—all of whom easily overwhelmed unarmed police—the British created the 'District Armed Reserve'. This force was usually composed of twenty-five men with 'Snider' rifles and provided the police authorities with a well-armed contingency unit, capable of handling almost any disturbance or law and order emergency. This force was not to be deployed on general police duties.²

As early as 1890, it was suggested that the armed police should be divided into two sections. The *first* was the force required for specific and fixed duties—such as guards and escorts; and the *second* was to be kept in reserve for use as a heavily armed strike force in the event of widespread disorder. Unlike the regular police, the armed police were supposed to operate in groups rather than as individuals. Moreover, direct orders from superior officers would be necessary in order to sanction their deployment for any operational task.³

The recruitment and training of police constables was a major problem for the British authorities. There was a very large divide between the officer corps—composed of well-educated Europeans and (later) Indians and the enlisted ranks. The constable was poorly paid with little prospect of promotion and was usually illiterate. Since the primary role of the police was maintaining British rule, recruits were selected on the basis of their physical prowess. The constable was “an ill-paid illiterate person, capable only of wielding the *danda* (stick) effectively.”⁴

From 1861 to the present day, therefore, the police structure of India has been almost entirely unchanged. States have the civil police backed by district armed reserves and the Armed Reserve Battalions (or howsoever they may be termed).

Urban Terrorism: New Challenges

India's internal security forces have successfully dealt with numerous challenges since Independence. Police forces fought and broke the back of the Punjab terrorists in the 1990s and prior to that police units played a pivotal role in the reduction of the first Naxalite rebellion and the North Eastern insurgencies. Even now, the Jammu

and Kashmir police are an effective force against the *jihadist* menace confronting that region.

However, these challenges have largely, though not exclusively; been rural based problems and tactics, weaponry and training to counter such problems have evolved accordingly. Purely urban terrorism though not new has now attained quite catastrophic levels in India.

The challenges of urban terrorism include bombings and *fidayeen* attacks (as on November 26, 2008) but must now also include such hitherto existential challenges such as cyber terrorism and attacks including weapons of mass destruction. These challenges place additional burdens on India's urban police structure.

The Mumbai Police : Unresolved Problems, Flawed Response

According to press reports, the Mumbai police mustered strength of some 42,000 at the time of the Mumbai attacks. According to the *Times of India*, the strength was as follows:⁵

- Total personnel: 42,000
- Number of police stations: 86
- Other measures: CCTVs installed, BEST buses, major railway stations (CST, Churchgate, Dadar, Bandra, Andheri, Borivali, Wadala, Mumbai Central), all major malls and multiplexes secured.
- Annual Budget: Rs 700 crore
- Number of vehicles: 1,500
- Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) personnel: 450
- Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) year of formation: 2003
- 1 police station and 8 units spread across the state armed with Glock pistols and AK-47s
- This was by no means an insubstantial force, but the devil, as it were, lies in the details.

Special Units

Mumbai's vaunted Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) which valiantly attempted to spearhead the city's response to the vicious assault was never intended to be a Quick Reaction Team operating against heavily armed terrorists. Indeed, the Mumbai

Police's own website gives the following description of the mandate of the ATS:⁶

- Created by Government of Maharashtra, vide G.R. No. SAS-10/03/15/SB-IV, dated July 8, 2004.
- To get information about anti-national elements working in any part of Maharashtra.
- To co-ordinate with Central information agencies, like IB, RAW and exchange information with them.
- To co-ordinate with similar agencies of other States.
- To track and eliminate activities of mafia and other organized crime syndicates.
- To detect rackets of counterfeit currency notes and smuggling narcotic substances.

In attempting to handle the situation that arose on November 26, 2008, the Mumbai ATS found itself out of its league. It was comprehensively out-thought and out-gunned, losing several valiant officers to the terrorists.

At one time, Mumbai, with much fanfare deployed 200 motorcycle mounted commandos. Armed with 9mm pistols and carbines and dressed in distinctive blue uniforms, this unit was supposed to be the city's answer to both terror and underworld violence.

Unfortunately, the unit did not live up to expectations and after operating for a few years, faded from view and from service. Deployment was abysmal with the unit being squandered by piecemeal deployment of one team of two commandos and one motorcycle to each police station and grotesquely misused; performing such tasks as guarding banks and jewelry stores.⁷

One of the problems that students of Indian Police forces face is the fact that the word “commando” is thrown around rather liberally. The word implies a degree of specialized training and skill beyond that normally expected from simply an armed police unit.

Unfortunately, though some states have created and deployed effective counter-insurgency police units—the AP “Greyhounds” being a prime example—the vast majority of “commando” units, whether under the control of State or metropolitan forces are merely heavily armed police units lacking either the tactical skill or inclination to operate as special operations units.⁸

Following 26/11, several cities, including Mumbai and Chennai have expressed their intention to create commando units. However, there is a danger that without proper training and skills development, these police commando units will merely be better trained armed police squads with vastly superior weaponry. Indeed, the shopping list for arms is quite impressive with sniper rifles, light machine guns and ballistic shields being among the items sought.⁹ Though Chennai's unit, trained in the city's own commando school, has performed well in competitions, it has not seen any combat, while the police commando units raised in Punjab and other states have often been counter-insurgency units, not suited to urban environments.

Still, despite the absence of a dedicated commando unit, Mumbai does have what could have been a useful armed response group in the form of its Local Armed Police (LA) units totaling nearly 4000 men are located at the following places:¹⁰

- LA-I/RCP : Naigaon, Mumbai-14
- LA-II : Tardeo/ Worli, Mumbai-18
- LA-III : Worli Police Camp, Mumbai-25
- LA-IV : Marol Police Camp, Mumbai-59

At LA-I, the Riot Control Police – three companies of them – form the city's elite riot control unit. In addition, one platoon in each company is supposed to be equipped for counter-insurgency duties. At least one RCP company should have been on alert that fateful night – along with its COIN trained platoon.¹¹ It was this solitary platoon that formed Mumbai's potential QRT on the night of the 26 November 2008. However, neither the RCP nor the LA Police were of much use during those vital initial encounters. Indeed, they were slow to react and deploy and there is little doubt that the greater burden of the first response to the terrorist attack fell on the ordinary civil police who bore the burnt of the terrorists' fury and who, despite their shortcomings, secured the ultimate prize – the live capture of the terrorist Ajmal Amir Iman aka Kasab.

The Constable

Mumbai's constabulary is very similar in their organization, equipment, armament and training to those in almost every Indian city. These personnel, who make up 92 per cent of the Indian police, undergo less than 6 months of basic training. In overcrowded training schools with grossly inadequate facilities, constables have to learn not only basic police work, but also weapons training and internal security duties. The net result is that not enough time is spent on any subject and the average constable is inadequately trained, if not grotesquely so.¹²

Indeed, if the response of the Mumbai police to the November 26, 2008 attacks is to be examined, the key areas need to be explored in detail namely:

- Armament
- Training
- Response time
- Leadership
- Coordination

Armament

Post 26/11, much attention has focused on the ubiquitous and infamous firearm that is the standard armament of the Indian constable: the .303 caliber Lee Enfield Rifle, in either its SMLE Rifle No.1 Mk.III configuration or its Rifle No.4 configuration. Over 500,000 of these rifles and 90,000 of their cousin, the .410 musket form the nucleus of India's police arsenal. It should of course be noted that at any given time, the Indian constable, wherever located, is unarmed. Press reports seem to indicate that at the CST, of 60 police and security personnel present, only 6 were armed and of the 20 police personnel at the roadblock that captured Ajmal Amir Iman aka Kasab – at the cost of the life of the valiant Tukaram Gopal Ombale-only four were armed with any type of firearm.¹³

Critics of the Mumbai police response and there are several such un-informed persons in cyberspace—point to the fact that the Enfield rifle is an excellent weapon with a superb service record. This is indeed the case. The rifle served with distinction during World Wars I and II and served the Indian army extremely well until 1965. However, the rifles of yesteryear that are so fondly remembered by insulated arms collectors and critics are not the weapons used by the Indian police.¹⁴

Alarm bells should have sounded when in the 1980s, at the height of Punjab's terrorist problem, 20 per cent of the Enfield rifles issued to the police were found to be incapable of firing a single shot. The result of this disparity is that the state police found themselves out-gunned in almost every counter with terrorists or insurgents or even with rural gangsters. This leads to a loss of morale amongst the constabulary and a net loss of efficiency. A touching and alarming example of this came from a thoroughly demoralized Punjab police officer in 1986: "Often it seems to me that my men's best defence against the attacker is the steel chain tying his weapon to his body. Even if he dies, at least the chain discourages the attacker from taking the weapon away. Beyond that we can do nothing". Other officers and constables, trying to fight insurgents without the correct equipment and with obsolete weapons,

compared themselves - to 'a blind man chasing a wild ass with a broom.'¹⁵ Poor maintenance, abysmal storage facilities and neglect have taken a very heavy toll on the serviceability of the rifles.¹⁶

Twenty years have elapsed since that time, yet the .303 Enfield remains the standard police weapon and the standard scapegoat for poor performance in fire-fights. Indeed it is noted that at CST, of the six armed policemen, at least five had the rifle and one a 9mm carbine. Of these, at least three policemen did engage the terrorists and none of them were able to neutralize a single terrorist. It was reported that the 9mm carbine magazine was charged with only 10 rounds instead of 30 and even then it jammed after only three rounds. Other policemen found that their rifles bolts refused to work after firing only two to three rounds. All of this can be attributed to deplorable maintenance of the weapons. Given the fact that the butt-plate of the Indian manufactured SMLE contains an oil bottle and cleaning implements, such neglect is inexcusable.

Yet the inadequacies of the Enfield rifle should not be an excuse for the 26/11 fiasco. Moreover, there is no excuse for such a large percentage of the force being unarmed. Indeed it has been reported that Mumbai took several steps to equip each station with, on an average, 25 SLRs, five carbines and ten pistols in addition to about 25 rifles of .303 calibre and 11 revolvers of .38 calibre.¹⁷ Senior police officers boasted of the fact that there were now adequate stocks of 9mm and .45 calibre pistols along with carbines, SLRs and teargas guns. Was this merely public relations rhetoric? Where were the weapons on that fateful night?

Training

It is apparent that few if any of the civil police were proficient in the use of their weapons and it is equally apparent that few policemen in potential trouble spots were armed with modern weapons. Equally stunning is the fact that policemen who responded to the emergency at CST did not draw their SLRs but again responded with an eclectic mix of revolvers and Enfield. It would appear that despite substantial weapons procurement, the problem was a combination of the non-use of that weaponry and the non-availability of that weaponry where it was needed combined with an inability to use the weapons available.¹⁸

This problem, like so many others is not unique to the Mumbai police and would explain why, despite the procurement of 71,717 INSAS rifles, 23,899 SLRs and 34,880 AK-47s in recent years (not to mention earlier procurement) for the Indian Police, there has been little appreciable improvement in the counter-terrorist capability of the civil constabulary.

While there are legitimate concerns about the standard of training imparted to armed police battalions and so-called commando units, the nightmarish state of civil constabulary is difficult to conceive. It is all well and good to train policemen in weapons use and tactics at the police training schools, but without refresher training, their skills will atrophy and wither. It would appear that few Mumbai policemen ever fired their weapons since the day they completed training.

Marksmanship training has become a point of some concern, with the skills of many even in the armed police battalions being suspect.¹⁹ However, in the case of the civil police, before one can talk of marksmanship, basic training in the handling of weapons seems to have been lacking. Again, one is not speaking about any specialized urban counter-terror training, but the most basic of weapons skills. Furthermore, the lack of such skills directly impacts on the psychological preparedness of a police force to handle a terrorist attack

Some of this is directly attributable to the fundamentally unarmed nature of the civil police and the fact that despite all its problems and its vast population, India is a low-crime country by any objective standard. Unfortunately, the unarmed constable is no longer viable. The *lathi* wielding force of the past is simply untrained and ill-prepared to tackle the threat that exists. This conclusion may well be controversial but it is nonetheless valid in so far as the policeman, whether he be directing traffic, conducting beat patrolling or performing crowd control tasks is the first responder to any terror attack. It is to him that people look for a response and his success or failure in responding will inevitably be vital.

The Punjab police had – in the early years of the terrorism crisis in that state – continued with the policy of arming only a portion of its personnel and even when modern weapons were sought, the state initially only procured sufficient to arm a relatively small proportion of its personnel. However, it was soon realized that one cannot predict that terrorists would strike only where the policemen were adequately armed. Every policeman was in the frontline and as such had to be able to fight back. The current scenario is no different. An unarmed policeman is of little use in confronting a terrorist who can and will strike anywhere and at anytime.

Response Time

Even these shortcomings, as serious as they are, might not have been fatal. Unfortunately, the response time of the police was so poor, that the terrorists had free run of large parts of the conflict zone for an inordinately long time. Furthermore, it would appear, again from press reports that fishermen who witnessed the landing of at least some of the attackers called the police who apparently arrived late.

Part of the problem remains a shortage of vehicles. 1500 vehicles for a force of 42,000 is clearly inadequate and all the more so for the fact that serviceability rates are usually lower and many of these vehicles are large trucks, ill suited to rapid response in crowded urban environs.

Coordination

The problem is further exacerbated by very poor communications and coordination that rendered the single platoon that comprised the Mumbai QRT useless and which prevented assistance from the heavily armed State Reserve Police battalions from being summoned to the conflict zone at short notice. The fact that the Local Armed Police units were not fully committed within a short space of time to seal off areas of the conflict zone and to contain the threat speaks volumes for the poor coordination that hamstrung the police response to the assault. In short, poor coordination and delayed response ensured that police units were committed piecemeal, support units were not deployed with any degree of urgency and rendered the Mumbai QRT and Maharashtra SRP impotent.

One is left wondering whether the Mumbai Police had any contingency plans drawn up for a terrorist attack of the November 26, 2008 variety-especially following the December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament. There seemed to be no guidelines for the police to follow and as such police officers at all levels were left floundering.

It appears that little prior thought was given to coordinating a response between the city and state police and central forces in the event of a terrorist strike. Even the deployment of the army, the state reserves and the central paramilitary units seemed to have been done without properly assessing their appropriate role.

Many major police forces around the world do have a set of guidelines to be followed in the event of a terror strike. While it is impossible to cater for every contingency, it is possible to improve coordination and response time by disseminating such guidelines and reviewing them periodically. All metropolitan police forces in India would do well to follow this example.

Leadership

There is little doubt that Indian police forces only achieve their peak efficiency when properly led. This has been proved repeatedly – in the Punjab, J&K, and the North East and even in Mumbai following the 1992-93 riots.

The Mumbai police leadership showed itself to be unequal to the task of

coordinating an effective response and even more unequal to the task of reassuring the public. The deaths of several senior officers of the ATS and the bravery of individual leaders at the operational level should not detract from the overall conclusion that senior elements of the Mumbai police were out of their league in confronting the multiple *fidayeen* attacks launched on Mumbai. Without adequate leadership, the response of any agency would be less than ideal.

Moreover, one must also inquire as to whether any elements in the senior ranks of the Mumbai police have any training or experience to handle such situations. A cadre of junior and middle-level leaders, supported by a nucleus of experienced professionals in the senior ranks is now a necessity for generating an effective response to terrorist attacks.

The Path Ahead


For the Indian Police to avoid the mistakes of the past, a multi-pronged approach must be taken on a nation-wide basis to rectify shortcomings and to improve the ability of police units to respond to this type of *fidayeen* attack. There have been many detailed recommendations made over the decades to improve the performance of the Indian police in general and certain units in particular. However, these remain unimplemented for a lack of political will. Perhaps the 26/11 attacks will provide renewed impetus?

At the outset, there is a pressing need for each city to establish effective QRTs of armed police personnel with appropriate levels of mobility. This does not mean simply loading a few Gypsies with policemen armed with assault rifles. While such a measure certainly has its utility in terms of creating a potential visible deterrent, the QRTs must receive a much higher standard of training than has hitherto been the norm. The model of American SWAT units has been suggested as an appropriate starting point and such a model should be studied most carefully. To achieve the desired level of training, there is a desperate need for a series of national police tactics and weapons training institutions.

However, it is the ordinary constable of the civil police force who will bear the burden of any first response to another terrorist strike. In order to prepare him for such a task a program of phased refresher training in weapons skills must be undertaken as a priority along with improved physical conditioning. It must be realized that the day of the unarmed constable is over and appropriate weapons found for these personnel. It must be remembered that simply giving a policeman an AK-47 or INSAS rifle doesn't turn him into a commando. Indeed, for almost all basic police tasks such weapons are unnecessary. However, the .303 rifle is equally inappropriate. Perhaps

the shift to arming all personnel with handguns can be considered as a necessary first step.

Furthermore, the coordination and communication between the civil police and their more heavily armed support units must be improved to the point where a rapid response is not merely appreciated but expected.

Unfortunately, as simple as these solutions sound, resources have to be found, plans implemented and serious steps taken to resolve issues of coordination and communication. These may yet be overcome; however, the stumbling block will continue to remain the training of the average constable. With the civil and armed police operating at substantially below their sanctioned strength, and with the sanctioned strength itself being grossly inadequate for the population and land area to be covered, when will time be found to incorporate the necessary refresher training needed to ensure the success of any police modernization scheme? Yet the time must be found, the resources must be made available and India's ongoing police manpower crunch solved. The failure to do so will result in the Mumbai attacks becoming the norm and not the exception. 

Notes

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2. B. P. Saha, *Indian Police: Legacy and Quest for a Formative Role*, Konarak Publishers, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 59.
3. G. R. Shah, *Image Makers: An Attitudinal Study of Indian Police*, Abhinav Publications, Lucknow, 1992, pp. 160-161.
4. Rear Adm. S. Singh, "Indian Police Force" in Major General Afsir Karim ed. *Indian Defence Review*: October 1993, pp. 73.
5. Prafulla Marpakwar, *More Teeth to Fight Terror*, Times of India, dated September 19, 2008
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See also Somit Sen & Aneesh Phadnis *Swaggering Commandos Chase Shadows in Amchi Mumbai*, Times of India, July 5, 2001.
8. Praveen Swami, *Desperate Need for National Police Tactics and Weapons School*, The Hindu, December 11, 2008.
9. Jaya Menon, *TN Commandos Shop for Arms*, Times of India dated December 4th, 2008 and NSG to Finalise Weapons Stock for TN Commandos, Times of India, February 3, 2009.
10. http://www.mumbaiipolice.org/special/org_fun.htm#armed
11. Loc. Cit.
12. M. Rahman, "Trying to Raise Standards" in India Today, February 28, 1993, pp. 58.
13. Two revolvers and two SLRs according to press reports. See, Meena Menon, "Police Fight Terror In Their Own Style", The Hindu, December 4, 2008.
14. For an excellent study on the Enfield Rifle in Indian Service, see Robert W. Edwards, "India's Enfields",

Keedysville, MD, The Consortium Press, 2000.

15. K. Sandhu, "Arming Moves: Upgradation of Arms Likely" in India Today, March 31st, 1991, pp. 42. S. Ghosh "Keeping the Peace", Ashish Pub, Delhi, 1989. pp. 133-134. S. Gupta & G Thukral, "Punjab Police: Ribeiro's Challenge" in India Today, April 30, 1986, pp. 32. & 34. The .303 rifle is still widely used.
16. It would appear that storage in most Indian police stations consists of leaning the weapon against a wall if it is a rifle or hanging it from a nail or hook from the wall if it is a pistol.
17. Somit Sen & Aneesh Pandis, "Police Strengthened against Underworld", Times of India, October 8, 2001.
18. <http://specials.rediff.com/news/2008/dec/10slid2-ultimately-it-was-the-havaldar-who-caught-the-terrorist.htm>
19. It would appear that when being given special training by the army, policemen from armed police battalions in UP, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh were compelled to enhance their marksmanship skills to meet basic proficiency standards. Unfortunately, the forces being trained, while destined to be quite competent, are tasked with anti-Naxal operations and not urban counter-terrorism.