



The Followers of Godse

The Aftermath of The Babri Masjid Demolition in Ayodhya

by

Shikha Trivedy

The BJP-RSS-VHP combine has for long tried to justify its Ram Mandir campaign with the argument that the Hindu psyche had been wounded by demolition of temples by various Muslim rulers and invaders and by reclaiming the supposed janamsthan of Ram, they were only righting a historical wrong done to Hindus. However, the planned pogroms against Muslims in Ayodhya and other parts of the country after the Babri Masjid had been demolished prove that the campaign for Ram Mandir was not at all motivated by religious sentiments. It was essentially a murderous anti-Muslim campaign.

Shikha Trivedy, who has been documenting the events in Ayodhya for the last three years, describes the mayhem that followed in Ayodhya after the demolition. —Ed.

In Ayodhya's hour of madness on December 6-7, when a few sane voices pleaded with Acharya Dharmendra of the VHP's Marg Darshak Mandal to stop murderous gangs of *kar sevaks* from attacking the Muslims of the town and burning and looting their houses and shops, he is quoted in the press as having

said, "I will never stop them. This is the only way in which Ayodhya can become like the Vatican." Today, the flamboyant Acharya Dharmendra and his fellow rabblerousers no doubt look back with some pride at the attempt made by the hoodlums they commanded to realise their twisted, pathetic vision. Between

nightfall on December 6 and mid-afternoon the next day, these *kar sevaks* killed and then burnt 13 men and children. While nearly all the Muslims had left their homes before the week-end for safer spots, the rest fled on hearing the news that the Babri Masjid had fallen. Those who died obviously could not escape in time.

The rule of the Centre was imposed in UP at 6 p.m. on December 6. The rioting began seriously only at about 4 a.m. the next morning and continued for nearly 12 hours, with mobs of several hundreds roaming the streets of this temple town, shouting *Jai Shri Ram* and plundering and torching each and every Muslim home—134 in all—and business establishments in broad daylight. First they looted all the valuables and currency they could lay their hands on. Then they smashed to pieces everything that was inside the houses. What couldn't be broken, whether it was a motor-cycle or some cattle or clothes and books, went into huge bonfires and was reduced to ashes. After this the houses were set on fire, but not if they were too close to Hindu homes, lest those too got damaged. Any other mosque they could find was an added bonus. As a result, barring two, all the masjids and *idgahs* of Ayodhya were either destroyed or damaged.

This was not just some mindless and wanton destruction of human life and property by the *kar sevaks* in order to sustain the high they had achieved only a few hours ago by razing the Babri Masjid to the ground. On the contrary, they worked to a carefully crafted plan. But all their zeal and commitment would have come a cropper if some of the Hindus of Ayodhya and the UP police and the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) posted there had not pitched in. The locals helped the strategists by identifying Muslim property well before December 6, and final touches by either actively participating in the '*lootmaar*' or turning a Nelson's eye to what was happening around them. For instance, on the morning of December 7, as I was

walking through the heavily policed Ramkot area, not even a stone's throw away from the disputed site, some *kar sevaks* were setting fire to the shop of 'Lala Tailors' which was owned by a Muslim. Instead of stopping the miscreants, the PAC men on duty were urging them to quickly throw out the odd pieces of wooden furniture inside, which they then used for making a fire to ward off the winter chill right in the middle of the road.

Ten days later, *mohallah* after *mohallah* still bore the scars of the victory march of the vandals who invaded Ayodhya and, unlike in 1990, celebrated the demolition of the masjid not by burning candles, but human beings and the rooves over their heads. Everything had been left as it was, the 24 hour curfew still in force making it impossible for those who had run away to come back. Less than a handful of Muslims could be found in Ayodhya; those who had stayed had either been saved by their neighbours or had successfully hidden themselves from the *kar sevaks*.

Fifty-year-old Beechu was one of them. His house, overlooking a rather beautiful garden, is in the *basti* of

Mirapur Bulandi, which lies on a stretch of road called Rajghat. It was attacked by about a hundred men at 11 a.m. on December 7, and within half an hour the remaining seven houses belonging to the Muslims of the *mohallah* met the same fate. There were no casualties, because most of the families had left Ayodhya well in advance. Beechu, who owns a cycle shop, was literally snatched from the jaws of death by two of his Hindu neighbours, Sarju Yadav and Subhash who tied a Bajrang Dal band on his head and passed him off as a *kar sevak*. "It was very difficult," says Yadav, "because the men who came here did not speak any Hindi, only Telugu. I somehow managed to convince them in the little English I know." Subhash did not think that any Hindu from their *basti* was involved in the attack, but on the other hand, he was also convinced that the *kar sevaks* had prior knowledge about the location of Muslim- households there. And where was the police at the time? Without any hesitation, both Yadav and Subhash reply "We only saw one man in PAC uniform and he was leading the *kar sevaks*."



December 5: Well armed and well prepared for the mayhem of December 6

At around the same time that Mirapur Bulandi was being overrun, the neighbouring *mohallah* of Machwana situated on Kaushalya Ghat, was under seige. An embittered Abdul Sattar points to what used to be his house. "I am a very poor man and so also had very little. But now even that has gone." He has not yet lodged an FIR with the police, preferring to wait for some local Muslim leader to accompany him to the *thana*. "The police is pressurising us to sign on statements they have prepared. I am not educated. Who knows what they have written?" he asks quietly. Once again, all the seven or eight Muslim dwellings in Machwana and a similar number in adjoining Shikwana are now little more than burnt out shells. Sattar, who was hiding in a flower bed nearby when the *kar sevaks* were doing their job, swears that he saw Hindus from his own *basti* as well as some from neighbouring ones egging the outsiders on. The inhabitants of Shikwana second this. They allege that the *kar sevaks* were brought back to their *mohallah* three times to break down the house of their zamindar, Nawab Tahir Husain Sahib. They succeeded in their last attempt and reduced to ashes everything in the house, including the 75-year-old Husain Sahib. He was torched at his front door — a few bones was all that was found of the zamindar whose family has lived in Ayodhya for more than 300 years now.

Stepping inside the ruins of what must once have been quite a grand house, I saw a frail, tiny woman of more than 70 years standing with her hands folded and tears rolling down her cheeks

in front of two policemen. The widow, Aliya Begum, was pleading with them to let her testify as one of the witnesses to the murder of her husband. The policemen flatly refused. She was not present inside the house when the *kar sevaks* descended on it, and as far as they were concerned, she was of no use to them. "It is true that I didn't see anything, but I could hear them shouting, 'maaro, kato, looto, phoonk do-phoonk do' as I hid in the bushes under the window at the back of the house. I also heard Husain Sahib begging the *kar sevaks* to spare his life," she added. The policemen, unmoved, wandered off to round up other witnesses for the inquiry. "I will swear on anything you want," she called after them, "the *Koran*, the *Ramayan*." She had no takers.

Standing alone and helpless in the courtyard of her house, surrounded by spilt grain, broken crockery, burnt wood, torn photographs and bits and pieces of other personal belongings, Aliya Begum awaited the return of her sons, their wives and children who

managed to get out and away in time.

Meanwhile outside, the two policemen were busy with their investigations. Why had they waited for 10 days before starting them, I asked? "We only heard about what had happened here yesterday," said one of them, slightly affronted. I did not think it would serve any purpose to point out to them, that the Katra police *chowki* to which they were attached was a five minute walk from the house of the late Nawab Tahir Husain.

A neighbour, Ali Ramjan's cycle shop was also located on the same *chauraha*¹ as the Katra police *chowki*. "When a mob began destroying my shop, the police encouraged them by shouting, 'loot lo, loot lo! And now they want me to lodge an FIR with them..." he trails off bitterly. Ramjan, however, is not complaining too much. After all, his six-year-old son Zubair Ahmed is still alive. Zubair was trying to slip out of the back of his house, when he was caught by the *kar sevaks* attacking it, who then tried to throw him into the bonfire they had made of the things looted from his house.



A day before: Rehearsing the violence they were to unleash

Zubair was saved by a Hindu friend of his father's, who claimed Zubair was his son.

Further down the road, across from Asharfi Bhawan are the *mohallahs* of Mughalpura and Begumpura. Once again, no house here has survived the wrath of the *kar sevaks* nor have any of the masjids. According to Mohammed Amin and Abdul Hafiz of Mughalpura, it was around 8 a.m on December 7, minutes after the PAC guard posted in their *basti* went off duty, that an army of *kar sevaks* overran their quarters. While Amin hid in some tall grass behind his house, Hafiz slipped into a freshly dug grave. Too scared to go back to their homes even after a couple of hours had passed, Amin, Hafiz and the others who had fled with them, decided to seek refuge at the police *chowki* in Katra. 'They refused to let us in,' says Amin in a matter-of-fact way, as if he had not expected otherwise. So they went running to a PAC camp at a nearby school. 'The situation there was even worse,' continued Amin. 'The police accused us of being murderers. They said we must have knifed some people and were running away from being caught and that in order to hide our crime we were dragging in the story about the *kar sevaks*. They threatened to kill us. Had their commanding officer not turned up, we don't know what would have happened to us.' Except for the wife of their zamindar, known as '*thakurain*' who came out of her house and shouted at the *kar sevaks* to leave, no other neighbour came to help them in their hour of distress.

'Many of us were also terrified,' says Sheetal who is in his mid-20s and lives in Begumpura, 'because, if we pleaded with the mob to stop the burning and looting they were quite ready to turn on us.' Despite this Sheetal personally saved the lives of

many people of his *mohallah*, and was dubbed a 'gaddar' for his efforts by his Hindu friends.

Unlike other towns and cities, there are no Muslim ghettos in Ayodhya. Muslim and Hindu houses stand side by side in most *mohallahs*. But there were a few, very small, predominantly Muslim pockets like Alamganj Katra and Society which were still totally deserted, their silence broken only by the whining of hungry dogs and the painful cries of starving monkeys. These neighbourhoods had been completely destroyed, specially

old Tony and his father Shaukat, a school teacher, were cut to pieces by sword wielding *kar sevaks* and then burnt on the 'chabutra' of their house. Shreds of their blood-stained clothing were still lying at the spot where they had been lynched. The Muslims of the *basti* had not yet returned and it was their Hindu neighbours, three women, who narrated to me the events of December 7. Tedhi Bazar was amongst the first *mohallahs* to be attacked at around 4 a.m by a mob comprising hundreds of men carrying guns and swords. The 10-12 Muslim



The murderous gangs had the full support of the police

Society *mohallah* with its 20-odd houses reduced to rubble and the *minors* of its tiny masjid, strewn about on the grass. Most of the bricks from the houses were dated 1924.

But perhaps the most gruesome act of violence was committed in the Tedhi Bazar *mohallah*, just behind the disputed site, and adjacent to a vacant plot of land where many of the *kar sevaks* had camped during their stay in Ayodhya. Thirteen-year-

houses were ransacked and set on fire. Apart from Shaukat and his son, two brothers, Salim and Nadir, were also killed. 'There were more than a hundred Muslim men, women and children here when the *kar sevaks* came. Some we hid in our houses for three days, the others took refuge in the Ramjanmaboomi police station,' said one of the women. At this juncture, a few men from the *basti* collected and made it quite clear that there was nothing more to be

said. The women, who had begun to show some signs of nervousness, quickly scurried away.

Tedhi Bazar is the *mohallah* from where the rioting in Ayodhya really began, and all the Hindus of the town to one man, accuse Haji Mehboob, the local head of the Babri Masjid Action Committee, for it. Haji Mehboob's house is located on the outskirts of the *basti* overlooking one of the main roads leading upto the disputed site, which was constantly used by the *kar sevaks*. According to those who hold him responsible for starting the violence, which includes everyone from the local journalists, to the mahants and shop-keepers, Haji Mehboob fired around of bullets/threw a bomb on a procession of *kar sevaks* on the evening of December 6, killing one/five of them. So enraged were the *kar sevaks* that that night they swore to take revenge. And the result of Haji Mehboob's folly was there for all to see. On this point, the two most prominent mahants of Ayodhya, Ramdas Paramhans and NrityaGopal Das, of course, disagree with everyone else. They insist that the Muslims, taking advantage of the prevailing situation, set fire to their own homes to claim compensation from the government.

The Muslims are reluctant to accept the more popular theory, although they don't deny it outright either. "I don't know whether he fired the shot," says one of their local leaders, "but if he did, it must have been in self-defence. Only a fool could afford to be aggressive at that point in time, with lakhs of *kar sevaks* milling around the place. And Haji Mehboob was no fool." One of the Hindu women I spoke to in the Tedhi Bazar *mohallah* had also murmured something similar under her breath. "Apni jaan bhi to bachani thi," This does appear to be the more plausible explanation. After all there is no reason why Haji

Mehboob should unnecessarily want to risk his life by firing at the *kar sevaks*.

Apart from this, Muslims also cite the curious behaviour of the station house officer of the Ramjanmaboomi police station, Shukla, on that day to strengthen their argument. Shukla, it was well known, intensely disliked Haji Mehboob, who is regarded as a somewhat notorious character. In fact, just a few week's earlier, Shukla had put him behind bars on what many think was a trumped up charge. Yet not only did Shukla save the lives of Mehboob and his family by locking them up in jail till the danger was over, but also let Mehboob go scot-free afterwards. The Muslims argue that considering the strong enmity between the two, Shukla would not have even let Haji Mehboob out of his sight if there was any truth in what is being said: that it was Mehboob who had first provoked the *kar sevaks* by attacking them.

And lastly, but surely, the fact that every Muslim, his home and other property was systematically singled out for attack as if the *kar sevaks* had gone around with a voter's list in their hands, puts the last nail in the coffin of the revenge theory. There was nothing spontaneous about the violence just as there was nothing spontaneous about the assault on the Babri Masjid. Both were planned to the last detail.

Consequently, for the first time now the divide between the Hindus and Muslims of Ayodhya is absolute. Earlier on both communities used to hold the 'outsiders' responsible for the happenings in Ayodhya, and always insisted that they would survive *kar seva after kar seva* together. Both sides would talk of how the Muslims of the town supplied all the wood used to build the temples of the Hindus and grew flowers and strung them for the necks of the gods and goddesses. This time there was no such talk. The

Muslims see the incidents of December 6-7 as the beginning of their end, a continuing process. They are afraid and angry, but above all they feel let down by the police, the administration, the courts and the Congress government. But nothing has hurt them more than the betrayal of the Hindus of Ayodhya, their own neighbours in many cases, who they are convinced were equal and willing partners in the atrocities committed against them. Abdul Sattar has made up his mind to go to Bombay and so has Abdul Hafiz. They were only waiting for the curfew to lift and the others to return before they made their move. It would appear that Acharya Dharmendra's dream might well come true, because not a single Muslim I spoke to wants to live in Ayodhya now.

As I left Ayodhya I remembered a conversation I had in 1990 with Haji Abdul Ghafoor, who used to lead the *namaz* in the Babri Masjid before it was converted into a temple overnight. When I asked him what he would do if ever the Babri Masjid was demolished, the Haji, well into his 90s, replied without any trace of emotion, "*Hamne to abhi se apna kafan kharid liya hai.*" The tragedy is that the rest of the Muslims of Ayodhya are now preparing to do the same.