

TERRORISM

Clueless in Chennai

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A view of platform number nine after the twin explosions ripped through the Kaziranga Express. Photo: S.R. Raghun

The police are still in the dark about the purpose of or the persons and organisations behind the twin bomb blasts that rocked Chennai Central railway station on May 1.

IT was a terror-filled May Day this year in Chennai. On that day, the city woke up to the news of two blasts in a train at the Central railway station. The explosions took place in the S-4 and S-5 compartments of the Bangalore-Guwahati Kaziranga Express around 7-15 a.m. and claimed the life of Parchuri Swathi (24), a software engineer with Tata Consultancy Services in Bangalore, and injured 14 others.

At Guntur in Andhra Pradesh, about 470 km from Chennai, Swathi's parents, Parchuri Ramakrishna and Kamakshi, were eagerly awaiting her arrival at their home on the afternoon of May 1. Swathi was to get married in a few months to her classmate Nagaraju, and she was coming home to discuss her wedding plans with her parents. She and Nagaraju had studied together at the Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University (JNTU), Hyderabad. She had completed B.Tech in Electronics and Electrical Engineering and M.Tech from JNTU. Swathi's father had planned to go to the railway station at

Vijayawada, about 35 km from Guntur, to bring her home because the Kaziranga Express does not stop at Guntur. Instead, Parchuri Ramakrishna and Kamakshi had to come to Chennai to receive Swathi's body.

Satyanarayana, Swathi's grandfather, called her "a precious child who excelled in studies". Her grandmother Katragadda Rajyalakshmi said, "Swathi told us that she had booked a ticket by Tatkal since normal reservations were not available. This disaster has taken her away from us."

The train had left Bangalore City station an hour and a half late because of a fault in its braking system. It was to leave at 11-30 p.m. on April 30, but left only at 1-05 a.m. on May 1. It was scheduled to reach Chennai Central at 5-40 a.m. and leave for Guwahati at 6-20 a.m. Instead, it reached Chennai Central at 7-05 a.m. on platform number nine. The passengers, who had gone to sleep late in the night because of the delayed departure, were just getting up. Those who had already woken up were getting down from their compartments to drink tea. Swathi had been travelling with her colleague Rajitha, also from Guntur. As Swathi got up from her seat and started walking towards the exit around 7-15 a.m., there was a blast under seat number 70. Shrapnel rained on her chest and she collapsed and died. Almost simultaneously, there was another blast under seat number 30 in coach S-5. The blasts were powerful enough to punch big holes in the floors of the coaches and mangle the seats/berths under which the explosives had been kept. Black smoke filled the air.

The blasts were caused by ammonium nitrate, kept in metal pipes and packed with small ball bearings, screws and nails. There were timer devices (clocks) too. Although they were low intensity explosions, the presence of shrapnel indicated that they were meant to maim and kill.

As blood-splattered passengers staggered out of the coaches, there was chaos. Some of them collapsed on the platform. A. Hamid Basha, a porter, and his colleagues, unmindful of the danger to themselves from the possibility of more blasts in the train, rushed towards S-4 and S-5 compartments and helped the passengers to come out. They seated the passengers in luggage trolleys and wheeled them towards the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, situated a few hundred metres from the station.

"The blasts were powerful. The passengers were in a terrible shock," said Hamid Basha. Station Manager S. Govindasamy and Deputy Station Manager K.S. Balasubramanian acted fast. Ambulances raced to the station. "Within 20 minutes, we had moved the injured passengers to the hospital," said Balasubramanian.

There were despicable acts too. When the uninjured passengers returned to the compartments, they found that their suitcases had disappeared.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa transferred the case to the Crime Branch-Criminal Investigation Department (CB-CID), a special wing of the State police. Teams from the CB-CID fanned out to Telangana, Seemadhra, Karnataka, Bihar and Assam looking for leads.

Although no organisation has claimed responsibility for the explosions, a high-ranking police officer said there was "a similarity in the construction of the [explosive] devices" between those used in the seven blasts which occurred on October 28, 2013, at the

venue of Narendra Modi's rally in Patna and the ones used in the two explosions at the Chennai Central station.

Modi was to address election meetings at Guntur, Madanapalle, Chittoor and Nellore on May 1. If the Bangalore-Guwahati train had not reached Chennai 90 minutes late, the explosions would have taken place in the train near Tada in Seemandhra, about 70 km from Chennai, the top police officer said (Nellore is about 100 km from Tada). Asked whether the explosions were meant to convey a message to Modi, the officer said, "We cannot say for sure...."

CCTV footage

On May 2, the CB-CID released footage from a closed circuit television (CCTV) which showed a man sprinting on the platform soon after the Kaziranga Express had pulled in and minutes before the two explosions occurred. Mahesh Kumar Agarwal, Inspector General of Police, CB-CID, described the person's movements as "unusual" and said they "required verification".

The police also looked into footage which showed a man covering his face at the Bangalore railway station. However, the CB-CID officers found that both the leads were cold ones. The man who was seen running on platform nine at the Chennai Central station was hurrying to catch a flight to Colombo from the Chennai airport as the train had arrived late. The man in Bangalore was just using an iPad or a notebook to shade his face, the police said.

As on May 7, a high-ranking police officer said there was "no clue" and "no lead" about the organisation behind the blasts. "We do not know whether it is a Muslim or a Hindu agency which is behind them. But there is some similarity between the Patna and Chennai Central explosions in the construction of the devices," he added. The police had not made any arrests until May 6. (The Patna police had blamed the Indian Mujahideen for the blasts in the venue where Modi was to address a rally.)

On April 29 in Chennai, Tamil Nadu's "Q" Branch police arrested Zakir Hussain, a Sri Lankan national, who was allegedly an agent of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Colombo. Zakir Hussain, who travelled often between India and Sri Lanka, had allegedly taken photographs of the naval bases at Kochi and Visakhapatnam, the Israeli consulate in Bangalore and the U.S. consulate in Chennai.

Slanging match

Zakir Hussain's arrest and the blasts at the Chennai Central station led to a slanging match between former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa. "If, after the arrest of Zakir Hussain, a full-fledged investigation had taken place into the extremists' activities, the explosions at the Central railway station could have been averted. But Chief Minister Jayalalithaa, who holds the Home portfolio, had gone once again to Kodanad," said Karunanidhi sarcastically.

He added, "The newspapers are full of reports about a severe drought and scarcity of drinking water in Tamil Nadu. It is said that the power cut, which had been absent before the elections, will become acute in the coming days. As for the law and order

situation, bandits stop the train and rob women passengers of their jewellery. No day passes by without a murder taking place.... *Theekathir* newspaper [run by the Communist Party of India–Marxist] has published a picture of farmers setting fire to their crops because there is no water to irrigate them.... Is there a government in Tamil Nadu to worry about all this?" Karunanidhi asked.

Jayalalithaa dismissed Karunanidhi as an "armchair critic" and alleged that he had failed to prevent the serial bomb blasts in Coimbatore in February 1998 and the explosions in trains in the State in December 1997 when he was the Chief Minister. Had the police got any information from Zakir Hussain about any plan to attack the Chennai Central station, the police would have acted on it. "Karunanidhi, who failed to put down terrorism when he was in power, has no moral right to express his opinion about the blasts in the train," Jayalalithaa said.

Karunanidhi hit back, saying that when the serial bomb blasts took place in Coimbatore on February 14, 1998, he not only spoke to the then Prime Minister I.K. Gujral on the same day, but went to Coimbatore the next day to comfort the injured persons in the hospital. "Should not the Chief Minister come to Chennai [from her bungalow in Kodanad] and meet the injured and console them?" the DMK president asked.

DMK treasurer M.K. Stalin also faulted Jayalalithaa for not visiting the injured in the hospital. It was "worrying", he said, that the Tamil Nadu government had taken no preventive steps despite warnings from the intelligence agencies that bomb blasts would rock Tamil Nadu.

The police ruled out any connection between Zakir Hussain and the Chennai Central station explosions.

On May 1, policemen from Rajasthan's Anti-Terrorism Squad and their counterparts in Tamil Nadu arrested Ashraf Ali (39), a militant belonging to the Indian Mujahideen from a mosque at Porto Novo (Parangipettai in Tamil) in Cuddalore district. They alleged that he was running an Indian Mujahideen module in Rajasthan, which was planning to execute explosions across Rajasthan. Ashraf Ali was also wanted in connection with a case of storing explosives in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, they said.

On May 3, J. Mohan Ram, whom the police described as a "rowdy" and history-sheeter, was injured when a bomb he was fabricating in a house in Chidambaram exploded. The bomb was powerful enough to damage the walls, windows and furniture in the house. The incident took place when he was making three bombs with three associates. Mohan Ram was taken to a private hospital from where he managed to escape.