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Guard almighty

In conversation with a close protection practitioner, **Akhila Seetharaman** discovers she's been languishing in 'condition white'.



I found Godrej Rustamji seated at a table located in the corner of an L-shaped coffee shop we'd agreed to meet at, his back against the wall. "I always choose a vantage point – this one gives me views of the road and both stretches of the cafe," he said. "You have no clue about what's happening behind you, do you?" With my back to the rest of the room, I had to admit I didn't.

Rustamji is a close protection expert – he provides security cover to people under threat in the form of teams of highly trained bodyguards who use strategic and tactical plans to counter against assault,

kidnapping and other risks that might sit at ease in the script of a Bourne movie. By force of habit, Rustamji, who founded the personal security company Code 3 Protection, always arrives a few minutes early to a meeting, a practice that allows him time to conduct a quick survey of the location, entries and exits, and people, and find himself a good seat for observation. "And there's always someone from my team waiting in a car somewhere in the vicinity, looking out for me, just in case," he said. Noticing that I was panning a quick sweep of the cars outside, he proceeded to assure me that I'd never be able to identify the tail. "But if you were to follow me after this meeting, I would know," he said.

Rustamji always varies the route he takes to his office. He parks facing forward in preparedness for a quick getaway. He's reluctant to part with his mobile number or his address to unknown people, and is uncomfortable about being photographed – anonymity is vital in his line of work, as is caution. For him, being on guard clearly isn't just a job, it's a lifestyle, one that can be mentally demanding.

"Protection in India is generally very noticeable. You're expected to be well-built, wear a safari suit and carry a gun," he said. Rustamji rues the fact that "bodyguards are bought like tomatoes", with the only questions asked being how many and whether they should be armed. In contrast, real protection, according to him, comes with covert, unobtrusive, intelligent cover. There's a lot more brain than brawn involved in providing this: from gathering information about the client and potential threats, assessing risk, creating comprehensive security plans, and deploying people who can act quickly and effectively as a team in crises. "If you can't think, you can't perform," Rustamji said.

This fortnight, his company kicks off a ten-day basic workshop on close protection, followed by a run-on four-week advanced training module. "We're looking to train people who are interested in making a career out of close protection and believe they have what it takes," he said. Rustamji is justifiably cautious when admitting students. "We do background checks on candidates before admitting them to our course," he said. "This includes police verification to make sure candidates don't have criminal histories. The last thing we want is the cops, whom we often work with, telling us that someone we trained is causing trouble."

Before hiring candidates, Rustamji also puts them through aptitude tests and sometimes, psychometric tests. "We want people who are even-tempered, who can exercise restraint," he said. "People who have a tendency to hit and push at the drop of a hat don't make the best close protection officers."

Rustamji said his company receives enquiries from regular bodyguards who are tired of being mere chaperones and want to be trained further. But not everyone can do this kind of job, he added. The course this fortnight includes a range of subjects from protocol and etiquette, the military strategy called the OODA cycle – observation, orientation, decision and action –, body language, conflict management and combat training that is more defensive than offensive. "The focus is on controlling the threat using the minimum force required and the right psychology," said Rustamji. "In a crunch situation, for instance, it makes sense to cover and evacuate the client first before getting your gun. Once you reach for your gun, the opponent is likely to shoot."

One of the aims of the course, said Rustamji, is to shift people's mindsets from "condition white" – a state of blissful oblivion – to "condition orange", in which they have a heightened awareness of their surroundings and are prepared to respond effectively when faced with peril; this refers to the combat colour code, first described by American handgun legend Jeff Cooper in his book Principles of Personal Defense and adopted by the Marine Corps. Close protection training, according to Rustamji, "teaches you not only how to protect someone else, but also how to protect yourself".

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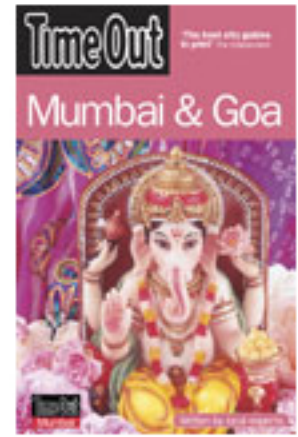
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