

Chapter 4

Emergency Response to Mumbai Terror Attacks: An Activity Theory Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The Mumbai terror attacks of November 2008 lasted for over 60 hours and resulted in the death of over 172 people. The attack revealed several shortcomings of the emergency response preparedness in Mumbai. This chapter concentrates on the emergency response provided and uses activity theory to analyze it. The authors explore the diverse dimensions of emergency, determine the lessons learned from the incident and evaluate the emergency response. They suggest how operations could be improved thus setting a standard for any future emergency response.

INTRODUCTION

The balance of safety and wellbeing of the public is disturbed by an emergency situation. Emergency responders try to mitigate this danger and restore the balance of public welfare and security during an emergency. This act is termed as emergency response. These emergencies could occur at a

national level and hence they can be large and complex which could necessitate in the cooperation of several agencies. Immediate measures should be taken by emergency responders to ensure safety of people and to mitigate the impact of the emergency. The key to a successful emergency response is how effectively the pre-specified emergency response plan is executed and how well it can dynamically adapt to the change in scope of the crisis. Deviations from the norm can be ex-

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pected in an emergency even when there is a plan in place. Emergencies at a national level require utmost attention and consideration because they involve capably aligning the emergency response processes and ensuring interoperability between systems from different agencies. This could be realized with the help of Activity Theory which assists in framing standards and ideal practices for large scale security operations. Activity Theory is a broad approach that takes a new perspective and develops novel conceptual tools for tackling many of the theoretical and methodological questions (Engestrom 1999).

BACKGROUND

Mumbai is the largest and busiest city in India. Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) is located on the west coast of India and is the capital of the State of Maharashtra. It is the financial capital of India and serves as its main commercial hub. On 26th November 2008 the city of Mumbai faced a terrorist attack that mercilessly caused the destruction of human life and property.

A group of terrorists attacked several locations in Mumbai including hotels like Taj Mahal Palace hotel & Trident (formerly known as Oberoi) hotel. They also targeted several other popular public locations including the city's main commuter railway station, the Chatrapati Shivaji railway station, formerly known as Victoria Terminus, Leopold Café, Cama hospital & Nariman house. The attack was brought under control two days later on the 28th of November 2008 by the Indian security forces. This attack was well planned and coordinated and it involved the usage of digital technology for communication (Oh, Agrawal and Rao). The terrorists attacked Mumbai in several public locations simultaneously. In addition there was also an incident of misinformation. While the Indian security forces were trying to identify the terrorists, an email from Deccan Mujahideen claimed responsibility for the attacks. It was later

ascertained that the group never existed. Before this attack, terrorism in India did not incorporate many components seen in the Mumbai attacks – multiple locations, extended siege, and use of hand-held weapons. The Mumbai terror attacks of November 2008 underscore the necessity for better emergency preparedness (Rabasa, Blackwill, Chalk, Cragin, Fair, Jackson, Jenkins, Jones, Shestak and Tellis 2008).

Emergency response is the set of actions taken to lessen the impact and minimize danger of an unforeseen incident which threatens public safety. It is a complex activity, typically involving multiple agencies. Activity Theory is a powerful and clarifying descriptive tool with the objective to understand the unity of consciousness and activity (Nardi 1995). This theory gives the flexibility of converting complex tasks into activities which makes it easy to interpret and manage. In this chapter we try to integrate the various activities in emergency response using Activity Theory with specific reference to the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature reviews highlight the usefulness of Activity Theory. We also draw attention to emergency-as-activity and describe the emergency response activities of the Mumbai terror attacks.

Activity Theory may be outlined by five fundamental principles as suggested by Engestrom –

- The first principle is that a collective, artifact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems, is taken as the prime unit of analysis (Engestrom, Miettinen and Punamaki-Gitai 1999).
- The second principle is the multi-voicedness of activity systems. Every activity system has several perspectives and be-

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