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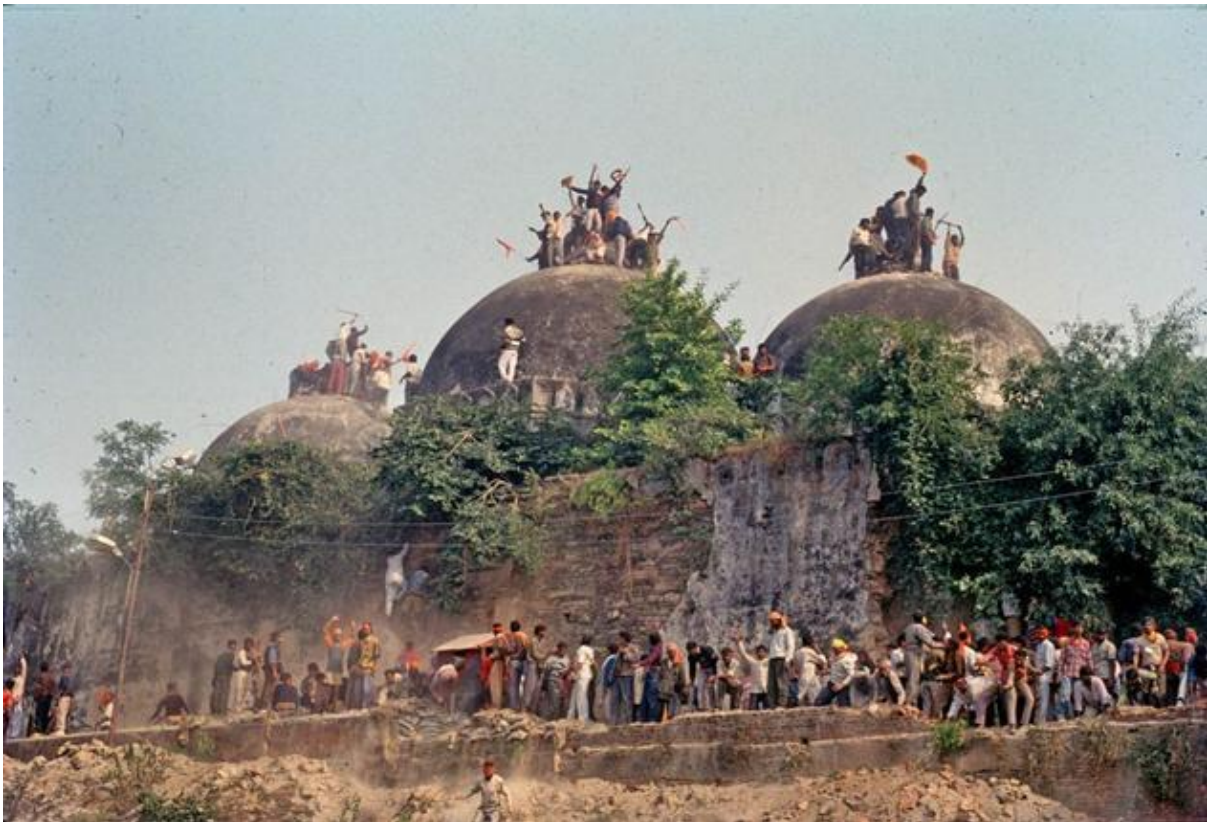


25 Years after Babri Masjid Demolition

## "When the Last Dome Fell"

Sajeda Momin

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'Kar Sevaks' armed with shovels, iron rods and pickaxes on top of the domes of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, the day the Mosque was demolished. File Photo: Sanjay Sharma. The Hindu

*On December 6, 1992, when the Babri Masjid was razed to a rubble by a frenzied group of kar sevaks, a young journalist, **Sajeda Momin**, who was at the scene, saw not just the domes of the medieval mosque collapse one after another but also the frightened faces of Ayodhya's Muslim men, women, and children, who had taken refuge in a police station in their own town.*

The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was destroyed on 6th December 1992—a quarter of a century and half of my life ago—and yet I can remember it as vividly as if it was yesterday. That dark day shook the very fabric of secular India and proved to be a watershed moment in the country's history as well my own professional and personal life.

I can still see the thousands of saffron-clad 'kar sevaks' clambering atop the 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque and pounding it with shovels, iron rods, pickaxes and anything they could lay their hands on. I can hear the screeching of Sadhvi Uma Bharti egging them on shouting "*ek dhakka aur do, Babri Masjid tod do*" through the microphones from atop the specially-built watchtower for the BJP/RSS/VHP leadership. I can visualize the three domes of the mosque collapsing inwards one by one at intervals of roughly an hour on that cold, wintery Sunday afternoon. Sadly, in my mind's eye I can also still see the frightened faces of the 100-odd Muslim men, women and children packed into a small room in Ayodhya police *chowki*. They were residents of the small holy town who had sought refuge here when the *kar sevaks* went on the rampage desecrating graves and beating and killing any Muslim they could find – some would say collateral damage of 'Operation Masjid Demolition', whereas I would say a glimpse of the future for the community. They did not even spare the BJP Minority Cell president who was killed while shouting "but I am one of you".

I was posted to Lucknow as the Uttar Pradesh correspondent of the Calcutta-based newspaper, *The Telegraph* in 1989, just before the BJP decided to pick up the Babri Masjid/Ramjanambhoomi as the issue that would help them attain power. If anyone had told me in the summer of 1989 when I made my first trip to the Babri Masjid that four years hence it would change the course of Indian history, I would have said they were giving too much importance to this mosque built by Mir Baqi, a lieutenant of the Emperor Babar, 400 years ago. But boy was I proved wrong and how!

Ayodhya was then a small, sleepy town on the banks of the river Saryu with purportedly 6,000 temples, *maths* and *akharas*, and this mosque or "Ramjanambhoomi Mandir" as it was being called was not even the most popular spot for pilgrims or tourists. Perched atop a hill with a deep pit behind it, the three domes of the Babri Masjid could be seen from a distance. It had all the signs of a mosque with a graveyard surrounding the front entrance, the final resting place of Muslims who had lived and died in Ayodhya over the centuries. The outer courtyard had a small platform on which Ram *bhakt*s sat and chanted bhajans. This was known as the Ram Chabutra and it was here that the idol of Ram Lalla (Child Ram) had sat for hundreds of years since the mosque was built, until that fateful night on 22 December 1949 when the idols were picked up and placed under the central dome of the masjid.

Ironically on that first trip to Ayodhya, I met many local Hindus and Muslims who told me that having a mosque with a Ram Chabutra in its courtyard was a great symbol of the syncretic nature of the town, the state of Uttar Pradesh and of India. They argued that Hindus and Muslims had lived in Ayodhya peacefully together for hundreds of years, and that the idols had been placed in the mosque by communal mischief-makers of the Hindu Mahasabha. The

heirs of those mischief-makers today rule both UP and India and the syncretic idyll has been thoroughly smashed.

During the four years between my first trip and 1992, I would hear many times from locals that 'outsiders' were coming to Ayodhya and disturbing its peace and communal harmony. As the BJP's 'Ram Mandir' campaign picked up Ayodhya and its twin town of Faizabad became my second home. Thanks to my frequent trips I got to know all the lanes and bylanes of the temple town very well – something which would stand me in good stead to escape the wrath of the *kar sevaks* on 6<sup>th</sup> December.

Upto 1992 I had never hidden my Muslim identity. I was naïve enough to believe that journalists had some sort of protective shield because after all they were only there to do their job. These were days long before the murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh—killed for writing the 'inconvenient' truth. My senior colleagues knew better and in that frenzied atmosphere insisted on calling me by a Hindu name so as not to draw the attention of the menacing *kar sevaks* who were holding journalists hostage on the terrace of Manas Bhavan, a temple overlooking the Babri Masjid.

As we stood from just before noon till 4.55 p.m., when the last dome fell, watching an act that was illegal and unconstitutional at so many different levels some of my 'secular'—now considered a dirty word—Hindu colleagues cried. I was certainly saddened by the destruction of the Babri Masjid for what it symbolised for modern India but I didn't cry. However, what did bring tears to my eyes was the room full of petrified Muslims at Ayodhya Police Station, not knowing whether they would get out of there alive—this was the human face of what the Mosque's demolition meant to me. Ten years later, lakhs of Gujarati Muslims faced the full force of similar *kar sevaks*. This time it wasn't a 400-year-old mosque that they demolished but the lives, businesses and spirit of the Muslim community. And then, yes I did cry – but today's India is beyond tears.

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