



## ‘Will come back to India

**Swatee Kher** Posted online: Sun Nov 30 2008, 02:19 hrs

**Mumbai** : It has been terrible, but I will come back to India. It is a country where people greet you with a namaste, a humble greeting. People here cannot be hated for the acts of these men,” says Andreina Varagona, also known as Rudrani Devi, an American citizen admitted to Bombay Hospital. Others in the group she was with were injured, while two lost their lives.

On her first visit to India to participate in a religious tour, Varagona was dining at Tiffin, the all-day restaurant at the Oberoi. The eatery, which offers world cuisine and is known for its live sushi counter was one of the first places to be attacked. Fortunately, says Varagona, it was not too crowded as it was late at night. Varagona was with five others at the restaurant when they suddenly heard gunshots from the lobby. Among those with her were her brother, friends Linda Ragsdale, Helen Connolly, Michael Rudder and Alan Scherr and his 13-year-old daughter Naomi. They had just returned from a prayer session in the city.

“(Upon hearing loud sounds) A gentleman at the restaurant went to check what had happened. He came back running saying there was firing. Our immediate reaction was to duck under the table. We were told not to say that we are Americans or British, but to just identify as Italians if the terrorists asked us anything,” remembers Varagona.

Naomi, who had come to India on her first ever flight, was screaming and refusing to get under the table. Alan and Varagona were forcing her down when Alan was shot in the head and killed. “He fell on me and all the blood splattered. I kept pulling Naomi down. There was brazen firing all around and I didn’t even realise when I got hit,” says Varagona. She suffered a bullet injury on her right thigh. They just lay down on the floor, while the terrorists continued firing. In the mayhem, Naomi was hit several times. “I tried to pull Naomi with me, but realised she was dead. The staff then asked us to move towards the kitchen and barricaded that door,” recalls Varagona.

Suddenly, there was the first grenade explosion and they realised that they should flee from the spot to save their lives. “We made our way down the steps and out of the hotel. Taxis were waiting to take us to hospitals,” remembers Varagona.

As soon as the alert was sounded in hospitals, Bombay Hospital kicked in emergency measures, calling in all the doctors on duty and drawing up a list of unoccupied beds in the hospital.

All through the trauma when Varagona stayed crouched under the restaurant table, she held the hand of her friend Linda, who is now recuperating in a room across hers in the hospital. Linda, a resident of Nashville like Varagona, was also on her first visit to India. “I had a special bond with Naomi as my daughter is her age. I had just taught her swimming loops and we had planned to do as many as eight by Friday,” remembers a teary-eyed Linda, who also saw one of the two terrorists. She describes him as young boy with a large gun and ammunition stuffed into a backpack and waist pouch.

Both Varagona and Linda probably survived because they pretended to be dead while the terrorists went on their shooting spree.