

**Saluting the Courage of New York**

**(Remembering September 11, 2001)**

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Lufthansa Airlines plane from Frankfurt touches down at the JF Kennedy Airport in New York and it is 11 O'Clock in the morning— a Sunday, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2002, about four months and ten days after the tragedy struck at the World Trade Centre(WTC) in New York. The runway is covered by a thick blanket of snow. The security arrangement at the airport does not indicate any extraordinary situation and the environment gives an impression of normality and business as usual. It takes about twenty minutes to reach downtown (as they call it) Manhattan. On the way, it is traffic as usual and it is OK for a Sunday in US. There is only one signboard displaying “We salute the courage of New York”. I am unable to recall whether it was a new addition in the changed situation.

On the surface, the life in New York goes on as usual. The people rushing to offices in the mornings and rushing back in the evenings. The Cafes and Restaurants are filled in the evenings. The gossip is as usual.

At the farthest end of Manhattan, on the edge of the downtown, bulldozers and cranes are busy clearing the rubble from the devastated WTC. A mysterious fear and anxiety engulfs a person visiting the area. The fear and anxiety follows you even a few blocks away from the scene of occurrence. Even after four months since the tragedy struck the area, one feels the screams of innocent victims haunting you. The horrifying images of half-burnt bodies and faces hang around in the air. The people pass through the streets with their faces hung down, as if they want to rush to their abodes passing quickly through the screams and images of half-burnt bodies still floating around in the air. In the evenings, even though the people living around give you the impression that they have got over the tragedy, their expressionless and tense looks and their conversations in the hushed tones belie the impression they want to convey. The air is thick with fear, anxiety and uncertainty. It is hard to believe that people who were a witness to the September 11 tragedy still live around the same area. Standing a few blocks away and that too after four months of the tragedy, I felt choked, breaking from within and I could hardly control my tears.

The New Yorkers avoid the topic. They do not want to discuss it, which in any case does not suggest that they have forgotten it. The impression one gathers is that they have internalised the entire tragedy. It takes a while before they open up to reflect upon the agonising event of September 11. There is no rancour or bitterness; instead there is a grace and poise in their expressions in discussing the various aspects of the entire tragedy. The tragedy has undoubtedly laid a serious psychological, emotional, cultural and economic impact on the people. There have been voluntary initiatives, providing psychological and emotional relief and educating the people to cope up with the emotional stress. The economy has been jolted as hundreds of offices operating from WTC have been devastated. The tourism has been badly affected and it would take a great deal of effort and time to bring it back on to the rails.

However, the basic cultural issue remains. The Americans in general and New Yorkers in particular ask specifically as to what had they done to deserve this fate at the hands of Muslim extremists led by Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda band. US as a multicultural society is abounded by mosques, Islamic Centres and even Islamic Schools. *Halal* mutton is easily available and the multicultural hotels and restaurants display in English and Arabic indicating availability of *halal* mutton and chicken and assuring the same being served if one wants it.

The debate has shifted to Islam via the involvement of John Walker Lindh, the sole North American member of the Taliban's fighting forces, after he was captured in Afghanistan with an AK-47 rifle and for his admitted membership of Al-Qaeda. According to media reports, John grew up in the ultra-modern liberal enclave of Marin County of California. His transformation into a Muslim militant of al-Qaeda variety has a curious dimension in that, his father, Mr. Frank Lindh, raised as an Irish Catholic, encouraged his son, Walker, — in search of spiritual alternatives and expressing his sympathy for Islam— to embrace Islam as his faith. With his father's encouragement, Walker started attending a moderate mosque in Mill Valley town after embracing Islam. Later he went to the Middle East for higher studies in Islam and his parents supported him all the way. Walker's father tried to combine his Catholic faith and Islamic practices as well and in a daring and forthcoming interview to Canada's National Daily, *The Globe and Mail* (January 26, 2002) he said about his son that "he wanted something pure, and he was definitely questing at an early age. We encouraged him to look." It is strange and has raised several questions and challenged the routes, which led John into al-Qaeda network.

John lived in a cultural milieu, which offered multiple religious and spiritual alternatives including several flavors of Buddhism, meditation centres, transcendental meditation packages and also Islamic Sufism. John's mother, Marilyn Walker is reported to have embraced Buddhism at some point of time. The questions being raised are: where did the road to Jihad begin for John Walker Lindh? Did it start in Marin County itself or in Afghanistan? Is there something in Islam that any person seeking spiritual bliss in it would ultimately land up in al-Qaeda?

The post-September 11 world scenario should prod Muslim societies in general and Muslim states in particular to address these questions and look inwards and embark on a correctional path to find ways of living cordially in a modern day social order constituting multiple faiths and cultures. The great tasks ahead are underlining the recognition of multiculturalism, territoriality, national self-interest, democracy and tolerance. The world would go the whole hog with Islamic ideologues in their campaign against corruption, alcoholism, tackling the roots of HIV AIDS, joining the initiatives leading towards tolerance and human brotherhood and would be partners in their march towards the spiritual unity of humanity across the globe. The rhetoric and sermons would not lead towards achieving any of these goals. Moreover, there is enough empirical evidence to suggest that the ploy of projecting the positive and peaceful aspects of Islamic faith and Muslim history has been used by extremists and terrorists whenever they were confronted with the stronger forces. Conversely, having their way, they would act contrary to these very basic Islamic values. Therefore, there is an urgency to take practical steps in the direction mentioned above. Thus, the history has enjoined a duty on Muslim intellectuals and theoreticians to restructure the Islamic precepts and strive to project the image of Islam in its proper perspective.

Having witnessed and faced the brutality of September 11, the US public opinion remains steadfast to its commitments, which is widely indicated by an outcry on the treatment of al-Qaeda and Taliban prisoners at the Guantanamo naval base in Cuba as reflected in American press. The American press has been impressing upon the US administration that it should respect Geneva Convention on Human Rights in its handling of all its detainees. The US public opinion wants the US administration to make it clear that it upholds International human rights law.

There are a few questions raised regarding the US presence in Saudi Arabia. According to William Pfaff (*International Herald Tribune*, Jan 26-27, 2002) the widely held Saudi view is that the US fought the Gulf War to defend its own oil interests, put Saudi Arabia in an uncomfortable position by the way it (the US) conducted the war and refused to go home when the war was over. The US enlarged its presence from a rotating detachment just after the Gulf War to a force of some 6000 in 2001 before September 11. "They are seen as interfering in Saudi affairs, and their presence offends Muslim religious sensibilities." William Pfaff further maintains that "the tale is a cautionary one of self-inflicted damage, the result of Pentagon expansionism, military ambition and the steadily increased power of neo-conservative hawks in a Washington now convinced that global extension of American power and control is the new Manifest Destiny. US security and leadership is held to depend on world wide military deployment." William Pfaff is right that there is no value in a military deployment, meant to stabilise a region— that actually destabilises or subverts it, which rather strengthens Islamic fundamentalism and helps it win its recruits. The US has to come out of its unilateralism which Bush administration seems to be pursuing, be it with regard to global warming, the UN, War Crimes Tribunal, International Criminal Court, land mine bans or trade conflicts.

It is a tribute to the US democratic tradition and freedom of expression that as the bulldozers and cranes are busy clearing the rubble at the devastated WTC, the general public is not losing sight of larger issues of US foreign policy and human rights.

*[The preceding narration is the summary of diary notes written by the author during his visit to New York in January 2002]*