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For Heroes of Mumbai, Terror Was a Call to Action



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Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Vishnu Datta Ram Zende working Monday at a Mumbai railroad station where he saved lives last Wednesday.

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

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MUMBAI, India — On any ordinary day, Vishnu Datta Ram Zende used the public-address system at Mumbai’s largest railway station to direct busy hordes of travelers to their trains.

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But last Wednesday just before 10 p.m., when he heard a loud explosion and saw people running across the platform, he gripped his microphone and calmly directed a panicked crowd toward the safest exit. The station, Victoria Terminus, it turned out, was suddenly under attack, the beginning of a three-day siege by a handful of young, heavily armed gunmen.

“Walk to the back and leave the station through Gate No. 1,” he chanted alternately in Hindi and Marathi, barely stopping to take a breath until the platform was cleared. No sooner, gunmen located his announcement booth and fired, puncturing one of the windows. Mr. Zende was not hurt.

Overnight, Mr. Zende became one of Mumbai’s new heroes, their humanity all the more striking in the face of the inhumanity of the gunmen. As the city faced one of the most horrific terrorist attacks in the nation’s history, many ordinary citizens like Mr. Zende, 37, displayed

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Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Nitin Minocha, a sous chef for a hotel restaurant, in a Mumbai hospital with his wife. He was shot in the arm on Wednesday.

extraordinary grace.

Many times, they did so at considerable personal risk, performing acts of heroism that were not part of their job descriptions. Without their quick thinking and common sense, the toll of the attacks would most likely have been even greater than the 173 confirmed dead on Monday.

Not far from the train station, as the same network of gunmen stormed the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower Hotel, a sous chef named Nitin Minocha and his co-workers

shepherded more than 200 restaurant diners into a warren of private club rooms called The Chambers.

For the rest of the night they prepared snacks, served soda, fetched cigarettes and then, when told it was safe, tried to escort the diners out through the back. They wanted to make sure their guests, many of them Mumbai's super-elite, were as comfortable as possible.

"The only thing was to protect the guests," said the executive chef, Hemant Oberoi. "I think my team did a wonderful job in doing that. We lost some lives in doing that."

During the attacks, six employees from the kitchen staff were slain. Another hotel employee, a maintenance worker on night duty, was shot in the abdomen and remained in critical condition on Monday.

Mr. Minocha, 34, caught two bullets in the left arm. It felt numb.

He could see that the bone had been shattered. He panicked.

"I'm a chef," he told himself. "I cook with both hands."

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Even after an aborted evacuation bid, hotel workers helped get water for their guests and held up bedsheets to create makeshift urinals. Next to the Nariman House, the headquarters of a Jewish religious organization, where gunmen took hostages, neighbors helped neighbors evacuate to safety.

At another hotel, the Oberoi, staff members ushered restaurant diners into the kitchen and out the door; at that hotel, 10 employees were among the dead.

At Victoria Terminus, also known as Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, Mr. Zende's calls prevented many commuters from walking into the path of two gunmen. "It occurred to me, I should prevent people from going to that side," he said.

The attackers had already shot up the other wing of the 130-year-old railway station, littering it with dead bodies, puncturing windows with bullet holes.

In choosing their targets, the gunmen spared neither rich nor poor, neither Westerners nor Indians.

At the Taj, for instance, Mr. Minocha was on duty at the Golden Dragon restaurant when gunmen stormed the hotel lobby. He cracked open the door, saw the commotion and promptly closed it. He and his fellow workers escorted diners at his restaurant to the city's most expensive Japanese restaurant, and finally up to The Chambers, where guests were invited to sit and wait it out.

"They were doing everything they could," said Bhisham Mansukhani, who had been attending a friend's wedding reception that night, before he was shepherded into The Chambers.

For the next several hours, the staff tried to keep everyone calm and well-fed. At one point, Mr. Minocha recalled Monday from his hospital bed, he had seen the red dome of the hotel on fire.

Well before dawn, security officers instructed that guests leave in groups of four. The hotel staff lined up, as though in a chain. Some people got out. Others did not. Bullets suddenly came in a burst. That is when Mr. Minocha was hit twice in the forearm.

The gunfire led to a near stampede. Mr. Minocha made it outside, screaming for help. Those who were still inside made a U-turn to The Chambers, which is when a maintenance worker named Rajan Kamble was shot in the back.

The bullet went straight through his abdomen, perforating his intestines, which a couple who had been dining at the restaurant, Prashant and Tilu Mangeshikar, both doctors, tried to push back into place with some bandages and bedsheets.

Prashant Mangeshikar said that even when they were trapped inside a room in The Chambers, the young hotel staff kept unusually calm. “Everything was looking like a holy mess,” he recalled. “The majority was between 20 and 25. Nobody lost their cool.”

At Victoria Terminus, the gunmen acted with a cool precision.

They first struck the long-distance section of the Victoria Terminus, spraying the large waiting hall with gunfire. Those waiting were about to board the slow, crowded, poor-man’s train to Varanasi, scheduled to depart at 11:55 pm, one of many that ferry migrant workers between India’s hinterland and this, its dream city.

Satya Sheel Mishra, who runs a second-floor restaurant called Re-Fresh Food Plaza, saw the two gunmen take their positions and fire. Seven bullets pierced his glass windows. Crouching on the ground, he saw the men shoot indiscriminately and then march toward the other side of the station, where Mr. Zende made announcements for the commuter trains to the suburbs.

Mr. Zende saw the gunmen walk in front of his window. Then he crouched on the ground and heard them shoot. One bullet came through a window. Above his microphone, the

Hindu elephant-god Ganesh, believed to be the remover of obstacles, sat in a blue box with twinkling red lights around him. Mr. Zende called his wife. “I am in the office. I’m safe. Don’t worry.”

Mr. Zende joined the railways at the age of 19, when his father, a railway guard, died. With a 10th-grade education, Mr. Zende began at the bottom of the ladder, working himself up to the announcement booth. Now, he commutes an hour and a half each way from a working-class corner on the city’s northern edges, naturally on the railways. He makes little more than \$300 a month.

On Monday, a woman strode up the steep, narrow steps to his announcement booth and burst out her praise: “Mr. Zende, you have done such good work. We need more people like you.”

She declined to give her name. She said she was a retired scientist who had stepped out of her home for the first time since the attacks began. She railed against politicians.

Then she signed off. “Jai Hind,” she said, or “long live India.”

Mr. Zende quietly replied, “Jai Hind.”

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