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The Siege: A well-documented, racy and incomplete thriller

by [Deepanjana Pal](#) Nov 26, 2013

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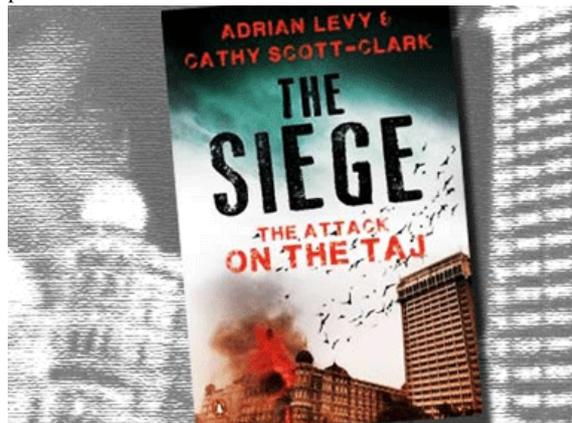
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On the morning of 26th November, 2008, few people had any inkling that by 9.30pm, Mumbai would be in the throes of a terrorist attack that would hold the southern tip of the city thrall for nearly three days.

Vishwas Nangare Patil was one of the few who wasn't entirely taken by surprise. Patil became Deputy Commissioner of Police of Zone 1 (south Mumbai) in June 2008. In his first week, he got a tip-off that the popular tourist hangout Leopold Café, made famous by Shantaram, was on a terrorist hitlist. Going through classified bulletins from the past, Patil discovered the tentacles of terrorism in Kashmir were inching towards Mumbai.

Intelligence reports, 25 of them from the CIA, suggested repeatedly that the Pakistani jihadi outfit Lashkar-e-Toiba was planning something in Mumbai, something big. Something that targeted, among other things, the Trident-Oberoi and the Taj. Eleven warnings hinted at a series of simultaneous attacks. Two warnings from the Intelligence Bureau specifically mentioned the Taj hotel as a target and gave dates for the planned assault.



Courtesy: ibn live

The dates proved to be incorrect, but Patil's suspicions – largely ignored by his colleagues – that Mumbai may be attacked in a way that the city and its people were largely incapable of countering proved to be true when on 26th November, 2008, a crew of Pakistani men, trained in jihadi camps, walked into south Mumbai. The story of the November attacks on Mumbai, popularly termed 26/11 for facility and perhaps out of some morbid need to establish a resonance to 9/11, is chilling. Ten men split into batches and spread themselves across South Mumbai. With the aid of their Pakistani handlers, they infected city's security mechanisms responded with paralysing terror.

True to Patil's intelligence, the terrorists killed people at Leopold Café. There was a massacre at Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus. The Taj, the Trident-Oberoi and Chabad House were taken over by young terrorists who were determined to devastate their targets and torture their hostages. This sounds like a gripping drama and it is, but it's also history and it records how unprepared Mumbai was for terror, despite years of experience with bomb blasts and tip-offs like the ones Patil had.

Patil emerges as one of the heroes in *The Siege*, a book by Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark that reconstructs the attack on the Taj and the police response to it. Much of *The Siege* is about the valour of everyday people – the wedding guests who didn't succumb to panic, the

hotel staff who acted like human shields, the chefs who found exit routes in the labyrinthine Taj. It's also got heroes like Patil and his colleague Rajvardhan Sinha, who give the Die Hard duo a run for their money. Patil went into the Taj with Sinha and a couple of constables and woefully limited firepower, but Patil and Sinha survived. Not even a massive fireball could bring them down. It's one of the many moments in *The Siege* that reads like a blockbuster film.

"It was the state Intelligence Bureau. 'Get out now,' he messaged. 'They are talking about blowing the CCTV room, as soon as they've secured the hostages.' Three floors and a fifty-yard walk down the corridor was all that separated the CCTV room from the gunmen on the fifth. That gave them about three or four minutes before they came face to face.

'Everyone out now,' Rajvardhan screamed, throwing open the CCTV room door. More than a dozen of them stumbled out, and into a tunnel of fire, singeing their hair and skin. Patil formed the group into a spear — As they edged forward, the fire was so hot that the sprinkler water transformed into steam. ... Patil was in front, Rajvardhan behind him, followed by Patil's radio operator. Behind him was Deepak Dhole, a veteran inspector — shots rang out: ack ack ack. Two AK-47s channelled in fire from above them, rounds chiselling sparks out of the marble — Rajvardhan glimpsed two corpses on the staircase as more rounds poured in — Patil pushed forward, followed by his batch-mate [Rajvardhan], who sent a burst of rounds up into the atrium. Then Dhole watched in horror as a gigantic ball of flames rolled forward and struck Patil and Rajvardhan."

The Siege is not a book you read for literary flair. It's written with the racing energy of a paperback thriller. There's just one significant difference from that popular genre: *The Siege* is all verified fact. Levy and Scott-Clark's reportage is outstanding, especially when you keep in mind how difficult it is to convince government departments like the National Security Guard to talk.

The two writers have interviewed a vast number of people, gone through all the documents they could, listened to audio transcripts, compared accounts, contacted Lashkar operatives — it's a staggering body of research and an outstanding example of how information should be gathered, recorded and presented.

Without actually pointing fingers and maintaining an unwavering objectivity, Levy and Scott-Clark don't shy away from making it clear that some people — like the then police commissioner Hasan Gafoor — could have shown greater initiative. Equally importantly, the writers make many of the Taj's valiant hotel staff, like Amit Peshave, Faustine Martis, Hemant Oberoi, Nitin Minocha and Boris Rego, unforgettable.

Pulling down Levy and Scott-Clark's monumental effort is the lazy editing by Penguin India. It's shameful to think that an Indian publisher's copy editors didn't bother to fix details like the spelling of Jaslok Hospital and Merriweather Road. Presumably these nitty gritty seemed unimportant when there's a larger, more thrilling picture, but these little mistakes can make a reader question the writers' authority — if you don't know the spelling of the street on which the Taj is located, then should one trust you to tell its story? In this particular case, however, you should because of the larger story that Levy and Scott-Clark are telling.

The more critical issue with *The Siege* is its decision to focus upon the Taj and relegate the violence at CST, the Trident-Oberoi and Chabad House to fleeting mentions. Reading *The Siege*, you may easily be lulled into thinking that all the 'action' was at the Taj, when in fact the highest number of people were killed at CST, which is barely described in the book.

While reporting the backstory of [Ajmal Kasab](#) and his fellow terrorists, Levy and Scott-Clark do a good job of showing how interconnected terror is with law enforcement and international politics. For example, America's own security concerns and political alliances allowed David Headley to enjoy the freedom of movement that he did. The parts of the book that describe Lashkar-e-Toiba's plans show that the aim of this attack on Mumbai was to give the city a sense of being invaded from unexpected angles simultaneously.

Unfortunately, when describing the happenings in Mumbai, *The Siege* loses this 360-degree perspective and Levy and Scott-Clark obscure the integral detail of the Lashkar attack: Mumbai the city, rather than a single landmark hotel, was under siege. There's better sense of the simultaneous terror in Dan Reed's outstanding *Dispatches: Terror in Mumbai*, a Channel 4 documentary that was made in 2009. Reed's film is another stellar example of research and you've got to wonder why it's only the foreign journalists who are able to put these stories together.

At one point, a Pakistani handler tells one of the jihadis in the Taj, "The maximum media coverage is on the Taj hotel" and it shows how we in Indian media chose to tell the story of 26/11. It doesn't mean that the other sites were given less importance by the terrorists. The savagery suffered by those in Chabad House and the terror experienced in Trident-Mumbai — the two other places that were under siege like the Taj — and the bloodshed at CST is largely ignored by Levy and Scott-Clark, even though those targets had the handlers and terrorists' full attention. Today, on the five-year anniversary, we'd do well to not forget that it's only now, after the media found its heroes and vantage points, that we have chosen to glorify one over others who suffered and countered terror valiantly.

Despite this niggling flaw in the design of *The Siege*, this is a book that you should keep on your bookshelf. One of the guests who was taken hostage in the Taj was retired banker, K.R. Ramamoorthy. He suffered horribly during the attack but, as *The Siege* tells us, his lasting sadness is not that he was tortured by the terrorists. It is that when he was finally out of the hotel, there was no one from the government authorities or security personnel who was interested in hearing his story, even though he was one of the few who had spent long, traumatising hours in the terrorists' presence. Thanks to Levy and Scott-Clark, at least the stories of the Taj have been recorded faithfully. It falls upon us to ensure the others that they haven't told are not forgotten.

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