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How I was saved in a split second

By As told to Samhita Chakraborty

3-4 minutes



Kunal Basu

*Author Kunal Basu is in Paris for a book festival on India and drove past the site of the shootings shortly before the carnage. He shares his story with **The Telegraph**.*

I flew into Paris from London on Friday afternoon. I was to speak at the Inde des Livres, a book festival on India, on Saturday.

On Friday evening, there was a reception at the Indian embassy. While I was being driven there from my hotel, I crossed the Republique (Place de la République) and Bastille (Place de la Bastille), places that would soon be under attack.

I spoke briefly at the embassy and, after the event, returned to my hotel in Gambetta by the same route. Around 8.30pm, I stepped out for dinner and walked into a restaurant near my hotel.

Suddenly, I received a text message from my daughter (Ajlai), who's in Berkeley in California, asking: "Baba, are you safe?"

I was puzzled and asked her why I wouldn't be safe. She said: "Because there are shootings in Paris."

That's when I realised why so many sirens were blaring outside. I had heard them but in a big city, one tends to dismiss these things as routine.

When I looked outside the restaurant, police cars and fire trucks were whizzing about. Other diners too started checking their phones. We were all worried and started talking among ourselves.

I kept thinking just one thing. While returning from the embassy, as we crossed the Republique, one of the central squares of Paris, the chauffeur had asked me: "Should we stop here for dinner?"

Although I had half a mind to stop, I decided I would go back to the hotel and go out for a bite later. Had we stopped, we would have been right at the centre of the carnage. I was saved by a split-second decision.

The festival I had come for has been cancelled. So I'm currently unemployed in Paris. People have been asked not to step out unless they absolutely must. So I'm confined to my hotel and wondering what to do for lunch.

I considered changing my Monday ticket and leaving on Saturday. But even if I manage to obtain a ticket despite the rush to get out, there are no taxis on the road to take me to the airport.

It's a strange feeling of being stuck, with the anticipation of a fiction writer.

I can hardly say that this is a new feeling for me, though. I was in

Beijing in June 1989 when the Tiananmen Square massacre happened and was finally evacuated to Japan on June 7 (three days after the massacre).

I was there in Tehran in 1978 when there was a huge uprising against the Shah of Iran. I was also stuck in Jakarta in Indonesia when Suharto was deposed in 1998.

I love Paris and I feel this city has a colour - it is normally a brilliant, fluorescent white. But today it's a misty, sad white.

I'm gazing out at empty streets as I wait to return to London, hopefully in time for my Tuesday flight to Dhaka for another festival, and then on to Calcutta on November 22.