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A Winter of Anguish: On Ayodhya from Bradford

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File Photo: Kar Sevaks raising slogans in Ayodhya on December 5, 1992. Photo: Subir Roy The Hindu Archives

For a young anthropologist living in the U.K.'s largely Pakistani neighbourhood, Bradford, news of the demolition of Babri Masjid was a bombshell. ***M.A. Kalam, former Professor and Head of the Department of Anthropology, University of Madras****, who was then in Bradford, U.K., recalls how it was to be an Indian in a distant land, when the Babri Masjid was reduced to rubble. "Being Muslims from India, for us it was quite an embarrassing state to be in, in the midst of the south Asian immigrants, irrespective of whether they pitied or sympathised with us, or showed anguish. Wherever we went and whomever we met, it was inevitable that the*

conversation would hover around — it was not directly alluded to — the events in Ayodhya and Mumbai. It was a disheartening situation."

In June 1993 the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Department of Human Sciences), Paris, invited me to speak on the reaction of South Asian immigrants[1] in England to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the subsequent anti-Muslim riots in Mumbai, and the bomb blasts there. Perhaps some of the dust risen from these happenings had settled down, but the heat was pervasive not just in India or the subcontinent but elsewhere in the world too. At the time of the demolition on December 6,1992, I was a Commonwealth Academic Visitor at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), pursuing anthropological research among South Asians in England.

Anthropological research, unlike some sociological studies which could be carried out using questionnaires/schedules and some limited directed interviewing, entails long-term stay with and within the habitats of the people being studied. It involves reaching out to people, interacting with different sections (both women and men) and different age groups, joining them in various events, marriages, rituals, feasts, festivals, and funerals; as an observer, if not a participant one, and to get a feel of what life is like from the inside. A degree of rapport with members of the community one was studying was an inevitable requirement in such a field study. I had pitched my tent, along with my three-year old daughter and wife, in Bradford, Yorkshire, in September 1992. We were to be there for a year. The locality we lived in was almost exclusively inhabited by Pakistanis.

To bring to the fore what we underwent and experienced during the period subsequent to the demolition of Babri Masjid (December 1992 onwards), it is crucial to elucidate the demographic profile and character of Bradford to give an idea of the setting obtained there, and to show where we were located in was a labyrinth of ethnic diversity, which in its wake evoked various kinds of reactions from the diverse populace there. Also, as a bit of recent history, during January 1989 Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* had been publicly burned in Bradford.

The South Asian population of Bradford at the time was 16.92 per cent of the total population. Of this, Pakistanis were 74.66 per cent, Indians 19.31 per cent, and Bangladeshis 6.02 per cent. So, three out of four South Asians one met in Bradford were Pakistani. In effect, the South Asian identity in Bradford was constructed as a Pakistani identity. But this overarching Pakistani identity hid the lot of the core autochthonous ethnic groups of Pakistan, namely, the Punjabis, Sindhis, Pathans, and Baluchis. Subsumed under the Punjabis but who had been vehemently asserting an independent identity of late, were the so-called Azad Kashmiris from

the PoK (Pakistan-occupied Kashmir); earlier, they went by the Mirpuri identity. Also, there was yet another ethnic group which was not indigenous to Pakistan and identified itself as Mohajirs (those who had migrated to Pakistan at the time of independence, and invariably spoke Urdu as their mother tongue. None of the other Pakistanis spoke Urdu as their mother tongue. Ironically Urdu, spoken by only about 8 per cent of the population is the National Language of Pakistan).

To the Caucasian ear and eye, none of these ethnic or linguistic differences made any difference. Anything they heard, including the languages spoken by the Indians or Bangladeshis, was a “Pakistani” language, and every South Asian they encountered or interacted with was a “Pakistani”. So much so that what was construed as a derogatory term, *Paki*, became a description among most sections of the white natives (undoubtedly to denigrate and vilify) for South Asians. Indians too were diverse and harboured ethnic groups based on region, religion, caste, and language. Only the Bangladeshis were the least diverse in terms of religion and language. The only diversity among them was the regional one.

In this maze, different ethnic markers surfaced at different times depending on the occasion. The ultimate reflection at the most macro level was the South Asian identity when the South Asians together had to combat racism and allied discrimination vis-à-vis the white natives. Also, the South Asian identity was invoked when they had to struggle against the local government and the state concerning policy issues.

It was in such an intricate, and at the same time interesting, social setting that we had settled down and established rapport with the “local” populace. And, we were in the third month of our stay there when the Babri Masjid demolition bombshell exploded in Ayodhya. One is not sure what kind of coverage was given in the print and electronic media back home in India. But being in England we had access to the BBC (radio and TV), other international TV channels, as well as to the relatively unbiased print medium. The front-page headline in *The Guardian* (December 7, 1992) said:

"Holy Rage puts India in Crisis: State Government falls as Hindu zealots raze mosque for temple"

The days we spent in Bradford before the demolition of Babri Masjid were relatively more pleasant for us in the sense that we were not constantly on the tenterhooks as to when someone would drop in and talk to us about the demolition, or meet us in the street and bring up the topic. Even someone trying to express sympathy was difficult to face as the sense of

embarrassment had got embedded in us. But to be fair to the people we lived with, nobody tried to needle us or made us feel defensive. It was something of an inherent attitude we developed post the demolition that made us to feel defensive.

What we saw, heard, and read was nothing less than shocking. It did not take much to convince us that indifference, neglect, and a level of complicity on the part of the Indian state (both at the central level and at the level of the Uttar Pradesh government) had gone a long way for such an event to occur. The South Asian population of Bradford, and most other places in England too (particularly the non-Indian sections), seemed convinced that the Indian state was unarguably involved in the demolition exercise by being apathetic to and turning a blind eye to the build-up of the event.

The demolition was not just about a physical edifice. It was much more; it was about razing to the ground an icon of religiosity, faith and belief. Muslims, not just in Bradford but wherever they were, were horrified. The event was roundly condemned all over the world.

Different streams of thought and reactions were expressed by the South Asians, particularly the Muslim sections, in Bradford as also elsewhere, as regards the Muslims of India. At one level there was a degree of sympathy for what befell on them. They were pitied upon for being helpless in a situation of the kind that came about.

At another level it was felt in some quarters that such a large Muslim population in India could not defend a mosque. They should have anticipated and seen what was coming and should have in concert taken steps to prevent the tragedy.

Being Muslims from India, for us it was quite an embarrassing state to be in, in the midst of the south Asian immigrants, irrespective of whether they pitied or sympathised with us, or showed anguish. Wherever we went and whomever we met, it was inevitable that the conversation would hover around — if was not directly alluded to — the events in Ayodhya and Mumbai. It was a disheartening situation.

Unfortunately, none of the things that were happening back in India could be kept under wraps or brushed under the carpet. The whole world was witness to the events through the print and electronic media. Keeping a low profile, not meeting/interacting with people, and expecting time to be a healer was an option, of course, but not at the practical level. The methodology of anthropological research does not encourage one to take that kind of stance; regrettably,

nor does it prepare one for such unforeseen circumstances. There is no standard operating procedure to adopt and fall back on.

Anthropologist friends at the LSE and elsewhere in England as well as in the U.S. wrote to me, spoke over the phone, and expressed sorrow at one level. But at another level they pointed out as to how crises in communities and societies where anthropologists carry out research, unfold a lot in terms of latent feelings and desires, preferences and prejudices, that get unwrapped during such events. It was quite revealing to see in the media reactions bordering on glee and triumph from some Bharatiya Janata Party followers, particularly in London and Leicester. Of course, such rejoicing happened in many places in India and the U.S. too.

The idea of India we had grown up with was an eclectic and syncretic one where people with different beliefs visited the religious institutions and shrines of the other faiths. It is not unusual for Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians to show devotion at the mausoleums and reliquaries of Muslims. Likewise, Muslims do visit and make votive offerings at religious places of different faiths. It was this pluralistic practice that was quite easy, particularly for the Hindus to follow due to their polytheistic practices, that lay in smithereens along with the rubble of the Babri Masjid.

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My father lived in a city in Karnataka during this tumultuous period. Though there was no direct impact of the Babri Masjid demolition in south India, the riots that targeted Muslims in Mumbai really shook us. Certain pockets in Karnataka were indeed quite sensitive in terms of Hindu-Muslim relations. We had relatives in many cities in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Those were not just anxious but nerve-wracking times. We had a degree of relief when my father joined us in Bradford in March 1993. His joining us almost coincided with the bomb blasts in Mumbai. While his joining us gave us some solace, the senseless killings that occurred in India whether due to the riots or the bomb blasts were nightmarish.

After the Paris presentation I also gave talks at the University of Edinburgh and the LSE. When it was time to return to the then Madras in August 1993 it was difficult to articulate our feelings.

But overall, we were happy that we were going back to a place where we would be closer to our relatives and friends. A Pakistani professor at the University of Bradford made arrangements for our journey from Bradford to Heathrow airport and accompanied us (we still keep in touch, at professional and personal levels).

Identity markers and the need for empirical studies

What had changed back home? In Madras, overtly, nothing seemed to have changed. However, a quick but limited visit to Mumbai, to meet a fellow academic, a sociologist, at the Mumbai University campus in Kalina, brought a bit of a surprise. Many Muslim girls had taken to wearing *burqas* and *hijabs* to emphasise their Muslim identity. Such identity markers were not so apparent among Muslim men students.

This transformation, according to my friend, was a post-riots occurrence. We both recalled how a Sikh professor, also a sociologist, who had been a shorn Sikh for almost his entire life, had taken to wearing the *pagri* (turban) subsequent to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination.

Though such stress of identity markers is understandable in localities of clustered living where there is religious, social, and peer pressure to adopt identity symbols, such an occurrence at the university level was, in a way, unexpected since in the normal course, a majority of the Muslim girls studying for post graduate education, would be from a slightly upper middle-class background. But of course, we also have the example of the university professor in Delhi taking to wearing the *pagri* subsequent to the riots in Delhi.

About six years after the Mumbai riots, Coimbatore was rocked by bomb blasts in 1998. Eyewitness accounts suggested that Muslim men had taken to wearing the skull cap to underline their identity. Also seen were changes in their garb. So, what came about in Mumbai earlier was not a one-off or an isolated kind of happening.

One is not aware of any empirical research that explains why soon after a crisis people assert their identity in such a manifest manner. Could it be because a sense of belonging to a group gives them psychological security? Is it a signal to the 'other', the real or the assumed oppressors, that there indeed is a group that comes to the support of the individual, and the individual can fall back on that group for succour? We need empirical studies to enrich our understanding of this phenomenon.

Subsequent to the tragic events discussed above, one came across, particularly in the academic realm, burgeoning instances of coming into the open of closet right-wing sympathisers. In a way it was a good augury as one knew manifestly what kind of ideological individual one was encountering. These people asserted themselves overwhelmingly during seminars, conferences and debates in general, with the vehemence of the newly converted. They were aggressively and unapologetically Hindutva. Expectedly, their joy knew no bounds when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies did manage to scramble to power at the centre in 1996.

A particularly galling thing for the liberal, secular and left-oriented sections, through the years subsequent to March 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts, was that if any untoward event occurred anywhere in the country, Muslims were blamed for it. Surprisingly, our school-going daughter, who was hardly conscious of her Muslim identity, too was subjected to such verbal salvos by her peers and seniors in school as well as in her play group outside school. Where and how did these small children get such ideas? They were, undoubtedly, exposed to and learnt from the communal discourse happening in their homes among the elders.

Notes and References:

1. I consciously do not use the term Diaspora. For the reasons for this and an explanation see **Kalam 2014** and **2002**.

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I thank Professor (Emeritus) **Chris Fuller**, LSE, for helping me access the headline of *The Guardian*, dated December 7, 1992.

The Guardian's coverge of the demolition can be accessed here URL: [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/28/ayodhya-mosque-india-guardian-report].

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