

Image: indianexpress.com



A 24-hour curfew – or *bandh* as it's known in India - has been in force for two days now. Marooned at Juhu Beach: all shops closed, streets deserted. I cannot buy anything, cannot go anywhere: a captive of this gracious, but now prison-like hotel! How things have changed in just a few short days. Penned two letters to family, scrapped both, deciding they were outdated and overtaken by events. All schools have closed, my work at a standstill.

I cannot get to see friends in Kalina to the East, or Bandra to the South: too dangerous to travel to either area, because it would mean passing through Muslim territory. In turn, friends are not prepared to put their life on the line to come and see me. Who would blame them? The phone system was down but now miraculously restored; though to actually make a connection and speak to anyone remains an even harder task than normal: people gaze in wonderment if you do manage to reach someone!

There is little danger for me personally, with the proviso that I stay inside the hotel and within the bounds of the surrounding locale. Foreigners are not targeted by this religion-fueled crisis. The main problem is Muslim versus Hindu riots, at street level ... and overzealous policing tactics: many of the 500 deaths in Bombay, to date, stem from police firing on rioting mobs. So I venture out for exercise on the beach and to other beach hotels that remain open, within walking distance of my very own seaside 'jail'. Hotel staff tell me it would be tempting fate to go further afield.

It's now four or five days since Ayodhya became a flashpoint, after Hindu nationalists tore down the Babri Masjid (a sacred site for Muslims) in Uttar Pradesh. This signified a boiling over of the inter-religious melting pot that India encompasses and subsequent unrest has spread quickly across the country. News feeds about the riots have assumed top billing on all the major global media networks. Bombay is more affected than most places, and I am right here in the wrong place, at the wrong time, caught and enshrined by this escalating mess.

My work is with schools: about fifty of them, scattered across this vast metropolis. Thus, it was during a round of visits, earlier this week - a couple of days after Ayodhya happened - when I began to realise the severity of the situation. At my first stop, the principal spoke about the rioting that happened across India, almost a decade before, when Indira Gandhi was assassinated, but felt this current situation could be worse. He mentioned that teachers and parents were extremely nervous about the whole Ayodhya issue and some had even suggested the school should close. Continual screaming from a child outside his office window, set the tone for my day and seemed to put both me and the principal on edge.

By the time I reached my third school, around lunchtime, it was becoming obvious that some degree of panic was in the air. News of riots from Bombay's central district had reached there and the school was in the process of closing. On arrival I found a madhouse of children, teachers, and parents, almost all in total frenzy, focused on finding books and bags and getting kids home to relative safety, as quickly as possible. High time, I realised, for me to get going too!

Outside no transport was available, so I struck out on foot for the nearest railway station: Vile Parle, about a 20-minute walk away. Before going to the last school, I had stopped at a café, near the station and spoken to a young English backpacker. She told me that she was flying home that evening and I had suggested that, if she had the time, Juhu Beach was not so far away and a pleasant spot to spend the afternoon, before leaving. Now, about an hour later, I looked for her again, to change my recommendation: forget the beach; go straight to the airport! As I half expected, she was nowhere to be seen.

I headed for station footbridge, aiming to make my way over the railway line. By then, extreme panic was in the air, making it difficult to get up the steps, with a multitude of people - their numbers swelled by scores of school kids on their way home to supposed safety - pushing and shoving as they scrambled past me, in one direction or the other.

At the other side of the bridge and lucky to grab a vacant auto, I sped away to my base camp at a school normally only ten minutes from there, but with the pandemonium of traffic on this day it took much, much longer. When I finally arrived, I found the principal fully engaged in a rapid closure of the school and frantic hand-over of children to parents. It was clear she had little time for small talk, telling me:

“Bombay is rioting over Ayodhya, and nobody can tell what will happen next. Just get back to your hotel as quickly as possible and lie low. I’ll be in touch.”

I heeded her advice and clambered back into my auto which was still waiting outside the front gate. We swung around and headed for the beach. Unlike the traffic chaos going towards the school, the road in the opposite direction was reasonably clear. Sitting back and watching the closed shops flashing past, the auto appeared – in my mind at least - to be travelling twice as fast as normal. (I wasn’t sure: was it real, or just my imagination playing tricks?). When we reached the beach, everything looked deserted. Once inside the hotel I managed to contact a friend by phone, who advised that a ‘bandh’ had been declared by the Maharashtra Government, and that I should remain hotel-bound until further notice. And that is how I stayed: tied to my hotel prison on the beach: a sort of house arrest ...albeit an idyllic location!



Image: citizenhotelmumbai.com

This should have been pleasant enough: quaffing beer accompanied by delicious Indian snacks, on the terrace adjacent to the sands, but because of the enforced lockdown and uncertainty all around, it was not a situation to enjoy. I became desperate to get out and about – to meet and talk with Indians I knew and cared for - before my scheduled exit from India a few days later. In the end I thought ‘to hell

with it; bandh or no bandh I need to get out of this place' and exited the hotel in search of a taxi that could take me to friends in the more easterly district of *Kalina*. Normally I would have chosen an auto rickshaw – they were cheaper and provided some breeze to offset the heat of the streets - but this time, the 'built-like-a-brick' black and yellow cab offered more protection and meant I would not be as visible to anyone on the streets.

Peering through the half-open passenger window of one of the taxis nearest to the hotel I saw that the driver was bearded and wore a turban. *"That's a start"* I thought. *"A Sikh, ... Neither Hindu nor Muslim, ...should be OK"*.

Image: gettyimages.in

"Can you take me to Kalina?" I enquired.

He looked unmoved, staring back at me; then in broken English: *"No sah, I stay Juhu"*.



"But Kalina is not far," I returned.

Sah, is too risky." This said with more volume, accompanied by some finger wagging.

I took my wallet out and held a 1,000 rupee note up to the open window: many times the normal fare for such a distance.

"OK, OK Sah. Get in. Keep head down."

"Amazing at times, how utterly persuasive money can be," I thought to myself.

He reached over to push open the rear door and I climbed in, lying flat along the back seat, out of site from any would be stone throwing, or taxi bashing hordes.

It was becoming dark as we passed over the multitude of North-South railway lines: the dividing line between East and West in this enormous city. Then shrouded by the dark, as we motored down from the bridge, into the suburban streets on the eastern side, I was emboldened to pop my head above the parapet ... or rear windowsill in this case. There were very few other vehicles and hardly anyone on foot, though at times groups of youths appeared, some carrying sticks and looking generally quite menacing.

Then ahead, I saw a larger group of people surrounding a fire in the road. “*Chalo! Chalo!*” I shouted at the driver (Let’s go! Let’s go!). “*Siddha, siddha!*” (keep going straight, straight ahead!). My small stock of Hindi ‘emergency words’ was coming in handy at last.



Image: allegralaboratory.net



Image: dnaindia.com



Image: hillpost.in

“*Keep head down Sah!*” He answered back, almost as loudly, driving on resolutely towards the blaze, staring into the night through the windscreen and muttering in *Marathi* under his breath; probably cursing this white man in the back for getting him into this mess! I could hear voices yelling as we drove through the melee, but we were not forced to stop. My hunch may have been right: they had no quarrel with Sikhs.

We past through a couple of other potential trouble zones, but from my dark, back corner of the cab, I could see dozens of armed personnel – police or military, I wasn’t sure in the dim light - who seemed to be in control. And once again, we were not stopped; perhaps something of a miracle, because I could have found myself in more trouble with the authorities, than with the street mob, if forced out of the vehicle. Disobeying a curfew edict could mean time in an Indian jail: not something that a person of any race or creed would look forward to with enthusiasm.

Because of the tense situation, the streets were virtually devoid of traffic, thus this rather foolhardy – and in many ways needless - expedition from *Juhu* to *Kalina*, took less than thirty minutes; perhaps half the time it would have taken under normal conditions of street chaos and traffic mayhem. With headlights dimmed, we pulled up outside the apartment which I knew so well, but never had I arrived in such a state of anxiety as on this occasion. The driver looked shell shocked but said he would wait. I shook his hand warmly, in gratitude, and alighted.

My friend stared at me in amazement, after I had rung the bell and she faced me in the front doorway of her apartment.

“My God! You came here! Are you mad?” were her opening words.

“Please get inside, before someone sees you.”

I must have looked a bit shell-shocked, because once inside, with the heavy wooden door closed and bolted, my friend immediately went to a cabinet and poured me a double scotch.

“Wait, I have some ice. Tell me, why on Earth did you come?”

“I was lonely over there. I missed you all.” Was all I could muster, as I accepted the glass and took a grateful gulp. My friend’s sister and her husband – visiting from Delhi – along with her elderly mother, whom I knew well, stood speechless in the background.

“Cheers everyone. Great to see you all again,” I said, raising my glass in a somewhat feeble attempt to make light of the situation.

FOOTNOTE: (Wikipedia)

The Bombay riots usually refer to the riots in Mumbai, in December 1992 and January 1993, in which an estimated 900 people died. The riots were mainly due to escalations of hostilities after large scale protests by Muslims in reaction to the 1992 Babri Masjid Demolition by Hindu Karsevaks in Ayodhya. The violence was widely reported as having been orchestrated by the Shiv Sena, a Hindu-nationalist political party in Maharashtra.

State government falls as Hindu zealots raze mosque for temple

Holy rage puts India in crisis

Delhi, India

A BANGING mob of Hindu zealots, angry at the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, set off a riot in Mumbai on Monday. The riot broke down the government of Maharashtra and caused the resignation of the state's chief minister, Uday Patil, and the resignation of several other ministers. The riot was the most serious since the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya.

Over the past week hundreds of Hindu groups had staged rallies and demonstrations, demanding the government to build a temple at the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The Hindu zealots, known as Karsevaks, had been demanding the government to build a temple at the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

At least four volunteers were reported killed in the mobbed streets. The riot was the most serious since the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya. At least 50 others were injured, by being hit by the rioters, or by being hit by the rioters, or by being hit by the rioters.



Image: theguardian.com