

# vir sanghvi

## Who killed Kamte?

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The more we learn about the events of 26/11, the less we know. We are aware now of who perpetrated and planned the attacks — thanks largely to Ajmal Kasab — but we know less than we should about other aspects of 26/11. Whatever new information is emerging shows the Bombay Police in a very poor

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light. There is, first of all, Hasan Gafoor's claim that, as police commissioner, he found that four of his officers refused to risk their lives that night. And now there is Vinita Kamte's deeply moving book, *To The Last Bullet* (Ameya Prakashan).

All of us know that Ashok Kamte, Hemant Karkare and Vijay Salaskar were killed on the night of 26/11. The version we have been fed is that these two top officers (Salaskar was not from the IPS) behaved like headless chickens driving around recklessly on the streets of Bombay and that they were easy pickings for the terrorists.

Vinita's book proves the opposite: their colleagues let them die.

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First of all, Ashok Kamte was not merely driving around. He was in charge of the East Zone so the attacks were outside his area. He was specially called to the Special Branch Office near the spot where the terrorists were.

Secondly, Kamte and Karkare were not together. Karkare had heard about the firing at VT Station and reached there independently. Witnesses told him that the terrorists had left and had now reached Cama Hospital.

Karkare radioed the Central Room at 23.24 hrs (11.24 pm): "We need to encircle Cama Hospital. We are near SB2 Office Side. Send a team to the front side of the Cama Hospital. Request the army for their commandos."

So, at 11.24 pm, the Chief of the state's Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) had (a) already worked out that this was a terror strike when much of the police force was confused, (b) had asked for commandos and (c) had planned to encircle Cama Hospital to flush out the terrorists.

But all his requests were ignored. No reinforcements reached Cama Hospital. Nothing he said was passed on. And police headquarters are only two minutes from Cama Hospital!

As it turned out, because there were no policemen at the front gate of Cama Hospital, Kasab and Ismail, his partner, simply strolled out of the hospital. They walked into the nearby Rang Bhavan Lane. On their way in, they shot at a passing Honda City, hitting the driver in his finger. Two constables from the Azad Maidan police station saw the incident clearly and informed their Control Room at 23.45 hrs. Residents of Rang Bhavan Lane who had seen the shooting also called the Control Room.

Nobody in the Control Room either sent cops or even, informed Karkare of any of this. He still believed that the terrorists were inside the hospital and that reinforcements had reached Cama Hospital — after all, he had radioed for men half an hour before. He decided to go to the front of Cama Hospital and took Kamte (who had an AK-47) and Salaskar (an encounter specialist) with him.

At 12.01 am or so, the vehicle containing Karkare, Kamte and Salaskar entered Rang Bhavan Lane. The officers thought they saw something moving in the bushes. So Kamte got out of the car and opened fire with his AK-47. He hit Kasab in the arm. But Ismail then returned the fire with his assault rifle and in the gun battle, the three men (Kamte, Karkare and Salaskar) were injured. (As, of course, was Kasab).

The terrorists pulled them out of the vehicle, threw them on the road and hijacked the car. They lay there from 12.04 am to 12.49 am! Were they dead? Probably not. Salaskar was alive when they took him to the hospital. He died there. Kamte bled to death from a scalp injury. If he had not been left to bleed on the road for over 40 minutes, he might still be alive today.

So why did the Bombay Police let their best men bleed to death on a road two minutes from headquarters? They knew they were there.

The residents of Rang Bhavan Lane kept phoning the Control Room. Many called repeatedly, describing the terrorists, and informing the cops of the fire fight. Nobody responded.

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At 12.04 am right after the gun-battle involving Karkare's team, a policeman reported the firing to the Main Control Room. At 12.25 am, Arun Jhadav, who had survived the attack, called the Control Room and told them about the incident. Nothing happened.

Just after the officers were shot, a police vehicle sped by — eyewitnesses are quite clear. But neither did it stop nor did it inform the Control Room. Another police vehicle passed at 12.33 am. It told the Control Room "three people are lying in the St Xavier's Lane. We need a stretcher." But it did not stop. And no help arrived for another 16 minutes!

The Control Room let the terrorists get away and let three brave officers bleed to death like dogs in the street.

And then, there are the lies and the politics within the force. One theory for the fiasco of 26/11 is that the Crime Branch officers who manned the Control Room were unwilling to help Karkare because of internal politics. Certainly, the way in which the police tried to conceal the fact that it was Kamte who injured Kasab (making it easier to capture him later) is truly contemptible.

When Vinita Kamte tried to find out how her husband had died, the Bombay Police did everything to stop her from finding out the truth.

Eventually, the State's Chief Information Commissioner forced the police to part with the logs and the audio records under the Right To Information (RTI) Act. That's how we now know what happened that night.

That goes to the credit of this brave woman and to the RTI, which has changed the equation between the citizen and the government.

But it says very little for the Bombay Police. The officers who sent her husband to his death are still in positions of authority.

The next time the terrorists strike, the police force will fail again. Brave men will lose their lives. And Bombay will pay the price for the politics within its police force.

The views expressed by the author are personal

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