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A night in the line of fire

Mateen Hafeez, TNN Dec 26, 2008, 03.22am IST

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I was about to sit down to dinner at home when the first SMS beeped on my phone. It was about 10 pm on 26/11 when the text message from my colleague informed me about `random' firing outside CST railway station. Even before I could dial the police control room to find out more, a call from an all-too-familiar number-the office board line-flashed on my cell.

Moments later, the city editor told me to rush to office. I realized it was something big and ran out after grabbing some food.

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The scene outside the J J School of Art was eerie. The area had been cordoned off, barricades had been placed across roads and reporters from some news channels were busy talking to "eyewitnesses". In the background, there was a constant noise, akin to fire-crackers going off. The eyewitnesses told us bullets were being fired, but there was no official confirmation as to what was happening.

What was I going to tell my editors-it's a gang war...no, it's a crazed gunman...wait, it's a terror attack? I started when there was a sudden tap on my shoulder, but was relieved to see a couple of colleagues standing beside me, looking as clueless as I felt. With no information available from the police at the site or over the phone, we decided to walk to the police headquarters a few metres away for "authentic information". But we were denied entry for "security reasons".

A month after the attacks, the most persistent memory of that `terror day' is the total lack of information in the first couple of hours after two terrorists sprayed bullets into innocent people at CST. Gradually, I realised this wasn't a grand design or a misplaced attempt to hold back information from people, it was rather a pathetic display of the breakdown of all communication channels-no one knew where to get help and from whom.

Outside the police commissionerate, the scene seemed to be straight out of a war movie. All passersby were asked to put up their hands and were frisked. Even women and old men were not spared the drill, but as I was to find out half an hour later, this too didn't help.

It was around 11 pm that my colleague and I reached Vasudev Balwant Phadke Chowk, better known as Metro circle. The only thing I was clear about now (after stringing together information available from various sources and colleagues at several spots in south Mumbai) was that it was indeed a terror strike. I tried to strike a conversation with every police official visible on the road and to engage locals in small talk, but there was little I could glean. In between, there were umpteen interruptions from reporter-friends who had reached home before the attack began and wanted updates.

My frustration was growing when, around 11.30 pm, a police vehicle appeared from the St Xavier's lane and slowed down around 200 ft from the Metro junction. Some journalists rushed to the vehicle in the hope that they could get an update from the policemen. Instead, a volley of bullets greeted them. A man in the jeep shot randomly from a pistol in his outstretched hand. Two persons standing near me were hit and fell to the ground. I lay down flat as the bullets whizzed past.

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The vehicle sped away even as someone shouted, "Woh log police ki gaadi me bhaage hain (they have fled in the police vehicle)." As I attempted to get up, I realised that the person lying next to me was dead. TOI's photo editor, who was barely a few metres away from me, realised that a bullet had grazed his shirt sleeve.

It was my closest brush with terror so far. During earlier assignments, I had reached the terror sites only after the carnage was over. But this time, I was in the middle of it. Everyone around us who had been caught in that unfortunate spot at an inopportune time was babbling on about their good fortune to have escaped alive.

Half-an-hour later, we heard over the police vehicle's wireless that two of the terrorists had been accosted at Girgaum Chowpatty. One died and the other, Ajmal Kasab, continues to make international headlines a month after the attacks.

I realised that the horrific night was not yet over when a TV reporter called me to ask whether ATS chief Hemant Karkare had been injured in the terror attack. I called Karkare's orderly, Akhtar Shaikh, to check on this and he broke down, "Sahab nahi rahe. Sahab guzar gaye." The next 30 minutes were a blur, with colleagues calling up with various leads. "Encounter specialist

Vijay Salaskar is dead, please check. Is ATS cop Hemant Karkare dead too? Are IPS officers Sadanand Date and Ashok Kamte dead?"

We made our way to J J Hospital's morgue to look for the answers. The scene there was chaotic, with doctors and social workers rushing to ambulances. I saw Hemant Karkare's wife Kavita in one corner. As a reporter covering the activities of the ATS, I spoke to her husband every day. I wondered for a moment whether I should speak to her, but decided against it. I turned to a senior IPS officer instead, who confirmed that Karkare was no more, and added that Date had only sustained injuries.

A little past 2.30 am, I trudged back home, physically worn out and mentally bludgeoned. It seemed as though the world had changed drastically in the four hours that I had been out on the street.

(This is the third in a series in which TOI reporters narrate the stories behind the news or tell the tale of the city through the people they meet)

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