

Murder mysteries

BY TEESTA SETALVAD

Union Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani, after many excuses, did appear before the Justice Liberhan Commission of Inquiry on April 10 and 11. His second appearance is due on May 14 and 15.

In this recall for our readers we focus on two important incidents that have a bearing on the evidence being led before Justice Liberhan on the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992.

Why was Mahant Laldas, the controversial former priest of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya, murdered brutally on November 16, 1993?

What is the truth behind the fatal 'accident' of an IAS officer carrying documents to the Liberhan Commission in May 2000?

One of the staunch opponents of the Advani-led *rath yatra* was the head-priest of the Ram temple at Ayodhya, *Mahant* Lal Das. He articulated his opposition to the blatant politicisation of religion and was made to pay with his life: he was found brutally murdered on November 16, 1993.

The Times of India dated October 18, 1990 reported the priest's public displeasure at the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation under the headline: 'Priest asks Advani to halt yatra'. The text of the report read: "*Faizabad–Ayodhya*: Bharatiya Janata Party president LK Advani should halt his *rathyatra* and Muslims from outside Ayodhya and Faizabad should also not politicise the Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid issue, head priest of the Ram temple, Lal Das said.

"The Hindus and Muslims of Ayodhya and Faizabad can resolve the issue themselves," Lal Das asserted while commenting on the situation arising out of Mr Advani's *rathyatra*. "In a meeting, Lal Das, the head priest for the past seven years of the temple which is at the centre of a controversy, said a 22-member delegation of the people of Ayodhya and Faizabad had met the President, R. Venkataraman, in Delhi earlier this month and presented a memorandum on the issue to him. "He said the memorandum stressed that the people of the two towns could, if given a chance, settle the issue amicably among themselves. "The delegation, after meeting the President, had also paid a visit to Shahi Jama Masjid's Imam, Maulana Abdullah Bukhari, who had supported the idea of resolving the issue by the local people, Lal Das said. "The head priest said the offerings at the temple were being deposited at two banks. He alleged that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was "looting the people in the guise of making collections for the temple". "The VHP and the local administration are conspiring to oust me from this post, so much so that the local administration are determined to arrest me at the behest of the VHP," he added.

"He said ten days earlier, while going from Ayodhya to Faizabad, 'Police wanted to arrest me and take me to the police station, but the editor of Current and legislator from Ayodhya, Mr Jaishankar Pandey, intervened and saved me.' Lal Das criticised the heavy police and para-military development in Ayodhya and said it has created a "state of terror" in the town. *Mahant* Laldas paid with his life for his bold and outspoken views. *The Independent* of November 18, 1993 recorded his brutal murder in a news report with the headline: 'Ex-priest's murder shocks Ayodhya'. The text of the report read: "The brutal murder of *Mahant* Laldas, the controversial former priest of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya, on November 16 has sent shock waves through the surrounding areas of Faizabad. *Mahant* Laldas, who had been unceremoniously evicted by the Kalyan Singh government, was shot dead on Tuesday night at his house in Ayodhya. The priest, who had emerged as the most vocal critic of the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh usurping the

Ram Janmabhoomi movement from the local bodies, had, for quite some time, been alleging a 'sangh parivar conspiracy' to murder him. "Fearing for his life, he is reported to have approached the local administration in Faizabad for security. His request went unheeded." Baba's death remains shrouded in mystery. The FIR filed by his brother yesterday morning states "property dispute within the family" as being the cause of his death. He has also named two accused in the FIR. Laldas subsequently deposed before the non-official commission investigating the whole issue, much to the annoyance of some local *mahants* who were part of the Bharatiya Janata Party-Vishwa Hindu Parishad bandwagon.

"He was equally candid in expressing fears about himself, saying that he has been receiving several death threats, the reason being that he was one of the few local *mahants* who knew all the details about how the Ayodhya issue had been allowed to escalate by vested interests. He minced no words in repeating that large amounts of money had been collected on behalf of the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas.

"Laldas was not the only *mahant* to level such allegations. Several other local *mahants* in Ayodhya, including Gyan Das, the *mahant* of Ayodhya's oldest temple, Hanuman Garhi and *Mahant* Vishwanath Prasad Acharya, who heads the town's biggest religious congregation, also admitted to the Nyas of having collected several crores of rupees. Some even claimed that the figure had crossed Rs 700 crore." What have been the results of the investigations into his murder? Should not the mystery of the murder of *Mahant* Laldas concern the Liberhan commission's investigation? More mystery and gore surround the commission of inquiry: The sudden and mysterious death, by 'accident' of OSD, Subhash Bhan Sadh, an official with the Uttar Pradesh home department on April 30, 2000. His father has alleged foul play because he was carrying important documents to submit before the commission. The Indian Express on July 6, 2000 recorded the mysterious events in an item titled: 'Was UP official killed for Ayodhya links?' The text read: "Express News Service — New Delhi/Lucknow July 5: A day after the high court ordered the Delhi police to investigate into the death of a senior official of the Uttar Pradesh government on April 30, the police are taking a fresh look at what was initially dismissed as an 'accident'. The police have been directed to file a report on the death of OSD Subhash Bhan Sadh, an officer with the UP home department, by August 22.

"According to a petition filed by the victim's father Bir Bhan Shad, his son was carrying top secret files relating to the Babri Masjid demolition when he boarded the Kanshi-Vishwanath Express in Lucknow on April 30. He was to appear before the Liberhan Ayodhya Commission the next day. But that never happened as Subhash met with an accident just before the train arrived at the New Delhi station. The files, the petition said, are missing.

"However, the UP home department denies it. 'It is true that his father has expressed fear that he was murdered but I do not find truth in the allegations. If he was carrying something, that could be only extracts,' said VK Mittal, principal secretary (home)... Subhash's father alleged that his son was pushed from the running train when it slowed down at the Tilak Bridge railway station. He was crushed between the wall of the platform and the running train and died a day later. The petitioner pointed out that although there were contact numbers of various officials and lawyers who he was supposed to meet regarding the case, the police made no attempt to contact anybody. "In fact, it was only through an anonymous phone call to an advocate and family friend Randhir Jain, that the family was informed. The caller, who is untraceable till date, also told them that the victim had been taken to RML hospital... The petitioner has alleged that the hospital authorities refused to respond to queries regarding his son's health, and even refused to conduct the post-mortem until the additional resident commissioner of UP intervened...

"Counsel for the petitioner, Randhir Jain said that the case should be handed over to an independent agency as it had not been investigated properly. Standing counsel for the state, KC Mittal, said that although they had not suspected foul play initially, they would now initiate fresh investigations. The matter was heard by the division bench comprising Justice Usha Mehra and

Justice SN Kapoor, who issued notice to the authorities at the mortuary to explain their apathetic attitude.”

Where does the investigation into the alleged murder stand now? Does it not have a bearing on the proceedings of the Liberhan Commission?