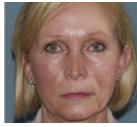


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'After 26/11 I think more and more that good deeds pay'

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Sheela Bhatt in Mumbai

Mumbai is *people*. If you don't like people you will misunderstand, even underestimate, Mumbai. It is impossible to understand Mumbai only through its economy, geography or demography.

The 10 terrorists who attacked Mumbai on November 26 last year succeeded in killing unarmed Mumbaikars, but failed totally in their mentor's larger goal of crushing the soul of Mumbai, because Mumbai is not about the Taj, the Trident or the Chhatrapatti Shivaji Terminus.

Mumbai is great because every slum-dweller dreams of enjoying the Taj's luxury one day when he makes enough money in the City of Gold.

The definition of a Mumbaikar is simple. If you have imbibed the spirit of Mumbai, you don't easily surrender, bow down, nor are you broken or have your spirit diminished.

Hemant Oberoi, the Taj's 55-year-old corporate chef who, along with his team, kept his kitchen running to serve traumatised guests amid gunshots and grenade explosions that dreadful November day, symbolises Mumbai's never-say-die spirit.

rediff.com's **Sheela Bhatt** met Hemant Oberoi to get him to look back on that traumatic night, to know about the healing process, and to recount the lessons learnt from the tragedy.

Oberoi has occupied the same cabin inside the Taj's famous kitchen for 24 years. This is his *adda* (*sanctuary*) adorned with more than two dozen Ganeshas. On that horrendous night the terrorists barged in barely six feet from his cabin to spew death and destruction.

He begins the conversation by saying, "I very much remember my colleagues who lost their lives. Seven of my chefs died, and three were injured badly."

Pointing to the passage outside his cabin he says, "When terrorists entered the hotel I was right here. As soon as we understood the situation our thought was to take care of the guests. We were stuck here the entire night."

It is difficult to imagine how he could keep his kitchen going even as frenzied terrorists went about their murderous spree just a few yards away.

He describes his cool thus: "You see, if I get panicky my whole team will get panicky. Our guests were already in a state of great panic."

What about the fear of death from a terrorist's bullet?

Pausing to think, he says, "I don't think... I mean, till one point we didn't fear and kept working, but not anymore. We have seen death from very close. I don't have fear. On that night we were not sure whether we will be alive the next morning."

"We didn't think about ourselves because there were 300-odd guests inside the Taj. The food and beverages team had 100-odd people working right here. I think they performed their duty phenomenally."

"We had to care about the guests, *yaar*," he says simply.

Image: Hemant Oberoi, corporate chef of Hotel Taj Mahal

Photographs: Rajesh Karkera

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