

THE NIGHT SHIFT

SUVARNA, THE HOME GUARD

News Clips

Hindi News Anchor 1: There was an attempt to rape a 22-year-old woman in a moving local train in Mumbai.

Hindi News Anchor 2: An American woman was not just mugged but her throat was slashed by an unknown man in a local train in Mumbai.

Voice Over

Suvarna: My name is Suvarna Dilip Kharat. I am 38 and I have been working for the Home Guard for 10 years now.

Voice Over

Suvarna: My work starts at 8pm in the evening and ends at 8am the next morning. The biggest priority for us, posted in those ladies' compartments, is that no man should enter, especially those who are high on drugs. So, let's say my train starts from CST to Badlapur, I stand at the train's door for the duration of the journey till we reach Badlapur. Till the time there are women in the compartment, I don't sit at all. I am always fearful that men could come into the compartment at any time and something untoward might happen. If that happens, I will be in trouble. After reaching Badlapur, our role doesn't end -- we have to get the train back to CST. Basically, we have to be in the same compartment through both these journeys till the time the train retires for the night at around 2 or 2:30am to ensure that all the women who travel in these trains are safe.

Voice Over

Suvarna: Once, my friend and me, we were in the train going from Badlapur to CST. There were four druggies who forcibly entered my compartment at Ghatkopar. I had nothing but a baton and a mobile. I was perplexed about how to handle the four of them by myself. As soon as they entered the compartment, I told them if they came even one step ahead, I would push them out of the train without caring for the consequences. While I was doing this, I told my friend to call the control room. By this time, we had reached Matunga station when the cops came in and took them away. Imagine if there were women in the compartment and these druggies would have attacked them. If we were around, we would have surely protected them, but what if we weren't around?

Kunal: Were you not afraid of the possibility that they could be armed?

Suvarna: Before I could process the fear, I started thinking of my colleague. She was in uniform, but she was a young girl, who was young and yet to be married. What if they would have tried to do something to her?

THE NIGHT SHIFT

Voice Over

Suvarna: We basically just stay at that last station at the end of a journey. So, let's say if we get the train back to CST from Kasara, then we simply stay at the station platform in CST because there are no facilities for us -- neither to sleep, nor to sit. We work with the police, but the police don't provide any of the infrastructure or facilities that women need. You must have been to the CST station and noticed the space at the ticket booking office? That's where both, men and women, sleep in the night.

But, the CST station is better because at least there is space near the ticket booking windows. Vashi station is terrible because there is no place to sleep or sit, except on the platforms. So, in the night, platforms are filled with us home guards sleeping all the way till the tracks! The place is full of mosquitoes and we all have to sleep there, out in the open.

Voice Over

Suvarna: Last night, we reached Thane at 1:30am and we saw all the police men were sleeping and there was no place for women to sleep. So, we had to sit next to a toilet. We asked them if they could make some space for us women, but they flatly refused. Men always get space to sleep in the night, but women are never provided any such facility.

Voice Over

Suvarna: I don't sleep a wink in the nights because I don't like sleeping in public. My women colleagues ask me, why do you not sleep? Now, men and women have to sleep together. I am not comfortable with that. At the very least, I feel there needs to be a separate room for women constables.

Voice Over

Suvarna: Often, when Home Guards does something, no one recognises it as us doing it. It's always the police that gets all the credit. When we do something, the least that people can do is at least give us our due credit.

Voice Over

Suvarna: We don't get a monthly pay, or even a weekly off. We don't even have standard 8-hour shifts. We are constantly working for the police, come rain or sun, and even through festivals. Despite this, we are treated very shabbily.

Kunal: You don't even have a weekly day off?

THE NIGHT SHIFT

Suvarna: We don't even have a weekly day off. If we take even a day's holiday, our pay gets cut. This is wrong. We have worked for 10-12 years. I have been working since we were paid Rs 90 per day. I would get Rs 3,500 each month. I've been working since then. What have you given us for all these years of service?

Kunal: How many hours would you have to work to earn 90 rupees?

Suvarna: 12 hours!

Voice Over

Suvarna: Everyone is made permanent and given jobs, but we are kept temporary in such precarious work conditions. Just because we are supposed to be a 'voluntary' force? The question is, are you making us work like we are a voluntary force? No, right? Then how can you not make us permanent?

Voice Over

Suvarna: We go to the first class compartments too. But, the women in those compartments never feel like we are one of them, or co-operate with us. They never do! Women in the first class don't co-operate with us as much as women in the second class compartments do.

Our duty requires us to stand at the door because our supervisors at the station check our attendance by checking the doors from the platforms. So, when we are in the first class and if women are standing there and we request them to move, they question us. They say we are making them move so that we can stand by the door and enjoy the breeze! Don't we all want the wind, they ask us rudely. These women don't think or realise that we are not there to enjoy ourselves, but to protect them.

In the second class compartment, on the other hand, all the women co-operate with us and are very nice to us. They also struggle and work like us, unlike those first class women who work in offices and act snooty. There is more solidarity here. They are much more empathetic and know what it feels like to have to stand for hours on end. They come to us and offer their seats and tell us to sit. Even when we refuse, saying we can't, they insist on us sitting for a few minutes. They say, we won't complain. No one would do this in the first class.

Voice Over

Suvarna: I was going to Badlapur in the first class compartment one night. It was her last day at work, so she had received a bouquet of flowers. She didn't say a word until then but when the last station came, while getting off, she came to me, gave me a rose, a chocolate and even offered a salute. She said it was only because of me that she could travel all the way to Badlapur in the train by herself. She said she was feeling very proud of herself. I felt very good about it, the fact that there is

THE NIGHT SHIFT

someone who wants to salute us. It felt very good when she gave me the rose and the chocolates. I told all my friends about it.

Voice Over

Suvarna: I was not going to join the Home Guard. In fact, I had always wanted to become a police officer. I tried 2-3 times, but they kept rejecting me because I was not tall enough. Someone I knew told me that the Home Guard was recruiting. So, I thought to myself, I will be able to don the khaki with the Home Guard too, so why not? The thing was, even at the Home Guard, in the initial training, I was not selected. After 4 days of training, I was rejected by them because I am not tall enough. That day, I cried a lot. I told people I had trained hard. I would wake up at 3:30am, leave home at 5am and come back at 8pm and sleep at 1am. I had struggled a lot, so I told them I will not leave, even if everyone else leaves. They told me that they could not take me, so I asked them if that was the case, then why did they even select me for training in the first place? So, I remained stubborn and then, they finally relented. After that, I even became the commander of 71 other women there!

Voice Over

Suvarna: Lots of them told me. Even my family told me, why are you doing the night shift? This isn't even work. I told them, I said you come with me and see what it is to work in the night and what my role is. Don't believe what society tells you. You see it for yourself. I'll take you along. You can pretend to be a passenger in the train and I'll anyway be doing my duty, like I always do. So, you will see what it is to be working in the night and how I feel, donning the uniform at night. I told my family all this, especially my mother, my sister and my uncles. All of them were unhappy with my night shift. But I feel like that was the best decision I made.

Voice Over

Suvarna: Earlier, I would often think, what will society say if women like me stepped out in the night? But then it struck me, why do I care about society so much? Because when I am at home starving, does society come to check on me, to see if I have eaten or not? Then, why must I give it so much importance? I will do what I feel is right. I know my life best, I know what is right and what is wrong. You don't need to tell me what is right. Who are you to judge me? Who are you?

Today, because I am working the night shift, so many women are able to get home safe in the night. Those women and I know what my job means.

Voice Over

Suvarna: We must support women and let them go out, explore the world. Unless they step out, they won't learn anything, they won't learn the ways of the world. Women who are always holed up at home and protected from everything start

THE NIGHT SHIFT

crying the second something goes wrong in the real world. They don't know how to deal with difficulties or situations. The helpless can make them follow any man who offers them even some support. But, women like us, who go out, won't do that. We would give such men a tight slap, because we are not innocent kids who don't know the ways of the world. We don't need them to 'rescue' us, we've seen enough of the world.

I have always believed that one must never follow a man. One must be so far ahead in life that the man has to follow you. I might not be earning much, but I am very happy. I earn for myself and not for anyone else. I am not dependent on others for my existence right now, nor will I ever be. I have saved enough for my future. I have never believed that my son or his wife will take care of me in my old age. And I am not even going to tell anyone how much money I have saved. It is none of their business. Whether I am having fun with this money or donating it to a charity, society doesn't have the right to ask me, in my belief. This is for my future.

Voice Over

Dilip: Earlier, she didn't know Mumbai too well so she would be scared to step out. Even if she had to go to Dadar, Sion or wherever, she would be clueless, she had no experience. But, now after her work, her experience has increased. She has even done election duty and helped conduct polls in Antop Hill, a very dangerous area in Mumbai, working till 2-3am. That is how her courage has grown. She had to face so many difficulties and dangers, but she didn't dither even once. This is how she has gained rich experience.

Voice Over

Dilip: The uniform is outside the house. When she is donning the uniform, she must exert the influence and power that it carries. But when she is at home, she must live by the rules of the house.

Voice Over

Suvarna: When I first came here, I felt, this house, my children, I should never leave this and go anywhere at all. And that all that I do should be for them. But then, wherever I look, I see how children are dumping their parents, they don't take care of them. Over the years, I've learned this much at least: everything has a place in life, be it family or anything. But one must live for one's own self. I have lived enough for others. I got married and lived for my husband, then lived for my children. But, where is my life in all this? So, if I am still not living my own life, after having lived for everyone else, what is the point of my existence? Then, my life is a zero. That's why, I want to do something for myself.

Voice Over

Suvarna: I have changed a lot. I was not so forward before this. (Laughs)

THE NIGHT SHIFT

I had never seen Bombay before I got married, so I was content being the lioness of my area. But, now, I feel like I am the lioness of Mumbai too.

This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.