



# THE HINDU CENTRE

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## 'Sarkari media said Babri Masjid was damaged; but it was gone'

Qurban Ali

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A CRPF jawan stands near the debris of the demolished Babri-Masjid, in Ayodhya on December 08, 1992. Photo: The Hindu Archives

*Reporting fast-paced breaking news is always an interesting challenge. On December 6, 1992, when the Babri Masjid was being demolished, **Qurban Ali**, a senior journalist at **Rajya Sabha TV**, was in Ayodhya reporting for the now-defunct Hindi publication Sunday Observer and the BBC's Hindi and Urdu services. He reopens a page from his past that he would rather not, to recall his near-death experience: "As the mob gathered to beat us, perhaps even kills us, one of the agitated kar sevaks suggested that killing us might disturb the ongoing demolition and it made more sense to lock us for the time being and kill us later."*

**R**evisiting decisive moments of your life is always a cathartic experience. I can never say the same about December 6, 1992, which brings back a series of haunting memories — that I would rather not revisit. However, when The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy called me and asked me for a first person account of my experience, I felt compelled to share the story as I had witnessed it 25 years ago.

I was working for the Hindi *Sunday Observer* at the time and was also a stringer for the BBC. BBC Hindi and Urdu services often had telephonic interviews that were called 'Phono' or 'two way conversation'. On the December 5, I reached Ayodhya and checked into Hotel Shan-e-Awadh, which over the years had become the favourite haunt of journalists. Anticipation and excitement ran high in the hotel lobby that evening. Backed by the parent Sangh Parivar, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) had announced the kar Seva that day. It was quite evident that they were on their way to demolish the disputed mosque. After all, they had been feverishly practising and rehearsing the demolition for days. The kar sevaks came equipped with all the logistics to demolish the medieval enduring 460-year-old mosque.

On the morning of December 6, Ayodhya was like a beehive with kar sevaks streaming into the already packed temple town. Journalists positioned themselves on an elevated platform near the Babri Masjid. At exactly 10 a.m., kar sevaks started gathering near the mosque and made their way towards the barbed wiring of the security cordon. Within minutes, there was commotion, the storming into the mosque had begun. The kar Sevaks could now be seen climbing the walls and perching themselves on the domes. At the time, BBC's then South Asia Chief Mark Tully decided to move to Faizabad so he could file the news of the storming of the Babri Masjid. Back then there were no mobile phones and the only way to connect to the BBC headquarters in London was through the Central Telegraph Office (CTO) in Faizabad. Mark's colleague, Gillian Wright, a Lucknow-based journalist, Ramdutt Tripathi, and I reached Faizabad around noon where Mark filed his first report. By 1 p.m. we were on our way back to Ayodhya where the first dome of the masjid had already fallen, and the other two were systematically being brought down. We were stopped by the crowds on the outskirts of the city. We went back to Faizabad and decided to follow the para military forces i.e. RAF & CRPF as they moved into Ayodhya. However, to our complete horror, the forces were stopped as well at a railway crossing between the two towns.

When all our efforts to reach Ayodhya were exhausted, a journalist friend Vinod Shukla, then the resident editor of *Dainik Jagran*, suggested a way out. He told us that he knew a way through the city cantonment area and offered us a lift in his personal NE 118 car. His wife and the *Jagran's* local correspondent Saral Gyapte were also in the car. In half an hour, we

managed to reach the Babri Masjid, but by the time the time there was no masjid; all three domes had been demolished. As soon as we got down from our car, a group of violent kar sevaks armed with Tridents and lathis charged at us. Most of them were local residents and were angry to see Mark Tully with us. They knew Mark was a journalist working with the BBC and were quiet unhappy with his coverage of Ayodhya. As the mob gathered to beat us, perhaps even kills us, one of the agitated kar sevaks suggested that killing us might disturb the ongoing demolition and it made more sense to lock us for the time being and kill us later. The five of us were locked in a room in a nearby building. Over the next two hours, a welter of emotions assaulted us, for me the pain was double because a mosque was being demolished and a death threat hung over us.

Saral Gyapte managed to free himself and rushed to the Mahant of Bada Sthan or Badi Haveli, a respectable figure in Ayodhya. When he came to know that the editor of *Jagran* along with some other journalist were being held hostage, he immediately came to our rescue and on his assurance, we were freed at around 7 pm. We were then taken to local office of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) where prominent VHP leaders including Ashok Singhal, Praveen Togadia and some Bharatiya Janata Party leaders were celebrating the demolition. The statue of 'Ram Lala' had been recovered from the mosque and was now at the VHP office where the leaders had lined up for a 'darshan'.

Saral Gyapte asked them for cover so that we could be escorted safely to our hotel in Faizabad. The Mahant of Bada Sthan gave his shawl to Mark Tully so he could hide under it and we were all asked to tie a bandana with the words "kar sevak" written on it. We were put in an Uttar Pradesh Police truck and dropped at the Shan-e-Awadh at 8 p.m.

We reached Faizabad in time to hear the government-controlled media, All India Radio and Doordarshan, blithely state that: "*Ayodhya main vivadaspad Dhanchey ko kuch nuqsan Pahuncha hai*" (the disputed structure in Ayodhya has been slightly damaged).

My last sight of the Babri Masjid was at twilight. It wasn't slightly damaged, as the *sarkari* media claimed. It had been razed to the ground with the kar sevaks taking the rubble as souvenir. At 11 p.m. IST, I broke the news on BBC Urdu service's news bulletin that the Babri Masjid was gone; it had been fully demolished.

**[Correction:** *This article was updated on December 8, 2017, to correct the following typographical error in the introduction: The author, Mr. Qurban Ali, reported for the "now-defunt Hindi [not Hindu] publication, Sunday Observer", as was initially published.]*

*(Qurban Ali is a senior tri-lingual (Hindi, Urdu, and English) journalist with more than 30 years of experience across all traditional media: TV, radio, print and internet. This includes over 14 years with the BBC World Service, and tenures with reputed media houses such as Rajya Sabha TV, Doordarshan News, ETV News, UNI, Observer Group of Publications, and Anand Bazar Patrika Group. He has extensively covered some of the region's major political, social and economic developments, including all general and assembly elections since 1989; natural calamities; conflicts like the Gujarat riots, Kargil War and Iraq war among other stories. Beyond India, he has reported from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the U.K., the U.S., and the UN. He has been a delegate at international summits. He also makes academic contributions as a panellist on interview boards and seminars at institutions of repute like the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) and Jamia Millia Islamia.)*