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**NATIONAL**

MUMBAI, November 21, 2009

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## 26/11: The first few hours at the Taj

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Nitin Kakade was among the first to enter Taj Mahal hotel during the terror attack. Photo: Vivek Bendre

*"I had no idea when I heard the firing that they were terrorists"*

It was when the bomb went off exploding the famous pink dome of the Taj Mahal hotel on the night of November 26 that sub inspector Nitin Kakde gave up hope. "I thought it was all over," says 35-year-old Kakde in an interview to The Hindu.

He lived to tell the tale, surviving a half-burnt face, charred hands and some shrapnel injuries. His only regret a year later is that he could not save Rahul Shinde, a State Reserve Police Force (SRPF) constable who got shot in the stomach. Kakde was part of a small police team that was the first to enter the Taj Mahal hotel after the initial reports of firing that night.

A beat officer right next to the Taj Hotel attached to the Colaba police station, Kakde was about to leave for home when he heard the sound of crackers at around 9.15 pm. "I thought it was a function at the Radio Club nearby, I heard the sound again and saw people running towards Regal cinema. I asked them what had happened

and they said some people were firing near the Taj," recalls Kakde.

What he remembers clearly is the dead silence around the entrance to the imposing hotel. There was a lone vehicle in the porch. He called his senior at the police station who told him about the firing at Leopold Café nearby. When he ran there, he met senior police officer Hemant Nagrale and two constables. They searched the Café and rescued the terrified people hiding there. Kakde and the others were on their way to the main entrance of the Taj when a taxi driver alerted them about two suspicious people sitting under a nearby tree. When they went to check, they found a live RDX bomb in a bag which had to be defused.

Then they entered the lobby of the Taj hotel only to find an unexploded hand grenade lying on its broken-glass covered floor, its pin removed. In Shamiana, the coffee shop on the ground floor, they found two injured foreigners. There were terrified people hiding in the shops, in cupboards, and many were injured. There was even a dead body in the pool, apart from a sniffer dog which was shot dead, says Kakde.

In the meanwhile the deputy commissioner of police (DCP) (zone 1) Vishwas Nangre Patil entered the hotel and it was then that they met the Taj general manager Karambir Kang, who said his wife was on the sixth floor. She had called to say that the terrorists were there trying to break into the rooms.

The SRPF platoon had also arrived by then. The lifts were shut down to prevent the gunmen escaping. The police went to the first floor where a party was in progress. Many who had not heard the firing disbelieved there was some attack and chose to stay behind. "We still managed to get 30 to 40 people out," adds Kakde. The hotel security staff led the small team of 12 policemen to the CCTV room on the second floor. It was on the CCTV that Kakde and the others had their first glimpse of the terrorists. "We saw two of them first kicking on doors, then two more."

The 12 of them split into two teams and the main idea was not to allow the gunmen to come down. "We

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fired from the second floor," says Kakde who was armed with his nine mm pistol with 10 rounds. "They had taken hostages by then and four people were kept in one room with their hands tied up," he adds.

Then came the moment of truth. A deafening explosion set off by two of the terrorists, which caused the false ceiling in the CCTV room to come crashing down. The terrorists set fire to bed sheets and flung them around, setting ablaze the inside of the hotel with its old wooden furniture and carpeting. The lights went off suddenly and the policemen were covered in a fog of smoke and darkness. Grenade explosions and gunfire lit up the darkness.

It was then that the bullets hit the two SRPF men, first Amit Khetle, and later Rahul Shinde. "When Shinde fell, we had to stop and take him to the CCTV room, but he had a serious stomach injury. A hotel staffer who was with the police got shot in the knee," explains Kakde. By then Kakde had exhausted his 10 rounds. Suddenly it dawned on them that this was no gang war but a terror strike.

"The left side of my face was burnt and my hands had their skin charred. I was in hospital for 10 to 15 days. Luckily my eyes were saved," Kakde says in relief.

The beleaguered group waited till the Marine commandos came and left the crumbling hotel only at 4.30 am.

Kakde has now been transferred to the D.B. Marg police station. It was 16 officers and men of this police station which caught Kasab on the night of the terror strike.

Keywords: 26/11, Mumbai terror attack, Taj Mahal hotel, CCTV,

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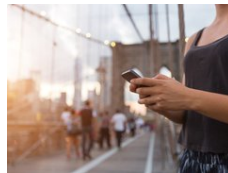
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from: *Ram*

Posted on: Nov 21, 2009 at 22:26 IST

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from: *Venkata Krishnan Aiyer*

Posted on: Nov 21, 2009 at 21:48 IST

26/11 attack was one of the worst things that could ever happen to India. India has still not been able to forget the dark images of that remorseful night and those subsequent 3 days.

from: *Deergha*

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