

A Hundred Beats

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Talking terrorism in Mumbai

By Fatima Bhutto

When I was invited to speak on my book, 8:50 am, at the Kitab Literary Festival in Mumbai, I was pleasantly surprised. When I received notice that I would also be speaking as part of a panel discussion on terrorism I was caught between being confused and enthused. There were many writers I read and respect coming to speak at Kitab -- including our own Kamila Shamsie, Hanif Kureshi, and Germaine Greer -- and I felt an odd mix of insecurity and delight at the prospect of being included on such a panel. "Don't be mad," cautioned friends, "you're on the terrorism panel because you're a Pakistani. In India, you're going to get eaten alive". Others insisted it was my decidedly pro-'axis of evil' slant that secured my place (all that's left is North Korea...they whistled under their breath). Regardless, I was more than willing to talk about terrorism and flew off to Mumbai and the festival armed and ready, mentally of course.

The dominant discourse of terrorism contends that it is states alone that have the right to use force; they are the only actors with a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Since the French revolution in the 1700s the violence exercised by states has been on any scale more frequent and more fantastic than that used by individuals or so called terror groups. How do they get away with this excessive and orgiastic propensity for violence? By employing a rather arrogant moral axiom: our violence is acceptable because it has historical and political meaning. Government sponsored massacres and murders are aimed at 'fighting terror' or 'defending freedom' while the terrorists kill just for the fun of it. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which slaughtered a combined total of an estimated 214,000 innocent civilians, are justified under this moral axiom. The Japanese government surrendered and so America's violence was perfectly legitimised as it fell under the 'historically important' category. The earlier Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbour, which killed some 2,500 military personnel, would probably not fit under 'historically important'. It was an act of terror and President Roosevelt declared the day of the bombings, December 7, 1941, a "date which will live in infamy". We could debate infamous vs. important forever, but it bears noting that only certain kinds of states are allowed to engage in acceptable terror.

Furthermore, there is a reason why resistance movements, which strike at typically non-civilian targets and must therefore be differentiated from terror movements whose aims are to perpetuate fear and

intimidation through random acts of violence, are often labelled by the press and states alike as 'underground' or 'subversive'. They are named so because they often take place among those below the institutions of established power. In layman's terms, they are non-state actors. Resistance movements take place among the masses -- like those who banded together to fight the Nazis in France, those intellectuals and citizens who fought the French colonialists in Algeria, or the farmer based Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico -- and it is this particular position that translates their struggles, which are not sanctioned by the powers that be, into 'terror' movements.

For us to have any meaningful discussion of terrorism then, we have to be transgressive. We have to willingly subvert the dominant paradigm and re-code the language of power. What about the conditions organisations such as the IMF impose on developing nations? Isn't that economic terrorism? Is economic exploitation not a form of violence? When I raised this point, George Brock, the Saturday editor of The Times of London insisted I was stretching the definition too far. I think the Zapatistas of Mexico would seriously disagree with him. The indigenous Mexicans, who came together under Subcomandante Marcos to form the Zapatista movement, live in Chiapas -- one of the poorest states in Mexico where 70 per cent of the population lives under the poverty line. Their land, however, is rich with oil, uranium and precious lumber. The state benefits enormously from those resources while the people of Chiapas are kept hungry. Enforced poverty and dispossession is absolutely terrorism and so it was that Subcomandante Marcos declared the Zapatistas would "transform our poverty into a weapon -- the weapon of resistance".

How important is language in this debate? Very. The state not only has the monopoly on indiscriminate and discriminate violence, it also sets the terms in which we are able to define and speak of terror. Militaries kill in the heat of the battle, terrorists kill in cold blood. Military victims are collateral damage and those of the terrorists are civilian casualties. Friendly fire, in my opinion, has to be the most ridiculous of all these linguistic conundrums. It is this abuse of language that allows a man with, and I'm being generous here, a passing familiarity with geopolitics to definitively identify for the world who is 'good' and who is an 'evildoer' (he is also obviously a linguistic terrorist, striking fear into the heart of the English language).

The moderator at our panel discussion, an editorial writer at The Times of India who will go nameless (Indrani Bagchi), was the only one of our panel -- which included besides Brock, the editor of the New Statesmen, and novelist Philip Hensher -- to be attacked. Choosing the one Pakistani on the stage, she asked me whether I thought counter terrorism had become an excuse for Islamophobia in places like "Britain which has a large population of potential terrorists owing to their sizable Muslim population". I pointed out to the nameless moderator (Indrani Bagchi), who was unqualified to make such a bigoted and racist statement, that her statement in itself was an example of rampant Islamophobia. Bless her, she didn't seem to think so. I then asked if it would be acceptable for me to come out and say that since

the state of Maharashtra had a majority Hindu population it would make sense for me to label it a potentially Hindu terrorist location. She clutched her mike and insisted she would never say that about Maharashtra, missing the point entirely but making her bias patently obvious. Religions do not make terrorists, arbitrary violence does. After the entire panel had a go at the moderator, I was pleased to see that the audience -- overwhelmingly Hindu I add, only to prove what a thoughtless and unrepresentative minority the moderator ( I.B) was -- took her to task for her statement. They ate her, not me, alive this time.

As our discussion came to an end and we made our way out of the auditorium, so many Indians approached me and insisted they shared none of the moderator's views. "We don't feel that way", one woman told me as she clasped her hand over mine. "We don't believe that about Muslims and we certainly don't believe it about Pakistanis. We're brothers and sisters after all".