

Behrampada

A Besieged Basti

By

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During historical moments, insignificant names are suddenly thrown up and become household words. In the recent riots which dealt a severe blow to the cosmopolitan image of Bombay, one of the names which shot into prominence was that of Behrampada, a hitherto unknown and insignificant Muslim basti on the edge of Bandra station. The basti received adverse publicity as the den of Muslim criminals and Behrampada became a name to be feared and shunned.

Were the communal riots which followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid solely responsible for this or were there other factors operating behind the veil of communal hostility? This article places the insignificant basti within the context of economic developments and political manoeuvring in the area and tries to explore the various factors which might have contributed to Behrampada acquiring such notoriety during the recent riots.

The December Riots

On the morning of December 7, 1992, there was police firing at the entrance of Ahmed Zakaria Nagar on

Anand Kanekar Marg (AK Marg). Pandey, an old Hindu resident of Behrampada who runs a cold drink stall at the gate of Ahmed Zakaria

Nagar, gave a first hand account of the initial attack.

A mob of Shiv Sainiks approached Behrampada with stones, sticks and

bottles at around 9 a.m. He was alarmed and immediately pulled his shutters down. But the mob came and banged on the shop. Pandey was scared and asked them to go away. They replied that they would break his shop if he did not provide them with empty bottles. So Pandey opened the shutter and gave them a crate of soda water bottles. There were a few policemen present but they did not control this mob.

Youngsters from Behrampada also came out on the road and tried to repel the attack by resorting to stone throwing. The Behrampada people claim that the police accompanied the Shiv Sena mob which came to attack the basti. When there was stone throwing on both sides, the police signalled to the Shiv Sena mob to retreat and opened fire on the Muslim boys. One person died on the spot and another died 15 days later.

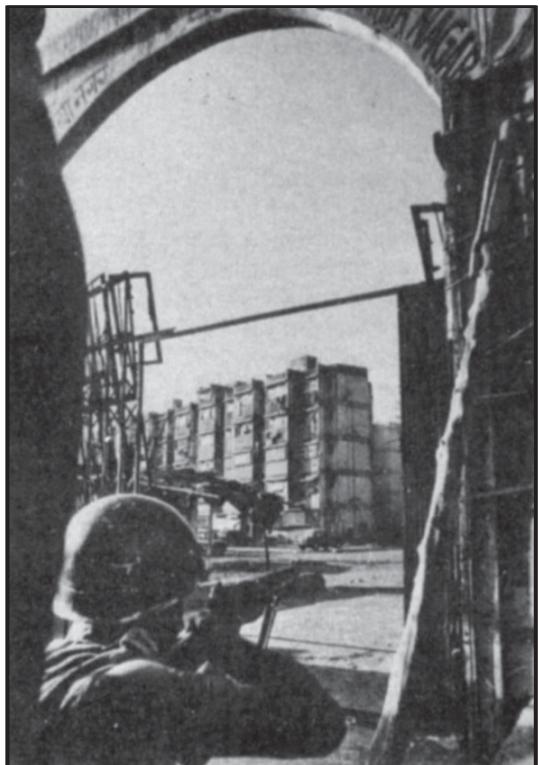
Nargis Sayyed, another eyewitness, states as follows: "There was a lot of tension in the area. I went out on the road and I found a group of boys from Behrampada standing on the road. A few had sticks in their hands. I saw police officers, among whom was Inspector Lade. Since I know him personally, I crossed the crowd and went ahead and started speaking to him. He told me, 'Nargis, control this mob.' I said, 'Yes sir, give

me a minute,' and started pushing the boys behind. There were many police officers and beyond them a group of Shiv Sainiks with bottles, stones and lathis. While I was trying to push the boys back, one elderly Muslim who had a stick in his hand tried to push me and go ahead. While I was controlling him, a bullet went past me and hit Dilshad. He fell down before my eyes. With this the Muslim boys ran into the basti."

The police did not fire teargas shells or resort to lathi charge nor did they warn the crowd before firing. Immediately, Dilshad was carried away in a police van. He was operated upon and the bullet in his brain was removed on the night of December 7. But he died in the intensive care unit of the hospital 15 days later.

The first phase of firing took place between 9 and 10.30 a.m. at various places along AK Marg on the edge of Behrampada. Many innocent persons who were going about their routine morning chores were injured and there

was total panic. After the firing, the police entered their homes, dragged people out, damaged their property and arrested many persons. The basti was terror stricken. With the fear of arrest, most injured persons were hiding in their homes and were not treated at a

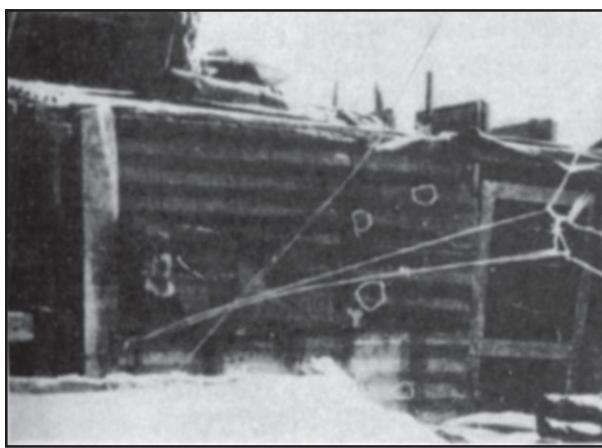


Police open fire at Behrampada

public hospital. When the government declared compensation for injured persons, treatment in a public hospital was made a prerequisite for eligibility. So, many genuine cases could not avail of the compensation under this scheme.

On December 8, the police again entered the basti from the north-eastern end of Behrampada near the LIG and MIG buildings and fired on the basti. One of the casualties was a 50-year-old woman who was fired on at close range. When the police entered the basti and started firing, the women had come out with raised hands to plead with the police to stop firing. Salma Begam, 64, who runs a zari business close to the gutter where the firing took place, is an eyewitness to the incident. She gave the following statement about the incident:

"When I heard continuous firing, I came out along with a group of women. We thought that if we pleaded with the police they would stop firing.



Bullet marks made by police firing on the house walls of Behrampada