

## 26/11 accused Fahim Ansari's lawyer killed in Mumbai office

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**Mumbai** : Shahid Azmi, a former TADA detainee, who was the lawyer defending 26/11 co-accused Fahim Ansari, was shot dead this evening by three unidentified men who fled in an autorickshaw after committing the crime in the heart of Mumbai.

Ansari is charged with conducting surveys and drawing maps to assist the Lashkar-e-Toiba attackers.

According to the Kurla police, the assailants ran into Azmi's office in Taximen's Colony, Kurla (West), around 7.45 pm. They fired four rounds, of which three hit the 33-year-old lawyer in the head and chest.

Azmi was with a clerk, who hid himself and escaped unhurt.

Additional Commissioner of Police (Crime) Deven Bharti said, "We are probing all possible angles. It is true that he had received threats some years back from the Ravi Pujari gang."

He had approached police regarding threats to his life

in 2006.

He did not have any security although K P Pawar, the lawyer of Lashkar attacker Ajmal Kasab, has Z-category security. Azmi's first big case was the 7/11 serial explosions aboard local trains in Mumbai in 2006 in which he was defending three accused, including one of the prime accused, Faisal Sheikh, the LeT's alleged Mumbai chief.

He was also the petitioner challenging application of MCOCA in the 7/11 serial blasts case in the Supreme Court. He filed the petition on behalf of Ehtesham Siddiqui, one of the prime accused. He defended some of the accused in the May 2006 Aurangabad arms haul case and the September 2006 Malegaon blast case. Azmi also represented Fehmida Ansari in the Gateway and Zaveri Bazar blasts case of 2005. Fehmida was recently given the death sentence.

Not long ago, he took up the case of three men accused of being Naxals: Vernon Gonsalves, Arun Ferreira and Sridhar Srinivasan.

In 1992, then barely 15 years old, Azmi was arrested under the now repealed Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), soon after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the riots that followed.

Arrested by the Govandi police, he was accused of conspiring to assassinate Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray. Convicted in 1999 and sentenced to five years imprisonment by the TADA court, he was lodged in Tihar jail but was acquitted the same year by the Supreme Court for lack of evidence.

Azmi was a distant relative of Samajwadi Party MP Abu Asim Azmi. "His father died during the the 1984 riots near his Govandi residence," Abu Azmi told The Indian Express. Soon after his acquittal in 1999, Azmi continued his studies and after completing his graduation from K C College, studied law at Mumbai University. He started his practice in 2004.

In the 26/11 case, Azmi last came to court during the recording of evidence last year. He subsequently chose to send his juniors. Recently, however, judge M L Tahaliyani had called Azmi to his chambers when the court was

not in progress.

Fahim Ansari's wife Yasmin, a regular in the special court, said she feared for her husband's defence now. "I don't understand why this happened. He was supposed to argue my husband's case. It was essential that he should have been there," she told The Indian Express.

Ujjwal Nikam, special public prosecutor in the 26/11 case, called Azmi a "very young advocate and very intelligent, good at the art of cross-examination".

Lawyer Subhash Kanse remembered Azmi as a "reserved but sharp and studious" lawyer. "He had joined our chamber in 2002, but soon after getting his degree the next year, he started his own practice," Kanse said.