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Recalling 26/11 attacks:Part V

Name: Dr. Dheeraj V Mulchandani Works at: Dr. Mulchandani's Medical Services With another anniversary coming up, Hindustan Times has started 'where were you on 26/11'. Now, although I was not in any of the places where people got shot / bombed, I've never gotten around to writing what we were doing on that night, but, looking back it's pretty scary!

This happened at the time when I was still working at Hinduja Hospital. There were two observers working in our department of Surgery from overseas. Karan was from South Africa and Nitin from the US. They had both come down to gauge the clinical processes in the Indian Healthcare System.

We had planned a night out, seeing that they would be leaving towards the end of November. They wanted to go to a place where they could chill and have a drink. We got all our friends around and decided to go to Leopold.

My wife and me have been Leopold fans for a while now, but off late their service has become greatly tipped towards foreigners. We decided to head off to Mondy's (Cafe Mondegar) instead.

There we were, sitting and enjoying the jukebox and beer when all of a sudden they started closing their long wooden windows. On enquiry, the waiter told us there was some sort of gang shooting happening outside and we should stay put and it should all be fine soon. This was around 9.15 pm. I clearly remember a BEST double-decker stationary outside.

Strange, I thought and made a mental note. In a couple of minutes, between my wife and me, we received 5-6 phone calls ranging from Ahmednagar to Dubai saying that there was some sort of blasts in Colaba and asking whether we were safe? Of course, at that time, all I could do was say in the usual Bombay drawl, it's all cool, there's nothing much happening here.

We continued our drinks till about 10.30 pm blissfully unaware of what was happening outside. When we finally decided to leave, the bus was gone but there were barricades outside and about a dozen cops. When we took the car out, we were told there are some people walking around Colaba with guns and we can't drive down causeway. I told them that we live at Strand and we need to get home. They asked us to go via madam cama road. We did. We had with us a dear friend from Navy Nagar and she had to be dropped home. We took the back road and reached RC Church to find armed guards at the naval gate. They would not let us in to drop her home. My wife got into a heated argument with the guards along with my friend saying that if there was a dangerous situation there, wouldn't it be foolish to ask a lady to walk back home from the security gate. Anyone who knows navy nagar knows there is a fair distance between the gate and any of the buildings. After a while, they agreed to let my wife drive my friend home whilst the rest of us, Karan, Nitin and me waited outside at the gate.

Once she was back, we were slowly starting to realise that the situation must be pretty bad for the security guards to behave in such a manner. We decided to head back as soon as possible. On the

way back, we were once again stopped at Sassoon Docks, with people telling us we can't drive through there onto S.B.S. Marg. There has been a bomb blast on the road, he said. How am I to reach home, I asked them? They said take the back road.

This back road I keep referring to is actually the Badhwar Park Road. The same place where the now infamous group entered my Bombay! We took that road and reached the electric house signal. Once again, we were stopped by the public. There were hardly any cops here yet. As luck would have it, one of the people knew us quite well. He worked in my wife's cousins shop. He convinced the crowd to let us go and that we stay close by.

This is another thing that is clearly etched in my brain. I made that drive from Electric house to Strand Cinema in less than 20 seconds and I did not see one thing moving on that road at that time. It was close to midnight and it was a strange sight to see Colaba empty.

Keep in mind, till now, none of us either heard or saw any gunfire or blast. We reached home safely and the first thing we did was switch on the television to get the news! Almost as soon as we did so, we heard a powerful blast that shook all of us to our very bones, including the house. It came from Nariman House, just a few buildings away.

My friends from overseas were in shock. So were we. We spent the next 3 days glued to the television, up on the terrace (rather foolishly now that I think of it) looking at Taj burn and Nariman House make shooting noises. My wife got goosebumps when she saw the commandos being air dropped on the roof there. Not something any of us will ever forget.

I applaud the staff of Cafe Mondegar though! I'm sure someone there knew it was a terrorist attack but they made sure none of the patrons knew that before we were ready to leave. It could have been chaos if they did.

Name: Megha Shrimali Age: 20 years Occupation: BMM Student (Undergraduate)

My Parents and siblings were out of town, sitting all tucked up inside my home, I switched on the television, and that was the time I saw (literally) and heard that our Mumbai was under siege.

Phone calls started pouring in, my parents ruled out an emergency-like scenario on me; do not attend unknown numbers, do not go out of home, they were terrified with the news sitting all far away from me. I felt so unsafe in spite of sitting all safe inside the 4 boundary walls, away from where the horrific incident was actually taking place.

At that time I just wondered, if I can feel unsafe at my home, what about those who were actually going through the disastrous menace? What about those who's near ones' were present there, where the terrorists held hostages?

After 2 years of this Black Day in our city I conclude this in mind that -No Place is safe, not even our homes. We just got to fight back and recover from every disaster. Just like how every Mumbaikar did after the attack on humanity and Innocence on the 26/11.

Nikita Talreja, Kalyan resident Age: 19 Occupation: Student (CA)

I just returned from my classes when the things started unfolding.

Mumma just opened the door and without asking anything to me, she went back to watch Television.

I was puzzled as to what's so interesting on it.

Leaving my bag on the table, I was watching something which gave me the shock of my life. INDIA was on under a TERROR ATTACK.

I stood there digesting the whole ongoing; for it wasn't something reel but real.

And then the whole chase began as to locating the terrorists and making sure most of the people are saved.

26/11 is engraved on my mind for three reasons:

1. The inhumanity of the ones who were out shooting in all possible directions just because they were trained to do so. 2. The after incident treatment of Kasab. 3. It's the best example for the tagline, "Move on!!"

Almost life came back on track once the 4-5days chase was over.

We were sorry for the ones, who lost their lives, we were angry over the ones who were responsible for it, All said but all faded away in a matter of days; Just because we were the onlookers.

But the ones who lost their closed ones still have fresh memories and find it difficult to gulp in certain after incident effects.

Everybody is right on his/her place stating we have our own life to look after, but think over it....

ISN'T OUR COUNTRY AN EXTENDED FAMILY....

It is certainly; just because members are increasing too much we are not able to bring this thought back....

Name: Kamal Mangwani Age: 41 years Occupation: Manager - International marketing

When everybody was glued to their TV sets looking at the stunning, horrifying and shocking pictures of the attack and busy blaming Pakistan, I was also watching TV. The only difference was that I was in Pakistan itself!

I was on a business trip to Pakistan on behalf of my company Premco Global Ltd and was in the middle of my trip when the attacks happened. I was in Faislabad, the native place of Ajmal Kasab. Everybody back home was worried and I had to decide on the fate of rest of my trip but since there was no flight before following Saturday I decided to stay back.

Pak media covered attacks throughout and I could hear news of terrorist's origin of Pakistan. The worst part was that I was hearing about Pakistan's involvement sitting in Pakistan itself. Everybody was talking about the attacks and everybody I met expressed their grief over it. My Pakistani associates took extra care of my security and tirelessly condemned the attacks.

I traveled to Lahore after 2 days and everywhere I went, people I met were extra loving and caring. I was moved by their sensitivity. They hated the crime and couldn't believe that Pakistan could be involved. I met few who apologized to me and told me that they carry immense respect for India and

criticize such heinous acts. I could see that people on both sides are innocent and kind in general and it is because of very few vested interests that we carry such feeling of animosity towards each other.

Ashish Agarwal Raheja Vihar, Powai, Mumbai Profession : Banker

November 26, 2008 is an unmemorable date in my life. It was a normal evening but there was something unusual which was bothering me, which I was not able to ascertain.

I was winding up for the day at around 8.00pm when I realized I had to check if my cousin who was supposed to come to Mumbai from Delhi to attend a Doctors Conference has reached Mumbai or not.

I was getting down from the stairs of my office at second floor in Lower Parel when I called her. She was very disappointed for not being able to attend the conference as there was an unannounced strike in their hospital and all Resident Doctors had to compulsorily stay back.

We were regretting we had to drop all the plans we had made for her trip. I had come to the parking lot and just sat in my car when I saw getting a call from my Delhi's next-door neighbor where my parents stay.

I was surprised as they do not call at this time. My heart started pounding. I took the call when Aunty asked me, How am I ? etc etc.. I simply asked, Aunty what happened. She informed cautiously, my mother had fallen unconscious and my father has taken her to hospital with the help of neighbors.

I was shocked.

I controlled myself and immediately called my elder brother who works for a Bank at BKC. I just told him, I am coming and will go home together. He is very soft hearted and emotional.

We started from BKC to our place at Powai. I slowly told him about Mom. He was speechless. We tried speaking to Dad but standard reply, all is well,don't worry.

This was creating further anxiety. We reached at my brother's home when we got a call from my cousin sister again enquiring our whereabouts. She was terrified. She asked us to switch on the TV and watch news. Mumbai was rocked by another bomb blast.

Considering it just another bomb blast and thanking God we were not there, I opened the laptop and started looking at flight details contemplating at what time we should go, a night flight or a morning flight? As we were discussing and wondering, the scene on news channel was turning serious. It was not just bomb blasts it was more than that. We were confused but decided to take morning flight. I made a list of all possible flights.

Still no comforting news from Delhi was coming. I came to my home wondering how to share the news with my wife. She was expecting our second child. That's when we saw on TV, Oberois and Taj Palace were under siege. It was one of the worst sights one can even imagine. I managed to tell her about mom. I was in continuous touch with my brother and father not able to figure out when we will be able to leave. That night I did not even winked my eye. I was wondering is this for real or a fiction? At 2.30 am, my father finally disclosed my mother had suffered from a Paralytic attack but he was not giving any detail. I was in tears. We brothers were desperately waiting for the morning to

show. Skepticism was there in mind, will be able to reach airport, will everything be well at the Airport? What sort of security will be on the airport and on the way to airport.

We were ready by 5.30 am. We called in for a cab, which we got easily. Reached airport in no time, all roads were empty. Security at the airport was as casual as nothing has happened. Now you can understand why the security breach is so easy. We managed to get on board the second flight for the day. We reached hospital directly. My mother was in ICU and her condition was not good. God was kind, she survived the Paralytic attack but my heart goes out for the families of unfortunate victim who could not survive the terrorist attack.

Arif F Bandukwala Minerva Industrial Estate, Bunder Road, Sewri (East)), Mumbai 400 015 (India)

My Name is Arif Firoz Bandukwala, I am 56 years old and I am a Mumbaikar since my birth.

I am a businessman by occupation, manufacturing packaging materials at Sewree, Mumbai.

My uncle, Sir Gulam Noon (now, The Lord Noon Kt, MBE) who is also my senior business partner was in Mumbai and he was staying at Taj Mahal Hotel, as he always does, during his visit to India in November 2008.

On that fateful Wednesday on 26th November 2008, I went visiting Lord Noon in his suit no. 361 on 3rd floor of Taj Mahal Hotel. Also present in the room were three of his business associates from UK, US and Ireland apart from the elder brother of Lord Noon and one of our business associate.

At around, 9.15 pm, Lord Noon went down to the Hotel lobby to see off Mr. Finbarr O'Driscoll, President, Kerry Ingredients Asia Pacific as he was flying back. Lord Noon was back in the suit by 9.25 pm.

Originally, we were supposed to have dinner at one of the restaurant at Taj, but as the destiny had willed, we were having Lord Noon's favourite delicacies (brought in by his family) in his suit that night. At precisely 9.30 p.m. the firing started and we were all startled and confused. In a few minutes, my driver who was waiting for me in the hotel parking lot called me on my cell alerting us that something was wrong and some terrorist attack was in progress inside the hotel and that we should not come out of the room.

After that it was a total pandemonium. Our only source of information was our cell phones and we kept receiving calls from our family and friends from all over the world, informing us that it was a systematic serial terror attack at various places in Mumbai and live coverage by televisions was conveyed to us (our room TV was switched off by the hotel to prevent panic). Six of us, Lord Noon, his elder brother Abbasbhai, our associate Ismail, Mr. Bob Carnell, Mr. Peter Dillane (both from Kerry Foods group) and myself were confined to the suit no. 361.

For a considerable period of time the hotel desk was advising us to maintain calm, stay put in our room, switch off all lights, stay silent and vigilant and wait for the rescue. I salute the exemplary courage and sense of duty shown by the hotel staff.

We were informed by friends that terrorists were seeking foreign nationals, more particularly from US and UK, and killing them indiscriminately, we were really worried as we had three such people in the room, including Lord Noon.

We moved some heavy furniture, jamming and securing door. We were informed that terrorists were

holed up in room no. 360 and only a wall was between them and us. Shortly, there was a huge noise of a bomb blast and again our friends told us that the dome above the sixth floor was on fire

As smoke started to enter the room, our friend from Kerry Foods who are from Ireland and have some experience in combating such situation, used wet towels to block out the smoke by placing them at the door. Soon we were without air conditioning, without light, without TV, without landline telephones and with our cell phones fast running out of battery. Twice we contemplated escaping from the room, but wisely decided against it.

Even though the constant firing was taking place in the other part of the hotel, our side was relatively quieter. Each one of us went through the entire gamut of human feelings – from fear, to anger, to despair and helplessness, to being nostalgic, to being spiritual and philosophical.

We all must have seen our entire life like a movie in a fast forward mode and rued the missed opportunities to do the right things we should have done and also thank almighty for some right things done by us for family and dear ones. I can recall every moment of the tumultuous night, when all of us maintained our sense of proportion and calm, even retained the sense of humour to see us through.

It is said that the tough time and trying circumstances bring out the true character of a person. It was most gratifying to see the humane side of a top executive, caring and gutsy behaviour in the worst possible crisis, Lord Noon's redoubtable leadership qualities and ability to stay calm in the crisis and thinking fast on his feet, will always remain etched in my memory. In the end, we were all resigned to the destiny, firmly believing that no harm will come our way as we all have been good human beings, deciding that we will not go cowardly and if it comes to a show down, will take out a couple of terrorists with us.

Late in the night, when we all were trying to relax and take a little nap which was proving elusive for me, I got a call from my wife informing me that TV was showing fire brigade rescuing some guests from first floor. I switched on the light and came to the window and started waving for help. All media waiting at Gateway of India captured the moment. Finally, the fire brigade came to our rescue and broke open the window and helped us all escape the ordeal at around 6.30 a.m. on 27th November.

Although, almost three years have passed, the memory of that night is still fresh in my mind.

Name: Manjari Jha Age: 25 Years Occupation: Trainer

Mumbai has a soul, an indefatigable spirit and an unassailable pride. Mumbai is such a place! That is what I had always believed about the city. They say to know Mumbai, you have to understand the smell of this city, hear the stillness of the sea and enjoy the music of noise.

On 26th November 2008, when everyone from this city was busy as always, pedestrians would have walked closely the Nariman Point, guests who stayed at Taj would have never thought they would witness a gory day and children who wandered on streets obliviously would have never thought they would see brutality and bloodshed.

I was a student then. I was pretty unaware that an incident like this would change someone's life so much. I was in my classroom when somebody had hit the panic button, we frantically started calling and wishing that no one was hurt. It was difficult to believe that people in a part of this city were attacked with gun, grenades and were held hostages. We silently prayed that no life is taken, but an

incident like this only becomes a part of blood-spattered history.

A relative of my classmate used to stay close to Nariman House. They were an old couple who always found delight in seeing the glitterati of the city through their window. They were shot when they tried to see through their window, what was this commotion about. They would have never thought that this view from their window panes would be the last. They were victim to the mercilessly shot bullets and grenades.

My heart went out to people who were kept hostages at Taj. I felt awful about the fact that few of us have turned out into abominable beasts that were killing and torturing people and we could do nothing about it. This day will forever be engraved in my heart for all the lost lives and devastated souls.

Name: Mrs. Sabiha Sheikh Age: 40 years Occupation: Teacher

It was an ordeal which lasted for nearly 3 days and 2 nights - the darkness torn apart by the deadly sounds of gun shots. First, we thought that somebody's marriage procession is going on about 09:10 p.m. with sounds of firecrackers. Then it was rumoured that a gang-war was in progress. But that was the onset of trauma, anguish, suffering, aloofness and uncertainty that was being unfold gradually.

We wouldn't know what would happen next. That night the phone didn't stop ringing either with frantic callers on the other end. On the phone itself they could hear the crackling sound of fire-shots tearing the night apart. We had to shut our windows, with total darkness, and our movements restricted.

The entire BEST Marg stretch was cordoned off. Residences around the Taj are most affected. Emotionally we were drained. It was even more difficult for children to pass through those anxious moments. My child who was 6 yrs old then couldn't eat anything nor sleep properly. Children till date are petrified at the slightest sound of a fire-cracker. First time we had seen a quite 31 December night that year. Time heals all wounds but some scars take more time to heal, when it involves a large society.

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