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The Untouchables: Bombay Police after 26/11

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On a overcast April morning in the compound of a police barracks in central Bombay, a team of 6 young men in commando clothing, armed with AK-47's and pistols, walked, crouched and lunged for our cameras. They simulated combat at close quarters: how to enter a building, guard its entrance, take control of the stairwell and burst into a room occupied by fictional terrorists. They were members of the Quick Response Team, or QRT, their existence a challenge to the much repeated cliché of a city police unprepared for the commando style attacks of last November. The QRT was created in 2003, after a series of bomb blasts in Bombay, precisely to counter a terrorist attack. Not to guard exits or form outer cordons or manage crowds, but to engage the bad guys. They were selected from among the constabulary for their youth and fitness. They trained with the army in Pune. They went to Manesar to train with the NSG. They have AK-47's, 9mm pistols, bulletproof vests, imported helmets. They are divided into teams on multiple shifts, so that at any time of the day or night, one team of 12 commandoes is always on call, 24x7.

On their biggest night, they would barely fire more than a few rounds. By dawn, they were manning outer perimeters at the Taj and Trident. What went wrong? The answers are couched in that familiar, mystifying vagueness which has come to define Bombay police in its moment of reckoning: "We were called into action at ten pm. A team of 7 went to CST. We went from train to train clearing compartments. We surrounded a motor cabin on Platform 2 inside which two men were hiding. But it turned out to be false alarm. We realized by then the terrorists had left the station. We were told that they had gone towards Cama Hospital. As we left, we heard firing outside Metro cinema. We saw a Qualis with guns sticking out of the window. We fired at it. But by then it had sped off." This from the team that went to the Trident Hotel: "6 of us entered the Trident. We saw glass, blood, bodies everywhere. A grenade dropped from one of the higher floors as we entered. We went up to the second floor going room by room. We didn't know what we were looking for. We took turns in escorting guests to the exit. We thought we'd go right to the top and start clearing the floors, but we didn't have enough numbers. We had been split up into very small groups. So we rescued guests and guarded the exits till the Navy commandos came."

The exchange with the young commandoes of the QRT : S.I Vasave, S.I. Kerkar, constables Mhatre and Patil took place in a former complex of jail cells attached to the Bhoiwada police station, about 10 kilometers north of Victoria Terminus. Its walls are peeling, patches of damp everywhere. One of the now-empty lockups serves as the QRT's main command post, with a roster sketched on a blackboard, and a wireless receiver propped on a table in the corner. Flies buzz around puddles and mounds of garbage. On the iron bars of the cells, underwear and trousers are hung out to dry. This is where the city has chosen to house and headquarter its elite anti-terrorist force.

The QRT was orphaned almost as soon as it was created, the casualty of yet another departmental turf war. It was meant to be part of the crime branch of the city police, but was then brought under the command of the Anti Terror Squad. The ATS itself is a bastard child; it's raised from the Maharashtra police, but the chief of the ATS reports to the Bombay police commissioner. That night, says S.I. Vasave, as we went from location to location, we had no one to guide us. The man who is meant to be in charge of the QRT, himself caught up in the anarchy of the night, called them just as they were setting off: "This is your first chance to prove yourself", Hemant Karkare told them. "*Kuch karke dikhana hai*". Just over two hours later, they would discover his body in a pool of blood in a lane behind Cama Hospital.

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Bombay turns you into a crime reporter. It is home to the most storied police force in the country. The only police force where a sub-inspector (Daya Nayak) can inspire a clutch of Bollywood thrillers. The only force which has a celebrity sniffer dog: Zanjeer, the golden labrador that scented out the hidden caches of RDX in Thane and Mumbra in 1993. Zanjeer was sent off with full honours when he died in 2000. Not long after we moved to Bombay in 2003, on my first visit to police headquarters, I lingered on the magnificent wooden staircase that leads to the police commissioners office. On the wall curved a gallery of the city's khakhi celebrities: Ribeiro, Soman, Samra, Mendonca, Singh.

On that day, I was on my way to meet Commissioner RS Sharma. The Telgi stamp paper scam had just broken. Sharma and several others, including the encounter specialist Pradeep Sawant were charged with bungling the investigation into Telgi, a forger of stamp paper. Over the next few weeks more than a dozen policemen - officers like Sharma and Sawant, but many others of varying ranks - were suspended, arrested and sent to jail. Later, Sharma was discharged and released. He said his release proved his case: that he was the victim of murky departmental rivalries. Many saw the Telgi purge as one of the worst moments in the history of the force. Worse than the 1992-93 riots, when the police was seen as nakedly communal? I asked an officer who was with the crime branch. Worse, he said.

In August of that same year, two blasts went off in the city - one at the Gateway of India, another in Zaveri Bazaar, a crowded marketplace in central Bombay. 54 people died. Acting on the basis of a tip off from a taxi driver, and using their network of informants, the crime branch cracked the case within two months. One of the main accused was shot in an 'encounter'. Three others were arrested. (They were recently sentenced.)

I had been in Bombay for only 6 months. I already had a taste of the fame and notoriety that is the legacy of its police force.

The city's first police chief, an East India Company buccaneer called James Tod, was tried and sacked for corruption in 1790. "The principal witness against him (as must always happen)" wrote Sir James Mackintosh, "was his native receiver of bribes". Charles Forjett, who became Commissioner almost a century later, was the police force's first moderniser. He laid the ground for Bombay police's high standards of detection. Forjett was Anglo Indian, and often moved around the city undercover to unearth crime, ("...the strong 'strain of the country' in his blood enabled him, when disguised, to pass among natives of India as one of themselves"), a technique he used to expose the Bombay chapter of the mutineers of 1857. The mutineers were strapped to cannons and blown to bits on the Esplanade.

The weight of so much history needs a suitable setting. Wander through the streets of south Bombay and it's a fair chance that some of the finest Victorian and Gothic architecture is police property: the Commissioner's office in Crawford Market, the late-18th century ATS headquarters in Byculla (which was the earlier Commissionerate, in Forjett's time), the Old Bazaar Gate Police Station (now the headquarters of DCP Zone 1), the Colaba Police station, built in 1906, and the Maharashtra Police Headquarters at Apollo Bunder, a grand old Gothic pile of blue basalt, once called Sailor's Home. All these buildings are a stone's throw away from the Taj, CST, Cama Hospital, Leopold's, Nariman House. Unknowingly, the terrorists of 26/11 had wandered into the heart of police Bombay. As the gunmen from Pakistan killed, lingered, reloaded, and killed again, they would unravel the reputation - and the troubled core - of the country's most celebrated police force.

There is a story the officers of Bombay police like to tell: of brotherhood, risk and the fight against evil. But it is a story that unfolds far away from Bombay, in the jungles of Vidharbha. Many of the officers in the 'frontlines' of 26/11 had done postings, often overlapping, in Maharashtra's naxal-affected districts: Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, Bhandara. This, I am told again and again, is not a coincidence. "You see who was the first to rush to the spots that night." Hemant Karkare (S.P. Chandrapur 1991), Sadandand Date (A.S.P. Bhandara 1995) and Ashok Kamte (A.S.P. Bhandara 1991) were at Cama, Deven Bharati (A.S.P. Gadchiroli 1996) and Hemant Nagrale (A.S.P. Chandrapur, 1992) were at the Taj, Parambir Singh (S.P. Bhandara 1995) at the Trident, KP Raghuvanshi (SP, Gadchiroli, 1992) at VT. "You get that killer instinct when you are in the jungle. We used to sleep with our AK's", one of them tells me. In the context of the November attacks, this may seem ironic, even mildly absurd. But this is a force looking for redemption. The successes of Maharashtra's police force in containing naxalism in Vidharbha in the early to mid-nineties are generally unchallenged, unlike the events of 26/11. There is a nostalgia for that time in the forest; many of them straight out of the Academy, thrust into a sort of *Boy's Own* world of adventure and danger, away from the politics and intrigue of headquarters.

When I met Hemant Karkare for the first time in August last year, the walls of his office were mounted with tastefully polished driftwood in interesting shapes - a crucifix, a stag's head - picked up from the jungles of Chandrapur. He was precise, almost formal. But that evening he was incensed. Both the ATS and the Crime Branch of the Bombay police were chasing a key informant, a car thief called Afzal Usmani, a crucial link to the Bombay module of the Indian Mujahideen (IM). The IM have been blamed for the series of bomb blasts across India in 2008. The Crime Branch got to him first. Usmani led them to the entire local IM module, and then, when the ATS asked for his custody, he 'vanished'. The IM case had gone out of the ATS's hands. (The Crime Branch says they had nothing to do

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Lonely, Troubled, Spinster, Spy. (Thank you, John Le Carre)

I've been a lover of spy thrillers for as long as I can remember. In fact, as a teenager I (once) even fancied myself becoming a spy when I grew up. So, I must confess I have been reading about Madhuri Gupta with interest, bordering on the voyeuristic.

The New Jungle Boys on TV

Three years is a short time in the history of a three decade long extremist movement. But if television appearances are a barometer of success, from near anonymity in 2007 to steady fame in 2010, the Maoists have finally arrived.

with the disappearance of the informant.)

Karkare wanted to complain to the DGP, AN Roy. But Roy was fighting his own battles. His status at DGP faced a number of legal challenges. And, going by the buzz in police circles, he was said to be locked in a factional war with Police Commissioner Hassan Gafoor. Roy's admirers, most of whom served under him when Roy was Bombay's police commissioner, found Gafoor uncommunicative and bureaucratic, not a leader of men. Gafoor's supporters claimed this was untrue, that Gafoor was competent, but less publicity-seeking than Roy.

Then, in October, the ATS began arresting Hindu radicals for the bomb blasts in the largely Muslim town of Malegaon, and Karkare was attacked by the BJP and the Shiv Sena. He went into a shell. I finally managed to get him to agree to an interview in the last week of November. He was upset but restrained. But he was more emotional in the company of his IPS batchmate, KL Prasad, Bombay's Joint Commissioner for Law and Order, whom he had gone to meet on the night of 26th November. The Shiv Sena had called for a bandh to protest the arrests of the Malegaon accused. "Hemant was very down", Prasad recalls. "I tried to cheer him up by cracking bawdy jokes. Hemant had a more intellectual sense of humour. His jokes had quotes from Churchill. I tried to pull his leg, 'Hemant, we are not like you. We are ganvaars'. But he was too depressed." Prasad was not in the best of moods himself. His long running tensions with Gafoor were well known in police circles. On the night of the attacks, the legatee's of Forjett were not a happy family.

By general consensus, it appears that the national malaise of political interference, venality and factionalism gained momentum amongst the Bombay police about 15 years ago, during the state's first coalition government. The home department, which came under the chief minister, was brought under the newly-created post of the deputy chief minister. This gave a new vigour to the usual commerce of transfers and postings, first under the Shiv-Sena BJP alliance, and later under successive Congress-NCP regimes. According to Julio Ribeiro, it was the beginning of the end. "The chain of command has been broken. Now, even an inspector will go directly to mantralaya for his posting." Ribeiro was Commissioner in the early eighties. He says he received only one application for a posting from the office of Chief Minister Vasantdada Patil, which he turned down. Today, flagrant, Bihar-style displays of "political nexus" are common across Bombay. An officer tells me how in some parts of the city, "inspectors roam openly with MLA's. We can't do anything. At best we can ask him to not do any work."

But the current factionalism is given a more sinister reading. In post-Raj Thackeray Bombay, it is suggested by a member of the Gafoor camp that the faction wars are based on resentment against a "clique of non-Maharashtrian officers who are ruling the roost" (a reference to the AN Roy's group). That the rank and file are angry with this clique, and that even Maharashtrian IPS officers are "upset by their high-handed behaviour". The idea of a largely Maharashtrian constabulary, protecting a city of 'outsiders', resentful of their non-Maharashtrian IPS superiors has a certain devious potential. It's the kind of conspiracy theory that the MNS could have dreamt up, except I am hearing it from a police officer! But empirically it makes no sense. The various factions of Bombay police, such as they are, have no regional homogeneity. I ask around if the insider-outside virus has infected the police. Mercifully, there are few takers. I am pointed to other ways in which parochialism has reared its head. Two successive home ministers of the Maratha caste - RR Patil and Jayant Patil - have fuelled accusations of caste bias in vital city postings. (I ask one of my crime reporters to do a spot poll : how many DCP's are of the Maratha caste? The answer: 7 out of the city's 12 DCP's are Marathas).

The communal taint of 1992. Parochialism in 2009. Bombay is an island. Its police force is not.

The walls of Assistant Sub Inspector Robert Pinto's flat are in bloom. There is a vivid patch of green algae growing out of the outer wall of the balcony. Next to the kitchen, a thick outcrop of shrubbery has forced itself out of a crack. How long, I ask, pointing to the weeds. He shakes his head. Too long. From his balcony, we overlook the grey concrete sprawl of the police's Motor Transport yard in Byculla. From above, the roofs of the white police cars - Qualis', Bolero's, Indica's - look like crushed eggshells. Kids run around the puddles. Around the three sides of the MT Yard are blocks of police flats, built in the early sixties. Each flat is about 10 square feet. There is a common block of bathrooms and one wash area on the far end of each floor. As we approach the building, we see a giant poster of Vijay Khandekar, the wireless operator who died on the steps of Cama Hospital, killed by grenade shrapnel. A small crowd surrounds us. They think we are here to meet his family. We say we have come to look at how ordinary policemen live. Hands tug at us, pulling us up the stairs. We are taken inside one of the flats. "Look, look at the cracks on the ceiling". Chunks of plaster have fallen away, exposing rusted iron pipes. Forty years after it was built, the bones of the building lie exposed. There is a minor scuffle for our attention. "Its worse in my flat". "No, mine is worse." The flats are crammed, even on a weekday afternoon. There are parents, grandparents, children back from school, cousins visiting from Solapur to look for work in the city.

The residents of the MT Yard flats still count themselves as the lucky ones. Space is a luxury in Bombay, even for the city's guardians. (Various proposals to increase housing for the constabulary gather dust. The post of the DG housing is seen as a dead end, or a parking lot where you await rehabilitation. Its where Hassan Gafoor is sent, for his omissions on the night of the attacks.) For the roughly 40,000 strong force, there are less than 20,000 liveable flats. The rest get a housing allowance, which varies according to

rank. A PSI, for instance, gets 3500 rs a month. That can get you a room in a slum. I am reminded of what one of the officers told me about the enormity of policing Bombay in the aftermath of the Indian Mujahideen arrests. 'Take Behrampada', he said, a teeming slum in Bandra that fell under his jurisdiction. "Its just rows and rows of three - storied tin sheds, about 3 feet apart. How are you going to police that?" There are constables who probably live in Behrampada. It is a strange notion: cops and potential sleeper cells, living in cramped proximity.

Vijay Khandekar was earning a constable's salary when he died at Cama: about 8000 rupees a month. The boys of the QRT have it better: for a job that involves a more direct risk, they get 100 percent more than the standard pay scale. A QRT constable (prefer to be called commandoes) earns 16,000 to 20,000 rupees a month. An S.I. of the QRT would earn about 28,000 rupees. That's just above a starting salary in a call center in Bombay's suburbs.

In one of the flat's, a girl of about 14 is conducting math tuitions for kids from her building. The floor is swarming with 8 year olds. She is giggling, excited by the cameras. Her father works in the M.T. yard as a senior mechanic. "Would you join the police", I ask her. She laughs and shakes her head. Later, I put that question to constable Amit Chittle, who was shot in the leg at the Taj. We are at his home in the rundown BDD chawls in Worli, tenements built for mill workers, now it is that rare thing: a low-income housing block in the heart of the island city. Amit is second generation police. The flat was allotted to his father, a motor mechanic. When we meet him, he is wearing shorts; the scars from the bullet wound are visible. Amit still seems in mild shock, ill at ease with the attention that his 'heroism' has brought him. On the wall is pinned a photograph from his college days, when he aspired to be a management student. Will you go back to work, I ask. He darts a glance at his mother. Lose the job, lose the house. Why not, his mother says. He can always find something less risky.

Senior Inspector Prakash Shishupal waves us into the Azad Maidan police station. Kasab and Ismael, after the massacre in VT, had walked past the back entrance of the police station before they entered Cama Hospital. When he heard they were coming, S.I. Shishupal locked up the back gate, switched off his phone and vanished for the rest of the night. He has since been transferred. But on the day we met him, he was still station boss. He looked harried. Spread out in his desk were rosters and call sheets. The DCP of his region wants visible policing. This meant extra shifts for his beat constables and P.I.'s, who already work twelve to fourteen hour days. The war on terror had created an administrative crisis. "DCP wants more people on the road. People should see the police." But do you have enough men, I ask? "No. We are running short every day." The city has swelled since Forjett's time, but its khakhi ranks have not kept pace. 40,000 to protect 20 million. Even so, he says without irony, Azad Maidan is the "number one police station in Maharashtra". The sanctioned strength of the police station is 365 men. They have 245 men. That still makes them better than the rest.

Attached to the Azad Maidan police station is what is called, rather optimistically, a Striking Mobile. Many of them were despatched on the night of the attacks. We ask to see one. After a while, a Mahindra Bolero pulls up. A S.I. rank policeman springs out, hastily jamming on his helmet, and clutching a SLR. Others emerge, carrying carbines. They arrange themselves for the cameras. How old, I ask, pointing at the SLR. About 25-30 years he says. When did you last fire it? They glance at each other nervously. It was an unfair question. Everyone knows that there are no bullets. One of the officers at the ATS had explained the rules: when you fire a bullet, you account for it. He had seen his men at encounters, even after the fugitive has escaped, on their hands and knees, looking for spent shells. I think of the other iconic image of the night, from the gunfight at CST: constable Jillu Yadav fires his 303 musket at Kasab and Ismail, finds it jammed, and out of sheer frustration hurls a plastic chair in their direction. They have AK-47's, we have garden furniture.

"**W**e were like sitting ducks." I am sitting with one of the officers who was part of the Taj operations. Its been a strange 9 months for anyone on the 26/11 beat, playing part-reporter, part-amateur shrink to a befuddled police force. The transition from the first few weeks of fame - memorials, tributes, awards, TV 'specials'- to ignominy has been disorienting. The rivalries that pre-dated the attacks have spread like a virus. All the actions of the night - both heroism and failure - threaten to be coloured by conspiracy theories. Several versions surface, depending on which 'camp' one is talking to, of who was brave and who wasn't. Who fired and who didn't. Who was genuinely injured and who faked an injury to get on the Gallantry list.

About the only act of daring on which there is consensus - other than Constable Omble grappling with Qasab at the barricades on Marine Drive - is Sadanand Date at Cama. With his receding hairline and soft-spoken ways, Date could easily pass for a somewhat athletic college professor. (Julio Ribeiro cautions against being fooled by his appearance: 'Date is very tough'.) Date, who like many others that night was outside his jurisdiction - he is the Additional CP of Mumbai's East Region; Cama falls in South Region - says that he met the seven policemen he rounded up and led to battle for the first time outside the gates of the hospital. He's been asked many, many times about what possessed him to hunker down in a darkened stairwell, as Qasab and Ismail lobbed a series of grenades at him and his men. With each burst, he took a hit - he was wounded in his leg and eye. But he didn't retreat, and kept firing. Date still has a grenade fragment lodged in his right iris. He is matter of fact: "There were people crying out for help. I am a policeman. What else could I do."

It doesn't help that there is no official police narrative because Gafoor, Commissioner during the attacks, inexplicably (or perhaps wisely) didn't order a single post-mortem into the biggest debacle in the history of Bombay police. Instead, parallel reconstructions mushroom in the media, fed by internal leaks. A number of 26/11 quickies hit the market. The family of Ashok Kamte, slain in the attacks, carries out their own investigation of the events at Cama hospital. And there is the slow daily grind of the Kasab trial, throwing up sanitised bulletins of the events of the night.

Much of what emerges points to banal, devastating truths: a night of incompetence. Lost nerves. A city police fighting army-trained terrorists. Occasional bursts of raw courage, or risk, or both. But for the most part, an almost surreal inertia. The great quiet.

But the facts have been complicated by the fog of politics and self-preservation. Information has become schizophrenic. There is too much of it, more than of any terrorist attack - wireless records, eyewitness accounts, still photographs, media footage, CCTV footage, intercepted calls - and yet too little. Some of the biggest mysteries of the night remain unexplained. A Himalayan - sized gap exists, even now, between the versions of the control room and those calling for backup. Take Cama Hospital, for instance, where a bleeding Sadandand Date had sent repeated messages for help between 11:13 and 11:50pm. None came. This allowed Kasab and Ismail, who spent 40 minutes killing and shooting, to walk out of the hospital unchallenged. Go by the control room version, and about 130 cops were sent to Cama between 10:30 pm and midnight! At the Taj, there weren't more than a dozen policemen inside the hotel engaging the terrorists in any serious manner until 2am, when the Navy commandoes came. But the control records indicate about 120 men were sent to the Taj between 10:15pm and midnight. Where was everyone? "We came. We took positions. We guarded exits. We saved hostages". The last is probably true, and important. Hundreds of people were rescued from the Taj and the Trident. But why didn't anyone directly take on the terrorists? I asked one of the officers who was holed up inside the Taj Hotel's CCTV room, watching the terrorists enter one of the rooms on the 6th floor and not leave it for almost 3 hours. He says he wanted to attack but he got contradictory instructions from different superiors, first a call from an overwrought senior saying "charge the bastards. They have killed our people" (two other officers at the Taj confirm receiving a similar call), and then, minutes later, another call from another senior saying Navy commandoes were on their way. "Let one agency handle it", he was told. (One of Gafoor's supporters say the strategy was to "evacuate the injured, rescue the trapped, and pin down the terrorists till the backup came. That's what we did, and it worked.")

The government committee to investigate the police response to the attacks becomes an outlet for months of frustration, buck-passing, factional rivalry and need for catharsis. Most of the testimonies are critical of the Gafoor, fewer of AN Roy. Gafoor is accused of only talking to his clique of officers during the operations. (Gafoor camp: "that's because the other officers didn't take Gafoor's calls.") Of camping outside the Trident instead of being in the control room. (Gafoor camp: "the Standard Operating Procedure says the control room should be manned by the DCP Operations, not the Police Commissioner"). Of failing to motivate his men to charge the terrorists. ("The NSG took 3 days. So why blame the police?"). Of not conducting a post-mortem of the police response. ("A debriefing happens only in the army.") And so on.

The committee makes some generic observations public: "no force could be prepared for the attacks", "senior officers could have played a greater role" etc. The epic convulsions of the night have been processed into bland officialese. But the damning testimonies against Gafoor make his exit unavoidable. He is 'kicked upstairs' as the Director General of Police Housing.

In the first session of the Maharashtra assembly after the 26/11 attacks, held in Nagpur, Gopinath Munde of the opposition BJP began his statement to the house by saying that he had been "briefed by both factions of the police force." The opposition alleged that there is a "gangwar" within the force, borrowing a term from the battle within the underworld. A celebrated police officer of the original war against the Bombay mafia, who was present in the visitor's gallery, says he was sickened. He says he wanted to take off his uniform and never wear it again. Ever.

There is a new bustle around the Bombay police headquarters at Crawford Market. The new commissioner wants things done in a hurry. "If we are attacked today", D Sivanandan said the day he took over, "we are ready to retaliate". This is, of course, hyperbole. On the day he makes the statement, nothing has arrived: no weapons, no bulletproof vests, no patrol cars. "For the past 9 months", an officer tells me, "all we did is push paper. Now finally we are on the move".

The commissioner has his share of critics. He was the head of the state intelligence during the attacks. Sivanandan, charismatic, always smiling (the character played by Mohanlal in the underworld thriller *Company* is said to be loosely modelled on him), laughs off the charges. "How is the state CID meant to know about terrorists from Pakistan?!"

While the force waits for modern assault rifles from the US, 50 AK-47's have been borrowed from the BSF (Sivanandan likes to improvise). 200 bulletproof vests are on their way from Delhi. He wants a dozen bomb disposal squads, up from the existing 3. The number of dog squads will go up from 5 to 100. For every 2 police stations, there will be a six-man team, trained and armed with new weaponry and bulletproof vehicles, ready to

respond at short notice. "Your friendly neighborhood commandos!", says an officer with a laugh. There will be CCTV's on every street corner like London and Vienna. 19 amphibious vehicles have been ordered from Canada. They can be used to protect the city from seaborne attacks. But it is more likely that they will make a less dramatic debut during Ganesh *visarjan*. Will all of this come through, I ask, somewhat incredulously? "Well, at least Sivanandan is trying. He is banging on every door. We are now holding meetings every day."

The new weapons finally arrive in the last weeks of August. Smith and Wesson pistols, Heckler and Koch sub machine guns, Colt grenade launchers: this is a city gearing up for a mini-war. Its another matter that the threats are more likely to be homegrown: a sleeper cell that gets activated, or the street thuggery of Bombay's political chauvinists. But this not the time for doubt. The image of the force has taken a dent; its time to display a modern, heavily armed, professional front. All the humdrum worries of city policing - murders, burglaries, *Ganesh*, *dahi handi*, vacancies, transfers, postings - take a temporary back seat.

But it is an election year, and the whiff of political opportunism has grown stronger. I am given an example: all DCP level postings within Bombay are no longer the prerogative of the police chief - they are decided directly in Mantralaya. A disgraced officer has been brought back as the DCP of Zone 8 near the airport because his family has a connection to Maharashtra's Minister of State for Home. Another 'black sheep' has used political influence to become DCP of Zone 11, in the suburbs. The DCP's are a vital link in the city's chain of power. The Bombay police is a 40,000 strong force. But as one of the officers explained to me, "the city is run by the Commissioner, the DCP, and the Senior PI - the station boss. That is the real pyramid of power." The problem is, the politicians know it too.

The new home minister, who replaced RR Patil, sacked after the Bombay attacks for claiming that the terrorists killed only 150 people, is, ironically not seen as competent. It is rumored that the police department is now being shadow-controlled by its old nemesis, Chaggan Bhujbal, the minister for Public Works. Bhujbal was sacked as home minister in 2003 during the Telgi stamp paper scam. His regime, it is almost universally held, corrupted the Bombay police like never before. Today, he is the head of the group of ministers to modernize the police force !

Election-year politics, it is whispered, is behind the surprise appointment of SS Virk as the state's DGP in place of AN Roy. Virk has been out of Maharashtra for 23 years, on deputation to Punjab. At the end of his tenure, he was arrested on charges of corruption, released on bail, and later removed as DGP Punjab by the Election Commission. His resurrection by the Maharashtra government, it is believed, makes him obligated to the masters of Mantralaya. But Virk was an 'action' figure in his own right. He was hit on the jaw by a bullet during Operation Black Thunder. He says as IG CRPF in 1986, he built a formidable network of informants in Amritsar and Jalandhar. "Ten days before he was assassinated, I met Sardar (Chief Minister) Beant Singh. I told him within a month you will be blown up by a human bomb and you won't be able to do anything about it." It has been, to put it mildly, an eventful career. The day I meet him in his office, though, he has a vision: of higher magazine circulation. As DG Punjab, he says he distributed thousands of copies of the police in-house magazine, *Darpan*, across the Punjab countryside. "It is important", he said, "to heal the psyche". He wants to do the same for Maharashtra. The circulation of the police magazine, *Dakshata*, is only 6000. He says he will raise it to 18,000. "We will release it, and just watch. The people will do the rest." I ask him if he is out of touch with Maharashtra police. He answers this by speaking to his orderly in fluent, but oddly accented Marathi. During his time in Punjab, he was given several chances to transfer from his home cadre to his home state, a rare opportunity in the All India Services. "But I never took it", he says. "I always wanted to come back." Why, I ask. "Because in Punjab, if you call a constable a b-----d, he will take it. But here, in Bombay, he won't. This a force which has a pride in the uniform. It is always better."

I called up one of the boys from the QRT the other day. They have scattered now; some guarding VIP installations, others posted to the Qasab trial. They are bemused by all the activity - the new NSG hubs, the neighborhood commando's. The last time we met, he had said he was kept awake by an aural memory: the terrible clatter of AK-47's echoing inside a deserted hotel. No longer, he says. All of us sleep better. But we are more alert: "*Ab koi risk nahin lena ka hai*". Where are you, I ask? He says he is stationed at the Taj, in a sandbagged bunker looking out towards the harbour, where already in the feverish imagination of the city's politicians, the next boatload of stealthy invaders will falter against the foot of a towering statue of a medieval warrior - king, rising 300 feet high from the Arabian Sea.



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