

WEEKEND MAGAZINE

6th December: The Day that Shook South Asia Under the Cloud of Crisis

As the Hindu militants dug into the walls of the 400-year old masjid, they were, in effect, digging into the edifice on which modern India stood. With each strike of the hammer India's claim to be a secular state was weakened. With every sweep of the shovel that removed the debris a chunk of the trust was thrown out into the dust. As the domes fell, one by one, so did a hope, a faith and a dream. Forever? Only time will tell. MAHFUZ ANAM, Executive Editor of The Daily Star, was in Delhi on the fateful day, and narrates his personal experience.

and expressed their deep fear of the backlash that was bound to occur throughout the country. Till this time, the extent of the damage to the masjid was not very clear, except that it was massive. I was still not fully aware of the extent of events occurring about 500 km from where I was. I returned to my hotel, and after a quick shower, tuned on the television and saw the Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao addressing the nation. It was a grim faced, haggard looking, tense Prime Minister that was speaking to his people. He spoke slowly and very carefully, evidently a bit to anxious to create the

tried to follow the unfolding story from there. The place was tense and there was an uncharacteristic silence all around. The unuttered question on everyone's lips was "what will happen now". That there will follow a widespread riot, there was no doubt. How serious it will be, and where it will spread was the question nobody was asking out loud, and to which there was really no answer. Like a waiting storm, the only thing to do was to brace for it and take all the precautionary measures possible. Having been mercifully spared the occurrence of widespread riots in Dhaka, I was totally unused to it. I recalled having heard my parents talk about the riots of Calcutta in 1946-47, and read about other incidents during Pakistan days. Suddenly the descriptions began to flash through my mind and I could picture thousands of people running around for shelter in hundred of Indian cities, saving themselves from neighbours, friends or acquaintances, suddenly turned enemy due to some civil transformation caused by ancient passions for which all the modern education, up-to-date communication and the obvious benefits of peace and co-operation seem to have no answer - at least, not yet. Most journalists that I could huddle into a corner to talk to me for a few minutes, blamed Narasimha Rao for having failed to perform his duty as the PM. All sorts of accusations from connivance with the BJP, to placating Hindu sentiments, to utter incompetence on the part of the government, was circulating through the vast and sprawling editorial department of the Times of India.

The news of reaction from outlying areas was suddenly supplemented by a few, closer to where I was. There was tension in the old Delhi and curfew was being imposed there. Suddenly riot seem to be creeping closer to where I was, and a chill through my body trying to psychologically prepare myself to confront such a situation. I couldn't help imagine the Delhi of the ancient times, the one that the Mughals had beautified, and thought how can there be such hatred when the evidence of Hindu-Muslim co-operation was written so largely on every ran nook and corner of this historic and fascinating city.

My thoughts were broken by Dilip's offer of giving me a ride to my hotel as he really did not feel comfortable with the idea of my taking a taxi at 10.30 pm from Bahadur Shah Jaffer Marg (Road), which is quite near to the old Delhi.

As the car drove us through the deserted streets of Delhi, we both remained engrossed in our thoughts. After a long silence I asked "Is it 1947 all over again?" There was no answer. My friend kept looking out through the car window into the darkness outside. The winter dew, coupled with Delhi's pollution, made things outside appear darker than it really was.

days as a result of the events that were to unfold within less than 36 hours of my arrival and dramatically change the perspectives in which India would be judged in the near future. The meeting I had come to attend was organised by NAMEDIA, a Non-Aligned media body based in Delhi, and funded by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation of Germany. There were many eminent Indian editors present, including my old friend and Unesco colleague, Dilip Padgaonkar, now the editor of the prestigious Times of India. I was meeting him for the first time after returning to full-time journalism. Hence there was a lot to talk about.

The ghost of Pakistan's founder, MA Jinnah, is haunting India. His so-called "Two-Nation Theory" is back in vogue, and this time, however intellectually flawed and historically untenable, back in those tumultuous days, captured the imagination of millions of Muslims of India. For whom it provided a simple ideological matrix within which to articulate their demand for a separate state. Seldom has there been such a quick and dramatic acceptance of a 'theory' by such a large number of people. This time, however, the Two-Nation theory has been resurrected from the black waters of history (it was relegated to history's dump, for in the very country born on its basis - Pakistan - the animosity and suspicion between the various nationalities and now between the so-called mohajirs and Sindhis have, after 45 years of living together, proved its futility) not by the likes of Khomeni equivalents in India, nor by the Muslim masses, but by the Hindu fanatics themselves. By destroying the Babri Masjid, on a morally reprehensible and the historically unsubstantiated ground, the majority community of India has reopened the old question of how safe is the Muslim minority in its hands. Doesn't the Khalistan demand of the Sikh community, whose links with the Hindus are generally strong, and made ever stronger through inter-marriages in almost every family in Punjab, provide further credence to the suspicion of the minorities as to their safety in modern India? Then again, why has India failed to convince the Kashmiris that their future is best served in status quo than in going for independence or with Pakistan.

The very fact that 45 years after its existence as a modern independent state, these questions are being asked, significantly erodes the credibility of the principles that India's founding fathers tried so hard to establish, and in the case of Gandhi, who laid down his life to put into practice. To add insult to the injury of their memory, these questions are not only being raised, but also they have become relevant, credible and, now in the case of the Muslims, urgent. After more than four and half decades of independence, democracy, and official policy of secularism, India finds itself confronting the same old dilemma, the same familiar questions and, in the form of a ghost, the same Jinnah. To rid itself of the live Jinnah, India had to part with a large chunk of its territory. What price will India have to pay to get rid of his ghost?

It was hardly the question uppermost in my mind as I arrived in New Delhi from Jeddah, on the early morning of December 5 to attend an international seminar of editors on the "Right to Information," due to start in a few hours at the prestigious India International Centre. But it was the above question and the others mentioned earlier that I would ask many times in the next few

especially about our common profession to which we both brought almost equal number of years of UN experience. Throughout the discussion in the meeting and later during dinner at his house, the Babri Masjid issue came up only once. In reply to my question towards the beginning of the day, he said "There will be some tamasha (public posturing) by the Kar Sevaks at Ayodhya tomorrow. Nothing much will happen. Not till later, after the court ruling on the dispute over the ownership of the land." I was not familiar with the legal aspects of the case but felt that there is nothing dramatic to file. Consequently our discussion fell back on the subject of the conference and on the far more exciting subject of personal experiences in journalism.

The following day, the 6th of December, when I woke up, it was a bright and beautiful early wintry morning. As I looked out of my second floor hotel room that overlooked the swimming pool, I could never imagine that within a few hours a carnage was to be set afoot and modern India was to face its biggest national crisis since the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. The mood at the conference was upbeat as everybody thought that the expected confrontation on the "Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhumi" issue, as it is called in

India, has been averted, at least for the time being. The Sunday issue of the Times headlined "Sants (Kar Sevaks) defer face-off in Ayodhya, only symbolic kar seva from today". All the other national dailies gave similar headlines and the impression was that the tension has been diffused. The day, he said "There will be some tamasha (public posturing) by the Kar Sevaks at Ayodhya tomorrow. Nothing much will happen. Not till later, after the court ruling on the dispute over the ownership of the land." I was not familiar with the legal aspects of the case but felt that there is nothing dramatic to file. Consequently our discussion fell back on the subject of the conference and on the far more exciting subject of personal experiences in journalism.

parliament assurance on 3rd December that "We are conscious of every eventuality which may arise." Yet there was some fatal flaws, including the absence of adequate preparation for any mob attack on the masjid. VP Singh had warned that the Ram temple leaders could make an about face at the last moment, and then the government could do nothing. He warned the government in the parliament on the same day, not to depend on the court ruling to protect the masjid and accused the government of shirking its responsibility by not taking firm action and declaring a clear policy on the masjid issue. He even speculated that the UP chief minister, Kalyan Singh, who undertook to abide by the Supreme Court rule, may resign from the government on December 5th. 24 hours before the 'Kar Seva' was to start, and join the fanatics. By then it will be too late to send law enforcing agencies, and the assault on the masjid will have taken place. In face of evidence to the contrary the government preferred to opt for inaction.

It was the second day of the NAMEDIA conference. The idea to have the conference on a weekend was to get as many of the Indian editors as was possible, and there were quite a few. All of them were relaxed, very informally dressed, talking away as we usually do in the subcontinent. The holiday mood and the incessant talking about everything under the sun made it difficult for the chairman - the editor of the Times of India - to call the meeting to order. Incidentally none of the editors talked about the imminent SAARC Summit. Nobody asked me about it and showed any interest as to its possible outcome. This, coupled with cursory reference to it in the Indian press till then, surprised me as to how little attention the media in Delhi was paying to, what everybody acknowledges to be, the only place where dialogue at a regional level can and does take place. I was disappointed and even a bit angry, and was set to make a point of it during the post-conference mingling over tea/coffee. However events were to overtake my plans.

During lunch, on the sprawling lawn of the India International Centre, overlooking the Lod Gardens (named after the Afghan dynasty that ruled India before the Mughals, perhaps the most beautiful garden in whole of Delhi), the first news of the trouble in Ayodhya began to trickle in. I saw some of the editors make a hurried job of their lunch and disappear, promising to return soon. By the time the afternoon session started, it was clear from the looks on

the faces of the editors that something massive was happening and they could not yet fathom the depth of it. When our meeting ended at 4 pm, a bit early by any standards, I did not guess that it was pushed a bit fast to enable the editors to quickly return to their respective papers to follow the story that was so gruesomely unfolding in Ayodhya. All Indian participants literally vanished within moments of the ending of the meeting, except for the few retired editors who realised the magnitude of the tragedy

THE TEMPLE STORY RETOLD

- 1. December 22-23, 1949: Not 'divine intervention', but a mob overriding protests from constable Mata Prasad installs idols of Ramlalla starting the saga. Local administration locks the gate but does not remove the idols.
- 2. 1961: Litigations start, three local priests plead for right to pray in Babri Masjid. Muslims claim the mosque back, all cases are clubbed together and remain in cold storage for 23 years. Petitioners do not accuse Babar of demolishing temple.
- 3. 1984: VHP steps in, forms Mukti Yagna Samiti with Mahant Avadyanath as chief, launches campaign for 'liberation' of Ram's birth place.
- 4. 1984: VHP rolls Ram-Janaki Yatra from Sitamarhi, Bihar, goes past Ayodhya, to enter Delhi on October 31. Indira Gandhi assassinated, agitation again in cold storage.
- 5. Threads picked up in 1985, campaign launched, court bows and orders opening of lock in February 1986. Decision of Rajiv government seen as sop to Hindus in return for reversing Shah Bano order.
- 6. Riots break out, Babri Masjid Action Committee formed, Syed Shahuddin emerges as leading advocate of Muslims. Gives call to boycott Republic Day parade, later withdraws call, but continues to agitate.
- 7. 1988: Temple becomes a political issue with BJP adopting VHP programme at Palampur, Himachal Pradesh.
- 8. October 1991: VHP observes 'valour day' at Ayodhya, kar sevaks enter shrine, damage outer wall.
- 9. July 1992: Kar seva resumes on land acquired by UP government, graveyards levelled, buildings demolished. Programme abandoned after trade-off between Centre and VHP.
- 10. November 1992: Pressure on BJP mounts to resume construction. Negotiations fail. Mandal verdict of Supreme Court bolsters BJP resolve to resume temple programme. Kar seva date announced, permitted by Court provided no violation of order.
- 11. August 1990: VP Singh throws up Mandal issue to counter dissent and temple BJP in a quandary, feels grass being cut from beneath, decides to regain initiative.
- 12. September 1990: L.K. Advani embarks on his Rath Yatra, arrested, sounds death knell of V.P. Singh government. Violence in Ayodhya over kar seva. Safran flag hoisted atop domes. All round drama, including escape of 'clean shaven' Uma Bharti. BJP has vice-like grip on polity.
- 13. New prime minister Chandrasekhar initiates dialogue, negotiations put on the shelf by VHP as elections announced. BJP consolidates further in Parliament, comes to power in UP.
- 14. December 6, 1992: Babri Masjid stormed again in presence of BJP, VHP leaders. The three domes demolished by frenzied kar sevaks. The saga does not end here, but is the beginning of yet another end.
- 15. 'The Hindutva Handbook' by Sangh Parivar. 'Family Rules' detailing the view of 'majority' shall prevail, majority sentiments are beyond judiciary, majority has the option to change stance, other issues are secondary to the temple, minorities have to abide by majority structures, might is right.

It was beginning of 1962. We were preparing for our Secondary School Certificate examination, introduced by the Dhaka Board for the first time instead of the age-old Matriculation. During the year 1960 the teachers, intellectuals, guardians, and a very limited number of students had opposed the terms and conditions set by the concerned Board. Unfortunately the bureaucrats won. And because of this reason those students who were reading in class eight in the year 1960 spent one and a half years before appearing in their Final exams. In class nine we appeared in the Board Examination for the first time. Only four papers were included in the First Part. Six other papers were included in the Second or Final Examination. Thus one whole year was lost in vain. We realized this only after it was too late. Those were the days when students had not learnt to 'flurry' if the concerned authority decided to be unjust. We were too 'modest' and the simplicity of life or obeying superiors was an ART we adored. Nevertheless we were successfully used as the "guinea-pigs" - the student community for the first time.

aware of the consequences that may follow if we were to abide by the newly introduced law of the Education Board. The Dhaka Board was the only one under the Education Ministry in that period. However, I cannot remember when or how this peculiar system was dropped. No apology was needed or any compensation required for those innocent children who lost two years in total because of the changes. I personally feel I have learnt the art of educating oneself in a better way. Or was I happy because I did not have to study too hard... going for ten papers in one single year! In 1962 one of my mother's cousins came to pay us a visit from Chittagong. She was a real 'doll', full of funny stories and fantastic tales mostly involving relatives. I as the 'angel' boy mostly spent my time 'loitering' about to listen to the forbidden conversations of the 'elderly' ones. No one ever dreamed I could understand what was being said or that I was paying any attention to them. My 'Khalu' was boasting one time about my 'Khalu' the next moment she was very rude about him. I failed to understand my Khalu's fault. She was saying: my Khalu was married to his profession first. My Khalu happened to be his second wife! How very funny! That they had moved into their own house yet did not find peace because no matter what time my Khalu was called he leave to attend to his patient. My Khalu was a Dentist. A REAL specialist. A Surgeon. After several days my Khalu

The Journey of No Return

by Mujibul Haque

wanted to leave for Chittagong. She was worried to hell for her seven children I wished she would stay a few more days. After all I was learning so much about the worldly people sitting at home. But she was to leave anyway. She had completed her work and there were too many things to do at home. But before leaving she asked me to visit Chittagong. We had stayed in Chittagong for three years when our father was in 'service'. When I told her I did not know her new home, she made a gesture with the movement of her hands and what not... assuring me that at the railway station all I was to do was tell the rickshaw pullers I wanted to go to Dr Shafi.

So, after the exams I left for Chittagong along with my younger brother. My younger brother for some unknown reason accompanied me. I had no idea he liked travelling. But I had told him about the 'tale' of my Khalu concerning my Khalu. He too was as doubtful as myself. "Ha! Ha! Ha! he had said" Tell a rickshawala I want to go to Dr Shafi? At the break of dawn the Ulka express reached Chittagong. With our bag and baggage we came out of the railway platform. There were several rickshaws. Almost all the rickshaw pullers expressed their eagerness to take us. But when we told them the name of the place they lost their interest. All of them went back to their seats. Some showed such annoyance I simply felt bewildered. Certainly we did not want to go to Hell! A few pretended they were asleep. One, looking at

me told me walk. My dear brother informed me that... lived rickshaws only. That's the reason no puller would take us there I reminded him our Khalu and Khalu lived there with our seven cousins. These people were the nicest persons I had ever met. "Nonsense!" said my dear brother, "why then do you suppose they do not want to take us on their rickshaw?" "I am at a loss," I said. We did not even know the streets of this city well. "May be it's too far off," suggested my brother. "So, what am I to do?" I retorted. "We'll pay two Rupees." Declared my brother I thought he had meant me. But no. He was trying to attract the attention of the rickshaw pullers. None moved. How in heaven's name could we have become so... I kept thinking. Walking with all the load would be too much for us. Besides my younger brother hated the very thought of carrying luggage. I whispered in desperation into my brother's ear: "Why not tell them we want to go to Dr Shafi..." Suddenly there was a great commotion. It looked as though 'the dead' had come to life again only to take us to

task for taking Dr Shafi's name. Even the rickshaw puller who was about to accept a passenger pulled his rickshaw towards us. Before our very eyes all our luggage were snatched from our hands and they became their property. There started a quarrel between several pullers. A tug of mini war began. My younger brother advised me to run. What for? I thundered. For there were no reasons to do so. Rather I was anticipating lest those men started to do the same with us as they were busy doing with our belongings. Surely all the pullings and pushing would be too much for our body muscles and bones. Finally I took courage. I had to. "I'll kill myself if all of you don't stop this fight!" "No saheb, no!" they cried out in a chorus. Looking about through the heavy mists I saw our luggage in five separate places. Every rickshaw puller was chanting the same 'song'. We were the relatives of Dr Shafi! And being so the apology began, with that the invitation to 'mount' their carrier. I assured them that they were forgiven and wished my desire that they return our goods to us. Naturally those who were in possession of our goods refused. This was no 'hijacking', nor 'mugging'. In

those days there were no such things. Rather it was a token of love expressed innocently in honour of the man who was an 'angel' to them - sent by the almighty! And that man happened to be Dr. Shafi, our beloved Khalu-jaan! Three rickshaws headed towards the street outside the Chittagong Railway premises. We were made to sit on two, rickshaw separately and in the third one our belongings found their place. I felt like the Maharaja of the port city while my younger brother almost died fearing he was at last 'kidnapped' to end up as a 'sacrificial' being to bring good luck to the rickshaw pullers. The greatest shock came when the rickshaw in the forefront stopped after about three minutes of our journey. We were five men now standing in front of a two storied building. The darkness of the dawn had subdued by then and everything was clear or visible. I saw name plate at the gate... rather through the grilles... there were no compound. The calling bell button was pressed by some one. Who did it I cannot remember. I was too busy trying to pay off the pullers who argued: on no account they would take any fare. The distance was so little that there couldn't be any 'charge' that may be accepted. One of the doors opened and our Khalu-jaan came out. Who 'salamed' who and in what manner is beyond me. The three poor pullers seemed so enchanted and the richness of feeling by which they carried our belongings inside the

house made me feel the whole world belonged to them. They had conquered the Universe! When my Khalu ordered them to take their 'fare' they 'obeyed'. "At least they had an 'emperor' I thought. What grace could Allah may have had for a man who was in a profession that was practiced by so many and in so many different ways. We were the living beings from Dhaka where the number of 'doctors' was said to be less than in Chittagong. Yet the name of my Khalu proved to be everyone's brother. Even when we travelled about the city we only told each puller his name. We never bothered to try to remember the name of the street where my Khalu lived. Maybe that is one reason even today I cannot recall the name of that particular street. In the year 1971 my Khalu had been picked up by the 'army' belonging to the Pakistanis forces, along with his brother-in-law. Place where they were taken could never be known as both had been 'blind folded'. However as their journey ended, they were pushed into a room. They were not the only men there. A voice was heard. It was a man's voice. An order was given to unfold everyone's blind. The order was carried out promptly. The official who had given the order was shocked to see my Khalu among the men. He was furious. He raised his voice unnecessarily demanding to know who had asked 'that' man to be brought there. "He's my doctor! He grewed. He is a 'saint' and he is not connected with a-n-y"