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PERSONAL ACCOUNT

mumbai attacks

'The terrorists were high-fiving'

Imam Siddique tells TUSHA MITTAL how the first of the people trapped inside the Taj were brought out. When security officials wouldn't comply with his requests, Imam Siddique hijacked a local ambulance to rescue survivors from Taj. Later, at an NDTV show, he lashed out at Simi Garewal for rightwing comments. Since then, he has received a number of death threats. His story.

I live in Colaba, a stone's throw from Nariman House. On the night that it all started, I was sitting in my fourth floor terrace flat. I heard what sounded like firecrackers. Much of the low-middle class population that lives in this area has religious festivals frequently. We hear crackers and processions everyday, so I dismissed those first gunshots as everyday sounds. But suddenly, I heard a loud explosion and a thousand voices in unison. I heard snippets like ye mar gaya. Then I looked down from my balcony and the street below looked like Beirut or Lebanon. There were dead bodies all over and people screaming.

I rushed downstairs to help and saw the first grenade outside Nariman House. Interestingly, the locals allowed us to believe that the Israelis living inside Nariman house were responsible for the explosions. The mob was furious, ready to lynch the Israelis they thought were responsible. I saw the mob go inside the house and bring two members out and throw them into a taxi. We don't know where the taxi went and what happened to the two of them.

By then, I wasn't feeling safe in this crowd, especially being a minority. Soon, I heard that something that happened at the Leopod café too. I know the owner well and am emotionally attached to the space. I rushed there to see if I can do anything to help.

The lady who owns the property said the police have taken charge here, but that something may have happened at the Taj and I should go there to help. I walked down the same lane through which I now know the terrorists had gone.

I saw a French couple who looked really distraught. I approached them as a citizen trying to help. The man shunned me away, but the lady confided in me and said that their daughter was stuck in Taj on the fourth floor. The entire area was barricaded and I stood near the Gateway of India. I spoke to the police through wireless vans and told them that a young teenager called Latisha is stuck gave them her room number. I then resigned to my spot and watched the madness unfurl. Grenades were being thrown from all sides. One moment I would hear gunshots from the right wing corner, and in the next moment I would see the left side go up in flames.

Suddenly, I identified a room on the six floor where I could see three silhouettes near the window. Their body language indicated that they were celebrating – high-fiving. I told the snipers, but at the time they had not been given the clearances to shoot. Others saw these men too, and in retrospect, if the snipers had not been so bureaucratic and aimed at this room, the operation could have been over much earlier. Although they were in the position to do something, they chose to be spectators at that point. I decided that I will put my ass on the line and do what I need to do.

Soon we heard another big explosion followed by massive fire. We were asked to move behind the gateway, since were in the line of fire.

But even from this further point, I was able to see that someone on the third floor had tied all the linen in his room and was hanging it out as an escape route. When he actually tried to escape, he slipped and fell almost to his death. We could hear this scream all the way to the Gateway. Watching this, knowing he lay right there, I was really agitated. I wanted to go rescue this person, but nobody came to my assistance. The snipers, NSG, and security personnel around were also not doing anything. They were just made to wait. There was nothing anyone could do. I went up to some of the Tops Security (private company) ambulances waiting nearby and tried to convince them to help me. They wouldn't agree. I finally had to threaten them that they will lose their jobs if they don't let me take the van. (I happened to know the owner of the company, Divang Rahul Nanda). I finally hijacked the ambulance with two other Tops Security employees, and we drove all the way, risking our lives, to where the yellow Mumbai police barricade behind which this man had fallen.

Both his hands were broken and we could see the marrow was coming out of the bone. It was one of the most grotesque things I have ever seen. He wouldn't let us take him to the hospital until we rescued his girlfriend Kelly who was still in the room. But I sent him off in the van to the hospital. His name is William Pike, from Britain.

As I looked up to see if I can spot his girlfriend, I noticed a younger girl in a room on the fourth floor. "Are you Latisha," I screamed to her. Turns out, she was the daughter of the French couple I met on my way here.

I went back and called the fire brigade to the site to rescue Kelly and Latisha. They tried the manual ladder first; it didn't work. The fire brigade tried manual ladder which didn't work. They finally using the snorkel hydraulic pipe and we were able to rescue both of them. As soon as I walked out with Latisha and Kelly, it became a media circus. Everybody wanted to take a picture of the first survivors rescued from Taj. I also want to say hats off to the fire brigade. They had only 2 bullet proof vests and yet in they went in for the operation.

I have worked for the last 25 years in various advertising agencies, but I have never been proud of anything I have done in my life. Looking back now, I am very proud of what I did on that day. It is very reassuring that I had the presence of mind to react in this situation. I was only thinking of what I would expect from others who were watching as mere spectators, had I been in that room.

I want to share this traumatic experience with others. There is a tendency to banish such things from one's consciousness, but I want this dialogue to continue. If there stories are not told to people, we will not be better equipped emotionally and socially to deal with this if, god forbid, it happens again.

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For me, the Mumbai assault has meant the loss of loved ones, but it also become the start of a new relationship with his own self. I had been a victim of the Bombay riots and had since lived with a fear of large gatherings, of mob fury. I witnessed first hand what happens in a riot. I was scared of being in a group of more than 20. But now I have overcome my fear. This has created a healing process within me.

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