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In The Eye Of A Storm

Are gallantry awards and media adulation a thing of the past for **Rakesh Maria**? **RANA AYYUB** takes a critical look at the high-profile Mumbai cop

YOU DON'T defend him and you don't let him defend himself!" exclaims a Mumbai crime branch officer. He's talking about the charges his superior Rakesh Maria faces. Vinita Kamte, widow of ACP Ashok Kamte states in her book *To the Last Bullet* that Maria, the JCP manning the control room on 26/11, denied knowledge of how Kamte managed to reach Cama hospital, where he was shot and killed along with Vijay Salaskar and Hemant Karkare. The book also alleges that Maria was unable to send timely reinforcements when they were requested by Karkare. (In fact, TEHELKA in its June 13 exclusive had established through the control room logs that it was Maria who



had sent the three officers to Cama hospital.)

The charges have sent shockwaves through the police force and jolted Maria, a 1981 batch IPS officer with a near-pristine record. Maria, who comes from a film background but turned away from the silver screen and towards the discipline of the police force, was so shocked by the allegations in the book that he offered his resignation, asking only that he be given an opportunity to place his side of the story on record. The Maharashtra Home Department is mulling this situation, even as it battles stinging criticism for endemic infighting in the Mumbai Police. An administrative official in the home department states, "Even if her allegations are baseless, one cannot dismiss them as she is the wife of a 26/11 martyr. It's a very touchy issue."



Photo: DEEPAK SALVI

But what of the man facing the brunt of the allegations? Rakesh Maria, who spoke to TEHELKA but refused to come on record, is indeed hurt. Maria, immortalised as the fiery police officer of books like Suketu Mehta's award-winning *Maximum City* and in Anurag Kashyap's film *Black Friday*, as the shrewd and no-nonsense police officer who played a big role in cleaning up the underworld and unearthing the 1993 Mumbai blasts conspiracy is certainly daunted by the fact that a big question mark now stands over his 28-year-old career which, he says, has been "clean and rewarding".

While not responding directly to the charges facing him, Maria does defend the police force from the flak it got after 26/11. "The criticism," says Maria, "was uncalled for and unjustified because none of our officers backed out from their jobs. It was the first time we faced an attack of this nature. We lost some of our best officers and the morale of the police force took a blow but that didn't affect any of them. Each officer present did what he was supposed to. The terrorists were cornered and restricted within the first half hour. Thanks to whom? The Mumbai Police."

Maria is also accused of charges ranging from not having gone to the site of the attacks even once in three days, to misleading then police commissioner Hasan Gafoor about the deaths of Kamte, Karkare and Salaskar. He refuses comment and maintains that his side of the story has been told to the Pradhan Committee, which probed 26/11.

Fifty-one-year-old Rakesh Maria started his career in 1981 as the Assistant Superintendent of Police in Akola. When he moved to Mumbai in 1986, his real calling came to the fore. It was his role in solving the 1993 Mumbai blasts case that won him fame as an investigator with an amazing network of informers. But as always, with fame comes its share of rivalries and controversies. While Maria was credited with cracking the 2003 Mumbai blasts case and was later made a part of an informal Anti-Terrorist Squad that was to look into the blasts, a 2005 IB report cast doubts on the veracity of the intelligence Maria had provided about the terrorists. The report suggested that Maria and his team had concocted the names of terrorists who didn't even exist. In 2005 itself, Maria's team was disbanded by then Police Commissioner RS Sharma. While a senior official questioned by the IB suggested that the IB report was true, another senior official who refused to be named said it was a major frame up to cut Maria down to size. It was also an incident that brought to the fore the ugly factionalism in the Mumbai Police, the very factionalism that stands almost completely exposed by Vinita Kamte's book or by the fact that her book, significantly, was launched by Mumbai Police Commissioner D Sivanandan.

Though he has many foes in the system and few friends, Maria diplomatically dodges the question of lobbies, giving it the euphemism "healthy competition". Whether it is a frame-up or just a case of emotions running amok will be known only when the whole truth comes into the picture. An official states, "Nobody stands by a police officer in the time of crisis. They use you and then leave you to fend for yourself." For now, Maria is carrying on with his work, stung though he is by the allegations. He still



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meets each and every visitor who comes to see him. And come they do, from all walks of life.

MARIA'S OFFICE, a sprawling room on the first floor of the massive Mumbai Police headquarters, adjoins the cells where hardened criminals are housed. This lock-up witnesses his shrewd questioning – or his wrath. His cabin is often surrounded by journalists who wait for the evening darbar, or “Maria's darbar” as it is called, where his department feeds the press stories of its gallantry which find their way into the newspapers the next day. Outside the office waits a patient queue of people his assistants try to dissuade, saying, “Saheb will not be free for another three hours.” However, wait they do. An elderly lady whose son-in-law has beaten up her daughter. A man whose cycle has been stolen.

Says a batchmate of Maria, not wanting to be named, “All this while he had been enjoying the media glorification, encouraging it and loving it, giving them stories of his gallantry. Let him also get used to this. Why is he reacting now when the media is asking him questions, raised after much research, by someone who lost her husband in the attack?”

‘EVEN IF HER ALLEGATIONS ARE BASELESS, ONE CANNOT DISMISS THEM AS SHE IS THE WIFE OF A 26/11 MARTYR,’ SAYS A HOME DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL

“In a democratic set-up, everyone has the right to ask questions and get answers.

However, once you get the answers, you should not go about trying to prove them wrong,” responds Maria with no trace of anger or vindictiveness, something filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt and his colleagues endorse. “He doesn't sugar-coat things; he calls a spade a spade and doesn't philosophise on terrorism,” says Bhatt, who first met him in 1993 when Maria was a DCP handling Sanjay Dutt's interrogation. “He told me bluntly, ‘This man is responsible for keeping weapons that were used. You have to face that.’ That's Rakesh Maria. It's people like him who are needed but are being demoralised.” It was Maria who asked Dutt to confess his role in the Mumbai blasts to his father after Sunil Dutt said his son was innocent.

While Maria also received a great deal of criticism for the arrests of several Muslims after the Ghatkopar blasts of July 2003, many, including activists, concede that Maria's ability to address the situation with an unbiased attitude also helped restore faith in the Mumbai Police. His bluntness and his straightforwardness might not have earned him many friends, but have won him the respect of juniors such as ACP (Crime) Deven Bharati, who says, “Maria is an extremely dedicated and sharp official and investigator who stands by his juniors all the time.”

Maria revealed Tiger Memon's involvement in the 1993 blasts by successfully catching and interrogating Asghar Mukadam and Badshah Khan, Tiger Memon's secretary. Later, in 2006, when under Meeran Borwankar the police had to let off many in the underworld like Iqbal Kaskar, Anil Parab and Ghulam Mustafa on grounds of insufficient evidence, it was again Maria who was brought in to use his enviable network of informers and break the back of the underworld. An official who has worked with Maria said: “He knows even the underworld small fry like the back of his hand. At times, our memory fails us but he comes up with names and cases no matter how old they may be within a minute.”

While colleagues speak of his sharpness, politicians believe Maria is being made a scapegoat. A senior minister in the state government adds, “How can you blame him? He was directed to go to the control room and he went right there and took charge. Our own administration and ministers were nowhere to be seen that night. Now, we're looking for an easy way out.”

‘HE DOESN'T SUGAR-COAT THINGS; HE CALLS A SPADE A SPADE AND DOESN'T PHILOSOPHISE ON TERRORISM,’ SAYS MAHESH BHATT

For now, Maria — an avid footballer who represents Mumbai Police in state-level matches — has written a detailed letter to the home secretary explaining his side of the story and describing the events of that night. He is eager to know what the state is doing to bring out the true story of 26/11. “What matters to me is what the people who you've seen outside waiting in queue think



of me,” says Rakesh Maria. Though his fair weather friends may have deserted him, this father of two children, one in school and the other in engineering college, is counting on his family, who, he says, have never forsaken him.

WRITER'S EMAIL

rana@tehelka.com

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