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Ajmal Kasab in custody: how the interrogation began

Excerpts from the book, The Siege, by Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark

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Adrian Levy & Cathy Scott-Clark



Ajmal was put in a plastic chair, a handcuff on his left wrist.

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At Nair Hospital, doctors were furious. Ajmal Kasab's patient's notes were marked: "Discharged against medical advice." The inspector called (then joint commissioner, crime, Rakesh) Maria to warn him but the Crime Branch boss was unrepentant: "This is no time for the fucking Geneva Conventions," he shouted.

Half an hour later the disoriented prisoner arrived in the courtyard of police headquarters and Maria called on his way down. "Take Kasab to the AEC." This was to be his first play, interrogating the prisoner in the Anti-Extortion Cell, Salaskar's domain. The risky manoeuvre of bringing Maria's

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only prisoner to Crime Branch in a volatile city still under attack was becoming an act of vengeance as much as anything else. "Now we will see how he feels," Maria said, running down the stairs and emerging blinking in the courtyard, where for the first time in seven hours he inhaled the chill air, his eyes stinging in the thin light.

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'For a long time after 26/11, the fear was all-consuming'



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A small gathering of heavy, uniformed cops stood stamping their feet outside the AEC, surrounding a diminutive figure wearing borrowed plastic sandals. Maria nodded to his men. "My heart is telling me I should strangle this guy, here and now," he hissed, looking at the shivering prisoner, "but my brain is telling me that he is the only link to this open case." Ever since Ajmal had been captured, voices all around Maria had proposed the old Mumbai story: one for the boys. He should be allowed to run before being shot. Some wanted to hang him, making it look like suicide.

Tombstone-faced, they all entered Salaskar's world, gawping at the dead inspector's paperwork and effects: suspects' headshots and wanted notices, bamboo lathis and bulletproof vests.

Ajmal was put in a plastic chair, a handcuff on his left wrist. If a room could smell of coercion, Salaskar's did. Maria, towering above the prisoner and flanked by the uniformed constables, began talking in Ajmal's mother tongue, Punjabi. It was also the language of Maria's father, who had migrated to Bombay in the 1950s.

Maria asked if Ajmal knew where he was. In his grubby beige and white T-shirt, a wrist and an arm bandaged, he looked a pathetic sight. He really was the most ordinary-looking mass murderer Maria had ever seen. Sallow and greasy, he reminded the cop of the kid manning the deep-fat fryer at the sweet seller's in Zaveri Bazaar.

A good interrogator needed an opener, and Maria was ready: "You wanted to die and so, just so you know, I am not going to kill you." He pointed to the blunt knuckles standing beside him in Salaskar's room. "They are not going to kill you either." He allowed Ajmal to digest the statement.

"These guys," Maria said, pointing around the room, "want to do it. But I will not allow it. You have failed in your mission because you are not dead. Now the world will come to know how badly you screwed up. You told one of my men that you hoped to be a shaheed. Well, my friend, I have news for you. Allah does not want you. No one does. The story of your miserable life continues as it always has. No one gives a shit. You are a poor, pitiful failure, even in trying to die."

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Ajmal groaned as Maria struck home. A dust bowl of disappointment was opening up before the prisoner, harking back to his inability to win acceptance, even as a young child when his father could not wait to discard him. While his brothers still out on the streets tonight would strive to accomplish their mission, he could already see that he was to be kept alive until a day of India's choosing, when, he had no doubt, he would be hooded and hanged. One last dismal thought occurred to him, something he would share with a lawyer on a chit that was signed and dated. He saw now that even after his execution no one would claim his corpse. In that moment, Ajmal knew something awful: *I am never going home.*

Maria had many questions. "How many of you are there in the city? What weaponry have you brought with you? What is your plan? Who is coaching you?" Ajmal had given answers at the hospital to the fat cop whose mouth had brimmed with scarlet paan.

Now he was made to go over the same ground. Maria sat back, soaking up that accent, the nasal vowels, the sibilant 's' and rolling 'r', a pendulous sentence construction and phrasing that sounded like a bow saw slicing through a trunk. It was the voice of the eastern Punjab: a vista of landlessness and poverty. Children there were born to sell, and lived to die, in Maria's opinion.

Excerpted with permission from Penguin Books India.

✉ **Adrian Levy & Cathy Scott-Clark**

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