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# KOSHY'S SPACE

GEORGE KOSHY



## My City is Burning, So Many Hearts Weeping

Monday , December 01, 2008 at 11 : 30

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*My city is burning... so many bleeding;  
Hearts weeping and I'm still flying...  
A fly on the wall... just watching;  
Flying from one wall to another.*

*Unable to cry along; unable to share a shoulder.  
A hand lend out is scanned for a boom mic;  
They think I'm a foe... they think I love to see them cry  
And also think I lack a heart!  
Always blamed for saying too much!*

*But, I was there too...  
Scared as much as you were; yet determined to fly on  
Dodging the same bullets that you did;  
Breathing-in the same smoke you did  
The pain was there, the emptiness too  
I lost as much as you did too  
My faith in so many things...  
My leaders my guardian angels my neighbors too  
But I'm still flying on and forever will too  
'coz from one wall to another I hit glass too  
And there I lay motionless; looking for help  
Unable to even call out...*

*But seeing me there you turn around  
And find a path that hits no transparent harm  
And as I get that breath back I fly on  
To another wall from where I look on  
And to see you safe and egging on  
Simply drains away that swelling tear  
Gives me the joy that drives me on  
And I go on flying... from wall to wall!*

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Mumbai city is burning. And this time it's not the iconic man-made structures; but the hearts and minds of each Mumbaikar. It happened when not one of us expected. It hit us where it hurt most and it left a wound that'll maybe someday heal. But I'm sure is; the scar will remain forever though..!

#### Day-1

A call from my colleague Yogita Limaye at 10:00 pm, there's been a shoot-out at Leopold cafe in colaba... could you find out more? Even as I try finding out, she texts me that she's in any case leaving for the spot with a camera unit; her hunch says it could be important.

Information already meanwhile trickling-in of more gun shots being reported; this time from the Mumbai 'Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus'. Most television channels too getting into breaking news mode...this had to be major..!

And that's what put us all into an alert mode... each of us calling-in our sources even as 'assignment' alerted logistics, fleet... each of our video-journalists too starting to call-in and enquire if the situation was bad and they needed to come-in.

News started coming in even as I traveled to the spot; the possibility of a gang war between two Nigerian drug-mafia. But

#### More about George Koshy

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#### Archives

January 2010

CST? How could the situation have reached CST?

10:20 pm and we have confirmation from my colleague Toral Varia that it is not a gang-war but a full-on attack. More news trickling-in by the second. A blast at vile-parle? An attack at the airport? There seems to be some trouble at Oberoi Hotel. The air reverberating with sounds that seemed nothing other than fire crackers; at times maybe even a cracker-bomb.

CST road seemed blocked. There was a crowd rushing our way; also some commotion seemingly near CAMA hospital. I head towards the other side. Let me check GT hospital first. This place seemed to be operational for disaster a management long ago because they'd already setup people to prevent the media from entering. Any information from there seemed highly unlikely; we move towards METRO. Policemen lined-up all along the way; each of them with drawn pistols and ready-to-fire sten-guns. Most of them on their tether ends already. "Hands-up karo!", came an order even as we approached them. One wrong move, someone would have definitely 'pulled-it'.

At the Metro junction there seems to be a bunch of police and our scribes. Gun shots get wilder. We're asked to move away and even as we walk 15 feet a police car pass us; we hear gun shots behind us and a huge commotion. And there we turn back to see two people fallen down. One hurt another dead already as we rush back. We realize this is now for real.

Hours turn into moments even as I and my video journalist Manish Dubey travel from one spot to another gathering info from passerby, the police were too wary to talk. The message that one of their vehicles have been hijacked had shaken them too.

The Oberoi, Santacruz, Mazgaon, Vile Parle , Vidhan Bhavan... news seemed to be trickling-in from everywhere. No one seemed to be knowing what and where and when and how. All that we collectively knew was times were bad. Each one was to fend for himself. It wasn't the time for jokes; the Taj was burning, the injured were being brought-into hospitals by the dozen.

Was this another serial blasts? Then what were armed gunmen doing in the open? Finally the Qualis with the armed men seemed to have been abandoned at Nariman point near the Vidhan bhavan and a Skoda car used to move further. A hot chase and there was one dead terrorist and another captured alive.

A huge explosion at Colaba. A petrol pump's on fire already. Confirmations from two of my colleagues here Prachi and Raksha both having heard it. A simple hop skip and jump for here; Raksha Shetty already in her bed sits up and within seconds is out on the streets escorted (for her own safety) by her husband Karan.

This probably only the beginning even as each of us reporters set the meter down - there was no turning back. This was it, the real thing our city was being attacked and we were on adrenalin. The wails of the passing ambulances even as I moved from the Trident/Oberoi to Colaba. A few locals agree to take us to a building opposite the Nariman House. We recce the place but find it too risky to stay. We head back. We see forces reaching. Hardly any solid fire-power yet. It's been an hour since the

grenade explosion already.

Raksha stays on... and I move to the Taj Mahal hotel. And the sight sends a chill down my spine. I'm at the backside entrance and there're the Anti-Terrorism Squad personnel all with drawn guns and taking guard, a fleet of ambulance and fire brigade vehicles... and most shocking: the sight of the burning hotel.

First the fire and then the huge amounts of salt-water will the structure's beauty ever survive? Well then the numbers spread - more than 50 people possibly dead already. Don't actually recollect when the Day 1 turned into Day 2 even as I scouted for someone who'd have some inputs. Chances of two people having scaled the pool-side gate late evening being the 'trouble makers'. The first casualty aswel; a hotel guard and his guard-dog.

## **Day-2**

Firing continued. The fires that had broken-up still continue to rage and almost took mid-early morning to be put out.

Meanwhile it seems like a wait and watch between the security agencies aswel as the terrorists. News of the presence of RDX inside come through. In other places too the stand-off continue. The army's trying it's best to penetrate the defenses of the terrorist. Confirmation comes-in of the presence of more than two terrorists at each of these places. The presence of the army has created speed and emergency in the process but a big break though still needs to come by.

It definitely seems a tough road ahead even as the terrorists keep moving in and out of locations with ease. An inkling even to the fact that they are familiar to the topography of the hotel really well. Were they insiders at the hotel? Did they recce the place earlier? Only the security agencies will tell us this later.

Meanwhile a stray bullet ricochets on the pavement space in front of us and injures one bystander and two journalists; including a lady photographer. Things quickly come into perspective. The Hollywood movie that was unfolding in front of our eyes in this wide 360 degree canvas quickly turn a reality. Suddenly the enormity of the dangers standing there near the frontline seeps into the psyche of the reporters aswel as all the media personnel present there. Everyone quickly duck to the ground bracing themselves to the stone pavements of the gateway. That was a close shave indeed.

More fires, which we later will realize are being setup by the terrorists themselves most of it as a diversionary tactic and also to keep the security agencies busy. Even as the heritage building of the Taj slowly burn, we can't help remembering the beauty of the priceless artifacts inside. The exquisite carpets, the antique furniture, the priceless painting, the enormous numbers of books in the rare library. This is a part of history these terrorists were destroying.

A connection meanwhile being established. Agencies pointing fingers at the LeT (the Lashkar-e-Toiba with it's well known affiliation to the Al Qaeeda. Reinforcements being brought-in from the agencies. The NSG (National Security Group) steps in, one terrorist was already meanwhile arrested alive.

This drama was just getting bigger by the minute. What was supposedly a gang war in had converted into a high octane drama playing itself on live television throughout the world. The world was watching closely even as Press personnel from across the world descend on those rough-cut stone pavements of the Gateway of India. More fires even as hostages are rescued by the minute from all the three flash points - the Taj, the Oberoi as well as the Nariman Building.

The drama at the Oberoi ends. Nariman building is still poised delicately even as conflicting reports come-in of the operation ending; even as fresh and unexpected gun fire begin all over again. Night fall brought with it a separate set of adrenalin rush. More gun shots each time reverberating from a different location. At times from the back of the building, then towards the belly; sometimes from a top floor at times from somewhere close-by.

NSG commandos slowly were lining themselves near the periphery of the corner facing the Gateway of India. It seemed they'd cornered the terrorists somewhere on the first floor. The Wasabi Restaurant in all probabilities. Even as heavy firing and counter-firing continue through out the night we noticed a pattern of lights being flashed into the sea from the window at Wasabi. Was this some sort of a morse code? Did they have an accomplice outside? Questions that'll hound me forever.

### **Day-3**

More fire power from both sides all through early dawn. All of it followed by a series of explosions- grenades exploding in quick succession. A raging fire breaks out; this time at the Wasabi. Sad but the reality we realize is- the damage is extensive. The restaurant has been gutted down. The fire officials are then moved-in. Even as the NSG commandos storm the restaurant from the other side. ATS officials providing the back up along with the army.

Even as the fire slowly comes under control smoke quickly fills-in. Looks highly impossible for anyone to have survived the fire and smoke and all of sudden then a face outside one of those windows. A terrorist tries to lob a grenade at the officials standing down below - he is shot - and the body falls down onto the pavement. Then-on the security personnel bore a contented look, a sense of relief, some even on their cell phones - one of them overheard saying "ho gaya, mein theek hoon" (It's over, I'm fine).

Was this truly the end? Seemed like and a 'lil while later we realize it is... what a night it had been, one that would stay etched in my mind for time immemorial. The people, the place, each moment of it all. My city had been attacked by people I didn't know. My city was also rescued by people I personally didn't know. Even as I remained a mere spectator to the drama unfolding in front of my eyes there were sms'es that came in by the galore.

Of public anger and frustration. Some blasting politicians for playing the regionalistic card - even as your goons continued sleeping it was the jawans from 'outside' who saved the day (the message read; if put mildly). A general anger a raging frustration; this was happening time and again and those doing it wasn't being sent a stern message. It is not OK..! a clear