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Mumbai's Longest Night, With an Abyss of Terror

By [SOMINI SENGUPTA](#) and [JEREMY KAHN](#)
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MUMBAI, India — For Amit and Varsha Thadani, Wednesday night in the Crystal Ballroom of the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower Hotel was supposed to be a night they would treasure forever: the lavish start of a life together, with a wedding reception for over 200 family and friends.

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It may be an anniversary they will dread forever.

About 9:45 p.m., as they had just finished dressing for their party in a second-floor room in the Heritage

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wing of the hotel, they heard the first crackle of gunfire, followed by commotion outside their room and instructions from the hotel front desk to stay put.

They did stay put, for more than seven hours, much of it huddling on the floor of their bathroom, trying to keep themselves calm. Their phones rang constantly, with updates and questions. At one point, Mrs. Thadani confessed, she stopped answering. She did not want to talk to anyone. There was more gunfire, along with two loud

explosions, one of which flung open their door and windows. Next door, they heard gunmen shoot a female guest and then her screams.

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“We could sense she was being dragged around,” Mrs. Thadani recalled.

In the Crystal Ballroom, friends had begun trickling in. They, too, were startled by gunfire. Could it be firecrackers? one wondered. A window shattered, sending everyone scampering under tables, and then eventually, led by hotel staff members, into a private, less accessible set of rooms. Ballroom by ballroom, restaurant by restaurant, guests were

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ushered into what was thought to be a safer cavity of the hotel, a private club called The Chambers.

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At the Golden Dragon restaurant on the ground floor, a woman could see through the frosted glass the gunmen parade through the lobby of the hotel and open fire, any which way. She had come to celebrate her husband's birthday, along with both sets of parents.

They, too, were led through kitchens and staff stairwells into safer quarters, where they huddled until nearly 4 a.m. She and her parents slipped out through the back staff exit, but with so many cellphones trilling, they drew the attention of the gunmen inside the hotel.

They began firing at those trying to flee. Her husband and his parents got left behind. Eight hours later, in the shadow of the hotel, she stood waiting for them to come out. Her husband did not answer his cellphone. She was still dressed in her black dinner blouse.

The chaos at the Taj was just one part of the abyss of terror that swallowed the city.

At Leopold Cafe, a restaurant popular with foreigners, a Belgian tourist, here to indulge his love of Bollywood, described the sudden awareness of deathly peril and the desperate actions of the staff members to protect their foreigner customers.

The tourist, Ronny Quireyns, 44, was seated in the air-conditioned upstairs with friends — film extras just coming from a shoot — on Wednesday night. A little before 10 p.m., they heard a loud blast outside; they immediately thought of a bomb, but the noise seemed too faint. But then they heard a series of sharp bangs from downstairs, he said. "A member of the staff rushed upstairs and said there were people shooting downstairs," Mr. Quireyns said.

The waiters pulled the cover off an air-conditioning vent and guided him and about 15 other foreigners to climb inside, he said. After about 10 minutes, Mr. Quireyns said, he crawled out and peered down the stairway to the floor below. He saw people writhing on the ground.



Finally, the waiters gave an all-clear, he said, and the foreigners fled the restaurant, where blood now covered the ground floor. Police officers took them to a nearby station to spend the night.

“It was really frightening,” Mr. Quireyns said. “It seems so surreal. You never think something like this will happen to you.”

Gary Samore, director of studies at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) in New York, was staying at the Taj with his wife and daughter, squeezing in a family holiday in Mumbai alongside a lecture that he delivered earlier on Wednesday evening on the nuclear challenge facing the next president of the United States. They, too, stayed in their room and tried to stay calm.

The television was not working. He had no local phone. Friends kept him apprised of developments by sending e-mail messages to his BlackBerry. At 3:30 a.m., Mr. Samore recalled, very heavy gunfire began. The American Consulate called to say the hotel was on fire. The family collected their passports, made a set of wet towels to help them get through a smoky corridor and found their way to a service stairwell and then a second-floor terrace, from where they could summon Indian soldiers.

“My BlackBerry,” he said, “may have saved our lives.”

In the kitchen of the Chambers, Raghu Deora, the chef, hid under a table. Four gunmen came before dawn and found him. What do you do? they asked in Hindi, and then they ordered him to stand up and turn around. They shot him from behind, his wife, Nandita, said Thursday afternoon. A bullet entered through one side and came out of the other. There were four gunmen, he told her while recovering in Bombay Hospital, all in their mid-20s, well dressed.

Close to dawn, Mr. and Mrs. Thadani, the bride and groom, crept out of the window of their room, and with the help of firefighters, climbed down a ladder and touched ground.

On Thursday afternoon, they counted their blessings and ate a homecooked meal.

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