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26/11: Leopold Cafe has moved on

Rahi Gaikwad



General Manager of the Leopold Cafe Eric Anthony with bullet hole seen in background . Photo: Vivek Bendre

The Hindu

The sound of grenade blasts ripping the air and the eccentric spraying of bullets gave General Manager of Leopold Cafe Eric Anthony four sleepless nights.

Any given day, there could be a hundred curious feet stopping by Leopold Café on the Colaba Causeway in south Mumbai. In a year's time since 26/11, thousands of eager fingers must have pointed to the cracks and bullet holes on its glass panels and columns, preserved as a chilling reminder of that fateful night when two terrorists struck with their AK-47s.

Leopold lost two of its staff; one of them — Inaquat Kazi — was to get married shortly. The other, Peer Pasha, was only 18. Kazi had a morning shift but general manager Eric Anthony called him back to work to do overtime because the café was short of staff that evening. “He was going to be married in two months' time. He was killed the moment he set foot inside the restaurant. I told Pasha to take him to hospital. However, Pasha started feeling giddy on seeing blood. A while later he too was shot dead,” said Mr. Anthony.

The sound of grenade blasts ripping the air and the eccentric spraying of bullets gave Mr. Anthony four sleepless nights. He said: “The two attackers were firing randomly. They were on drugs I think, for they looked very relaxed and calm. It all fell quiet for some time. “The customers were scampering to their feet thinking they had gone.

But they came back! After loading their magazines, they started firing again. A bullet grazed the back of my head as I ducked. “I am truly merciful to God that I am alive today. I had so many close shaves. I was sitting with three of my female friends. When one more girl came in, I offered her my chair. All the four girls were injured — three of them were critical. If not for the fourth girl, I would have been dead today.”

It was the day India was playing England at Cuttack. The match came as a blessing in disguise for co-owner Farhang Jehangi and waiter Tukaram Ilake. Mr. Ilake went up to check the score when all hell broke loose. “I thought India was winning and so people were bursting firecrackers. When the noise became ghoulis, I realised this was something different. I thought of calling home to say this is my last living moment,” he said.

“Dhoni was batting,” Mr. Jehangi recalls. “I went up with my brother to watch the match. Then the attack began. People started screaming. All the plates and glasses started falling. It went on for one or two minutes, but felt like one and a half hours. I was just praying to God it would stop.” Both stayed put upstairs and Mr. Anthony ran to the Colaba market. Mr. Ilake came down when the coast was clear and found a police officer training his firearm on him. “He must have thought I was a terrorist. I raised my hands and pointed to my Leopold uniform.” The long wait was over.

Although, not for Prashant Tambe, who has not received any compensation from the government for his injury. For customers, the wait ended in a mere four days after which Leopold reopened. “I have learnt that tourists say that when they go to Mumbai they would definitely visit Leopold to show their solidarity. Customers keep coming back and convey their good wishes. They say it was good that we opened in four days and showed we were not bogged down by this kind of an attack... Three girls who were injured said they were not going to miss out on their second home. The

spirit is still the same. Life goes on.

After all you have to look to a better future,” said Mr. Jehangi. Mr. Anthony often regales his customers with his story. “They get very excited. Sometimes the images come to haunt you, but we are trying to forget.” Leopold has made an effort to step up security with guards, CCTV, metal detectors et al. However, like the old times, one can always saunter in without a check.

For the anniversary, Mr. Jehangi said “we will observe a minute's silence at 9.40 p.m. Perhaps people will light candles. There is nothing to celebrate. Our respects go to the families of the deceased who have struggled a lot. The losses from damage to furniture are nothing; it is the loss of life that is most tragic.”

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