

Sunday Herald

Sunday, December 7, 2008

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Survivor tales

Parag Rabade recounts horror stories of Mumbai survivors when they came face to face with the terrorists.



After the dust has settled down, the slogans shouted, the politics played out and the drama enacted on television news channels there are some stories that would continue to be told and scarred lives that would continue to fester.

For many survivors who escaped the terror attacks on Mumbai's landmarks — the Taj Mahal hotel, Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus and the Oberoi-Trident hotels — it was an ordeal they would never forget in their lives.

Raghu Deora (34), who works as a senior chef in the Taj, was on duty when the terrorists stormed the hotel. He was one of the hostages held by the terrorists in Chambers' Club along with a few staffers and hotel guests.

"I was constantly in touch with Raghu on my mobile... at one time it appeared that everything was over, but it was our good fortune that he came out of the jaws of death," his wife Nandita recalls at the Bombay Hospital, where her husband is recuperating.

Raghu sustained bullet wounds in his stomach and legs, but his condition is stable. Recalling the ordeal her husband went through, Nandita said while Raghu and others were being held hostage in Chambers' Club by terrorists, NSG commandos opened fire. The four terrorists fled from there. Raghu and others took the opportunity to move out of the chambers and started to go downstairs towards the exit. However, in moments the terrorists re-emerged and everyone ran in panic.

"Raghu and two others took shelter in a nearby room. They hid under the beds. The terrorists soon emerged there as well. They literally dragged the three out from under the beds. The terrorists then asked each of them in Hindi, "Tum kaun ho, kya kaam karate ho?" and then started firing at them.

"Presuming that the three were dead, the terrorists left the room. In that second two victims, who were badly hurt, moaned in pain. One of the terrorists immediately returned and silenced them permanently. Raghu, however, was lying down pretending to be dead, and the attackers did not shoot at him again.

"He remained there for hours, before the commandos entered the room and brought him out," Nandita recounted what her husband had told her. It was his presence of mind that helped Raghu survive.

Businessman Apurva Parikh was at the Kandahar restaurant at the Oberoi with his two friends Anand Bhatt and Pankaj Shah on Wednesday night last week.

The terrorists had entered the hotel and started firing around the restaurant. The hotel staff then quickly moved all the diners to the kitchen, but soon two terrorists entered the kitchen firing indiscriminately.

Parikh and his two friends were in the group of 15-20 people who were taken hostages by two terrorists and were taken to the 19th floor of the Oberoi. There they were lined up against the wall. Parikh's friends tried to talk to the terrorists, asking them to show mercy. But the brainwashed gunmen asked them to recall the Babri riots and Godhra carnage and started shooting at the group.

As they fell over each other, Parikh was under the heap of bodies, unable to breathe, and was hit by a bullet in his hip. But somehow he survived, lying in the pool of blood of other victims. He did not move, as he realised that both his friends were dead. When the terrorists went away from the room, he attempted to take a slow breath.

There were three others who had survived and the four of them communicated with each other through sign language.

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After spending a considerable time under the dead bodies, Parikh and the others moved out and went to an AC plant room on the same floor. They were there for almost 24 hours till the commandos broke in and took them to safety.

Marathi film actress Sonali Khare and her husband Vijay go to either Taj or Oberoi once a week to dine, and on that fateful Wednesday, both of them were at the Taj. Suddenly, there was sound of shooting and Sonali first thought it to be the sound of firecrackers.

"We were about 40 or so in the restaurant and when we saw the terrorists we panicked. We entered into a side room of the restaurant and locked us inside. We did not know what was happening outside, but soon we heard about the terror attack on Mumbai through our cell phones and our hearts sank...

"Later, my husband called joint commissioner of police K L Prasad and told him about our hiding location. Soon the police and Taj security guards arrived and all of us came out. As we emerged into the lobby, we saw blood and broken glass everywhere. It was horrible," recalls Sonali.

Among those who were trapped inside the Taj and Oberoi were wealthy people with connections and power. At the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST), which was targeted by two terrorists, there was no time for any phone calls.

Mohammad Toufik Sheikh, who runs a tea stall at the station, was standing in front of a medical store inside the terminus when the two terrorists entered the long distance section and began firing randomly and hurling grenades.

Sheikh ran out towards the ticket counters and alerted the commuters waiting in the queue. Sheikh entered the cabin of ticket issuing counters and locked himself inside.

One of the terrorists reached there and started kicking at the door. When that failed, he fired at the glass counter. The bullets hit the stand on which the back-up batteries were kept.

"Then he saw me, and fired three rounds. But I was unscathed. Seeing this, the terrorist gave vent to his anger by hurling a few abuses at me and left," Sheikh recounts.

Like Sheikh, 22-year-old Avantika from Delhi too saw death in the face. She happened to be in one of the restaurants at the Taj and was a witness to the young men shooting mercilessly. They shot at her a couple of times, but luckily, they missed her. "If you had seen the glare in their eyes you would know that they didn't look at us as people. To them we were only objects," says Avantika, who caught a glimpse of these violent men just outside the restaurant she was in. Avantika manages to talk calmly as she narrates.

From inside the chambers, she was still in touch with friends and family. "In fact, I spoke to people I hadn't spoken to in years together. I was calling up everyone I knew, asking for help. Everything happened so fast, there was no time to think," she feels.

Back home in Delhi, she is now keeping track of all that has happened after, through the news. "My interest in what is happening in our country has only escalated. Now, I want to know," she says. Is she scared after all this has occurred so close to her? "No, not at all," she replies, in a confident tone.

With inputs from Yamini Vijayan

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