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Cops missed early chance to hunt down terrorists

Mateen Hafeez, TNN
Dec 29, 2008, 01:54am IST

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MUMBAI: Had the Azad Maidan police acted quickly on information given by an eyewitness that terrorists were down the lane from the police station, they could have been ambushed them outside the Cama Hospital itself.

C P Singh, a watchman with the Times of India Group, was posted on Badruddin Tyabji Marg, the narrow lane leading from the north end of CST railway station to the backyard of the Azad Maidan police station and Cama Hospital, on the night of November 26.

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He heard gunshots being fired at CST, across the road from The Times of India building, but reckoned he was at a safe distance. It was only when Mohammed Ajmal Kasab fired a burst towards the third floor of The Times of India that Singh realised how close he was to danger.

Kasab was climbing down the stairs from the foot overbridge linking CST to Badruddin Tyabji Marg when The Times of India photographer Shriram Vernekar shot a picture of him from the photographer's room on the third floor. Alarmed by the flash, Kasab let loose a volley of bullets in his direction.

"I ran for my life and entered Azad Maidan police station, the next compound (which is barely 100 metres away)," said Singh. "The police station was full of commuters evacuated from CST. Some armed policemen were busy taking positions in and around the police station. Shivering with fear, I told the duty officer that the two terrorists were coming from the adjacent lane. The policemen started grilling me. They asked whether I had seen the terrorists, how did they look, could I identify them etc," said Singh.

The CCTV footage from The Times of India building shows that the terrorists arrived in the lane at 10.23 pm.

"Had the policemen not wasted time and reacted quickly to the information given by me and taken up positions near the rear gate of the police station, the terrorists would have been stopped or killed right there," said Singh, now a prosecution witness.

According to the watchman, three plainclothes policemen were checking their `search lights' near the rear gate of Azad Maidan police station when Kasab opened fire. "These three ran back into the police station compound," he said. It is not clear why they did not report the matter to their seniors.

A policeman at Azad Maidan said, on condition of anonymity, that no armed policemen were deployed at the mouth of Badruddin Tyabji Marg even 40 minutes after the CST attack began "since most of our staff had already been deployed at the CST". He admitted that they had left their backyard unguarded despite being a stone's throw from the action.

Eventually, when the Azad Maidan police station realised that the terrorists has left the station and were in the vicinity of the police station, their men took up positions facing the right direction. By then, the terrorists had entered the next compound, Cama Hospital. On the way there, they killed three civilians and two hospital watchmen.

By the time additional commissioner Sadanand Date entered Cama Hospital with a few policemen to challenge the terrorists, they were well entrenched. Two policemen, Vijay Khandekar and Prakash More, were killed fighting the terrorists inside the hospital and Date and another policemen were injured.

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After this, the terrorists slipped out of the hospital and went down Tyabji Marg where they ran into a police jeep carrying ATS chief Hemant Karkare, additional commissioner Ashok Kamte, inspector V Salaskar and three other policemen.

Policemen at Azad Maidan admit that they lost an opportunity in the chaos that night. "We were not well-equipped," was their excuse.

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