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THE CURIOUS TALE OF MUMBAI TERROR

The Mumbai attacks need a thorough investigation

By Raveena Hansa | February 24, 2009

In all the confusion and horror generated by the ghastly terrorist attacks in Bombay, a dimension which has not received the attention it deserves is the circumstances surrounding the death of Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) chief Hemant Karkare and two of his colleagues, encounter specialist Vijay Salaskar and Additional Commissioner of Police Ashok Kamte. The major pattern of operations involved well-organised attacks on a few high-profile sites in Colaba – the Taj and Oberoi Hotels and Nariman House – while a parallel set of operations was centred on VT or CST station, Cama Hospital and the Metro cinema, in the middle of which is the police headquarters where Karkare worked. The latter is an area where foreigners are much less likely to be found.

Why is a Proper Investigation Crucial?

Hemant Karkare was engaged in unearthing a terror network with characteristics which had not been seen so far. The investigation started by tracing the motorcycle used to plant bombs in Malegaon in September 2008 to a Hindu Sadhvi, Pragyasingh Thakur; it later uncovered a cellphone conversation between her and Ramji, the man who planted the bombs, in which she asked why more people had not been killed. For the first time, the Indian state was conducting a thorough professional probe into a terror network centred on Hindu extremist organisations, this one with huge ramifications, some leading into military and bomb-making training camps and politicised elements in the army, others into organisations and political leaders affiliated to the BJP. One of the most potentially explosive discoveries

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was that a serving military intelligence officer, Lt.Col. Srikant Purohit, had procured 60 kg of RDX from government supplies for use in the terrorist attack on the Samjhauta Express (the India-Pakistan "Understanding" train) in February 2007, in which 68 people were killed, the majority of them Pakistanis. Initially, militants of Lashkar-e-Taiba and other Islamist terror groups had been accused of carrying out the attack, but no evidence against them had been found.

The hostility generated by this investigation was enormous, with allegations that the suspects had been tortured and that Karkare was being used as a political tool, and demands that the ATS team should be changed. Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi and BJP Prime Ministerial candidate L.K.Advani accused him of being a 'desh drohi' or traitor, a charge that in India carries a death penalty. The Shiv Sena offered legal aid to those accused of the terrorist attack, and an editorial in its mouthpiece Saamna threatened that 'the people will take action' against the ATS officers involved in the Malegaon blast probe, adding that 'On such officers we spit, we spit'. In an interview shortly before he died, Karkare admitted he was hurt by the campaign against him. On November 26, just before the terrorist attack, the police in Pune received a call from an anonymous caller saying in Marathi that Karkare would be killed in a bomb blast within two or three days.

Just as attitudes to Karkare in society at large were polarised, with some admiring him as a hero – one Maulana went so far as to call him a 'massiha (messiah) of Muslims', an amazing tribute from a Muslim to a Hindu – while others hated him as a traitor worthy of death, attitudes within the police force too were polarised. For example, dismissed encounter specialist Sachin Vaze (who with three colleagues was charged with murder, criminal conspiracy, destruction of evidence and concealment of the dead body in the Khwaja Yunus case shortly before the terrorist attack) was a member of the Shiv Sena who was actively engaged in the campaign against Karkare and in support of the Malegaon blast accused.

Hard Evidence or Pulp Fiction?

Given this background, and reports that are riddled with inconsistencies, it is not surprising that many residents of Bombay are asking questions about the exact circumstances of the death of Hemant Karkare and his colleagues; when A.R.Antulay raised the question in parliament, he was merely giving voice to a small part of the doubts entertained by many others. The earliest reports, presumably relayed from the police via the media, said that Karkare had been killed at the Taj, and Salaskar and Kamte at Metro. If this was not true, why were we told this? And why was the story later changed? Was it because it

conflicted with eye-witness accounts? In the early hours of the 27th, under the heading 'ATS Chief Hemant Karkare Killed: His Last Pics', IBNlive showed footage first of Karkare putting on a helmet and bullet-proof vest, then cut to a shootout at Metro, where an unconscious man who looks like Karkare and wearing the same light blue shirt and dark trousers (but without any blood on his shirt or the terrible wounds we saw on his face at his funeral) is being pulled into a car by two youths in saffron shirts. The commentary says that Karkare 'could well have fallen prey to just indiscriminate, random firing by the cops', and also reports that there were two vehicles, a Toyota Qualis and Honda City, from which the occupants were firing indiscriminately.

Later we were given two accounts of the killings where the venue was shifted to a deserted lane without cameras or eye-witnesses. The first account is by the lone terrorist captured alive, claiming to be A.A.Kasab from Faridkot in Pakistan and a member of the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba. According to him, just two gunmen, he and Ismail (also from Pakistan), first attacked VT station, where they sprayed bullets indiscriminately. (Around 58 people were killed there, over one-third of them Muslims, and many more might have been killed if the announcer, Mr Zende, had not risked his life to direct passengers to safety.) They then went to Cama, a government hospital for women and children used mainly by the poor. Initially, according to the police, Kasab claimed he and Ismail had killed Karkare, Salaskar and Kamte. Later, in his 'confession,' he claimed that while coming out of the hospital, he and Ismail saw a police vehicle passing and hid behind a bush; then another vehicle passed them and stopped some distance away. A police officer got out and started firing at them, hitting Kasab on the hand so that he dropped his AK47, but Ismail opened fire on the officers in the car until they stopped firing. There were three bodies in the vehicle, which Ismail removed, and then drove off in it with Kasab.

The other account is by police constable Arun Jadhav. According to him, Karkare, Salaskar, Kamte, a driver and four police constables including himself were driving down the alley from VT to the back entrance of Cama (barely a ten-minute drive) in their Toyota Qualis to check on injured police officer Sadanand Date when two gunmen emerged from behind trees by the left side of the road and sprayed the vehicle with bullets, killing all its inmates except Jadhav. They then dragged out the three officers, hijacked the vehicle, drove to Metro junction and then Mantralaya in South Bombay, abandoned it when a tyre burst, and grabbed another car. According to police accounts, they then drove to Girgaum, where Kasab was injured and arrested and his companion killed.

These accounts raise more questions than they answer. Kasab claimed that a band of ten terrorists

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landed and split up into twos, going to various destinations, he and his companion going to VT. He said they wanted to blow up the Taj, as in the attack on the Marriott in Islamabad; yet we are told that only 8kg of RDX were found at the Taj, and even that was not used; contrast this with 600kg of RDX and TNT used to blow up the Marriott: could they really have expected to blow up the Taj? Given that the rest of the operation was so systematic, why did they plant two bombs in taxis to go off in random locations, one in Dockyard Road and another in Vile Parle, 25 kilometres away? He said that the terrorists planned to use their hostages as a means of escape, yet there was no attempt at any time to do that; at other times, he also said they had been instructed to fight to the death. He says he is a labourer from Faridkot near Multan and only studied up to Class IV, but it is reported that he speaks fluent English. Several people have pointed out that the pictures of him in VT show him wearing a saffron wrist-band, a Hindu custom, and police later revealed that he could not recite a single verse from the Koran, which any child growing up in a Muslim family would have been able to do. Indeed, a thoughtful article on the soc.culture.jewish group argued that the terrorists were not Muslims but mercenaries, given their appearance and behaviour (especially their reported consumption of alcohol and drugs), pointing out that they did not need to disguise themselves, since Muslims who look like Muslims are plentiful in Bombay, and would not attract undue attention.

During his interrogation, Kasab said that he and eight of the operatives had done a reconnaissance trip to Bombay a few months back, pretending to be students and renting a room at Colaba market, which is close to Nariman House. It is extremely hard for Pakistani nationals to get Indian visas, and they are kept under close surveillance by the police; it is also most unlikely that the Indian immigration authorities would be fooled by forged passports of another country. In that case, the Indian immigration authorities would have visa applications of nine of the terrorists including Kasab, and could match the photographs in them to those of the terrorists: has this been done? Later, Kasab changed his story and said that the team who carried out reconnaissance was different from the team who had carried out the attacks.

The events in VT and Cama and the back lane also put a question mark over his story. According to witnesses, two gunmen started firing at the mainline terminus in VT at 21.55 on Wednesday night, but at precisely the same time, according to CCTV footage, two gunmen began an assault on the suburban terminus. If the first account is true, there were four gunmen at the station: where did the other two come from, and where did they go? We are shown video footage, claiming to be CCTV but without the timeline of normal CCTV footage, of Kasab and Ismail wandering around the parking lot near the

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mainline terminus. This surely cannot be before the shootout, since the station is completely deserted; and after the shootout, Kasab and Ismail are supposed to have escaped via the footbridge from Platform 1 of the suburban station on the other side of VT: this, again, suggests there were four gunmen. Even if Kasab and Ismail had been shown photographs of Karkare, Salaskar and Kamte before they embarked on their trip, how could they possibly have identified the police officers in a dark alley in the dead of night according to Kasab's first story? According to his later confession, a police officer got out of the vehicle and started firing first, injuring him; how, then, did Ismail manage to kill the rest by himself?

Witnesses in Cama hospital say the terrorists spoke fluent Marathi, and this report in two Marathi papers (Maharashtra Times and Navakaal of 28 /12/ 2008) has been confirmed. The gunmen killed two guards in uniform, spared a third, who was in civilian dress and begged for his life saying he was the husband of a patient, demanded water from an employee in the staff quarters and then killed him. They then appear to have made a beeline for the 6th floor (which was empty) and the terrace, taking with them the liftman, Tikhe. 15-30 minutes later, six to eight policemen arrived, and another employee took them up to the 6th floor. The policemen threw a piece of steel up to the terrace, whereupon Tikhe came running down and told them there were two terrorists on the terrace. A fierce gun-battle ensued for 30 to 45 minutes, in which ACP Sadanand Date was injured. Panic-stricken patients and staff in the maternity ward on the 5th floor barricaded the door; nurses instructed the women to breast-feed their babies to keep them quiet, and one woman, who was in the middle of labour, was told to hold back the birth; but they were not invaded. Eventually the gunmen appear to have escaped, it is not clear how. If they were Kasab and Ismail, then these two must have been fluent Marathi speakers. And why would they have taken up positions on the terrace? Was it because it overlooks the lane in which Karkare, Salaskar and Kamte were later supposedly killed?

The other account is equally dubious. In his first account, Jadhav said Karkare was in the second row of the Qualis, while in the second he was supposed to be in the front row with Kamte. In the second account, Salaskar was initially sitting behind the driver, but then asked the driver to slow down and got behind the wheel himself: is it plausible that an experienced encounter specialist would deliberately make himself into a sitting duck like this when they were in hot pursuit of terrorists? In the first account they were supposed to be going to check up on their injured colleague Sadanand Date, but in the second were supposed to be looking for a red car in which they had been told the gunmen were travelling. If the report about the red car was a decoy to lure them into an ambush, it is important to know who told them that the terrorists were in a red car. If the gunmen were firing from the left side, as Jadhav

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claimed, how was Karkare hit three times in the chest while Jadhav himself got two bullets in his right arm? In fact, the only vegetation in that part of the lane is on the right side, and is pinned to the wall by chest-high wire netting; it would be necessary to climb over the netting to hide behind it, and climb over again to come out: impossible under the circumstances. Witnesses say only two bodies were found at the spot next morning: what happened to the third officer? Who were the three constables killed?

How did two terrorists manage to kill six police personnel, including Karkare and Kamte who he said were armed with AK47s and Salaskar, an encounter specialist, when one terrorist was later captured and the other killed by policemen armed only with two rifles and lathis? Assistant Police Inspector Ombale was killed in that encounter, but his colleagues survived. A DNA report on 2 December said that sub-inspector Durgude, who had been posted in front of St Xavier's College, between Cama Hospital and the exit point of the back lane onto Mahapalika Road, saw two young men whom he took to be students and called out to warn them that there was firing at Cama. When they ignored him, he approached them, upon which one of them turned an AK47 on him and killed him. If Kasab and Ismail were there, who was firing inside Cama? Again, it is evident that at least four terrorists, and possibly more, were involved in this operation.

There was also an intriguing report in DNA on 28 November saying that Anand Raorane, a resident of a building opposite Nariman House, heard sounds of celebration from the terrorists there when the news of Karkare getting killed was flashed on TV: isn't that strange? The same report quoted a resident of Nariman House and a local shopkeeper who said that the terrorists had purchased large quantities of food and liquor before the attack, suggesting that more than two of them were planning to occupy the place for a long time. Eye-witnesses in St Xavier's saw a man shot and lying on the pavement in front of the college around 12.30 a.m., while about three gunmen stood over him: who was that? Various reports said that two to eight terrorists were captured alive. Now there is only one in police custody: what happened to the other(s)?

A careful scrutiny of all the reports available so far suggests, to this writer anyway, that the killing of Karkare was a premeditated act executed by his self-proclaimed enemies, some of whom had prior intelligence of the attack on the hotels and planned their own attack to coincide with it. The operation in Cama, in particular, seems to have had the sole objective of luring Karkare into the lane where he was later reportedly killed. A.R.Antulay's demand for a probe into the killing was widely supported, even though the same parties who were earlier vilifying and threatening Karkare responded by baying for his

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blood. P.Chidambaram's clarification that it was by chance that Karkare, Salaskar and Kamte happened to be travelling in the same vehicle does not explain any of the other anomalies: Why did the terrorists go into Cama? If they were intending to slaughter people ruthlessly as they did in VT, why did they desist – did they have a sudden crisis of conscience? If they intended to create a hostage crisis, why did they go to the 6th floor and terrace, where there were no patients or staff? On the other hand, if they were looking for a getaway vehicle, wouldn't they have been more likely to find it on the road than on the terrace of Cama? How did these Pakistanis learn to speak Marathi so fluently? And are we really expected to believe that they could defy the laws of nature by being in two places at the same time, engaged in a shootout at Cama while at the same time gunning down sub-inspector Durgude outside St Xavier's?

The Objective: Shutting Down Terrorist Networks

These are just a few of the numerous questions being asked by vigilant Bombayites who find themselves thoroughly dissatisfied with the information that has been doled out. These are citizens who understand that their security depends on identifying Islamist terrorist networks in Pakistan and shutting them down, but feel it is equally important to their security to identify and shut down Hindutva terrorist networks in India, which have been responsible for the majority of terrorist attacks in Maharashtra, and possibly the whole country, in the past five years. Why are they so cynical about the possibility of a genuine professional investigation? The answer is that we have too much bitter experience of investigations in which innocent people (usually Muslims) are rounded up, tortured and even killed, while the real culprits are allowed to go free. Interpol chief Robert Noble's amazing revelation on December 23 that India had not shared any information about the terrorists with it, despite its offer to use Interpol's extensive resources to assist in the investigation, can only fuel the suspicion that the information dished out by the police to the public via the media is not of a quality that would be acceptable to a truly professional police agency. Karkare broke with this dismal record, but now he is dead. When a person who has been vilified, slandered and threatened with death is killed in suspicious circumstances, it is imperative that a proper investigation should be carried out soon, before too much evidence can be manufactured and/or destroyed. If Kasab aka Iman disappears or is assassinated like Lee Harvey Oswald, or is executed, that could only be seen as evidence of a cover-up.


The government and people of Pakistan have as much interest as the government and people of India in eliminating the terror networks that have killed President Asif Ali Zardari's wife Benazir Bhutto and

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thousands of others in both Pakistan and India. The terrorists, on the other hand, be they Islamist or Hindutva, have a common interest in destroying secularism, democracy and peace within and between the two countries. That is their precise agenda. Pakistani politicians had offered a joint investigation into the terrorist attacks, a far more sensible suggestion than belligerent statements by some Indians accusing Pakistan of harbouring terrorists who are killing Indians, which led us to the brink of war. It should be obvious that a military conflict between India and Pakistan, advocated by the Shiv Sena, would be disastrous for both countries

economically, while a nuclear war, which might ensue if extremist forces captured power in both countries, would have unthinkable consequences. If the Indo-Pakistan peace process is halted, as L.K.Advani advocates, the terrorists would have won.

Indeed, without a joint investigation, the terrorist networks behind this outrage can never be uncovered: how else could the names and addresses in Pakistan revealed by Kasab be followed up to the satisfaction of all parties? Interpol could act as a coordinating agency, but would not be able to follow up information about the terrorists unless it is provided by the Indian authorities. The Indian government owes it to the memory of Karkare, Salaskar and Kamte, who died fighting terrorism of all hues, to establish a credible account of exactly where, when and how they were killed, and identify their killers; unlike the well-known female TV anchor and others who berated Antulay for 'helping Pakistan,' we do not have to agree that one has to be a moron in order to be a good Indian! The government also owes it to us, the public, who are the prime targets of all terrorist attacks, to carry out a credible investigation which identifies and puts behind bars all the mass murderers involved in this and other attacks.

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