



Bombay Bandh!

It was 1992; five days since the Ayodhya flashpoint, when Hindu fundamentalists tore down the Babri Masjid, a sacred site for Muslims in Uttar Pradesh. Unrest across the country, Bombay most affected. Wrong place, wrong time for yours truly: enshrined by the escalating mess, stranded like a beached whale in Juhu: captive in my prison-like hotel.

State government falls as Hindu zealots raze mosque for temple

Holy rage puts India in crisis

Andhra Pradesh has been hit by a wave of violence as Hindu zealots have begun to demolish mosques and other religious sites. The state government has fallen and the country is in a state of crisis. The violence has spread to other parts of the country, including Bombay. The situation is described as a 'plague' that is spreading rapidly.



“Bombay is rioting because of Ayodhya,” people told me. “It’s already bad and spreading like the plague! Get back to your hotel as quickly as possible and lie low.”

Back at my beachside base, staff said a bandh (curfew) had been declared. I should remain hotel bound. So there I stayed: tied to my prison overlooking the sands: an idyllic kind of house arrest. Shops closed; streets deserted; an eerie, surreal feeling!



I ventured from my seaside 'jail' only for beach exercise and visits to hotels nearby. As a foreigner I was not a direct target; it was a Muslim-Hindu conflict ... fueled by overzealous police. So far there were 500 people dead in Bombay! I couldn't get to friends, and they wouldn't come to me. Who would blame them? I was forewarned not to tempt fate!

Nevertheless, a captive being always seeks to escape!

Peering through the half-open taxi window I see the driver: bearded and wearing a turban. *"Perfect. A Sikh ... neither Hindu nor Muslim,"* I say to myself.

"Kalina?" I enquire cautiously.

Sah, is too risky." His prompt response accompanied by finger wagging.

I hold up a 1,000 rupee note: many times the normal fare. A few seconds thought, then: *"OK Sah. Get in. Keep head down."*

I lie flat on the back seat, well-aware we're a moving target for taxi-battering hordes, or truncheon-wielding police! The old Fiat cab burbles forward, through dark, empty streets. After a while I summon courage and peer over the parapet - the rear windowsill - to see clusters of menacing youngsters, brandishing sticks and rocks. Ahead I spot a large group surrounding a fire in the road, screaming slogans.

"Chalo!" (Let's go!) I yell to the driver! *"Sidha! Sidha jao!"* (Straight! Go straight!) ... my tiny stock of Hindi words has come in handy, at last.



"Head down Sah!" He answers sharply, hands glued to wheel, driving towards the blaze, staring into the night, muttering *Marathi* under his breath, cursing this white man for bribing him into such a mess! Voices yell as we pass the melee, but we're not forced to stop. Their quarrel is not with Sikhs.

Further along we encounter more trouble. From my shadowy corner I see armed personnel: police or military, camouflaged by the dark. It's a miracle we're not stopped; I'd be in more trouble with the authorities than the street mob. Disobeying a curfew means Indian jail, not something anyone takes on enthusiastically.

Thirty torturous minutes later, lights dimmed, we arrive outside my friend's apartment in *Kalina*. I'm shell-shocked; my driver appears comatozed! I pass over the money and thank him profusely; shaking his hand vigorously to bring him back to the real world. Then I alight and ring the doorbell.



My friend stares at me: her face a picture of disbelief. *“My God!” She cries, “You came here! Are you mad? Please get inside, before someone sees you.”*

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