

# VANITY FAIR

HOME



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letter from bombay

## Anatomy of a Siege

A year ago, terrorists took over the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower, India's fabled five-star hotel, in an attack that left 172 dead across the city. As India still seethes over the bungled rescue efforts, those who survived the 60-hour ordeal reveal the full horror of what happened.

By Marie Brenner





A reporter talks on her cell phone outside the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower on November 27, 2008, hours after the terrorists struck. *By Arko Datta/Reuters /Landov.*

#### CORRECTION APPENDED

*Last year ... I was working as a decorator in Jhelum city [in Pakistan]. But I was unhappy with the meager amount that I would make.... My friend Muzaffar suggested that for better money we should get into robbery and dacoity [armed robbery]. I ... went to Rawalpindi with Muzaffar and took a room on rent.*

*We ... knocked on the door. A man opened it and asked me what had I come for. I told him we had come for jihad, so he let us in.... Abu Maaviya was our trainer and trained me for three months in operating rocket launchers, grenades, AK-47s, and other sophisticated weapons.... Of the 15 of us, 2 had run away, while 6 were sent to Kashmir. So 7 of us were left, to which 3 other boys were added, making us 10 in all—five pairs ... sent to Mumbai.*

*In C.S.T. [Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus], Abu Ismail and I started firing at the public there with our AK-47 rifles. Ismail was throwing grenades also.... [Later, on the street,] I was surrounded by police. One snatched my gun. The others started punching me on my abdomen.... I then lost consciousness and woke up only in the hospital. —From the confession made in court in Mumbai (Bombay) on July 20, 2009, by Ajmal Kasab, 21, the only survivor of the 10 gunmen who carried out the terrorist attack on the city on November 26, 2008.*

**I**t was a bright Wednesday morning in Bombay, at the height of the wedding season. Crowds thronged the Gateway of India, the city's signature monument, in front of the grandest of the grand hotels, the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower. A warm breeze blew from the Arabian Sea, and bouquets of lightbulb-shaped balloons wobbled in the wind above the vendors at the Gateway. Politicians and socialites and bankers from Saudi Arabia packed the rooms of the hotel. That night there would be a wedding in the Crystal Room for the scion of a prominent textile family, a private dinner for the board of the Hindustan Unilever company, and a banquet with European dignitaries in the Rendezvous Room. Drivers, waiters, chefs, pool boys, and driveway attendants in towering turbans were starting their day. Because of riots in the region the month before, a police detail had been dispatched from the hotel to other parts of the state. The banquet staff was relieved that the V.I.P.'s would not have to go through the onerous security checks. The talk at poolside was about a new movie, *Slumdog Millionaire*, that had just opened in New York to rave reviews. "It is a travesty," one guest said. "They are making us look like we all live in a *chawl* [slum]."

All that day, crows flew in uncommon numbers over the red domes of the hotel toward the pool. In Room 476, Maria Mooers, a Texas oil heiress, awakened late in her suite and thought, Why are there so many crows today? Although for nearly a decade she had been spending months at a time at the Taj, she had yet to learn that in India the crow is believed to bring warnings and messages from the dead. From his suite over the Gateway, Sir Gulam Noon, the frozen-foods magnate referred to in the tabloid press as "the Curry King," saw them, too. They flew through the banyan trees in the hotel's garden all day long on India's 9/11.

met Maria Mooers soon after I arrived in Bombay in January. The hotel had just reopened in the wake of the 60 hours of carnage that

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A Q&A with Marie Brenner on the siege of the Taj

I had unspooled on international TV the last week of November. Mooers was one of the first guests to return. Following the catastrophe, she had moved in with her driver and his family. “I felt safer with them than I did anywhere else,” she told me. Tension gripped the city. Pakistan was deploying troops toward the border. There were rumors of terrorists at large in Bombay, of sleeper cells at the Taj, of Israeli intelligence agents camped out at the local Chabad, or Jewish center. “The person who is working for me is going to kill me,” one Taj chef reportedly told his father, a famous chef in Goa, shortly before the young man died.

hotel. *Photograph by Kate Burton.*

As I write, 26/11, as it is referred to, remains the most important incident of international terrorism since 9/11. A recently released audiotape reveals the chilling level of sophistication as handlers in Pakistan negotiated with hostages in English. For almost three days, a highly trained, well-equipped team of 10 jihadists dominated the global stage. The most prominent act of terrorism planned—some Indian officials have alleged—with the help of members of the Pakistani military, 26/11 was the first operation of its kind to employ cutting-edge technology. Terrorists in their 20s, in T-shirts, communicated with their handlers in real time by satellite phones and used the Internet to identify their victims.

The hotel, bombarded with requests for interviews, was turning everyone down. There was no sign of the usual tourists in kurtas and pink saris saying “*Namaste*” to smiling waiters who mocked them behind their backs. The garden was eerily quiet. In India, there is a karmic fear that returning to the scene of one catastrophe will invite another. Mooers was not superstitious, however. A slim blonde of indeterminate age, she had the confident look of a woman who had grown up in a rich Texas family—her father was one of the early partners in ARAMCO, now the Saudi Arabian oil company. Love had found her in Bombay, but she was intensely private about her romantic life. She ran her oil-services business at night in order to be in sync with Texas time. She had not wound up, like so many others,

dead in a hallway or stripped and bound on the night of horrors, when some 1,000 guests and 500 employees had been trapped in the hotel.

Most of the staff was back on duty, although many were still in shock from having seen their colleagues gunned down in front of them and body parts strewn throughout the hotel. A memorial to the Taj dead—31 people, including 12 staff members—was already in the lobby. An additional 141 had died throughout the city.

“a bomb has gone off”

On November 26, Mooers had just come back to Bombay for the winter and was given Room 476, a suite by the stairs on the modern, Tower side. “Room 476?” she complained to the general manager. “I hear the waiters all morning long. Please move me as soon as you can.” She was irritated that it was the wedding season, which meant that the hotel was crowded. At 9:45 p.m., Mooers heard a grenade blast. It took a few moments for her to react. Bombay was always crowded and noisy, even in the late evening. For that reason, residents felt sure that their city was safe, at least for the privileged class. They lived in a bubble, shunning the use of “Mumbai,” the new, political name for the city, believing that Bombay was still “the golden songbird,” in the words of the writer Suketu Mehta. Although there was a long history of bombings in the country, including one at the Gateway of India in 2003, few of the elite believed that their cozy way of life would ever be threatened, and certainly not at the Taj. With its 10 five-star restaurants, where young chefs from the villages hoped to become the next Gordon Ramsay, the Taj was more than a hotel; it was a palace of dreams and aspirations. You came to the Taj to order your birthday cakes, and later you got married in the Crystal Room. Bombay’s rich bought their best-sellers from Nalanda, the bookstore in the lobby, worked out at the Taj’s gym and pool, and were members of Chambers, the private club. For more than a century, the Taj had kept out what V. S. Naipaul called the neurosis of India.

Mooers had no such illusions. She seemed to understand what was happening almost from the start. At 9:45 she placed a call to the concierge. “Is someone doing a demolition?” she

asked.

“No, Ms. Mooers.”

“Well, then, you better call the Bombay police and security,” she said. “A bomb has gone off inside the hotel.”

There was no reaction from the concierge. “Do not worry, Ms. Mooers. It is wedding season. There are fireworks all through the city.”

“What I heard were not fireworks. I think there are terrorists in the hotel,” she told him.



Karambir Kang, the hotel's general manager, who continued to rescue guests after his own family died in the siege. *Photograph by Bharat Sikka.*

“We will check on it,” the concierge said, his tone light and bright. A few moments later Mooers heard gunshots. It was becoming clear to everyone that the hotel was under attack. The operators—who would stay on duty until dawn—began to call guests: “Stay inside. Whatever you do, don’t open your door to anyone. There is a problem in the hotel.”

All that night and the next day, Mooers was on her phone. From her window she saw a man trapped in a burning room. Smoke came under her door. For 24 hours she was marooned in her suite. She thought, I am by the stairs. I might be saved.

**A**t first it was unnerving to see the vast Edwardian-era palace on the sea surrounded with massive scaffolding, the Palace wing and Louis Vuitton boutique boarded up. A guard was stationed in a green booth in the driveway, his assault rifle pointed toward the Gateway. A metal detector and a luggage check blocked the drive and hotel entrance. The turbaned driveway attendants, with no cars or limousines to park, looked lost, as if they had wandered off a Bollywood set into a demilitarized zone. From the guard’s booth you could look up to the terrace of Chambers, where 100 guests had been captive that night. Many of its stained-glass windows had still not been replaced. Outside my room, an elderly security guard stood in the hall with a leather ledger, marking down the time guests left their rooms and the time they returned.

The city’s rage had narrowed down to one issue: long into the night a squad of police and a contingent from the army had stood outside the Taj while terrorists roamed the floors above, taking hostages. The police were waiting for orders from a commissioner of noble lineage who stayed put in his car at the nearby Oberoi hotel and for the arrival of commandos and anti-terror forces from New Delhi. From his station a few blocks away, A. N. Roy, the head of the state police, screamed at his men, “Why can’t they go in? Why are they standing there?” But powerful as he was, Roy could not directly command the local police. India is a top-down society of entrenched bureaucrats, with appallingly inadequate communication among agencies.

It had been a year that spared no one in India. The stock market crashed, the 9 percent growth rate sputtered, the rise of luxury brands and fancy malls to fuel bourgeois tastes slowed. By the time I landed in Bombay, the social and political establishments had begun to realize that, for all their chummy relations with the police commissioners, they were as vulnerable as the slum kids and the teaboys gunned down on 26/11. For 60 hours the world had seen the dark underside of India—the Taj’s red domes in flames, unruly crowds at the Gateway gawking at terrified guests clinging to the curtains in their grand suites. For anyone outside India, the massive incompetence seemed unimaginable in the country that had produced a Nobel economist, many of the world’s top billionaires, and the most advanced of computer companies, Infosys. Inside India, however, with 450 million people—almost half the population—earning less than \$1.25 a day, the rich had long trained themselves not to see.



A cell-phone picture taken by Dr. Tilu Mangeshikar of guests trapped in Chambers, the Taj’s private club.



**T**hat night, news stations showed commandos in black jumpsuits landing in helicopters on the roof of the Chabad, Indian politicians broadcast the whereabouts of stranded guests, and stacks of bodies at the train station appeared on television screens. A photographer from the *Indian Express* managed to sneak into the Taj as the security team went through the rooms. “What are you doing here?” one of the policemen asked him, but did not force him to leave. “What is the use of India Shining [the national campaign of economic optimism initiated in 2003] when you can’t secure your own citizens?,” Suhel Seth, the Taj’s marketing strategist, demanded. “Banging on about nuclear power when your cops get paid \$200 a month and live in a *chawl*? ... A swine of a chief minister away in Kerala while Bombay burns?”

India has long tolerated its desperate economic paradox. A few miles from the Taj is the notorious human-trafficking center of Kamathipura, where thousands of Nepali girls kidnapped by the Mafia are kept in cages. Despite pressure from human-rights groups, the brothels flourish a mile from gleaming corporate buildings.

In New York, watching the chaos of 26/11 on television, Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly was confounded. “I could not understand why the police in Mumbai could not control the crowds,” he said later. “What was going on there? Why did they allow those procedures to be shown on TV? Commandos landing on a roof like a James Bond movie? Almost eight hours to get your commandos from New Delhi?” Kelly dispatched a team of three terror experts to India to study the tactics used and the flood of mistakes made. Could what happened there be repeated elsewhere?

Inside the Taj, the public-relations staff went into overdrive, announcing funds for victims and awards for heroic staff members. Soon, however, a story began to circulate that the Taj had had a clear warning of danger from the Bombay police. Interviews with chefs, security men, and executives were suddenly canceled or postponed. That, too, was very India. “We are a culture of liars. It is our legacy from the British, the lies we tell to insulate ourselves and please. Bullshitting is part of our deal,” according to the author Madhu Trehan.

the start of 26/11

Cross a busy street near the Oberoi hotel and you enter the other India. The sign on the road blinks on and off: Badhwar Park, Officers Railway Residences—a reminder of colonial days. Long favored by concierges whose tourist guests want “a slum experience,” the ghetto across the street is tucked into the shadow of the grand hotels. Tourists pay \$50 to marvel at the façade of cheerful industry that Westerners mistakenly believe defines India’s slums—one-room huts, neat lanes, open doors, smiling faces, scurrying rats. On the night of November 26 last year, India was playing England in a championship cricket match. The *chawl* was deserted.

In cricket-obsessed India, even later it didn’t seem surprising that few in the slum had seen the terrorists stop their boat quietly near piles of refuse on the shore. The coastline was unprotected and infrequently patrolled. You need an elaborate license to maintain a yacht at the rich seaside resort of Alibag, across the bay, but a small boat from Karachi could easily glide in on a moonlit night with no harbor watch to stop it. The 10 Punjabi terrorists trained near the Pakistani village of Faridkot had maps and elaborate instructions to guide them. They carried knapsacks loaded with explosives and plastic bags filled with nuts, dried fruits, amphetamines, and grenades, supplied at a training camp operated by the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), allegedly with the knowledge of the Pakistani military. They had trained at the camp for three months, taking instructions from handlers, all of whom they called by the familiar “Brother.” Eight of the terrorists jumped off the boat at Badhwar Park. They moved quickly, ignoring a woman who yelled,

“Hey, where do you think you are going?” The other two went ashore farther north, near the Oberoi hotel, where they would kill 32 people.

Some hailed cabs with dancing Krishnas on the rearview mirror and bumper stickers that said FATGIRLSLIM.COM. Two—including Ajmal Kasab, who would survive—drove to the train station and fired into the crowd with their AK-47s for almost an hour, resulting in 53 deaths. They then invaded nearby Cama Hospital, killing five. From there, they raced down to the street, where they encountered three of the top police officials in Bombay, including Hemant Karkare, chief of the Anti-Terrorism Squad. A fierce gun battle ensued in which the terrorists killed all three officers and then commandeered their car. They ran into a police barricade on Marine Drive, a grand avenue that runs along the water. The driver, identified as Ismail, was killed. Kasab, who with Ismail had killed three constables, was pummeled by police. He lost consciousness there, in the street. At the hospital, just after midnight, they discovered he was still alive.

Another pair of terrorists walked down a narrow pedestrian lane leading from Badhwar Park to the Chabad, called Nariman House. The seven people inside suffered the worst of the terrorists’ torture—they were beaten with the butts of guns and stabbed in the genitals. The terrorists were told by Brother, “One Jew killed by you is worth 500 normal people.” The young rabbi from Brooklyn and his wife were killed, but their two-year-old son survived. He escaped in the arms of his Indian nanny and now lives in Israel with his grandparents.



Standing in front of the Gateway of India, the driver Kamlesh Mandal, who saved the powerful



businessman R. K.  
Krishna Kumar.  
*Photograph by  
Bharat Sikka.*

Of the remaining terrorists, two went straight to the Taj and planted a bomb outside the building before entering the lobby. The other two stopped at Leopold Cafe, where the tables were crowded with tourists. They pulled out their assault rifles and sprayed the restaurant with bullets. Then they turned down the lane near state-police headquarters on their way to the Taj. They were now in the jumbled streets of old Colaba, where the fashionable restaurant Indigo and smart boutiques such as Bombay Electric are jammed into decaying colonial storefronts.

The team of four were later identified by Kasab to the Bombay police as Shoaib, Javed, Abdur Rehman, and Nazeer. Two of them broke down the door near Nalanda, and two stormed the driveway on the Tower side of the Taj. The one named Rehman wore a hat that said YESHU, Jesus in Hindi. Brother had told him that it would make him look like a tourist.

**A**t the hotel, a driver named Kamlesh Mandal was in his place near the driveway. Kamlesh earned \$200 a month and paid \$60 of it to rent one room on top of a fisherman's hut in Badhwar Park. He was the only resident of the *chawl* who worked at the Taj. Each day, he would snake through the alleys of Colaba, past the lane that led to the Chabad, nodding to the vendors of peacock feathers, bangles, and

Obama T-shirts stationed beside newsstands that sold 40 newspapers and 200 magazines in every conceivable language. Arriving at the hotel, he would shower, put on a crisp white uniform, and check the night's list of functions.

"Where is all the security tonight?" a doctor by the name of Tilu Mangeshikar asked her daughter as they walked up the driveway to attend the wedding in the Crystal Room. Trained in emergency medicine in Chicago, Dr. Mangeshikar disliked big Bombay parties. "I am leaving at 10 and not a minute later. I have a killer day at the hospital tomorrow." She walked past Kamlesh without noticing him.

Inside the lobby, Al the pianist was working his way through the last notes of "Always" when he looked at his watch: 9:36. Time for his break. He closed the music and headed for the men's room. Upstairs in Room 476, Maria Mooers heard the terrorists shooting outside the Palace wing. They then ran down the hall of shops, past a display of photographs of Gregory Peck, Sophia Loren, Bill Clinton, and other famous guests at the Taj, past a group of Moghul portraits and a 30-foot red mural of the arts by M. F. Husain, the Picasso of India. They stopped in the lobby, staring at the silk-covered sofas, the grand piano, the towering displays of orchids. Slim Bombay debutantes in saris swished by them on their way to the wedding. For five minutes they remained motionless, cowed by the surroundings. "It is very opulent," one of them would tell Brother in Urdu on his satellite phone. Then they opened fire.

"What is that noise?," Al asked the bathroom attendant. Outside, Kamlesh heard it, too, and later he recognized the black Mercedes pulling into the drive. Rushing from his post, he threw himself on R. K. Krishna Kumar, the vice-chairman of two subsidiaries of the Tata Group, the conglomerate that owns the Taj, and one of the most powerful businessmen in India. "Sir, you are not going in there!" he yelled. "Get off of me!," Kumar cried. "Are you mad?" Kamlesh grabbed him in a hammerlock, and they wrestled in the driveway. Kumar recalls, "He fought me, but I managed to get into the door to try to get

two bodies, and then we struggled and he dragged me out.” An explosion rocked the lobby, and a shower of broken glass forced them back. Kamlesh was badly cut, but he managed to drag Kumar across the street. It was 10:10. The Taj driver had saved Krishna Kumar’s life.

After shooting up the lobby, two of the terrorists raced to the pool, killing guests and a security guard and his dog. Then they, with the other two attackers, took an elevator to the sixth floor, the highest in the Palace wing, where the Taj put up its most important guests.

india’s nigella lawson

Stories of what happened in the hotel that night would be repeated, tweeted, and texted for months. Bombay residents would remember precisely where they were and what they were doing when the terrorists hit the Taj. All over the world, people imagined themselves in the nightmare. Watching “Terror in Mumbai,” as CNN called the story, travelers in countries everywhere saw themselves opening a door in a fancy hotel and encountering a terrorist carrying an AK-47.

I had planned to be at the Taj that week for the wedding of a friend’s daughter. On Thanksgiving morning, another friend called me from New Delhi, sobbing. “My God, Sabina did not even want to go on this bloody trip,” she said. She was talking about Sabina Sehgal Saikia, a gifted reporter who had re-invented herself as a best-selling food writer —India’s Nigella Lawson.

The Taj staff always made Sabina feel like a queen. At *The Times of India*, she had won awards for her reporting from Kashmir and had helped the paper morph its celebrity coverage to catch the dizzying rise of the India Shining wave. For the paper, she had developed Delhi Times, one of the first style sections in India. Socialites vied to have their parties covered in it, but Sabina rarely attended them. “I try to avoid the socialites,” she told her friends. When she had awakened in New Delhi that morning, she was dizzy and exhausted and in tears, because she had committed to going to Bombay for the wedding of the son of a dear friend and colleague. “I wish I could say no this time,” she complained to

her best friend, Ambreen Khan, an executive at the *Indian Express*. “My life is out of control—I am so stressed out. Why did I agree to fly to Bombay for a party?” Ambreen had little patience for her friend’s complaints. “What is the matter with you?” she gently scolded her. “Why are you getting so emotional? Go or don’t go—just stop whining.” At 45, with two children, aged 14 and 11, Sabina was constantly frustrated by the demands of work and family. Zaftig and passionate, a generous and exuberant hostess, she would feud with rival food critics and then invite them to her grand parties. Sabina flew all over the world, reporting on the restaurant scene as she struggled to keep her weight down and control her diabetes. “I wish I were invisible,” she said as she left for Bombay.

At 10 p.m., Sabina was in Room 641, the Taj’s Sunrise Suite. “You can’t believe this suite,” she texted Ambreen. “Come join me.” She had said to Santanu, her husband, on the phone earlier, “I wasn’t expecting this. They are really laying it on. A Jaguar met me, and they have given me the Sunrise Suite. You don’t know what you are missing.” The Taj style was to shower celebrities with trays of pastries, books, champagne, maybe an upgrade to the Presidential Suite. The hotel’s general manager, Karambir Kang, an amiable Sikh, had arranged to meet Sabina for lunch that day in order to press her to co-author a cookbook. Kang, the son of a general, had the elegant manners of the British Raj. “I saw something in him that was remarkable when he first applied,” former Taj executive Camellia Panjabi told me. “I said, ‘We are going to get you new clothes and send you to Lucknow.’”

**L**ucknow, a dusty city in the North, was a backwater on the tourist track, but Kang had quickly made his way up through management. Now he was in Bombay, and his sons, Uday and Samar, were enrolled at the posh Cathedral School. They were close in age to Sabina’s children, and he had come to consider her a friend. It had been his decision to give her the suite next to his family’s apartment. At lunch, the chef at the Golden Dragon, the Taj’s Chinese restaurant, had brought out dish after dish for the prestigious writer. “I’ll get sick!,” Sabina protested, adding, “and I have to save myself for the wedding tonight.” Kang confided to Sabina, “My children are fed up with

hotel life.” They had been set to move in early November to a new apartment a few blocks away, but the contractor had been slow, so they would not be able to move until after New Year’s.



“I’m waiting! Where are you?” Sabina texted Ambreen again just after 10 p.m. She had left the wedding party early, she said. Immediately, Ambreen left the Oberoi to join Sabina. It was a 10-minute drive. As she passed the train station, she saw hundreds of people running from the building. Approaching the Taj, she heard sirens. “Stay in your room,” she texted Sabina. “There is a problem in your hotel.” Then, on the driveway outside, someone shoved her. It was a Taj driver, who screamed, “Get back in the car! There is shooting in the lobby!” By the time

Santanu Saikia, whose wife, the food critic Sabina Sehgal Saikia, was killed in the Taj, with their children.

*Photograph by Bharat Sikka.*

she returned to the Oberoi, it too was surrounded by police.

In New Delhi, Santanu Saikia had a frantic call from his wife: “My God, something is going on here! There is shooting downstairs!” There were no immediate flights to Bombay, which was 20 hours away by car. “I am coming for you,” Santanu told Sabina. Meanwhile, masses of reporters and TV cameramen had flocked to the Gateway, and within minutes a friend had given Santanu the mobile number of a Taj public-relations woman. For hours he tried to get through to her. By the time he did, smoke was billowing from the sixth floor of the Palace wing. “That is where Sabina’s room is,” she said, sobbing.

When Karambir Kang arrived in the lobby that evening, the first thing he saw was a corpse. He told me later, “I called my wife, Neeti, and she was so calm. ‘There is a gang war in the lobby,’ I told her. She said, ‘We are fine.’ I said, ‘I am on the way to get you.’” As he stood in the lobby, he could hear sirens all over the city.

where were the police?)

Speeding toward the hotel that night, Vishwas Nangre Patil, Bombay’s deputy police commissioner, tried to keep himself from erupting in rage. His command was Zone 1 of the city’s 12 police districts, a plum assignment that included the five-star hotels, South Bombay’s big corporations, and the Gateway of India. Patil knew, however, that his situation was conditional. His first language was Marathi, which set him apart from his superior, Commissioner Hasan Gafoor, who was from a landed feudal family and grew up speaking the Queen’s English. Part of a new generation that was rocking India, Patil was one of thousands of ambitious village boys moving up in the booming call centers and computer campuses, displacing Anglo-Indians from well-connected families. Arriving in Bombay as a young student, carrying his *baksa*, a cheap tin trunk, Patil had driven by the Taj and looked at the red domes. “This was part of a world that had nothing to do with me and never would,” he told me. There was no resentment in his tone. Village boys understood that if you pushed the boundaries you might get exiled to a hellhole district or charged with corruption. They lived within the system, with bulletproof vests, many

coping with service revolvers that seemed to date from the 1947 Partition, and the knowledge that if they were injured or killed in the line of duty there would be little compensation for their family. Their take-home pay started at \$150 a month.

There is blurry 26/11 footage of Patil with Sunil Kudiyadi, the Taj's security chief, racing through the Palace wing of the hotel. When Patil got to the Taj that night, he ran into Kudiyadi at the back of the hotel, near the pool. Kudiyadi exclaimed, "Terrorists have barged into the hotel!" They rushed upstairs, where they saw two bodies, one on top of the other, and a young girl with her hand partially blown off, howling in pain. Before Patil could assist her, he became aware of shots coming from the floor above. The two men rushed to the second floor, where Patil dodged bullets behind columns with only a pistol for cover. Kudiyadi, who was beside him, didn't even have a pistol or a bulletproof vest. Patil had decided to get to the top floor for the best strategic location, but when he could not find the attackers he continued to search lower floors. He shouted into his phone, "It's do or die!" The police commissioner responded, "The army is on its way. Wait for backup!" Patil and his men watched security footage from a control room on the second floor—a strategy that would turn out to be catastrophic.





**I**t seemed that everyone I met in Bombay had the private cell-phone number of Rakesh Maria, the joint commissioner of police. You hear “Call Rakesh” or “Rakesh will see you” frequently in the city, where justice is often carried out in private. Maria, the son of a Bollywood producer, is part of the India where everyone who matters can speak of “my man” in the police department or the prime minister’s office, who can fix anything from canceled flights to stalled court proceedings, to threats from the Mafia. Actually getting to see Maria is not so easy. He has long since turned his mobile phone over to a deputy. In Bombay, the lines of authority are tangled, a legacy of the British effort to keep the Indians in their place. Growing up, Maria watched his father having to pay off one Mafia thug after another, and that eventually drove him into law enforcement. Today he is recognized as a good man caught in an impossible system.

Rakesh Maria, joint commissioner of police.  
*Photograph by Bharat Sikka.*

In *Maximum City*, his vivid portrait of Bombay, Suketu Mehta describes a character called Ajay—said to be based on Maria—as a ruthless interrogator who uses electroshock on suspects and demonstrates the process for Bollywood friends. In the waiting room outside Maria’s office at police headquarters, situated in a warren of crumbling buildings, cadets lounge on dirty plastic chairs while parrots and crows fly around in the open air. Every hour or so, the harried Maria rushes past, carrying a stack of legal briefs, calling to visitors, “I am late for the commissioner.” He rarely leaves the office before midnight. The day I went to see him, my companions in the waiting room were an aging Muslim widow whose house had been seized by the Mafia, three shopkeepers embroiled in a dispute with their landlord, and an oilman who was trying to collect \$1 million from a partner who had fled

to Dubai.

On November 26, Maria had left work early to have dinner with his son when he got a call: “There’s shooting in Zone 1—a gang war at the Leopold Cafe.” Rushing to his command center, Maria told me, he saw “a constable I knew on a large screen. First I saw a speck of blood. The speck became a stain that filled the screen. It was the first time that we had ever confronted the fact that we were not dealing from a position of strength.” A few minutes later he learned that his closest colleague, the head of the Bombay underground unit investigating terrorists, had been wounded in a taxi near C.S.T. “We were in shock,” Maria said. “No one could speak.”

Grabbing a phone, Maria shouted, “Go in, go in! Keep them pinned down!” Across the street from the Taj, state-police commissioner A. N. Roy was frantic. “What is Gafoor doing? Why aren’t they going in?” For hours, thousands of texts and blogs reported on the desperate situation inside the hotel: *Body of a bellboy found by the restroom.... A black bag of explosives in the lobby.... Three men down.* “We were a city at war,” Maria said. While the world watched in horror, the lines between command posts blurred as commissioners debated what to do next. “I am watching them!,” Maria screamed at his men around the city. “Commandos are coming!”

high-tech terrorism

Room 632, 9:45 p.m. K. R. Ramamoorthy, chairman of the ING Vysya Bank, traveling from Bangalore, had stepped into the hall to go downstairs when a Taj security guard warned him about trouble in the hotel. He went back into his room and turned on his TV to learn that the Taj was under attack. Ramamoorthy, who was 68 and balding, tried not to react. Then there was a knock on his door and the voice of a man identifying himself as a waiter. A minute later Ramamoorthy was facing two terrorists with rifles and a sat phone. Then two more terrorists came into the room. For the next two hours, 632 would be used as the command center for the Taj attack. Two hotel stewards and two housekeepers were cowering in rooms nearby. The terrorists made the staff members and the banker strip,

then tied them up and dragged them to the fifth floor. They bound them with sheets and kicked them.



When the attackers got their handler on the phone, they began to interrogate Ramamoorthy. “What is your profession?” one terrorist demanded.

Adil Irani, the pool boy who freed bound guests.

*Photograph by Bharat Sikka.*

“I am a teacher,” he said.

“No teacher can afford to stay at the Taj.”

There was a great flurry of Urdu once the terrorists made contact with their handler. “His name is K. R. Ramamoorthy,” one said and told the handler to look him up online. “Is he

bald?” another asked the handler. “Does he have glasses?” Their discussion was interrupted by an explosion, then smoke. The attackers fled, leaving Ramamoorthy and the other four hostages to escape or await rescue.

In another room the terrorists found a pool boy named Adil Irani. “My husband is a Muslim,” his wife told them on his cell phone. “Spare his life.” Adil, who was actually Parsi, was lucky—he had a Muslim name. They tied him up and threw him on the floor. Meanwhile, their sat phones kept ringing.

CALLER: *Salaam ailekum*. [Peace to you.]

RECEIVER: *Wailekum as-salaam*. [And to you.]

CALLER: Have you set the room on fire or not?

RECEIVER: We are just collecting the clothes.

CALLER: Start the fire fast. And look for a suitable stronghold.

CALLER: There are three ministers in your hotel ... and one cabinet secretary.

RECEIVER: Oh! That is great news!

CALLER: Find those three or four persons. Then you can make India agree to anything.

RECEIVER: Allah willing.

CALLER: Throw one or two grenades. There may be a navy outside.

Looking out the window, Patil could see explosives dropping from the sixth floor. In the

second-floor TV-security room, he and his deputy fired up through the atrium, hoping to keep the terrorists confined to one small area. Helpless, he watched them set fire to the carpets and curtains. Soon the entire sixth floor was in flames. Patil shot into the atrium. He could see on his monitor the terrorists dragging hostages to the fifth floor, using them as human shields.

CALLER: How many hostages do you have now?

RECEIVER: Five.

CALLER: Which floor are you guys on now?

RECEIVER: We are on the fifth floor. We have set three or four rooms on the sixth floor on fire. The rooms were facing the sea ...

CALLER: O.K., no hostages should remain alive.

From Ahmedabad, the mother of a 24-year-old banquet trainee named Mallika Jagad texted her daughter. "Are you home?" she asked. "Yes, Mum, I am safe," Mallika answered as grenades flew past the window of the private dining room reserved for the Hindustan Unilever board on the floor above the lobby. Mallika was in charge of the dinner for 30 guests, executives and their wives. "There are billions of rupees in this room," she had been told that afternoon as she went over the plans. "They must be handled perfectly."

"When the shooting started, I could see these corporate people were not going to be very calm," Mallika later told me. "I said to them. 'As long as you are here with me, you will be safe. Now, get down on the floor.'" Hearing gunfire, she had a colleague throw keys to her from down the hallway. Then she hurried to lock the door and turn off the lights. "No one say a word," she said. The lights of cell phones and BlackBerrys in the room blinked like fireflies. She had piles of linens placed on the floor behind the curtains to serve as toilets

for the guests.

**T**he next morning, Ajmal Kasab, the sole surviving terrorist, found himself in front of Rakesh Maria. “He was baby-faced. I was not expecting that,” Maria told me. “He said that he had been injured and was in pain. I said, ‘I don’t care for your pain. I want the truth.’ I had four basic questions: How many were in the city? What were the plans? What was the weaponry with them? How did they enter the city? His attitude was I am not afraid of death. I said to him, ‘You will either talk to me or I will turn you over to the constables or to the public screaming for your death.’”

During the attack, one terrorist had told Brother, “Sir, we have made a mistake. A sat phone was left on the boat.” Surprised on their trip by what they believed was an Indian Navy cruiser, they had killed the crew and taken the boat, realizing only later that they had left behind at least one sat phone and a map. The newsmagazine *Tehelka* would report that a list of their phone numbers was available at the Indian Intelligence Bureau at least five days before the attack. The story would cause headlines once the country realized, weeks later, that 26/11 could have been stopped. A tough and independent police constable had penetrated the terrorist camps and reportedly supplied SIM cards, which were never tracked. Incredibly, he was later arrested in New Delhi as a possible conspirator. The Intelligence Bureau accused the police of crossing the line of their proper authority. The constable who had risked his life remained in police custody for weeks.

**F**rom Room 641 there came one final, horrific message from Sabina Sehgal Saikia. “They are in my bathroom. This is the end for me. I love you very much,” she texted Santanu. Soldiers and policemen had arrived at the hotel by then and were waiting in the lobby, but not a single one defied orders and stormed the sixth floor to attempt to rescue Sabina or the family of Karambir Kang.

At the Oberoi, Commissioner Hasan Gafoor stuck to the rules that had been drilled into him at school and refused to order the men in. It would take hours for the commando

force to get from New Delhi to Bombay. First they had to wait several precious hours for a plane. What went wrong? The chief minister who could have countermanded the order to wait for the commandos was out of town. The army blamed the navy. The navy blamed the Bombay police. Conspiracy theorists circulated the rumor that this was all a plot devised by Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party, to embarrass her political rivals, right-wing Hindus of Bombay's crony-capitalist class. Even Rakesh Maria, the most powerful man in law enforcement, was powerless. There was nothing he could do to help Vishwas Nangre Patil. "Patil kept saying, 'I need commandos!' I said, 'The army commandos are coming! The navy commandos are coming!' The police were not allowed to go up. They were lobbing hand grenades. 'Frozen' is not the correct word. They were not able to go up."

"We looked like we were run by the Keystone Kops," Suhel Seth said later. Landing in Bombay at three a.m., the commandos found no helicopters to transport them into town. They had to wait for buses to take them. The image of those commandos in their black uniforms stuck at the airport rocketed around the world. Meanwhile, in Room 632, the Bangalore banker spent hours tied up on the floor, along with the pool boy.

**P**atil, ordered to remain in the TV room, screamed in desperation, "Where is the backup?" On tapes of the scene, his voice falters as he realizes that he can do nothing, that lives would be lost because of a hopeless system. Why didn't he break rank and "lead from the front"? Drilled into every Indian is the necessity to obey. You memorize your lessons if you want to survive in the culture of technocrats. But as smoke filled the hallways of the sixth floor and he watched the terrorists on the screen, he could stand it no longer. "I am going in!" he said. "No!," Gafoor cried. "Keep them pinned down! Wait for MARCOS [the commando force]."

Outside, at the Gateway, Karambir Kang yelled at Krishna Kumar, whose life had been saved by the driver Kamlesh, "My children and wife are inside. They will die!" Then he

rushed to the fire brigade, who were desperately trying to get their hoses to pump water past the second floor. “We ran to the head of the fire department,” Krishna Kumar recalled. “We pleaded with him to try to take Kang’s family from the outside. He said, ‘I have no authority.’ I screamed. No one could do anything. I ran to the deputy commissioner of police. I said, ‘I am the vice-chairman of this company.’ I tried again and again. I called the chief minister, who was not in town, and spoke to his son. I said, ‘It is chaos here! You must call the army.’”



At three a.m. a bomb rocked the building. The TV screens went black, and the explosion knocked Patil to the floor. “I thought I was going to die. The explosion destroyed the hall.” Suddenly in darkness, Patil rushed

Deputy Police Commissioner  
Vishwas Nangre Patil.  
*Photograph by Bharat Sikka.*

into the corridor by the fire exit. There was a blast of gunshots, and as bullets struck Patil's bodyguard, a constable next to him collapsed. It would be two days before his charred body was found.

When the bomb exploded, Raymond Bickson, the managing director and C.E.O. of the hotel group that owns the Taj, picked up the phone in his office and shouted, "Get me out of here!" On the sixth floor, sheets of fire were advancing down the hall. Afraid that the hotel would collapse, the terrorists took flight, abandoning their hostages. Adil Irani managed to get out of the hastily tied sheets that bound him, and freed the other employees, but Ramamoorthy was so frightened that at first he refused to leave. Just then the long-awaited commando force surged through the building. Kudiyadi hurried with them from room to room, hoping to rescue trapped guests. At three in the afternoon, he knocked on the door of Room 476 to find Maria Mooers. At first she refused to answer, but then he said her name. "They threw me over their shoulder like a trussed turkey," she told me. "They said, 'Give us some water. We have not had a drop to drink. Move quickly. Close your eyes. There are terrorists in the hall.'" They raced to the stairwell door as bullets flew by them. Mooers looked down at bodies and blood all over the floor. She later recalled seeing crows eating the bodies.

chaos in paradise

In New Delhi, the anchorwoman Barkha Dutt, who had trained at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, prepared to leave on a dawn flight to Bombay.

"Everyone was clueless. We mirrored the confusion. We were watching the cops getting shot, relatives of people in the Taj calling constantly, saying, 'Do something!'"

One of those trapped was Dr. Mangeshkar, who had started her evening declaring that she would stay at the wedding one hour tops. The hotel staff passed trays of sandwiches and drinks at Chambers. "Leave this kitchen right now—the terrorists are on the way," Kang ordered. "They refused to leave," Kang told me. "They said, 'We are preparing food and drinks for the guests.'" Kang ordered them again, "Leave! Your lives are in danger."

Dattatrey Chaskar, a waiter, begged Kang, “Save my son!” No one could find the young man. Later he would be discovered huddled among stacks of lamb chops in a cold-storage cabinet.

In Chambers, the private club, the decision was made to try to escape to an outside hall. At the front of the line of the first set of volunteers, Dr. Mangeshikar looked through the window in the door. “I saw a terrorist in the hall,” she said. “I saw the flash of his gun. I took out my cell phone and shot his picture. Not one person in the crowd tried to attack him. We could have overpowered him. We are such a passive people. Why didn’t we all mob him? My daughter grabbed me and threw me to the floor.” At that moment the terrorist turned and fired at the door, and a steward collapsed, with blood gushing from his stomach. Dr. Mangeshikar wrapped him in a sheet and desperately called the hotel operators. “I have an emergency surgery here. I need medical supplies. This man will die.” Telling me the story, she erupted. “And can you believe the bloody politeness in this country? This idiot said to me, ‘Madam, it will be a little difficult right now.’” Dr. Mangeshikar overheard a minister on his cell phone, saying, “We are all locked in Chambers—200 of us.” That exaggerated number was quickly passed to Indian TV and announced on air. Within moments, handlers watching in Pakistan appeared to have alerted the terrorists, and a hail of bullets was fired at Chambers. From his headquarters, Rakesh Maria was watching as well, he later told me. “Black them out!” he shouted. “Black them out!”

In the Zodiac Grill, a hedge-fund manager went behind the bar and opened a bottle of Cristal champagne. Immediately a waiter hurried over, saying, “Sir ... ” The executive glared at him as if to say, Try to stop me. “You are using the improper flute,” the waiter said. “Let me assist you.”

Just before dawn, an 82-year-old Parsi banker awakened in his room. He had not been wearing his hearing aids, and he dressed quietly to walk to the Gateway and join the

morning class in Laughing Yoga. A group meets there each day to do their tree poses with one of the laughter instructors who are the rage in Bombay. As he walked down the carpeted grand stairway, he encountered the Taj security staff. “Get back into your room!” they shouted. “There are terrorists in the hotel.”

On the plane with Barkha Dutt and her crew, Santanu Saikia was convinced that his wife was alive. He had heard that Sabina’s mobile number had been traced to the city of Raigarh. “I was convinced that she had escaped, that they were holding her perhaps as a hostage,” he said. “I knew that I could find her.”

Driving in from the airport, Dutt was astonished that the roads were open. The usual 90-minute trip into Bombay took 20 minutes. At the Oberoi hotel, she found a raucous crowd. “It was like a party—a carnival.” There were cameras everywhere, and slum kids were selling water. “There was no crowd control at all. There was one thin yellow rope. Anyone could have left the hotel, and anyone could have gotten inside. It was outrageous.” At the Chabad, thousands had gathered on the street, hoping to catch sight of the commandos arriving from New Delhi.

**I**n New York, it took TV viewers a moment to recognize the dot of grief and rage that was the chiseled face of Ratan Tata in the mob of cameramen outside the Taj. The chairman of the Tata Group is India’s Rockefeller, controlling his vast empire from Bombay House, the headquarters of a conglomerate with interests in Jaguar, 80 hotels (including New York’s Pierre as well as the Taj), and steel, power, and chemical companies.

A few years before 26/11, Tata, honored at a B’nai B’rith dinner in New York, had spoken of India’s globalization. “It began with the Taj,” he said. “For my family everything started with the building of the hotel.” In the Edwardian era, horse-drawn carriages and the first cars brought maharajas and nabobs to the hotel for 12-course feasts. Lord Mountbatten, the viceroy of India in the final days of the Raj, after drawing the line separating India and

Pakistan, departed from the Gateway after a 21-gun salute in front of a reviewing stand erected at the hotel. Gandhi, Nehru, presidents, prime ministers, the Beatles—all were part of the history of this grand establishment.

Tata was at home when he was told that terrorists were rampaging inside his hotel. As he prepared to run out, his deputy stopped him. “You are a security risk. It is not safe for you there.” He visited the site the next day. “I stood next to Mr. Tata for hours,” Krishna Kumar told me. “He said repeatedly, ‘I cannot believe the hotel is burning down. It is not possible that it is being destroyed.’” Nothing else in Tata’s empire compares to the Taj, built by his family, it is said, as a grandiose response to the segregated hotels of the British.

In the months before the attack, Tata had been under siege in the state of West Bengal, where farmers who had lost land protested the construction of a factory to build the new, \$2,000 Tata Nano car, which would put millions of the aspiring middle class on the road. The subtext of what happened at the Taj that night lies in the power of the Tata empire. Eventually, Tata left the state and relocated to Uttarakhand. Critics from the left will tell you that the Tata Group is run without a conscience and will point to the violence used in 2006 to quell worker riots at the site of a proposed steel plant. What is not as well known is that the company gives 60 percent of its profits to charity, according to Suhel Seth.

Four days after the attack, with a voice of suppressed rage, Tata appeared on CNN with Fareed Zakaria. For Tata to speak with a reporter at all was quite rare, but he clearly understood that he was responding to the toughest situation of his life. Tata had been connected to Zakaria for many years. Zakaria’s mother edits the Taj in-house magazine. At that point, Tata had no idea how the terrorists had gained entrance—whether there were embeds or whether they had broken in by force. When pressed about a police warning, Tata responded, “It’s ironic that we did have such a warning, and we did [take] some measures ... [but] it could not have stopped what took place.”



“What did they expect?,” Karambir Kang told me. “That we would turn the hotel into an armed camp? Anyone could have gotten into *any* hotel with the assault rifles they carried.”

The reporter Ashish Khetan, who contributed to an explosive book about 26/11. *Photograph by Bharat Sikka.*

the truth of the matter

On the day I meet the author and investigative reporter Ashish Khetan, crucial copper cables have been stolen from a train station outside Bombay. The city is paralyzed. All trains and cars are stopped, and thousands of people cannot get into town. Khetan is stalled too, and he repeatedly texts me about the delays. I wait for him at the popular Hindi TV station, Aaj Tak, where he runs the Mumbai investigative unit. Slim and voluble, Khetan is the son of a pharmacist from a village outside Lucknow. He worked a year without pay for a city paper there, hoping to catch the attention of an editor in New Delhi or Bombay. He distinguished himself reporting on the 2002 Gujarat riots, which resulted in the unprosecuted slaughter of 2,000 people, mainly Muslims. Although the authorities

tried to ignore the riots, Khetan's journalism contributed to the investigation of government officials, including the notorious chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, who was subsequently banned from the United States for human-rights violations. As I landed in Bombay, two of the country's top industrialists had praised Modi's leadership, implicitly endorsing him for prime minister. A few weeks away from the publication of a book he was contributing to, called *26/11: Mumbai Attacked*, Khetan believed he had a bombshell—the detailed notes of Vishwas Nangre Patil, which made a convincing case that he had given the Taj ample warning of an attack.

“You're lucky,” Khetan said to me. “Listen to what I've just gotten.” In his cubicle, he turned on his computer and suddenly, in the small room, desperate shouts from hell floated out—Urdu from the terrorists, the local Marathi patois from the police, along with a mix of Hindi and English. “These are the police tapes from inside the hotel, but they are still embargoed,” he said. The voices collided with the sounds coming from the newsroom: *I can see the men! ... They have rucksacks on their back! ... Hold them! ... They are throwing grenades! ... Assault team at ready, sir! ... Waiting for orders!* The voice of Rakesh Maria (“Calling Zone 1!”) mixed with that of Vishwas Nangre Patil (“I cannot get through to Central! The moment I can, I will get back to you, sir!”).

‘**T**hey are lying! The Taj is trying to blame this on me, and they will not get away with it!” Patil told Khetan a few days after 26/11. Protesters dressed in white, holding candles, were demonstrating in front of the Taj. Khetan had seen footage of Patil moving through the halls without backup, and he feared that the deputy police commissioner would be held responsible for the disaster. Khetan had waited for hours to see him, and when he was shown into his office, Patil was drafting notes for a letter he intended to send up the chain to his superiors. He pushed the notes—eight full pages, single-spaced—across the desk. They were a detailed report of everything he had told the Taj. “I cannot give you this,” he told Khetan, “but I will tell you the contents.” It was a bold move. The letter would surely die somewhere on the levels

above him. Who in the Bombay police would ever be self-destructive enough to get into a war with the Taj? Yet Patil was determined to demonstrate that the Taj was at fault. “Everything could have been taken care of,” he told Khetan. “The crony class is trying to make me take the fall.”

“Ashish knows the true story. Ask him,” Patil told me when I went to see him. “I let him see my notes. I wanted to make the story known. I only spoke to Ashish.” Khetan had taken me to Patil’s office, and I could see that the deputy commissioner was nervous. I marveled at the courage of his revelations. Slim, with a pencil mustache, he wore a crisp uniform and a belt gleaming with military polish. “Are you worried about what will happen to him?” I asked Khetan when we left. “Yes,” he said. “They will probably banish him. But he’s a Marathi boy, and there will be a lot of public support. This is the new India.”

From the moment they had met, Patil and Khetan had their own pathway of communication. “Would you be more comfortable speaking in English or Hindi?” Khetan asked him. “He thought because I was an author we were not in the same class. He thought I came from the world represented by the Taj. I had to tell him that I too came from a village with my *baksa*.” They spent hours together that day, and later Khetan went with Patil on patrol. “I made a decision to get this story out there,” Patil told him. “I want the world to know.”

Two months before 26/11, Patil had been put on alert by India’s intelligence bureau that the Taj and the Oberoi were possible targets of Pakistani terror groups. Meeting with Karambir Kang, Sunil Kudiyadi, and several other Taj executives, Patil laid out the police recommendations: install automatic glass doors, shut the driveway, close the kitchen, and set up the same security procedures that are used at the Bombay Stock Exchange. But who in the vast Tata empire could make such a call, except Ratan Tata himself? Not Karambir Kang, who would only dutifully pass the suggestions up the line, and not anyone on the hotel’s security force.

Wasn't it reasonable, I asked, to speak about the responsibility of Patil himself and the whole police force? If they were so alarmed, why wasn't there a substantial security detail present? For five hours Patil had stayed at his post, as conditioned into obedience as the most loyal pukka officer. He knew the terrorists had AK-47s and grenades and believed his men would be slaughtered. On the tapes, you can hear the desperation in his voice: "The lifts are jammed, and exit gates are manned, but reinforcement is very poor, sir. Please send strong reinforcement, sir. We can catch or kill these bastards." By the time the commandos got to the Taj, more than a dozen people were dead. The hours during which the terrorists were confined in a room and allowed to stay there would emerge as the central event of the catastrophe. They would then remain in the hotel for another 40 hours.

survivors of the victims

"I went from hospital to hospital. I was with my brother-in-law. We raced into one after another, saying that I had to check the morgue. Everywhere I went in those hospitals, the charred bodies were stacked on each other. Victims were burned beyond recognition. There were ambulances everywhere, just taxis taking the dead and the victims away. I cannot get these images out of my mind. At each morgue, I would look at the bodies and say, 'No, that is not Sabina.'"

I was sitting with Santanu Saikia in the bar of the Oberoi hotel in New Delhi. Tall and bookish, known for his meticulous reporting when he was at *The Economic Times*, Saikia, who now runs an oil-and-gas-information Web site, has the courtly air of the world of the tea plantations of Assam, where he grew up, the son of a literary critic. "I was told again and again, 'There are 500 rooms in the hotel. The numbers are in your favor.' I did not believe that Sabina had been killed," he told me. "She had been a war correspondent. I knew her as a very resourceful person."

He continued, "Then somehow in the crowds I was able to find my way into the Taj. All of my friends in the media were there, and I said, 'Pick up any information you can.' There

were last-minute reports that hostages had been taken, including a woman. My friend Barkha Dutt also heard rumors that Sabina had been found.”

Dutt made a split-second decision: “I told my producer, ‘Mike him up!’ We had been told from inside the hotel that Sabina was alive. I wanted to broadcast that. In my mind it was going to be a happy moment. I was told, ‘She is fine!’” The pandemonium of the crowd around the Gateway overcame Dutt, and she had no time for a pre-interview. “On the air, I said, ‘I have Santanu Saikia here, and the good news is that there are reports Sabina has been found.’ Then there was a terrible silence, and Santanu said, ‘No, Barkha. I was in touch with her, but I have lost complete contact. Nobody knows where she is.’” Dutt would later come under vicious attack for what was seen as exploitation in a culture known for its restraint. “The panic was incoherent,” she told me. “When you talk to a poor man in Ahmedabad, no one says you are being exploitative. But perhaps because this had touched another class, the reaction was understandably irrational.”





There was chaos in the city. “It was outrageous,” Dr. Mangeshikar said. “At my own hospital, the Bombay Hospital, doctors were subbing as anesthesiologists because no one would come on the streets.”

Mallika Jagad, the banquet supervisor who kept 30 V.I.P.’s secure. *Photograph by Bharat Sikka.*

On Saturday morning, 50 hours into the attack, Santanu, through friends, was able to get into the Taj with the police. “There is no way to describe the horror that I saw. There were emergency workers and medical staff wearing rubber gloves, bringing out bloated bodies. No one in the Bombay police had eaten in days—nor had I.”

As the sounds of grenades and bullets echoed through the hotel, Santanu raced through the smoke to the sixth floor. “There were gaping holes in the floors. Everything was burned. I stopped when I came to 641. The door was completely charred.” Santanu hesitated, then forced himself to enter the suite. He found Sabina lying facedown near the bed. “This is very difficult for me,” he told me. “She was intact. I could recognize her. She died instantaneously from an injury to the back of her head.”

**W**hen I spoke to Karambir Kang, he had just returned from weeks in the Punjab, trying to recover from 26/11. That week he was on the cover of *People India*, celebrated for his heroics, but he had yet to speak in detail. Kang had presided over the Taj for almost a decade. He was late for our meeting, because at the last moment he had been called into a meeting with Ratan Tata. Kang’s pain was in his eyes, his walk, the fog that surrounded him. We sat for a long time in silence. “Would you like to talk another time?” I finally said. “No, I agreed to speak,” he said. “Why did you come back?” I asked. Kang waited to answer, his eyes filling with tears. “The Taj is my home,” he said. “My duty is here.” He had his laptop with him. As we sat

out by the pool, he opened it and showed me smiling boys on holidays in Chicago and California. “They could not wait to move to our new apartment,” he said.

He recalled that night. “I walked in, and there were suddenly hundreds of texts, messages, alarms. My deputies were calling every guest in every room.” Kang raced from room to room in an effort to help stranded individuals. He was aware that Maria Mooers was trapped in 476. He knew that Dr. Mangeshikar was among those in Chambers, trying to get out. He worried about two of his chefs, who had last been seen in the Crystal Room. Every few minutes he called his wife. “We are calm,” she said each time. “Take care of yourself.” Kang’s texts and phone calls continued nonstop as hundreds of concerned friends, panicked guests, and reporters tried to contact him. By the time he found Sunil Kudiyadi and Vishwas Nangre Patil in the lobby, the terrorists had been confined to the sixth floor. “They had lit fires,” Kudiyadi told me. “There was screaming on all sides of us.” Kang was in shock. He kept saying, “Can somebody help my children?”

Kang told me, “I had found the police in the lobby. I could not get them to move. I ran to the sixth floor with my chief of security and the deputy commissioner. We could not see through the bombs and the smoke. I looked at the door. My family was inside. We just stood there. No one could move. On the phone, Neeti said, ‘There is smoke coming in. I’m not going to make it.’ I told her, ‘Do not worry. I will get you out.’ I called five minutes later, and the phone rang and rang. I knew she was gone.”

When he finally came downstairs, he called his mother, who was in Bahrain. “I could not save them,” he said. “Then you must go in and save others,” she said. All that night and the next day, Kang went from room to room in the huge hotel.

Kudiyadi reached the office of Raymond Bickson, the managing director and C.E.O. of the parent company of the Taj, with 10 commandos. Rushing to safety through the lobby, Bickson saw the head pilot for Taj Air. “I grabbed him. He said, ‘My wife was caught in the crossfire.’ I said, ‘You have to think of your daughters,’ and I dragged him out.”

Soon after the New York cops returned from Bombay, Commissioner Kelly briefed an audience filled with corporate-security experts, trying to find the lessons for New York in the Taj tragedy. Every crisis leaves a legacy of miscommunications, warnings ignored, and a series of larger questions about the notion of responsibility. It became a convention to say that the old security rules would no longer suffice, that the silky nights at the Taj would forever be tainted with the horrors of 26/11.

The Taj hired a private security force from Israel that has placed guards with concealed weapons in the lobby and wired the hotel with sensitive new equipment. In May the ruling Congress Party scored a tremendous election win, in part, reportedly, because of the diplomacy exercised after 26/11 not to get into a war with Pakistan. Later, Pakistan released the LET mastermind widely thought to have been the architect of the Bombay attack, claiming that they did not have sufficient evidence to prosecute.

Vishwas Nangre Patil, who had worried that he would wind up ordering around sweepers in Bihar, was praised. The trial of Ajmal Kasab created a brief media storm when he suddenly confessed to some of the charges against him. Maria Mooers spent the winter happily with her lover at the Taj. *26/11: Mumbai Attacked* hit bookstore best-seller lists in India, and several newspapers ran excerpts. Hasan Gafoor was relieved of his command.

In March, the Unilever board members who had been trapped went back to the Taj to thank the staff. They held a dinner by the pool and scheduled it for 9:36 p.m.—the time of the attack. “The board did something unusual,” Unilever C.E.O. Paul Polman told Suhel Seth. “We served the staff. We needed closure, and we did not have it until that night. We made so many friends with one another and with the Taj staff. And we lived.”

On my last day in Bombay, I started my morning with the Laughing Yoga class. A large woman with her hair pulled back stood near me, trying to participate, but she clearly could not bring herself to laughter. It was Karambir Kang’s mother, who had come to live with him in the hotel. “I would not allow him to be alone,” she said.



The children of hotel manager Karambir Kang, photographed shortly before they were killed.

On Kang's first day back at work, he was visited by the hotel's in-house photographer, who operates the Taj Memories studio. "Sir, I have something to tell you. Please sit down. I think I was the last person to see your children."

"What do you mean?," Kang asked.

"Your wife called me at eight p.m. She said I had to rush up to your suite. The boys needed pictures for a school project the next day. I was still in the hotel, and I rushed to the lab to get them printed."

The photographer said he had left the building at 9:40.

"These are for you. Here are your boys. I took their portraits on 26/11."

Kang spread the pictures out on his desk and saw his sons, Uday and Samar, clowning for

the camera, with his wife, Neeti, in the background. He studied the pictures for days. Their appearance was a miracle that he would never be able to explain.

*CORRECTION: In the original version of this article, Barkha Dutt was incorrectly identified as the reporter who overestimated the number of people trapped in Chambers, the private club. We regret the error.*

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