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TSI EXCLUSIVE

# Rise of the Privates

The new security bill will generate an army of private guards in India. They are expected to be the eyes and ears of the government and provide muscle to India's intelligence gathering network, report Anil Pandey and Vikash Kumar **WITH INPUTS FROM PATHIKRIT PAYNE AND SRAY AGARWAL | Issue Dated: March 22, 2009**

Tags : History | private | security | agencies | India | commandos | Wilson Benjamin Mandlik | Sarjerao Sadashiv Bhosle | routine | guard | duty | Oberoi Trident | terrorists | bullets | Appaso Maruti Patil | licensed | attackers | injured | Patil | National Security Guards | Naval Police | local | armed | constabulary | Mumbai | warriors | bravery | footnote | history | isolated | Taj hotels | Global Positioning System | ambulances | Amir Ajmal Qasab | pistol | terrorist | Tukaram Omble | Central Industrial Security Force | Home Ministry | National Crime Records Bureau | security | The Private Security Agencies Regulation Act | authority | benefits | government | bill | coordination | CBI Director | Joginder Singh | Home Guards | moolah | mantra | paramilitary | forces | Sophisticated | companies are | Topline | G4Securities | Vikas Verma | MD | Property Guards Security Services | Preity Zinta | Aishwariya Rai Bachchan | technological | human | resources | agency | abduction | murder | Madhya Pradesh | Naxalites | scrutiny | West | US | Canada |



26/11 remains a red letter day in the chequered history of private security agencies in India. Private commandos, Wilson Benjamin Mandlik and Sarjerao Sadashiv Bhosle, were on routine guard duty at the Oberoi Trident around 9.45 pm when terrorists began their deadly attack. According to available accounts, they were the first two who came eyeball to eyeball with the killers, but without instantly realizing their motives. Before they could do that, they were mowed down in a hail of bullets.

But the firing had alerted their third companion, Appaso Maruti Patil, (see photos) who was in the parking lot. He rushed towards the site of firing and engaged the terrorists, reportedly single handedly with a licensed firearm, but nothing close to what the attackers were carrying, for a little under an hour. His hide and seek with the butchers continued, shot for shot. The alert but injured Patil used that time to inform his control station about the enormity of the terrorist attack. Tragically, he was shot while talking on the cell phone, making one final call. The terrorists had managed to spot him.

Welcome to the world of these unsung heroes, the world of Patils, Mandliks and Bhosles. Unlike the National Security Guards (NSG), Naval Police, local armed constabulary and other brave hearts who perished that evening in Mumbai, there are not too many who have spared a thought for these warriors. Patil's bravery for instance, is unlikely find a footnote in history, considering that it has gone unreported in the media. Brave as their acts were, they were not isolated. Twelve hours before the NSG reached Trident and Taj hotels on 26/11 - and nine minutes after the first gun shots rang out in the corridors of the luxury hotel - commandos of a private security agency had reached an unmanned exit and begun a clinical rescue operation helping out guests who could be evacuated. One of the hotel staff had apparently dialed 1289, the private security guards' company's 24x7 toll-free phone, and the response was instant. Global Positioning System (GPS) and RT phones in hand, 51 state-of-the-art ambulances with sirens screeching and top-lights flashing, arrived and started the evacuation. All through the rescue, they were in direct line of terrorists' fire.



Elsewhere in Mumbai, a police constable took all the bullets in Amir Ajmal Qasab's pistol on his body, yet held on to the terrorist's hands to ensure that he was finally arrested. The heroics of Tukaram Omble and the private security agency's commando Patil among others - are now legion.

The big problem for terror-hit India is how best to guard itself in the face of huge shortfall that besets its premier security agencies. Consider the following: Intelligence Bureau, short by 6,000 staff, National Security Guards by 1,000, Border Security Force needs 45,000 more hands, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) by 5,000 and Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) requires 33,000, according to well placed sources in the Home Ministry.

Roughly, what is the extent India's internal security cover? According to a 2007 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report, the total strength of the police personnel is 14.2 lakh. Military sources put the combined armed forces strength at 13.25 lakh. As compared to these official heavies, the central association of private security industry (CAPSI) estimates that the combined figure of private security is a whopping 55 lakh!

The government, concerned about the obvious limits of state security, is serious about widening the scope of private security agencies. The Private Security Agencies Regulation Act, 2005, is a move in that direction. The Act talks of establishing a controlling authority in states that will have the power to issue or cancel licenses given to private security agencies. This controlling authority will function under a Joint Secretary level officer of state home department. The law stipulates that parameters of recruitment of guards will be on the lines of police constables. It will also be mandatory for agencies to provide standard wage and other employee related benefits. According to sources and that could well be the main reason for enlarging the scope and functions of private security - the new privates would act as the 'eyes and ears' of the government. The bill says as much: "All private security guards of private security agencies shall render assistance to the police. Further, "if violation of any law is noticed by any private security guard during the course of discharge of his duties, then the police will have to be informed, the bill says.



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However, there are lacunae. First, it is silent on what constitutes proper coordination between police and private security agencies. Second, the Act does not allow security guards to carry weapons. Faced with a heavily-armed terrorist, that should be considered a handicap. Already, the impending threat has raised the demand for arming private operators. Says former CBI Director, Joginder Singh, "The guards are supposed to protect only with a danda. At least they should be allowed to carry light weapons considering the growing threat perception."

The law stipulates training of personnel on the lines of Home Guards, which entails an expensive training regimen. Most private agencies - with moolah as the sole mantra - are unable and unwilling to invest, hence the dilapidated conditions of most such security companies. The bill should change that. Importantly, based as they would be in localities and colonies, they can serve as useful 'detectives' for our intelligence agencies. Former director general of Tihar Prison, R.P.Singh, told TSI,



"Private guards are manning all parts of cities. They have sensitive and important information. However, due to lack of coordination with the police, they are not utilised. Government can even think of taking their service for intelligence gathering. This will help to break terrorists' network." Unarguably, private security cannot become an alternative to official agencies, like the regular police or army or paramilitary forces, but can become a handy placebo. Sophisticated, armed and efficient, on duty at prime hotels, airports, industrial hubs, with quick response times that does not need bureaucratic clearances is pretty much the need of the hour.

Security companies are, naturally, worked up. A number of them - Topline and G4Securities for instance - amongst dozens of others have mushroomed in the last few years. Now with the bill, they will get official teeth.

Says Vikas Verma, MD, Property Guards Security Services, one of the seven wings of G-7 Securitas Group, which guards top film stars like Preity Zinta and Aishwariya Rai Bachchan: "Because of our superior technological and human resources, state police forces seek our help." He claims the agency has even solved cases of abduction and murder.

In addition, there is upgraded technology. In Madhya Pradesh, Naxalites would hide grenades under corpses. When the police closed in for scrutiny, the mines would explode in their faces. The police wanted to buy very expensive robots, but we suggested they use an inexpensive anchor to do the same job as efficiently. And it has worked.

The mushrooming of such private security agencies, has led to other complications, like below par services. Cities are teeming with thousands of men who are hardly trained, under paid, weak of physique, ill-mannered and whose claim to provide security in a rarely washed and stained uniform, could at best be considered laughable. To be sure, some inspiration is coming from the West. In US and Canada, even places as sensitive as airports are managed by private security agencies and the story of the role played - even overplayed - by the US private agency Blackwater is legend.

Most agree that it would take many years and a lot of investment to reach US levels - if at all. In the US, for example, private agencies use satellite imagery and process data which is supplied to the government. Though there have been examples of lapses on their parts, which has led to innocent civilians being bombed in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet, they are able to identify and advice the government on precise locations of terrorism hotspots and exact targets at many occasions.

Already, with top corporates and others seeking protection, the state of high-end security has improved. Ramesh Aiyar, Executive Director of the Topline Group, claims they have the latest equipment and trained personnel to deal with any situation. "We have the latest gadgets like vapour explosives detection, which makes it possible for us to detect not just explosives but also other chemicals." He claims his company is competent to deal with air rescue and combating biological warfare. For operators like him, the Act could not have come at a more opportune time.

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