

# Terror at Taj Hotel could have ended first night itself

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Within the first hour of the firing at Café Leopold on 26/11, a small group of armed policemen who pursued the four attackers inside the Taj Mahal Palace and Towers Hotel were presented with 12 golden minutes to restrict, if not eliminate, them as they were holed up inside a room for that duration. Another, much bigger, opportunity came after midnight when the four terrorists took refuge in a second room for nearly two hours and the Mumbai Police had about 120 armed men to take them on.

CCTV footage accessed by The Indian Express shows that on both occasions, the police squandered the chance waiting for commandos to arrive from New Delhi and launch a counter-offensive — a full 12 hours after the attacks began.

The first group of policemen to reach the scene of any of the targets attacked that night was a team of six policemen led by DCP (Zone 1) Vishwas Nangre-Patil. The Indian Express photographer Vasant Prabhu tailed that team as it pursued Lashkar militants Abu Shoaib and Abu Umer, who had shot and killed diners at Café Leopold. This team entered the sprawling hotel complex from the same North Court gate at the rear as the terrorists.

They reached the heritage wing and sought to hunt the terrorists through the maze of corridors inside, intermittently exchanging fire, challenging AK-47s with their pistols. Unable to make any impact, Nangre-Patil and his team moved to the security control room of the hotel on the second floor, where Taj securitymen were monitoring the unfolding horror

through CCTV camera pictures from across the hotel.

Over the next four hours, this nondescript room would witness the shocking unpreparedness of the Mumbai Police to take on the attackers whose number had doubled as Shoaib and Umer teamed up with Abdul Rehman Bada and Abu Ali, who entered the hotel from the main entrance five minutes before them at 9.38 pm.

CCTV footage from inside the hotel shows the four terrorists gathering first inside Room 551 of the heritage wing for 12 minutes and later in Room 632 for nearly two hours with minor interruptions in between.

On both occasions, Nangre-Patil and his team got this information instantly from the hotel's security staff. The first chance to restrict or engage the Lashkar men presented itself within an hour after they had raided the hotel, the second came about two hours later as the sequence of events recorded by the hotel's CCTV cameras show:

22:27: All four terrorists enter Room 551 and stay inside until 22:39 when two of them emerge from the room. They enter an adjoining room and bring out a hostage.

22:48: The duo take the hostage back into Room 551 and stay inside until 22:54.

22:54: One terrorist comes out of Room 551 to take a look in the corridor for a minute and returns to the room.

come out of the room and go back into it individually before leaving it together at 23:13 and spreading out. As soon as they noticed the movements of the attackers at 22:27, the Taj security staff asked Nangre-Patil to seize the opportunity and block the terrorists in that room. Nangre-Patil is learnt to have said that special forces were on their way and would take over the task.

Then came the second opportunity.

00:38: The four terrorists trooped into Room 632 and stayed inside.

00:53: One of them left and returned shortly.

01:28: Another left the room and returned after a few minutes.

02.34: All four left the room and fanned out, igniting fires on the sixth floor.

Nangre-Patil, who continued to remain in the hotel security control room, was once again informed by security staff as soon as the four terrorists entered Room 632. This time, the DCP informed senior officers over the wireless and also sought more policemen. But according to Control Room transcripts of the wireless conversations heard by The Indian Express, Mumbai Police Commissioner Hassan Gafoor told Nangre-Patil to wait for backup. When contacted, Gafoor said: "There was no question of asking anyone to flee or not engage the terrorists. Nangre-Patil displayed exemplary courage. He told me, 'Sir, I will do or die', and I told him not to contemplate such things as the Army was on its way. Two constables

with him had died, and he was lucky to have survived."

Despite repeated attempts, Nangre-Patil was unavailable for comment.

The backup, in the form of the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) Quick Reaction Team (QRT), "striking mobiles" and "assault mobiles," were already at the hotel. In fact, three "striking mobiles" with 18 armed policemen each, three "assault mobiles" with five men each, six police station mobiles with a minimum of four men each, as well as a Quick Response Team armed with AK-47 assault rifles — a total of about 120 armed policemen — were at the ground floor of the hotel, awaiting orders to proceed to higher floors.

The operations to storm the hotel began in earnest much after the Marine Commandos arrived at 2:10 am but even they could not go beyond the ground floor. They were followed by the NSG at around 8 am and operations were launched only at 9.30 am.

While 20 people were killed in the first 30 minutes of the attack, another 12, including NSG Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan, died later. The wife and two sons of the hotel's general manager, Karambir Kang, were also killed in the fires the terrorists set after they left Room 632 at 2.34 am.