

In Hot Blood

A Note on the Author

Bachi Karkaria is a veteran journalist and columnist with the *Times of India*. She also curates the Times of India Litfest.

In Hot Blood

The Nanavati Story That Shook India

Bachi Karkaria

 juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
KS House, 118 Shahpur Jat, New Delhi 110049, India

First published in hardback by Juggernaut Books 2017
Published in paperback 2019

Copyright © Bachi Karkaria 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any means
without the written permission of the publisher.

For sale in the Indian Subcontinent only

ISBN 9789353450540

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, New Delhi

Printed at Manipal Technologies Ltd

To the lovers who didn't get shot



Contents

Prologue: The Long Shadow of an Urban Legend	1
1. Once Upon a Monday	4
2. A Warship Gets Torpedoed	6
3. Three Shots	10
4. Landing Up at Lobo's	12
5. Clash over Custody	16
6. A Fine and Fissioned Family	25
7. The Curtain Rises	36
8. The Star Cast	42
9. A Gun, a Towel – and a Grinning Skull	48
10. Witnesses for the Defence	66
11. A Summing Up and Two Surprises	83
12. The Juror Who Refused to Toe the Line	105
13. Bombay the Metaphor	107
14. High Court, More Hype	111
15. The Gods Intervene	128
16. Prem, the Charmer Not Just the Snake	134

Contents

17. 'Unusual and Unprecedented'	148
18. The Supreme Court – Twice Over	156
19. The Last Chance	165
20. The Daddy-less Years	170
21. Kid Gloves Always for Kawas	177
22. More Help from On High	180
23. 'It's Entitlement, Stupid!'	187
24. Bombay Was a Parsi	189
25. The Sindhi Connections	195
26. Naval Gazing	200
27. Kawas and Sylvia, Served Fresh	222
28. Last Port, Canada	239
29. Mumbai Is a Tabloid	250
30. From Life to Afterlife	283
31. Closure	293
<i>The Back Story: Credits</i>	297

Prologue

The Long Shadow of an Urban Legend

Way back on 27 April 1959, a Parsi naval commander, Kawas Nanavati, shot dead his English wife Sylvia's Sindhi lover, Prem Ahuja. Three bullets in less than three minutes is all it took, but the trial which began the following September held the nation in thrall for five years, and the story has continued to have as obsessive an afterlife in films, books, even PhD theses.

Its immediate allure is easy enough to explain. This was India's first upper-class crime of passion, and it titillated a society still in the socialist straitjacket. Pythagoras himself could not have come up with a more perfect 'right'-angled triangle: handsome naval officer in dazzling whites, seduced wife in repentant black and the easily demonized dead playboy-businessman. There was the unequal pitting of 'upright Parsi' against 'unscrupulous Sindhi'. The setting infused the tale with its own legend: Bombay was an urban grail, a glittering, cosmopolitan Camelot with streets paved with opportunity – and stardust.

The class, the cast, the context were such a triple whammy that they have knocked out all else. But those three quick shots fired by Commander Nanavati had a much wider reverberation echoing right into the present. There are three main narratives that deserve greater engagement.

The case: The high-octane drama from sessions to Supreme Court apart, the case honed fine points of criminal jurisprudence. It also foretold the way elite mafias would manipulate the system to subvert justice. The Nanavati trial set a pattern, but it has also remained unique. In none of its high-profile successors which bloodied every decade were the topmost echelons of executive and judiciary locked in such a bristling turf war. In none of them was a prime minister obliged to intervene.

The media: Courts are the *de jure* custodians of criminal justice, but a relentless fourth estate is often the *de facto* arbiter. In the hoary expression ‘*Vox populi, vox dei*’, the modern media, ‘the voice of the people’, increasingly arrogates to itself the ‘voice of God’. This too began with the weekly Bombay newspaper *Blitz*’s espousal of Nanavati’s cause. In those days of black and white, *Blitz* managed to create a technicolour story. In both content and form, it became the masterclass for the covering of crime.

The triangle: None of the case’s prodigious spin-offs has examined the extent to which privilege and prejudice loaded the dice of public perception. We have been even more coy about the complex man–woman equation, within marriage and outside. Geometry’s triangles are simple – not so the ones compassed by chemistry. For too long we’ve believed

In Hot Blood

in those clichés of Unalloyed Hero, Unmitigated Villain and his Unwitting Victim. They need to be deconstructed, if not actually dismantled.

Did something less edifying lurk beneath the fanciful tapestry of love and honour woven by Nanavati's lawyer, Karl Khandalavala? How much of this upright officer's actions were driven by the twice-born entitlements of Bombay-Parsi background and hothouse naval culture?

Who was the human behind the unidimensional arch villain, Prem Ahuja?

Doesn't Sylvia deserve today's prism of empowerment? She should be seen as a woman who wanted something more than what her marriage gave her, and actively went for it, eyes wide open, or almost.

And what of the aftermath? The Canada years have remained unexplored – till now. We know that Kawas and Sylvia's reconciliation made the defence team's job easier. But how did they ultimately weather the storm, salvage their marriage and script a new love story?

Despite the energy expended for over half a century on l'affaire Nanavati, it's not an open book. Nor yet an open-and-shut case. Not by a long shot.

Once Upon a Monday

It's an exclusive cul-de-sac in Bombay. It's entered from swish Nepean Sea Road; the Arabian Sea whooshes at its other end. It's a sunny, humid late afternoon. In draped, air-conditioned bedrooms, socialites bestir themselves for the languid exertions of the evening. Kitchens are a-clink with the readying of tea. A cake from nearby Bombelli's sits atop a crisp, white, cutwork tray-cloth, or perhaps just-fried fritters. The only raucous sound is the cawing of a crow trying to keep its claw-hold on the swaying palms of a building whose curved facade and balconies preside over the rolling waves. Jeevan Jyot is six storeys high but still the tallest, and the newest, on this cosseted stretch of old money. It was built by the Life Insurance Corporation of India and named after its emblem, an earthen lamp with a flame of life. There's nothing to indicate that the flame is about to be blown off, orbiting somnolent Setalvad Lane into urban mythology.



In Hot Blood

It's the same sticky afternoon of 27 April 1959. He's dropped off his wife, three kids and a friend of theirs to the matinee of *Tom Thumb* at Bombay's art deco Metro cinema, and promised to pick them up at five thirty. Nothing unusual here either; millions of dads do this the world over. Okay, not all of them have had a pre-lunch showdown with a wife who has confessed her infidelity. And none that we've heard of has gone back to his naval ship and requisitioned a revolver. The intended purpose of this one act will trigger a case that will end the jury system in India, involve the topmost echelons of power, create a near-constitutional crisis, send Bombay's women into a swoon, and become part of race memory.

So here's the story that refuses to die.