



**April 2001
Special Report**

Rathyatra retraced

Unless he, too, prefers to suffer from ‘memory failure’ before the Liberhan Commission as Uma Bharati did, Union home minister LK Advani would benefit from a quick survey of news reports that recorded his words and deed for posterity – during the bloody rath yatra in 1990, till the demolition of the Babri masjid in 1992 and subsequently

By TEESTA SETALVAD

After eight years of procrastination, the proceedings of the Justice MS Liberhan Commission investigating the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 have reached the conclusive stage. Evidence of the key accused in the entire episode, however, still requires to be led, before arguments from either side can begin. This includes the evidence of former BJP president, best remembered for his bloody rathyatra to Ayodhya in 1990, Lal Krishna Advani. Today he is India’s home minister. Others to depose are another former BJP president and presently Union HRD minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, and former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh.

Through rather dubious claims in a writ petition filed before the Delhi High Court, Singh has sought to avoid appearing before Justice Liberhan altogether. It is to be hoped that the Delhi HC judge in question will call Singh’s bluff and compel him to appear in this significant investigation.

Advani, too, has been avoiding appearance before the Commission, pleading “other pressing commitments” as an excuse for some time now. He is scheduled to appear before Justice Liberhan on April 10 and 11. Further cross-examination of former Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao and some other witnesses are also due.

Only after these depositions and cross-examination will the arguments begin and the key issues under investigation be raised. The issue being probed relates to the crucial question of rule of law under the Indian Constitution. A place of worship and a historical site was destroyed in broad daylight with no resistance from the police and the paramilitary deployed. Equally important is the instigation to violence that resulted in systematic and violent attacks on the lives and properties of Muslims, before and after the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

For the first time in the half-a-century old history of the Indian republic, a mass movement was orchestrated and thereafter blatantly used to subvert the law and defy basic norms of equal and fair protection of all sections of the population by the law and order machinery. The purpose of the investigation, however delayed (as unfortunately all such public investigations have been in the past) and subverted, too, by key witnesses accused of criminal conspiracy yet holding positions of power today is to nail and punish those guilty.

As Advani’s date with the Liberhan Commission draws close, CC proposes to recall — through documents and press clippings — the events that led to the demolition. This will remind our readers of the issues raised by the movement that resulted in the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the widespread violence it brought in its wake. A reminder of the past words and deeds of the key leaders of the sangh parivar, something they would like us all to forget today.

In this issue, CC looks back for answers to the questions:

Ø What was Advani’s role in leading the rath yatra in 1990 and again in 1992? Through public speeches and silent mobilisation, in the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992? In inciting crowds and thus triggering rounds of communal riots countrywide through his rath

yatra?

Ø What did large sections of the mass media report and record about the trail of blood that the rath yatra left behind in its wake?

Ø How did Advani and the BJP react to the demolition soon after it took place?

Ø What has Advani said on the issue, from the time the BJP adopted the Ramjanmabhoomi programme initiated by the VHP in 1986, until the demolition, and since, even as Union home minister?

Ø Which is Advani's realspeak and which his doublespeak?

1993

A month after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, on January 25, 1993, Advani expressed "no regrets over the demolition" adding, "it was the hand of providence that willed the fall of the Babri Masjid".

The Indian Express dated January 26, 1993 reported on his public meeting in Ahmedabad under the headline: 'No regrets over demolition, says Advani'. The text of the report read — "Ahmedabad: Bharatiya Janata Party leader LK Advani told a largely attended public meeting at Narangpura in Ahmedabad at the end of his three-day visit to the state on Sunday that what happened at Ayodhya on December 6 would change the course of Indian history. Mr. Advani said he did not regret the demolition of the mosque though he was sad that day because his fervent pleas to kar sevaks not to damage the monument had been ignored. Reciting a couplet from Tulsi Ramayan, 'Hoi So Soyi Jo Ram Lekhi Rakha', he said the disputed structure was destined to fall because Providence had ordained it so."

Another report of the same event in *The Economic Times* dated January 26, 1993 had the headline 'Providence willed fall of Masjid, Advani'.

Soon after the demolition, despite occasional outbursts of remorse at the event, LK Advani was unequivocal in his assessment that the political gain to the BJP from the demolition far outweighed outpourings of secular remorse. December 6, 1992 meant increased voter support for the BJP, or so Advani felt. At no place is this more clearly evident than in the foreword to the BJP's white-paper on Ayodhya, authored by Advani and triumphantly released by him at the party office in New Delhi in April 1993.

The Frontline dated May 21, 1993 carries a report on the event titled, 'Black, and White'. "The feeling in the rank and file that after December 6, 1992, the BJP has come into its own was corroborated by its leader, LK Advani at a press conference in New Delhi on April 18 to release the document, when he claimed: "It was because of Ayodhya and the people's perception of it that the BJP increased its voter support."

In the foreword to the paper, Advani amplifies his claim. "...But the kar sevaks did more. They did not just erase a symbol of our subjugation. They did not just begin building a symbol of resurgence. They showed us as if in a flash, how far we have to travel. For the country reacted in two diametrically opposite ways, as virtually two different peoples. For a handful — those in government, in political parties, and in large sections of the English press, for instance — what happened were a 'national shame', it was 'madness', and it was 'barbaric'. For the rest of the county it was a liberation — a sweeping away of cobwebs. The depth of anger at the recent policies, surprised me, as I said; the depth of the chasm between these two nations — the microscopic minority and the people — did not."

The *Blitz* of May 1, 1993 in an article under the heading, 'I Accuse...', quotes Advani in the foreword: "Sri Rama is the unique symbol, the unequalled symbol of our oneness, of our integration, as well as of our aspiration to live the higher values. As Maryada Purushottam, Sri Rama has represented for thousands of years the ideal of conduct, just as Ram Rajya has always represented the ideal of governance. And one saint of our land after another, one saintly tradition after another has immersed itself in devotion to Him: the sacred Sri Guru Sahib

celebrates and invokes Sri Rama about two thousand four hundred times, Gandhiji died with His name on his lips.

“It is natural, therefore, that the place of His birth has been an object of the deepest devotion for Hindus through the millennia — the inscription which has been found at the site and which speaks of a magnificent temple with a pinnacle of gold, dedicated to Lord Vishnu Hari who had humbled King Bali and defeated the wicked Dashanana, that is, Ravana; the record of the unremitting struggle of the Hindus to regain the site; the pathetic history of their worshipping the spot from a distance when they were denied access to it, of their circumbulating it — all these bear testimony to their deep and abiding, and indeed stirring, devotion to Sri Rama.

“On the other hand, the structure which Mir Baqi put up on the orders of Babur never had any special significance from a religious point of view. It was purely and simply a symbol not of devotion and of religion but of conquest. Correspondingly, quite apart from its being an obstacle, preventing Hindus from worshipping the birthplace of their idol, Sri Rama, it was for the country the symbol of its subjugation. This is how in 1989 the Bharatiya Janata Party formally decided to lend its shoulder to the cause — the party was responding to the deepest urges of our people.”

1990

To go back three years, when Advani led his rath yatra from Somnath through Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, and Purulia in West Bengal until it's culmination, news reports portray the then BJP president in a defiant and angry mode, as he challenges the law and order machinery to dare act against him or his rath initiative. Incidentally, news reports of the period warn of the fast-deteriorating ground reality around the trail of the rath yatra that caused deep polarisation and brutal and violent communal outbursts.

The Telegraph dated October 16, 1990 records the defiant mood of Advani as he dares the government to arrest him. A report titled, ‘Advani defies govt to stop rathyatra, arrest him’, reads:

“New Delhi, Oct. 15: The BJP president, Mr LK Advani, today warned the government not to “stand in the way” of building the Ram Janmabhoomi temple and said any obstruction on its part would prove costly... Speaking from atop his rath, Mr Advani challenged the government to arrest him and his associates and impound the rath. He warned: ‘If the government stops us, it should be ready to face the consequences.’”

The Sunday Times of October 14, 1990 similarly records Advani in a defiant mood. ‘No one will stop this rath yatra’, is the headline of the interview he gave to Swapan Dasgupta.

“Q. Now that the rath yatra has taken off, there is a demand that it be banned on the grounds that it is inflaming communal passions. You have said it will provide a healing touch. Is there some failure in communicating this view to those who demand a ban?

Advani: No, I do not attribute it to any such failure to understand the message of the rath yatra. I am sure that everyone knows that it has provided a healing touch; it has not caused any tensions or has not inflamed passions. These demands are being made by people who felt that they could ride roughshod over the sentiments of the Hindus. But now the sentiments of the Hindus have been manifested and articulated in such a powerful fashion without arousing any communal passion that their case has become indefensible. It is the indefensibility of their own case which makes them react with such vehemence.

“I am pained by the casual comments being made here and there about the rath yatra leaving behind trails of blood and communal passions. Actually, these have nothing to do with ground reality; I can admit that I was very apprehensive when it started. As everyone knows, Gujarat and particularly certain places such as Baroda, Ahmedabad, Surat and Bharuch have become very susceptible to riots over the slightest provocation.

Therefore, I was particularly keen to ensure that nothing happened. You may have noticed that as the first reaction of the rath yatra, there was the blood tilak, vessels of blood and the collection of shastras. All this is symbolic, they don't mean anything. Even then they saw that I

didn't approve of the slogans that are being raised. Babri Masjid todo, jo hum say takrayega sidha upar jayega' and I think this disapproval had a very salutary effect on them".

A spate of news reports, analyses and editorials around this period warn of the grave consequences to harmony and unity caused by the divisive politics of Advani's rath. This editorial in *The Times of India*, dated October 5, 1990 called 'Playing With Fire' really sums it up:

"If the BJP president is congratulating himself on the success of his Rath Yatra – and going by his recent utterances in Maharashtra he seems to be doing just that — the rest of the country has reason to be greatly worried. For, with the conclusion of the Gujarat chapter of the programme, it should be plain that Mr Advani's campaign is leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Communal riots have already broken out in Baroda and Banaskantha. It is difficult not to see the connection between the Rath Yatra and the Ram Jyoti campaigns on the one hand and the heightening of communal tensions in different parts of the country on the other... Indeed the collection of lethal weapons, particularly of trishuls, gory ceremonies and performance of other rituals designed to create a spirit of militancy... it would be something of a surprise if violence did not follow it.

"By taking the lead in the campaign whose divisive and destructive potential is just going to unfold ... he has considerably lowered his political stature. His inflammatory speeches, his indulgent wielding of glittering Sudarshan Chakras in public and his endorsement of the most bigoted among the militants threaten to identify him with the likes of Acharya Giriraj Kishore of the VHP... If Mr Advani is concerned about the unity and integrity of the country and stands for the defence of law and order, he should reconsider his course."

Advani paid no heed as a succession of news reports from different newspapers show. 'Stop Rath Yatra, government told, read a headline in *The Hindustan Times*, October 7, 1990. An article in *The Sunday Observer*, dated October 14, 1990 titled, 'The Communal Flare-up' was authored by none less than Sudheendra Kulkarni, then assistant editor with the paper and today officer on special duty to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. The article read:

"Tumkur, Mandya, Kodagu or Coorg, Chitradurga, Mysore, Mangalore, Shimoga, parts of Bangalore city itself and even Dharwar in North Karnataka, have all reported instances of mounting tensions and even minor clashes. What is new to this present round of communal violence in this state, is the extent to which it has succeeded in penetrating the villages. The burning down of an entire hamlet of Muslim farmers near Chennapatna is only the most shocking among the cases reported so far. In Kolar district, too, Muslim houses in several villages have been reported to have been attacked by unknown outsiders.

"Even as the state was reeling under the sudden spurt of religious strife, yet another piece of inhumanity was committed in Bah Malkheda, a village in the north-eastern district of Bidar (which borders Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh). Seven persons, including a woman and a child, were roasted alive, in a clash that was set off by nothing more than a minor altercation between two drunken youths... There is no doubt whatsoever, that the Muslim community (which constitutes about 35 per cent of the town's population) bore the brunt of the rioting, both in terms of lives lost and property damaged — of the 17 dead, 13 were Muslims. Muslim hoodlums, in turn, attacked a colony of Tamil speaking Adi Dravidas (adivasis) and set ablaze 15 houses. 'They asked us angrily why we received the Ram Jyoti at our colony on Dussera,' recounted Venkatayya, who was one of few old men present when the attack occurred.

"But what Hindu lumpens wreaked on the Muslims was on a far larger scale. Yaarab Nagar, a colony of poor Muslims, engaged in beedi-rolling, toy-making and other low-paying forms of self-employment, was attacked by a mob 500 men wearing 'khaki shorts' (as Saab Jaan Saab, a local resident described them). A Muslim watchman of a nearby plastic factory was roasted alive when it was set ablaze. Sikandar Pasha, a lottery ticket seller, was burnt alive in front of his house. Amir Jaan, a beedi roller, was axed to death while Khairun Bi, an elderly deaf woman, was knifed and killed inside her little hut".

Other news reports of the period published by the national press record with chilling similarity the trail of violence that Advani's rath yatra inspired. 'Fears of another round of communal

frenzy dog Gonda', read a headline in the *Blitz* dated October 14, 1990.

In a long report, *The Telegraph* (Insight) dated October 14, 1990, was scathing in its comment. The newspaper has likened Advani's rath with 'Chariots of Fire.'

"...The extent to which communal passions have been heightened is evident simply by taking a look at what is happening in UP today: even before Mr Advani's rath has entered the state, the death toll in communal clashes has gone up to 44. And with the BJP chief about to enter UP, there is apprehension that this figure might shoot up... When the rath moved into Maharashtra from Surat, the armed Bajrang Dal activists were less prominent — but the speeches of the BJP leaders were as full of venom..."

"It was not just coincidence that communal riots should break out in Karnataka, within days of Mr Advani and his Ram rath passing through Solapur, near Maharashtra's border with Karnataka. On October 3, communal clashes claimed nearly 20 lives in Kolar, Chennapatna and Ramanagaram towns and another 12 a few days later in Davangere. At least in Davangere, the instigation once again was VHP volunteers, who insisted on taking the Ram Jyoti procession through the heavily Muslim populated areas of Davangere town.

"In neighbouring Mandya and Hasan districts miscreants desecrated places of worship, set fire to houses and vehicles and assaulted women. But what needs to be pointed is the failure of the Veerendra Patil government.

"In Madhya Pradesh, where Mr. LK Advani's rath wound its way through 13 of the state's 45 districts, the BJP message was clear: the Muslims in India had to choose between Maryada Purshottam Lord Ram and looter Babar. This was repeatedly stressed by BJP leaders in the course of Mr Advani's whistle stop tour from October 6 to 10. In fact, at Mandasaur, from where chief minister Sunderlal Patwa hails, Mr Pramod Mahajan, the BJP leader in the course of a fiery speech asked the Muslims to either have faith in Lord Ram or else leave the country. Mr Advani all the while nodded in acquiescence and the hundreds of youths who surrounded the podium brandished their swords and trishuls and hailed the speech. The result, of course, was inevitable: communal clashes broke out in Raipur."

'When the Pink City ran red with blood', *The Sunday Observer*, by Nirupama Subramanian, dated October 28, 1990, reads: "Death arrived at Mohalla Koliyan and Rishi Ghalib Nagar in the congested Ramganj area this week with a savageness that has few parallels in this part of the country. The Pink City acquired several shades to turn a crimson red, the colour of blood and mindless violence."

Similarly, *The Telegraph* report on October 28, 1990 in 'Purulia violence after Yatra' by Barun Ghosh says: "The communal flare-up that rocked Jhalda in Purulia district on Thursday claiming 9 lives, is a direct fall-out of the *rathayatra* of Mr. LK Advani which passed through the town on October 20."

The Independent, dated November 2, 1990 in a story titled, 'Communal riots take a new turn in Indore', depicts the grisly violence in that town. "Communal Frenzy and out-bursts are nothing new to Indore. These are like festering sores and this sprawling industrial town, over the years, has learnt to live with them. What is remarkably different in the on-going clashes is that rampaging mobs armed to the teeth have clashed with the police attacking them with firearms and, of all things, tear gas grenades. Curfew orders have been violated with impunity and families of policemen have been attacked and their houses damaged. That the riots were pre-planned is evident from the large haul of stored arms and weapons from several houses — petrol bombs, country made pistols, guns, Molotov cocktails, swords, spears, knives, tear gas grenades, glass shards and soda water bottles.

The events in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 and countrywide in the dark month that followed are testimony that the assessments of scribes were proved woefully correct.

1992

After the demolition, here are some of the newspaper headlines. 'Over 200 killed in nationwide

frenzy', reads *The Indian Express*, December 8, 1992; 'Anarchic situation in Ayodhya,' is the headline of *The Hindu*, December 8, 1992; 'SC hints at trial of BJP leaders,' said *The Pioneer* of December 8, 1992; 'Violence toll crosses 500,' was the headline in *The Indian Express*, December 9, 1992; "Violence Unabated, toll mounts to 700", *The Economic Times*, December 10, 1992; and, "Shoot at sight in Calcutta: Toll mounts to 950, *The Economic Times*, December 11, 1992.

The *Frontline* on January 1, 1993 in its story headlined 'Wounds all over — The violent aftermath' said: "It may well go down in history as the worst round of widespread violence the country has seen since Partition: over a thousand people were killed in the week following the Black Sunday. The states of Maharashtra and Gujarat were burning and bleeding with more than 200 of their people consumed by the communal fury in less than a week. Anarchy reigned in Bombay and Surat where the tolls were as high as 191 and 155 respectively five days after the vandalism in Ayodhya. Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Assam and Karnataka were also reeling under the impact of riots. Surprisingly, while West Bengal remained by and large peaceful initially, a belated bout of violence broke out in Calcutta and adjoining districts."

1994

Two years later, this report in *The Independent* dated July 25, 1994 is a sombre reminder of just what the Ayodhya movement was really all about. "Fears of 'ethnic cleansing' in Ayodhya; 'Shuddhikaran' programme includes fight against 'Islamikaran' of holy city by Janardan Thakur. "Behind the surface calm of this besieged town, a sinister plot is being executed. Its goal: to scare away the Muslim population, take over their land and property — and their holy places. Leaders of the community wake up to threatening calls by unidentified callers demanding that they 'quit Ayodhya or die'. Muslim shops are ransacked and burgled at night and the police refuse to register their cases lest the shopkeepers claim compensation from insurance companies to keep their establishments going."

Clearly, Advani, the man who played a pivotal role in the movement that led to the demolition of the Babri masjid, with callous disregard to its implications for the rule of law, or its human consequences, will have a lot to answer before the Liberhan Commission.

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