

Soldiering On...

TEAM CLAWS



An account of the valour and heroism of Naik Bishnu Shrestha, 7/8 GR

Naik Bishnu Shrestha chose to join the Indian Army in his father's footsteps. He was enrolled in 7th Battalion, the 8th Gurkha Rifles, a unit in which his father had served in earlier. After a smooth and uneventful career, and at the age of 35 years, 18 of which were spent in the Army, Bishnu proceeded home on retirement as so many before him have done. But fate had a different test planned for him.

On 2 September 2010, Naik Bishnu Shrestha boarded seat no. 47 in AC3 coach of Maurya Express at Ranchi. As the train chugged through the darkness, Shrestha sat quietly, looking out of the window, contemplating a peaceful life ahead with his family in the quiet mountains of his homeland. At about midnight, when the train was moving through a jungle stretch in West Bengal, it came to a screeching halt, sending passengers lurching forward in their seats. For a short span of time the atmosphere was pervaded with confusion, with people wondering what had happened. This was soon replaced with fear as without warning and seemingly from every direction, some passengers stood up and began to take out weapons—guns, knives, clubs and swords. Shouts of “sit still and take out your valuables”, rent the air, sending shivers down the spine of the hapless passengers.

From the dense and dark jungle beyond, more armed robbers poured into the train from a side door. They made their way down the aisle, waving knives in the faces of terrified passengers and forcibly took away their wallets, cell phones and laptops and also snatched jewellery from the necks of women. As they approached Naik Shrestha, he calmly handed over his wallet to them. He was a hardened soldier and knew that this wasn't the right time to take them on. If it was just a few hundred rupees that the robbers wanted, well then they could have it. The stakes had to be higher for a pitched fight. That time was to come within a few minutes.

Shrestha was sitting near a young girl. She was with her parents and the entire family was terrified. The hoodlums had taken what little jewellery the young girl possessed and then some among the robbers came after her honour. They ripped off her clothes in an attempt to gang rape her and she screamed for help. The time for Naik Bishnu Shrestha to act had come.

What the robbers did not know was that while Shrestha had handed over his money, he had kept his khukri concealed, waiting for an opportune moment to use it. Now was his moment of truth and he was to be tested as never before. And he was not found wanting.

Drawing his khukri, he leapt forward and grabbing the would-be rapist from behind, pulled him up off the girl. He then disposed of the second sword-brandishing robber with a flash of his khukri. Another robber slashed his knife

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wildly at the girl's neck but she moved back and survived the assault with just a minor gash. Shrestha then took on this hoodlum, disposing of him with another masterful stroke of his khukri. With the robbers in his immediate vicinity disposed of, he then set about looking for the others.

There was in him a rage of the just, fighting for a noble and honourable cause. He moved through the aisle and over the next twenty minutes, single handed, cut, dodged and engaged in back-alley knife fighting. Wounded and bleeding himself, he carried

on nevertheless, killing three hoodlums and incapacitating another eight. The robbers had finally had enough and they withdrew in some confusion. The valour of one man had saved the honour of a young girl and caused an armed gang of robbers, about 40 strong, to retreat in terror. When the train pulled into the next station, police and emergency personnel were there to treat the wounded. The valiant Shrestha was rushed to hospital, where he spent the next two months recovering from the injury to his hand. From the dead and injured robbers, the police recovered 40 gold necklaces, 200 cell phones, 40 laptops, and nearly Rs 400,000 in stolen cash.

Naik Bishnu Shrestha was subsequently awarded the Shaurya Chakra and Sarvottam Jeevan Raksha medal for his act of valour. The government also rewarded him with the bounty that was on the head of this gang. Other honours too came his way which included an award of a silver-plated khukri and a cash bonus of rupees 50,000 from his unit. He then went on to receive a well-deserved Sena Medal on Army Day 2013. The family of the girl he had saved offered him a reward, but he never stopped by to collect it. His response was soldierly: “Fighting the enemy in battle is my duty as a soldier. Taking on the robbers on the train was my duty as a human being” was his terse response to the Indian media. Well done soldier. The nation and the Army are proud of you.

This incident is sure to draw parallels from another horrifying incident which took place two years later in December 2012 and shook the conscience of the country. Can anyone ever forget Nirbhaya? The gang rape of this 23 year old girl awoke the nation from its slumber and led to unprecedented protests. But on that cold December night, when she lay naked and bleeding after her horrific ordeal, dumped on the highway, crying for help and much-needed aid, her clothes and body torn, but her spirit intact, an indifferent public just watched and refused to

lift a finger to help her. Thousands passed by, but none did their duty as human beings. Had a Bishnu Shreshtha been present, the story may have been different. Alas, that was not to be.

While millions across the country later turned up in support of Nirbhaya in her quest for justice, there was an absence of courage when it mattered most. It could not even manifest itself into a simple act of covering a naked scarred body of a rape victim left for dead on the capital's highway. War is often condemned for its inhumanity, but ironically, it is the soldiers like Bishnu Shrestha who time and again through their acts of valour teach a callous society what it means to be human. Within each of us, there lies the spirit which was so vividly displayed by Bishnu Shrestha on a stranded train when he single handedly took on a group of 40 armed robbers. That is the spirit which we must discover and unleash. For valour is not only to be shown in the battlefield, but exhibited in each of the challenges which confront us in the course of our lives.