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A TIME FOR HEROES

Whether it was the recent high court blast in Delhi or the tsunami in Tamil Nadu, there are always those among us who quietly go out and risk lives in the aid of others. There are bravehearts, like the man in Jaipur whom people call The Habitual Saviour, who find it within themselves to turn from ordinary to super human at the spur of a crisis. Sunday Times profiles some men of courage



M PARAMESWARAN Nagapattinam (Tamil Nadu) Tsunami, 2004 'I lost my three children, but God had plans for me' His 40th birthday celebrations turned tragic. M Parameswaran was having a bash with his friends and relatives at the beach in his native village in Nagapattinam when the tsunami waves struck. His three children and his seven relatives were soon washed away. Parameswaran escaped the giant waves by holding on to a branch of a tree. "I was holding the hands of my son when the waves struck. It came in such force that I lost hold of my son within seconds. I could not realize what was happening and I managed to hold on to a branch. I lost my children and in-laws," says Parameswaran. His wife P Choodamani was at home, some 600 metres from the shore, and was about join him at the beach when the water swallowed their children. The couple launched a desperate hunt for their children and relatives, but they only found their bodies. Even as their world turned upside down in a matter of hours, the couple didn't lose heart and decided to help the tsunami victims, particularly children orphaned by the catastrophe. "When we were looking for our kids, we came across several children who lost one or both their parents. We decided to help them by providing food and shelter. I think it is God's will to take away my children so that I could be caretaker for several others," he says. Soon, the couple converted their house into an orphanage and four children joined them within four days of the tragedy. He then started visiting neighbouring villages to invite orphans to join his shelter home, assuring them free education and accommodation. Now his home accommodates 27 children, including seven girls. "One of our boys has joined a marine engineering course in a private college in Thanjavur," he says with pride. – **Bosco Dominique**



ABHISHEK PANDIT Jaipur (Rajasthan) Serial blasts, 13/5/08 'He is a habitual rescuer' On June 11 this year, when a house-cum-chemical factory caught fire in the walled city, Abhishek Pandit arrived on the scene within minutes and rescued three women trapped inside the compound. But not many were surprised. Pandit is a habitual rescuer and people call him whenever there is an accident in the city. On May, 13, 2008, when the city was hit by bombs that left 69 people dead and hundreds injured, Pandit got down to work as soon as he heard the news on television. "I went to the hospital and on seeing the emergency unit full of bodies lying in a pool of blood I stayed there for two days. The hospital staff needed support," says Pandit simply. In Jaipur, everyone vouches for his bravery. "He is a braveheart and is always sought out by the fire department and various police stations whenever there is a problem. I have recommended him for a bravery award," says commissioner of police, Jaipur, BL Soni. Chief fire officer Ishwar Lal Jat, too, endorses Pandit's heroism. "People like him are needed in our society. He always does a great job." During one of his recent rescue missions, Pandit burnt his hands and legs. But he goes on undaunted, unafraid. Such has been his reputation that youngsters already see him as a legend and inspiration. Many, in fact, accompany him whenever there is a trouble in the city and there is need for people to be extricated out of misery. – **Ashish Mehta**



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VIJAY K SONDHİ Delhi High Court blast, 7/9/11 'They were like my family' At 10am on September 7 this year, when a briefcase bomb exploded at gate number 5 of Delhi High Court, Vijay K Sondhi, a member of the Delhi Bar Council, was not anywhere close to the premises. He was driving. But within seconds of a concerned relative calling him to enquire about his whereabouts, Sondhi turned his car towards the court building. The scene at the blast site was terrible: limbs, blood-soaked clothes and people writhing in pain. For someone not comfortable with the sight of blood, Sondhi didn't think for a moment before jumping off his car, picking a badly injured man, putting him in his car and driving straight to a hospital. Soon, he was back at Gate No 5. By 11am, Sondhi, his fellow lawyers and some other volunteers – all soaked in blood by now – had managed to send all the injured to hospital in their personal cars or autorickshaws. They then went to the government hospitals to donate blood for the victims. Before leaving the place, Sondhi and his colleagues also ensured that the attack site was properly cordoned off so that important evidence was not lost. This spontaneous and voluntary effort by Sondhi and his colleagues saved many lives – people they didn't know, people who were complete strangers. But the lawyer doesn't like being called a hero. "I have worked at the high court for more than 20 years. It is an extended home for me. So I felt as if the victims were my own family, and was compelled to help them. I wasn't alone, many other senior advocates helped too," he says. – **Shalini Singh**



RAJAN KAMBLE Mumbai Hotel Taj attack, 26/11/08 **'My papa is brave, I am proud of him'** Two plaques that greet visitors at the entrance of a nondescript home in suburban Gorai reveal a heartwarming tale of heroism. One "lauds the bravery" of Rajan Kamble, while the other recognizes his 'life-saving' act. Kamble was one among the many uniformed staffers at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Colaba on November 26, 2008, when terrorists stormed the building. On night duty as a maintenance staffer, Kamble took many guests to safety before he fell to bullets which he took to save the lives of a doctor-couple. The doctors bandaged Kamble's bleeding wound while they were cooped in the hotel for more than six hours. Later, Kamble was rushed to the state-run JJ Hospital, where he succumbed to his injuries after a few days. Kamble's wife Shruti, 39, is yet to come to terms with his death but is proud of her late husband's selflessness. "When I called him that day to ask him to be careful, he told me that his work was his first wife and he would do whatever was needed," she says, recalling how she had made his favourite food that day and waited for a call from him which never came. But Kamble's sacrifice came as no surprise to Shruti who can recall many acts of kindness in their 16 years of togetherness. "Recently a woman came home looking for Rajan. On enquiring, I learnt that Rajan had rushed her son who had a bike accident to a hospital; he had been lying unattended on the road only because he looked like a beggar. Rajan had left his address too," she says, adding that Kamble must have helped so many others she didn't know of. Life is tough now for Shruti as she has been forced to bring up her two boys, Rohan, 13, and Atharva, 4, all by herself after her in-laws abandoned them. "I haven't slept peacefully for three years. There is a constant sense of unease about my children's future," she says. But Kamble is a hero for his elder son who has already decided to fulfill his father's dream by joining the armed forces. "He goes around proudly saying my papa is brave," says Shruti. – **Madhavi Rajadhyaksha**



ANKIT PATEL Ahmedabad (Gujarat) Serial blasts, 26/7/08 **'Hiding with fear only helps terrorists'** On July 26, 2008, the Gujarat capital was rocked by a series of blasts. It seemed the whole city was on fire. Ankit Patel, 26, lost two of his best friends in the attack and was himself saved by a hair's breadth as he went about helping victims at a hospital. "Bodies from across the city were pouring in at the trauma ward of the Civil Hospital. Shocked at seeing badly mutilated bodies and badly injured people, I rushed out and bought two dozen-odd shrouds to cover the dead. I had just climbed up the steps of the ward when a powerful blast hit the entrance. My two friends Bhikha Patel and Jaikishan Patel, died on the spot," says Patel, recalling the horror. Within moments of the explosion, his motorbike went up in flames. Though rattled by the violence and death of his pals, Patel didn't run away. "I knew that I would be accepting defeat if I went home. I had to be there and help the injured. I had to tell the terrorists that even if they attack hospitals, they cannot be victorious over the human spirit," says Patel, a finance sector employee. He did not go home at all as he worked with the victims for three consecutive days. He went home only after life returned to normal. The serial bombing was the worst terror attack on the city, but it was not the first time Patel came out for people in distress. He and a group of friends routinely help those in need. In times of calamities, he often takes the day off, sometimes more, to contribute in whatever way he can. "Since the Civil Hospital is in our area, we are aware of the various departments and are on first name terms with the staff. This helps in times of crisis, be it an earthquake, riot or terror strike," says Patel, the only son of his parents. "It is a man's duty to help another man in need. My mother says that a good deed is like a prayer offered to the Lord." – **Radha Sharma**



before he fell to bullets which he took the lives of a doctor-couple. The man's bandaged Kamble's bleeding head while they were cooped in the bus for more than six hours. Later, Kamble was rushed to the state-run JJ Hospital, where he succumbed to his injuries after a few days. Kamble's wife Shrutti, 39, is yet to come to terms with his death but is proud of her late husband's selflessness.

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-Madhavi Rajadhyaksha

Now family relatives gather in a very rare occasion annually of any first one to risk if it

Sanjay Ojha

DINESH BARNWAL Ranchi (Jharkhand) Bus accident, 12/8/11 'He saved 15 from sure death' As a live wire fell on a tourist bus and the passengers trapped inside began to scream for help even as those on the ground ran for cover, a man in his late 30s rushed forward to help, uncaring of the danger. After all, 15 lives, including that of his teenage son, were at risk. On August 12 this year, Dinesh Prasad Barnwal and his family were returning from Koderma, his native place, to Ranchi when the bus in which they were travelling touched a high voltage (11,000 volt) transmission line and caught fire near Ichak Mor in Hazaribagh district. "The bridge on Sivane River had developed cracks so the bus had to use the temporary diversion. The moment the bus left the main road it came in contact with a high voltage electric line. My father realised the danger and immediately jumped out of the bus. He realized that I was still in the bus and returned. By that time the bus had caught fire. He picked me in his arms and slowly carried me out. He once again entered the bus which had caught fire and one after another helped 15 other passengers to move out safely," recalls Barnwal's son Vishal Kumar, who had sustained severe burn injuries on his left leg and is still under going treatment at his mother's native place in Daltongunj. Though he managed to save many lives, Barnwal got trapped in the blaze and died on the spot. Now he lives in the memory of his family members, neighbours and relatives. Renu Devi, Barnwal's neighbour in Ranchi, remembers him as a very helpful man. "In the last one decade I don't remember a single occasion when he refused to help anyone. He was not financially sound but still was there for everyone. In case of any unfortunate incident in the colony he was the first one to extend help. He never hesitated in taking risk if it helped someone," says Renu. - Sanjay Ojha



K J THOMAL Kochi (Kerala) Train mishap on Peruman bridge, 1988 'I wish I could help more people' On July 8, 1988, the Kanyakumari-bound Island Express derailed on the Peruman bridge and fell into the Ashtamudi Lake. Ten bogies of the train were partially or completely drowned. K J Thomas was in one of the bogies. "Our coach fell into the lake closer to the bank, but it fell in such a way that the passage inside the coach was on the top side," says Thomas, recalling the day. He tried to break the window panes, but was unsuccessful. Thomas panicked as he didn't know what to do. As he managed to get out into the lake he saw several struggling hands crying for help. Instead of worrying about his own safety, Thomas decided to help others. "I caught hold of one boy who was in my coach and swam to the door," he recalls. Mustering some courage, he swam back into the coach once again. "I went inside and caught hold of the boy's brother and their mother and rushed back but that was all that I could do. I was exhausted by then," he says, with a deep sigh. Both the boys whom he saved were almost the age of his only son, says Thomas, who is now enjoying his retired life at Koonanmav near Kochi with his wife and son. - K P Sai Kiran



SANT LABH SINGH Ropar (Punjab) Naina Devi stampede, 4/8/08 Winning hearts with selfless hard work More than 140 people were killed and hundreds injured in a stampede at the Naina Devi temple in Anandpur Sahib on August 4, 2008. With the families of the victims arriving at the site to identify the bodies, it was chaos all around. There was not enough food, water and shelter for the people who were stuck at the site. The arrival of the victims' families made the situation worse. That's when Sant Labh Singh, head of a local 'kar sewa' sect and his volunteers stepped in. Working day and night without a break, they not only helped transporting families and bodies of their relatives across the state, the volunteers also donated blood for the injured. Labh Singh and his men provided food and water to the thousands of tragedy-struck people through special 'langars' and took care of their accommodation as well. Due to his selfless service, Labh Singh, who is involved in many social activities, has carved out a special place for himself in the hearts of locals and people from other places in

the country. For his socila work, Labh Singh has many awards and honours, but winning people's hearts is most important to him. – **Gourav Sally**



BHAGIRAM BARMAN Guwahati (Assam) Mob violence in city, 27/11/07 'I took a risk to save a tribal girl' On November 27, 2007, a rally of Adivasis stormed Guwahati. They were protesting against the delay in granting of Scheduled Tribe status to them. As some of the protesters turned violent, there was a reaction from local people. Bhagiram Barman, 40, an Assamese tea retailer at Beltola, too bore the brunt of angry tribals. But then he saw a naked Adivasi girl running on the road and crying for help. She had been stripped by three local youths. "I was shocked to see a girl without a piece of cloth on her running down the street," recalls Barman. "I ran towards her, took off my shirt and tied it around her waist. I found some duppatas to cover her bare body," says Barman, who took a big risk by protecting an Adivasi girl when tempers in the city were running high. "It's a big blot on the society," says Barman, who is absolutely convinced that he did the right thing. – **Prabin Kalita**