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MUMBAI'S ENCOUNTER KILLERS

AB TAK CHHAPPAN: THE TRUE STORY

There were three accused in Chhota Rajan's aide-turned-rival OP Singh's murder. All were killed in 'encounters' in a span of 40 days. Coincidence? Ashish Khetan investigates

Pratibha Kakede works as a housemaid. She used to return home by two in the afternoon. But on November 13, 2006 she was running a temperature and her employer took her to the doctor for a check-up. At around one, Pratibha called her husband to see if he was back from his morning shift. Sunil Kakede, who was working as a driver for Rs 4,500 a month, was already home and, as was his daily routine, busy making lunch with their elder daughter, 12-year-old Pallavi. Lunch had to be ready before the two younger children, 7-year-old Bhavi and 5-year-old Chirag came back from the local municipal school. Pratibha told Sunil that she would be late and he should eat with the children. After lunch, at 2pm, Sunil got a call from a man he addressed as "bhau" (elder brother) and set out of his one room house situated over a drain behind the public toilet in Teendongri slum in Goregaon. Sunil had moved in here after he got bail in a robbery case in July 2006. He paid a monthly rent of Rs 1,500.



Watch out: Jagdish Sail

Sunil Kakede was a Chhota Rajan henchman, say the police. His widow works as a maid in six houses to feed her three children

"He had taken up the driver's job and I was cooking at two houses. Together we were earning Rs 6,000 per month," says Pratibha. When she returned home at around four, Sunil was not around. She tried calling him but his phone was switched off. Around 6.30pm Sunil's younger brother, who lives along with his mother and two sisters in a chawli opposite Sunil's, came over and told Pratibha that according to a TV news flash, the police had killed Sunil in an encounter.

"I didn't believe him and immediately called up Inspector Desai, a Crime Branch inspector, who had told us that nothing will happen as Sunil had reformed. Desai said he didn't know anything but would check and get back," says Pratibha. Thirty minutes later, Desai called up Sunil's brother and confirmed the news. The Kandivli Crime Branch Unit XI, one of the 12 elite units of the Mumbai police, claimed that Sunil was planning a major robbery. The police got a whiff of the plan and intercepted him at Kandivli in the evening. The inspectors importuned him to surrender. Instead, according to them, Sunil opened fire. They retaliated. Sunil was killed. Luckily for the policemen, they escaped without any injuries.



Collateral damage: The widow and children of Sunil Kakede

Over the last few months, Mumbai has witnessed a surge in encounter killings. And those wielding the gun are the same set of policemen who earned notoriety for gunning down "gangsters". The victims of the long arm of the law this time around consisted of reformed criminals or those with insignificant criminal records. Circumstances suggest that these killings are nothing less than cold-blooded murders carried out to further personal agendas of Mumbai police's Dirty Harrys. Among the encounter specialists active again are many veterans like Jagdeesh Sail. Sail who was lying low after two controversial encounters in 2005 is back with a vengeance – he shot dead two "gangsters" this month in the span of just two weeks.

'Ramnarayan had left Chhota Rajan long back. He was only a real-estate agent for last 8 years. The police knew this. Why then the need to kill him?'

The "encounters" have mostly been in response to the murder of Amjad Khan, a former aide of Chhota Rajan who was killed outside a sessions court in Mumbai's Fort area on October 14 last year. Khan had severed ties with Rajan and joined the Chhota Shakeel gang. He was also close to certain policemen perceived as anti-Rajan and close to Shakeel. Since Khan's murder, allegedly at the behest of Chhota Rajan, the two factions of the Mumbai police aligned with rival gangs have been busy settling personal scores. The anti-Rajan faction of the Mumbai police is going all out to kill anybody and everybody who was ever even remotely associated with Rajan in the past. In an act of retribution, the pro-Rajan faction of the police is also striking back.

The police claims that Sunil was a Chhota Rajan henchman who was about to kill a businessman until they foiled his plans. Pratibha claims that Sunil was in constant touch with the police and their informers. The man Sunil referred to as Bhau was a police informer who would regularly take him to cops, says Pratibha. He set out from his home for the last time after "Bhau" had called him up. After his death, Pratibha found a diary of Sunil's in which he used note down his daily activities. The diary mentions his daily routine as a driver. Pratibha says that between the two of them they made just enough money to eke out a living. "He has left nothing. No bank balance, no jewellery. When he was alive I was working at two houses, now I work at six places so that I can feed my children," she says.

A. Dharmadhikari, head of Unit xi, doesn't agree. "Sunil was involved in many robberies in the city and was planning to carry out more," he says. Which raises the question as to why the police failed to recover any looted property from his house.

Ten days before Sunil was killed, Mumbai police killed Sarfya Gagan Singh Nepali in an encounter. And one month after Sunil's killing, one Suresh Gandappa Pujari was killed in a police encounter. Curiously, all three — Sunil,

Salaskar says Khan was Chhota Shakeel's hitman. Then why was no case ever filed against Khan?

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The Making of a Paper
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Nepali and Pujari — were accused in the murder of OP Singh, a former Chhota Rajan associate who was killed in Nasik jail in 2002. Rajan suspected that Singh had joined hands with Chhota Shakeel. OP Singh was trying to build a parallel gang and was involved in the attack on Rajan's life in Bangkok. Incidentally, Amjad Khan was also very close to OP Singh and it was only after Singh's murder that he broke off with Rajan and joined the Shakeel camp.

All three were out on bail and were awaiting their trial in the OP Singh murder case. It was a clear message to Chhota Rajan — if you will kill one of our men, we will kill three.



Sixty-One and counting: Vijay Salaskar



'gangster's' nemesis: Pradeep Suryavanshi

The anti-Chhota Rajan faction of the Mumbai police is killing anybody who was even remotely associated with him

His family spent the entire night waiting for him to return. In the morning they got the news that police inspector Vijay Salaskar had shot Khan dead. An encounter specialist, Salaskar is now the head of the anti-robbery squad of the Mumbai police. It was his sixty-first "scalp". Salaskar said that Khan was wanted in over 20 cases. Fact is, Khan had been living in Shastrinagar slum in full public view. He regularly attended the court in connection with the cases against him. Salaskar said that Khan was a key member of the Chhota Shakeel gang and used to carry out contract killings. Fact is, there was no case of murder or attempted murder against Khan.

Khan had lived all his life in a 10 feet by 20 feet room along with his family, which included his eldest brother's wife and son; his two sisters, their husbands and children; and three brothers who were unmarried. Khan's father, a taxi driver, had died ten years ago and his mother died three years ago. The only object of "luxury" in his house is a 12" Videocon TV perched atop an old wooden table. According to Salaskar, Khan, along with two or three accomplices, was waiting to shoot a builder on the Western-Express Highway in the wee hours of the morning. Fact is, the Western-Express Highway wears a desolate look at those hours and would be an unlikely place for a builder to be shot at. Fact is, that Khan was picked up by the police from outside a mosque with dozens of residents as witnesses. But a few like Shaheen (name changed), a neighbour who wanted to record a statement against the police, were threatened into silence. "The police said they would book me as Chhota Shakeel's moll if I did anything against them," said Shaheen. Khan's sister Nagma says that they do not have the money to go to court. "Nobody is helping us. My brothers and husband are very scared. What can we do? The police are the kings. Tomorrow they can kill us," she says. Salaskar denies any wrongdoing. "Khan was wanted in cases of robbery and we were hot on his trail," he says.

Shaheen was threatened into silence. 'The police said they would book me as Chhota Shakeel's moll,' she says

Ramnarayan Gupta was picked up with his friend from outside a mobile phone shop in Navi Mumbai on November 11, 2006. The shop owner informed Gupta's brother who is a lawyer. "After being informed that some men had abducted my brother in a Toyota Qualis, I sent telegrams to the police commissioners of Mumbai, Thane and Navi Mumbai. All the telegrams were sent round 4pm and were delivered around 6pm to the three commissioners," says Ramnarayan's brother RV Gupta. At 8.30pm Gupta was killed in a police encounter at Versova in Andheri.

According to the police, they had posted two teams of policemen and both spotted Gupta outside Nana-Nani park in Versova. When they asked him to surrender, Gupta fired twice, once on each team. While no policeman was injured, the five rounds of fire opened by the police were bang on target — one bullet hit Gupta right on the centre of the forehead, one just below the right ear, one on the right chest and one each on the two nipples. In what was clearly a brilliant feat of marksmanship, the police say they fired from a distance of 50 to 60 feet.

Gupta was not alone when he was picked up. The police also taken with them one Anil Bheda. Gupta's partner in his real estate business, who was with him when the police intercepted him. While Gupta was killed the same evening, Bheda was held captive for over a month and a half. Bheda told tehelka that he was first put up at Majestic hotel in Kolhapur, 320 km south of Mumbai. One week later, he was shifted to the Mid-Town Hotel at Andheri in Mumbai. All along Bheda was repeatedly told by policemen that if he ever spoke to anyone he too would be eliminated. Bheda was let off on the condition that he immediately moves out of Mumbai with his family. "The Navi Mumbai police also forced me to sign on a statement saying that I was with Gupta only till 12 in the afternoon and after that Gupta left saying he was going to Govandi," Bheda said.

The police first said that Ramnarayan had more than 20 cases against him. However, in reply to his brother's writ petition before the High Court, Mumbai Police Commissioner AN Roy said that the number of cases was ten, the last registered in 1998. Out of ten, three were shown as cases of murder but the police had never arrested him in connection with them. "Ramnarayan was earlier associated with the Rajan gang. But he had left the gang a long time back and for the last 8 years he working as a real estate agent. Everybody including the police knew this. Where was the need to kill him after so many years when he had reformed and was leading a normal life," asks RV Gupta.

Both Ramnarayan and Sarfya Nepali were killed by the veteran encounter specialist Pradeep Suryavanshi, who is now posted at the DN Nagar police station. Suryavanshi has killed over a dozen "gangsters" in the last three years. He killed most of them as a part of a special squad set up by the former additional commissioner of police, (west region) Parambeer Singh. Suryavanshi says both were notorious gangsters and the police fired at them in self-defence.

Which is no consolation for the hapless families of the killed. According to them, Sunil Kakede, Shahnawaz Akbar Khan and Ramnarayan Gupta were a bloody game between policemen and mafia dons ensconced

safely in their havens outside India.

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