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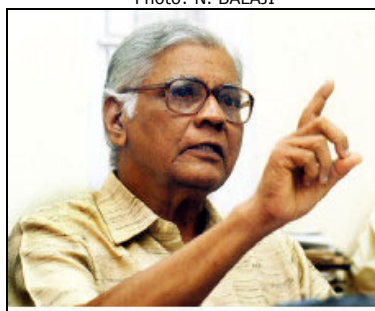
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### 'I would say one of those lotteries in life'

*A hotel guest re-lives the night the terrorists attacked the Taj Palace and Towers in Mumbai*

— Photo: N. BALAJI



**UNHARMED: 'Mostly earshot account if you like. But it tells you how close it was. If I had gone to the restaurant, I don't know; but no point thinking about such contingent situations. The fire brigade was superb. I was also lucky to be on the sea side.'**

**A. Vaidyanathan**, eminent economist and a member of the Central Board of Directors of the Reserve Bank of India, was in his room in the heritage wing of Mumbai's Taj Mahal Palace and Towers when the terrorists struck on the night of Wednesday, November 26. After his return to Chennai, he spoke to *The Hindu* on his experience. Here is his first-person account, given to **Meera Srinivasan** in Chennai on Friday:

I was there for a meeting on the 26th. The meeting was in the afternoon. They usually put me up at the Taj, so I went there. Some of my friends, whom I normally spend time with, were not in town. So I decided to stay back in the room. I ate in the room and was just watching cricket.

Then at 9.30 p.m., things began popping. My room was in the second floor of the Palace, very close to the stairwell of the central dome. That's where the thing apparently started. It went padapadapda...single shots and then bursts of fire. I was wondering why they were bursting crackers. There was no particular celebration at that time, there was no festival. And certainly inside the Taj wasn't the place.

It went on for almost an hour-and-a-half. Around 10.00, I said, 'Look! Let me check.' So I called the desk and the duty manager, but nobody picked up the phone. I said [to myself] there was something wrong and later it turned out that they had been really shot. Then I switched on the television and saw that it was close home, downstairs.

You asked me whether I ever thought of walking out. I knew that if this was going on, there was no sense in walking out. That's why I switched on the television to see if maybe there was anything you'd know. And sure enough, it was happening right there. So I could understand. If something like this had happened, they would not be able to respond. That's a simple inference.

Anyhow, there was no other news but this firing went on, in bursts, sometimes very close, sometimes a little bit far away. Then around 10.30 or 11 p.m., I got a call from the hotel saying: 'Look, lock yourself in and don't go out until we tell you.' In fact, I took a little while to act on that but I did eventually. Then I put out the lights and went to bed. No other call. I didn't want to call my wife because she might get worried.



### News Update

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Then around 11.00 p.m., there was one huge explosion. In fact, the building shook. I have a feeling that was the one which blew off the roof-top restaurant. Around 2.00 a.m. there was another big one and then the third one around 3 a.m.

But you see, in between there were bursts of fire. What I heard very close in that corridor of mine – it must've been very, very close – was bursts of firing, doors being broken open, people shuffling the debris, including broken glass. It went on. You try and keep calm. When the thing goes... you feel a bit pulled. This went on. Luckily I didn't panic. I took a – I don't know what you would call it – philosophical [view]. I am not given to prayers or anything like that. So I said, 'Look, if the chap is going to come to you next, what the hell do you do? Just sit. You think of little things like what defence (laughs)... and so on. But I didn't panic, I didn't particularly think of death.

But then, it went on. I had put out the lights and I didn't even bother to open the curtains or anything like that. I was very cautious not to do anything that might attract attention. Sometimes, I said: 'Look, what the hell? How do I get out of this? Let's see...let's wait. Around 2 or 3 [a.m.], I began seeing lights outside. You see, my room was on the road – looking over the sea and the Gateway of India. I saw lots of movement. What I heard fairly early on was faint shouts from below: 'Don't panic.' 'We are coming to help.' This was the fire brigade, it turned out subsequently.

At 11 p.m., I [had] looked out, through the translucent curtain, and there was nobody on the road. It was also surprising that I didn't hear any screams or shouts or panic in the hotel. It's certainly true that our doors were locked, but you know if there was such fright ... none of that. That was the other somewhat eerie thing.

Then at 3.00 a.m., I took some courage and went to the curtain, removed it a bit and saw lots of these fire service cranes and ladders operating. By that time, they had apparently done quite a bit of rescuing. How do I know! (I didn't know that there was any kind of security.)

#### Cordite smoke

But my room meanwhile had a lot of cordite smoke. You could smell it. I had switched off the air conditioner because I don't like it to be too cold. You were breathing that...it's not difficult, but it's irritating when you are in a smoky place.

All this was fine. But I was wondering how people were actually facing this. Subsequently there was a chap who told me about the events at Leopold Cafe. What I did was to push aside the curtains and people were all moving around in the cranes. There was a fire service man who was putting powerful lamps and beaming them at the windows. He located me and said: 'Hold on, we'll come.'

The question was: what do I do, how do I go? The ladder was placed. The fireman came, broke the window, and asked me: 'Are you alone? Do you have much luggage?' I said, 'Give me a couple of minutes to dress.' I put on my trousers and shirt. Put on the shoes without the socks, put the clothes in the carry-on bag. I asked the fireman, 'Do you think I can?' He said, 'Don't worry. Take the bag,' and asked me to come. They helped me get on to the ladder. It was not a platform; you had to get on to it. So I got down. It was around 5.30 a.m.

You know one thing which happened? The bullets were obviously very close, but one of the things that happened was when I was leaving, I found that the entire room was flooded with water.

#### 'Take cover'

And immediately [after I got down] they said: 'Don't stay here. Take cover behind the parked fire engines and then keep going.' Along the side of the Gateway of India, there is a ledge with a sitting place. Everybody was asked to go and sit there – a large number of people.

Next to me was a chap who had a television camera, who apparently was in Leopold Cafe. He described to me the scene. He said this was a backpacking tourist kind of a place; young people go there and have fun. He said they were all eating and suddenly, two fellows broke in, just sauntered in practically, with the guns and systematically, with bursts of fire, shot at random. Sheer carnage, he said, at least 20 people were killed and lots of people injured. This chap even showed me a small brass bullet, which had not detonated or whatever!

#### What about security?

The other thing I noticed this time - you see, I go there every other month. The last time I went, last month, there was very tight security. You could not get into the [Taj] Palace. There is an entrance there which is closed. At the

entrance to the tower, they had two-level security. First, when you enter the open parking, where the cars are parked, you had a very heavy metal frame, your baggage was searched, and then you went. At the entrance of the foyer, there was another metal detector and you were personally searched and so on. This time I noticed it had gone. We could go straight to the Palace.

So that's how it happened when we got down. In all of this, what you feel is – as I said, I was not panicky, I was fairly calm – the sense that you can't do very much about it by being excited or angry. You are not going to help anything. This, I suppose, is one of those personal qualities that people have. Some people have it, some people don't.

I got down, but still it was obviously a tense kind of experience. I got down and went to the place [the ledge with the sitting place along the side of the Gateway of India]. Then you found you were sort of exhausted – physically and emotionally – and you feel a bit wobbly. So I sat there and after a while the Taj people came and said that they would take care of me. I also contacted my colleagues in the Reserve Bank and they said that they would [make suitable arrangements for me]... By the way, my friends in the Reserve Bank called around midnight to find out whether I was all right. In the meantime apparently, they also contacted the security people. They said, 'Yes, he is in his room.' So they were a bit reassured, but they were not sure what would happen in the morning.

I was already booked on the 9 a.m. flight. So I was able to go the airport in time, have a wash on the way, and that's how it ended.

Now when you then see the visuals, you begin to wonder. The reason why there was no noise at all during all of this – of people screaming and shouting. I think most people decided they would lock themselves in. The places where you would have had screams are in the banquet halls, the dining halls, and restaurants. These are on the other floors. You wouldn't really hear about them on the second floor. That is probably why there was this apparently eerie silence.

But my God! The carnage you see on this [television screen]... one wondered what the sense of all of this was. I don't think there is any point in trying to make sense out of all of this. It is despicable and it also tells you how just a few very determined people with perverse motivation but still strong motivation and technology, they can create such havoc in such a short time! It also occurred to me that it is not possible to have preventive kind of action. After all, it takes just two people or five. They merge in the crowd, they can do all kinds of things.

Look at the force that you have to deploy to neutralise them without harming the large number of people who are around. I think tightening the law is not going to help. The point is: people should understand that this is something that you can't really plan against. All you have to do is to look at the root of this – now that is a bigger problem. We don't have any solution to this. But when people say that it is because of this negligence and that, it is a bit too simplistic. Laws can't prevent this unless you become a police state. In fact, even police states have terrorism. So it is absurd to think we should sacrifice open societies for this purpose.

Anyhow, that is the kind of adlibbing I can do about what I felt. I can't really say anything about an eye witness account. Mostly earshot account, if you like. But it tells you how close it was. If I had gone to the restaurant, I don't know; but no point thinking about such contingent situations. Anyway, nothing happened. The fire brigade was superb. The kind of rescue operation they did. I was also lucky to be on the sea side. If I had been on the other side, I probably would have come back only today, when they cleared the thing up. So it's all right. Some people will say providence...I would say one of those lotteries in life.

#### Not in Kolkata

You see, my wife was under the mistaken impression that I was away in Kolkata. She did not see the television at night. So she did not know what was happening. And my daughters were also under the impression I was away in Kolkata. But then, in the morning, the first thing I did when I got down was to call her and say: 'Look, I am in one piece. And this is what happened.' She was a bit puzzled. I said 'Go see the television. You'll see what has happened.'

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- Terror strikes Mumbai, over 147 killed
- 46 killed as twin blasts rock Mumbai

**Major terror attacks in 2008**

- Terror strikes Assam, 62 killed
- 17 killed in Imphal blast
- 20 killed as 5 bomb explosions rock Delhi
- 17 BLASTS ROCK AHMEDABAD
- 60 killed, 150 injured as terror strikes Pink City

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