

Taj Values & Ethos: Interaction with Mr. P.K.Mohankumar

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Abstract

On 26th November, 2008, an extraordinary event changed the course of life for many people. That day the world saw two extremes of human emotions and responses. At one end the terrorists who mercilessly killed and maimed ordinary citizens, and on the other some ordinary heroes, who sacrificed their lives, to save fellow human beings. Some such ordinary heroes were at the Taj. During the onslaught on the Taj Mumbai, 31 people died and 28 were hurt, but the hotel received only praise the day after. Its guests were overwhelmed by employees' dedication to duty, their desire to protect guests without regard to personal safety, and their quick thinking. Restaurant and banquet staff rushed people to safe locations such as kitchens and basements. Telephone operators stayed at their posts, alerting guests to lock doors and not step out. Kitchen staff formed human shields to protect guests during evacuation attempts. As many as 11 Taj Mumbai employees—a third of the hotel's casualties—laid down their lives while helping between 1,200 and 1,500 guests escape.

Heroes like 24-year-old banquet manager, Mallika Jagad and her colleagues, who were assigned to manage the event in a second-floor banquet room, saved all the guests in the banquet room. Forty-eight-year-old Thomas Varghese, the senior waiter at Wasabi, the upscale Japanese restaurant, saved every single guest and staff in his restaurant, but he never did get out. The terrorists gunned him down as he reached the bottom of the staircase. Karambir Singh Kang, the Taj Mumbai's general manager, who lost his wife and two young children who were in a sixth-floor suite, where the general manager traditionally lives. Kang led the rescue efforts until noon the next day.

*What went into making these professionals, who demonstrated motivation, dedication, sincerity, desire to serve and ownership of the highest order, beyond their call of duty? What was the DNA of these ordinary heroes? To have some insight into what goes into making such professionals and to know more about the Tata philosophy and guiding principles, that made the Taj one of the most loved and revered brands in India and in the world; **Mr. KK Bajpai**, General Manager (Systems), School of Management Sciences, interviewed, **Mr. P.K. Mohankumar**, Chief Operating Officer of Gateway Brand at Taj Hotels Resorts & Palaces at Oxford House, his office at Appolo Bunder, right behind the Taj.*

KK: Mr. Kumar, what is the secret? How do you produce such professionals, with

extraordinary sense of duty and feeling of ownership? The example of which we saw during the unfortunate events on 26/11.

PKM: See, I would begin by saying, perhaps there is no other organization in the world, that is so complete, so holistic as the Taj Group and I say it with lot of pride, and I think I am quite qualified enough to say that because I am second generation with Tata, I have been with the Taj group and Taj, for the last 38 years. So, it's been a way of life. You know, it's not a job.

And if you ask me what it is that makes the Taj, so special, is, what we call is the Taj-ness. It's the spirit of the Taj, and that spirit is something that you feel, it goes to your body mind and soul. It is not something that's measurable; it's not something that you can actually imbibe by kind of going through some management development program. It is something that you absorb. You imbibe, it becomes part of you, and it becomes so much of an integral part of you as you go along in the company in your journey of life. Having said that, I think, the Taj-ness of today, the kind of image, the ethos that outside world gets to know the Taj, specially the 26/11 has not happened just overnight, it has taken generations of people, employees, associates who worked in this organization for the last hundred years, hundred year plus.

KK: You have people who have worked for...

PKM: Generations!! Grandfather to father to son. There are many such people. So, it has taken generations of people, for a very long time, who have actually understood... and how did they come back to the Taj and worked again? There is some magic about the Taj, and the magic is not in terms of material benefits, it's not in the terms of careers, it's not in the terms of the fame and the material comfort that you get out of it. I think, it's about the sense of belongingness. It's about taking pride in the fact that you are working for an organization that is so unique. So, what are the things that are so unique about the Taj, I think one of the things that have magnetic attraction to anyone who starts working for the Taj is that there is a huge bonding. There is family like bonding in the institution; it's an institution, not a hotel. And so therefore anyone who starts working for the Taj, feels that this is a nursery; this is a university that you learn, continue to learn, there is a certain sense of accommodation, there is a certain sense of like how you may go to a family home. When you go to a family home, even if you are not belonging to that family home, you are somebody who is a friend of that family home, and you go there as a guest and the matriarch of the family takes care of you, gives you food. So it is something like that. The Taj means a lot to India.

The Taj Mahal hotel in Bombay is an epitome of excellence, world class excellence for Indians. So, this is a building that has actually transformed itself into an institution, and it has stood the test of time for centuries. So in a sense, the hotel industry, hospitality industry from the eastern hemisphere, for us it's a very different philosophy, as against the western

hemisphere. The western philosophy is very very driven from the left side of the brain. It's all about logic, it's all about processes, it's all about approaches, methodologies, everything that needs to be, can be counted. Whereas the eastern philosophy is all about spiritualism, it is all about the mind, it is all about the heart. And that's what hospitality in the true sense mean. It's all about; not the quantifiable, not the measurable aspect of it. It is the experience that we sell. It is about once you are coming to the Taj it is not just about the chandeliers, it is not about the marble and it is not just about the artwork that's around the place. It is about the people that make the difference. And the way they actually welcome our guests. The way they actually look after the guests, the way they actually cook food for the guests, the way they take care of the guests' comfort is as if each employee feels his or her responsibility to make that person feel at home.

Long before the technological advent, we remembered the names of the guests who used to come back to the Taj. So, when someone comes back after about let's say seven months or six months, the receptionist or the bell boy, or the watchman, the porch guard, used to recognize the guest by his name.

KK: You had Customer Relationship Management (CRM) long before it was even thought of!!

PKM: Absolutely. See, that is the human mind. You know, if you really are so passionate, and are so involved and you take that pride in the fact that I am the porch guard, I am the first person to welcome the guest, and I am the Taj, that feeling comes in to the person, he remembers hundreds of names. Right. And then that's the magic. So from the time you get out of the car, guest is welcomed by his first name and is taken along and then all along back to the room, and wherever, he goes in the hotel. His preferences, his likes, his family members, he himself, become so familiar with so many faces in the Taj. So, the same thing can be replicated. But any hotel anywhere in the world, food or the beautiful décor, the design, the tables, the crockery anything are things that can be replicated, anyone can buy it. But they can't buy the spirit of the Taj people.

KK: The DNA of Taj.

PKM: The DNA of the Taj, and this DNA of the Taj is, coming, arising out the fact that for me I know this is where I learn, So it is about growth, it is about learning. These are the two powerful elements that keep the employees within the Taj. The other thing is, Taj may not necessarily be among the best paymasters, but, then you know life is not all about counted in money.

KK: Of course, when you have generations of people working for you, certainly it is not the

criteria (the money)

PKM: That's right, absolutely. Life is also beyond. You know the salary that you get at the end of the month. You know suddenly you may have some illness in the family, your father is not well, your mother is not well, the Taj comes to help. The Taj will go out of the way to ensure that the employee is taken care of. Then housing is there and other basic necessities of life. Most of the employees actually get help in getting various things. But more importantly it is about the value system of the Taj that is so very sacrosanct. The value system of the Taj, you know there is a card and every single employee actually keeps this card. It is called the credo card. The Taj credo. I will show you the value system here (opens the card), as you can see, this is a little card that we proudly carry in our pockets and we keep coming back to it.

KK: It seems there are no employees at Taj, everybody is an owner.

PKM: Everybody is an owner. Everybody in fact has huge stake in this company. The reason is that for us it is a lifetime journey. And even those who actually go beyond probably looking for the greener pastures, even they always remain aligned to the Taj and connected with the Taj and the people of the Taj. There is no disconnection with the Taj. It is difficult for me to explain in measurable terms or in real words that what this feeling is. But I can see that, for example, (reads from the credo card) people diversity, integrity and respect. You know we are the true India, mini India, the Taj is mini India. We are very secular; we respect every creed, every community.

KK: Your secularism is not anti-religious?

PKM: Absolutely not. No. Gender equality, we have huge respect for women, and there are lots of lady employees who worked with the Taj for generations, then integrity, you know integrity that we practice is in line with the Tata philosophy. Each of us sign a certain undertaking.

KK: What surprises me that the processes that you are mentioning are there in any good organization. They have vision statement, mission statement, they are very good, and most of the organizations have very good mission and vision statements, but that getting translated and imbibed into people's heart is the issue. I am wondering what kind of training system you have?

PKM: It all begins with the leadership. It all begins with the head of the family. Taj leadership sets the tone. It actually walks the talk, believes in the philosophy, propagates the philosophy, and becomes a role model.

KK: So, the mantra is walk the talk.

PKM: It is 'Walk the Talk'. Leadership should walk the talk. And when you become a Tata man, you automatically get yourself integrated towards a philosophy of integrity. We value it immensely, for us, it is a trust. The nation trusts you. If you see TATA, the tagline is, TRUST. Tata's trust. So this Tata's trust is priceless, it actually spans centuries.

KK: So, that trust has actually made those people sacrifice their lives, at a time when they had the option. There are times when you don't have a choice and you fight, but when you have a very convenient choice and no blame of course because you are not a soldier, but still you are fighting.

PKM: You see, let me tell you that first thing that we are teaching our employees when they join the Taj is that guest is God. Guest is God. So, they say, can you explain further about this "Guest is God". How one can live up to it? You know it is very high, idealist platform, to say "Guest is God".

The way we translate it is that we never say no to a guest, we never say no to a guest (repeats), if guest wants to have breakfast at one o'clock in the morning, it is given to him of course. Whatever the guest is actually expecting and asking us to do, we do it. Like the famous battle cry, my duty is not to ask why but to do or die, in a sense literally what some of our associates did on 26/11.

Where did this spirit come from? The spirit came from the fact that every single employee owns the guest. So, therefore on that day, those people who were inside that hotel took it upon themselves that it is my moment, I have to put my hands up and be counted to protect my guest. Normally, we are not used to protect the lives of the guests. We are used to usually creating experiences, to make the guest feel absolutely happy and delighted and create lasting memories. But it was rarest of the rare moment, in the history of the Taj when lot of our associates were called upon, unexpectedly, to protect the lives of the guests. And the way in which they went upon doing that was reflected on their huge intensity of connection with the spirit of the Taj. They did not mind facing up at close range the bullets of the terrorists. They made sure they live the spirit that the Guest is God. The God has to be protected. So, it's the passion. This passion comes from the eastern philosophy which believes in emotion. So, there is high emotion connect. Otherwise in the western philosophy it's just a job where employee feels it's a hotel and when my time is up I disconnect and I have my life. But for us, this is life. Taj is life. And I am living example of that myself. My wife is a social activist. She actually is at the other end of the spectrum. She is looking after the underprivileged, the poorest of poor and I am here looking after a very different profile of people.

KK: Through them you are, actually taking care of poorest of poor.

PKM: Absolutely. You need to create wealth for the nation. Late Mr. JRD Tata said that you have to create wealth for the nation and then after that make sure that the wealth is distributed equally to all in the society. So, coming back to this whole ethos of Taj-ness, the growth is fundamental to any employee. Growth is fundamental, more than material benefits. If you see in any sector whether it's a doctor, engineer, technologist, or a manager; after you pass out of your college you tend to actually join the best of the institution, the one that actually has the world class name. That world class institution may not be world class paymaster in the campus interview but you join that. The fresh graduate who is aspiring to become one of the best professionals in his lifetime would always make an intelligent choice to join an institution that can teach you. Because what you learn in the universities is only basic, it is fundamental. But as you go out in the world with the knowledge that you have learnt from that institution, a world class company of your choice in the sector that you have chosen teaches you practical knowledge what has not been taught in the university. They teach you real life situation, they make you a leader, and they actually make you a complete human being. So there are different dimensions of your young mind that the organization gives shape and form to.

KK: Do you think that spirituality also has a role to play here because you mentioned the 'spirit' and 'connect' and what are your perceptions about spirituality?

PKM: Well, you are preaching to the converted! (Laughs). My life has always been a journey of spiritualism. I very strongly believe in spiritualism and I am very proud of it. I am also a religious person. I also believe, you know, they say that you have two types of *bhakt*s. *karmbhakt* and then who actually prays in front of the God, a “regular” *bhakt*. So, spiritualism is in a way, a manifestation of your inner self, and you connect with the universe, you go beyond what you see, you go beyond what you see, you go beyond what you learn. If you are developing that capability to see life in the larger context and not immediate benefits that you get, you keep asking yourself the question – who am I? What am I? Where do I go? The mundane life that we live for 70-80 years.

KK: The quest for self-awareness.

PKM: Yes. How many of us in the whole world actually talks about, who am I? What am I? Those are metaphysics states level. But I think the world which has more than 6 billion people where at least one billion of people are getting into the middle class and upper middle class or rich class and they understand that you may have all the riches in the world but ultimately are you happy? So, when you ask that question 'happy', that encompasses spiritualism.

KK: When a person can be called 'happy'?

PKM: That is a search that you do for yourself. Happiness is something you need to ask yourself. What is going to make you happy and keep asking that question. For example, I want to have a better job, ok then what will happen? Then I want to have a car, okay, then what will happen? Then I want to own a house and so on. Keep asking all that.

KK: So, the continuous quest to search for happiness makes a person greedy at times also and makes him do all different kind of things.

PKM: Possible. In that quest for acquisition in the process, you may actually succumb to a lot of temptations and do things accordingly. But you can always recover, right? So, now you have acquired everything that you want, then you ask yourself the question – are you happy? No. Because, I don't get sleep, I don't get mental peace, I do not have friends, and my friends measure me for what I give or take. So, what is the real happiness? The tragedy is that by the time we actually discover happiness, it's a bit too late in life. There is not much life left then. I think the next generation is searching for that happiness, the true definition of happiness from a very early stage onwards. So, in a sense, what I would advocate is, you may not necessary be able to discover complete happiness but you can start thinking of it from a very early age.

KK: Taj has taken certain innovative steps to popularize local Indian food in various locations, what you have to say regarding this?

PKM: Yes we took some initiative to promote and preserve traditional culinary delights in various locations by incorporating local delicacies in the menu. The objective was patronize the old Indian cooking tradition which is fast vanishing even from homes. This initiative was very well received by our guests and encouraged by their response and our resolve to revive the tradition we implemented this in western and north India initially. So, Rajasthani food became popular, Goan food became popular and then we came to south of India. So we actually changed the whole image of India. There is so much of sea food and so much of exotic hinterland food that we can serve. India has a huge repertoire of great food. We are still discovering that we have not documented it. It has passed on from generation to generation but today it faces the danger of extinction because the next generation of people both girls and boys are not working in their home kitchen...

KK: Instant food!!!

PKM: Yeah, they all are going out. So when they get married they would not know how to continue this whole tradition of home food. That is why in Taj in my division I started a movement called – Home-food by Homemakers at gateway hotels. This is a brand and at 25 locations where we have hotels what I have done is I have actually gone around and

identified the homemakers who are excellent cooks at home, talked to the families whether it's a husband, father, mother and requested them to support that woman of the house to come over and spend two hours in our kitchen. We created a home kitchen in the hotel, bought home utensils and home masalas. We serve them exactly like we serve home food and the only difference is that the mother or the wife is not there to serve instead of that we have our own people. But we also serve in a *thaal* as this is also relished by so many people. So, in every gateway hotel in the coffee shop we have one section called "Home food, by homemaker at gateway". So if you go to Jodhpur it's not Rajasthani food but Jodhpur food, if you go to Varanasi it's not UP food but its Varanasi food like *dumaloo* or *aloobanarasi*. It's a famous dish now, but there is a way of making it and we have mastered that through the help of these homemakers. They are getting employment also and we are paying them well. We give them food, we drop them back home, and then they come back in the evening. In the process what is happening is that The Taj is propagating the ancient home foods of India to the outside world.

KK: Can these values and ethos of Taj be transported with your help to management colleges for making better management professionals in future?

PKM: Absolutely. What we need to do is we need to actually do it through mass media. You can make a film about the Taj highlighting the Taj-ness as a management education that how Taj has become a world class organization. What has taken Taj to retain and attract generations of employees to continue to work for this organization and that case study should be propagated at the mass communication level to all the management colleges of India. Only then it gets imbibed because Taj is a role model. Taj is a role model in many ways and it is highly respected. So it is not necessary that it can only be for hotel management graduates but it can be for any sphere of leadership, it is about service management.

KK: Thanks Mr. Mohan Kumar for your time and sharing the essence of Taj-ness and leadership mantra that the Taj follows.

PKM: Thanks.