

Between the Lines

Anjali Monteiro, Nasreen Fazalbhoy and
K P Jayasankar

In an analysis of the intensive press coverage following the demolition of the Babri Masjid the authors point out the critical role of the press in both creating and controlling conflict situations in society.

In recent times, the Babri Masjid has become a symbol of immense political significance; besides being a mosque and a historical monument, it has and continues to be used to interpret and reinvent the history and the role of different ethnic communities in India.

Following its demolition on December 6, 1992, riots broke out in different parts of the country. Bombay saw the worst riots in living memory. For over a month, stunned residents of Bombay lived through a near-war situation. During this time, when movement was restricted because of frequent curfew, and rumours were rampant, the press, perceived as a credible source of information, became a crucial opinion-maker.

Even a superficial glance at the newspapers, however, showed that the same events were being represented very differently by a number of leading newspapers. The press appeared to be guiding reactions to the events. An analysis of the newspapers and their reporting of various issues relating to the demolition, we felt, would help us understand the situation in Bombay during that period and to enable us, as teachers, to use these insights in media education.

Modern news media cannot be assumed to be passive channels that simply transmit 'facts'. That these 'facts' are framed and interpreted in the very course of presentation is a visible and accepted reality. Given the heavy ideological significance of the Babri Masjid issue, we were interested to see how the demolition of the Masjid was being represented. What frameworks were used to understand the event? What could this tell us about our society and polity and the role of the press in reporting this conflict? With these questions, we decided to look at the newspapers of December 7, 1992, the day after the demolition. Apart from the demolition, we were also concerned about the presentation of the "Muslim" reaction, since even while we were in the process of working on this analysis, "Muslim reaction" was being used as a justification for the riots. From our own viewpoint, the demolition raised fundamental issues of secularism and the Indian nation state, and hence we were interested in an analysis of how the



press designated the role of the State. Accordingly, we focused on these three aspects in our analysis.

We chose three language groups for our study: English, Marathi and Urdu. The Times of India (TOI) and the Indian Express (IE), the two leading English dailies in Bombay, were the obvious choice. Their Marathi editions Maharashtra Times (MT) and Loksatta, were selected to elicit whether the editorial policies differed because of the different readership. We added Navakal, a populist Marathi tabloid which had taken a virulent anti-Muslim stance.

For the 'Muslim' opinion, we looked at Inquilab and Urdu Times of which the former is older, and is considered to be more moderate.

In each paper we studied the headlines, the lead features and the editorials. The account which follows is not exhaustive, but it highlights only the main insights and significant differences that emerged during the analysis.

The demolition and its aftermath

The first aspect considered was in terms in which the demolition was viewed. Was it seen as an event to be condemned, or an occasion to be celebrated? What kind of weightage was given to the event? In what kind of context was it placed and how were the events that followed to be evaluated? There was an obvious contrast between Navakal and all the other papers; the Navakal story was more like a propagandist pamphlet of the Sangh Parivar, with no pretension of being a news report. While all the other papers condemned the event, regarding it as a blot on the secular state, Navakal treated it as an occasion for celebration, situating it in mythic time, and proclaiming the event as a victory for Ramrajya. The headlines grew progressively larger, and exclaimed:

"Intoxicated with devotion to Ram, and driven beyond restraint by insult, youth bring about a revolution in Ayodhya! Ramrajya proclaimed! Saffron flags flew over Babri and youth danced intoxicatedly! All three domes of Babri Masjid destroyed! Walls broken!"

Navakal did not have a photograph of the mosque at all. A line drawing of Ram in a victory pose was placed below these exultant statements. The lead feature continued the mythic tone, celebrating the bravery of the kar sevak youth "bravely surging forward

to face the bullets of the guns" with the "blazing noonday sun as witness". The images of sacrifice and martyrdom, and the use of the present tense in describing this event contributed and added to the conflation of mythic tone and historical time. The demolition of the Babri Masjid was projected as a culmination of centuries-old struggle to "reinstate" *Ramrajya* in the face of domination by alien rulers. In this context, any condemnation of this event would inevitably be seen as morally unjustified and anti-national, since "nation" here was equated with '*Ramrajya*'.

While the other papers all condemned the demolition, there were interesting differences in the weightage given to the event. The TOI gave the demolition the most prominent place, with a close up of the demolition in progress, showing the *kar sevaks* actually atop the domes of the mosque. The picture spanned six columns, covering almost three-fourths of the top half of the front page. The headline stated "KAR SEVAKS DESTROY BABRI MASJID", with the sub-headlines: "PRESIDENT'S RULE IN U.P. - ASSEMBLY DISSOLVED - IMAM APPEALS FOR PEACE". This was the only paper in which the headline identified the aggressors as '*kar sevaks*' and highlighted the Central government's response and the Imam's appeal for peace. As opposed to this, MT chose to highlight a different set of "facts". Here the photograph (the same as in the TOI) was reduced to span four columns. The main headline said "BABRI MASJID DEMOLISHED" (but did not identify the aggressors) and "U.P. GOVERNMENT UNDER PRESIDENT'S RULE" while the sub-headlines said: "ARMY OUT IN ALLAHABAD, CURFEW - 6 STATE GOVERNMENTS DISMISSED - FIRING IN BARODA AND AHMEDABAD".

The two newspapers, despite belonging to the same group, did not see things the same way. While the TOI identified the government reaction in terms of action being taken against the UP government, MT highlighted the dismissal of the six BJP ruled states. While the TOI emphasised the Imam's message of restraint and peace, the MT communicated the spread of violence in different parts of the country. The implication of the sub-headlines that the army was out in Allahabad and that there was firing in Baroda and Ahmedabad, was clearly that Muslims were running riot.

The IE restricted the visual to three columns and announced "KALYAN DISMISSED AS MASJID IS RAZED". The sub-headlines said: CENTRE IMPOSES PRESIDENT'S RULE ON U.P., ASSEM-

BLY DISSOLVED". If we compare the headlines of TOI and IE some subtle differences emerge. While the TOI uses the active voice to identify the aggressors as *kar sevaks*, the syntax and the passive voice of the headlines of the IE appear to give more importance to the political fallout of the demolition, rather than to the event itself. Moreover, the use of words such as "imposes" implies an element of critique of the government's action. The *Inquilab* had a small photograph which was centred on the front headline which said "BABRI MASJID SHAHEED". The term "*shaheed*" which means "*martyred*", is regularly used as a mark of respect. However, we felt that in this context the term certainly had more significance than in its customary usage. The *Urdu Times* placed the headline in reverse contrast and highlighted the event saying "BABRI MASJID HAS BEEN RAZED TO THE GROUND". Contrary to the stereotypic expectation that the Urdu press would have used the event to arouse the Muslims to a high pitch of emotion, at this sensitive time in fact, these two dailies took a restrained stand. Both questioned the secular credentials of the then Congress government. The *Urdu Times* editorial, titled "By the Hindus, for the Hindus, Hindu rule" started by saying:

In the history of India, 6 December will be remembered as a day when the values of the Constitution, the Judiciary and the Parliament were not simply shattered, but when the minorities have been told in no uncertain terms that if they want to remain in this country it is at the mercy of Hindu extremist forces.

The *Inquilab* also expressed similar apprehensions regarding the future of secular forces:

There is no doubt that the martyrdom of a 500 year old and historical Babri masjid has stunned the secular and democratic forces who had never dreamt that in a democratic country fascist forces could dance such a naked dance which would cause all humanitarian and secular forces to bow their heads in shame.

It went on to counsel restraint:

At this time the need of the hour is that we should hold on to patience, restraint and reason. Sadness and anger are natural, but it is necessary that we face the present circumstances with a cool heart and

struggle for the rebuilding of the mosque according to legal and Constitutional means.

The Republic or the nation

The TOI and IE brought their editorial onto the front page. Flanking the headline, the TOI said "THE REPUBLIC BEMIRCHED", whereas IE stated "A NATION BETRAYED" (emphasis added). It is revealing that the two newspapers chose the words republic and nation respectively. The term republic brings to bear other notions such the 'constitution' and 'secularism'. 'Nation' (*Rashtra* or *Rajya*?) is an altogether different ball game; it is a word that has repeatedly been used by the *Sangh Parivar* to denote what they call a '*Hindu Rashtra*'. A sticker seen in the suburban trains of Bombay, during this period read: *Bharatiyata to Nagarikta hai; Hindutva Rashtriyata hai!* (Indian-ness is merely citizenship; *Hindutva* is nationalism!), which presented a dangerously simplistic antinomy: the Republic of India: Citizenship/*Hindutva*: nationalism. Given this insidious rhetoric, is the usage of the word "nation" innocuous? The context in which the IE editorial situates the demolition is noteworthy:

The acts of aggression leading up to the destruction of the so-called disputed structure were fired by an atavistic slogan long ingrained in the votaries of Hindu Rashtra. The hawks among them have made no secret of their pathological anxiety to set right an aberration of history by pulling down a mosque built in Babar's name where once a temple stood.

Conceivably, they now gloat over their present achievement, heralding it as an assertion of the Hindu will, as quid pro quo for whatever was done to Hindu shrines in the name of Islam in distant centuries. It is sad that they do not recognize the irreversibility of history. (IE editorial, emphasis added).

The IE editorial, while decrying the demolition, also reinforces several myths, i.e. the act was tantamount to setting right an "aberration of history", it was after all a place "where once a temple stood" and even if Hindu temples had been pulled down in the past "in the name of Islam", they should be condoned, because of the "irreversibility of history"! This demolition, this forgetfulness of the "irreversibility" of history has:

... mindlessly intensified the morbid fears and suspicions of

some sections of the people which their bigoted leaders will now love to put to their narrow sectarian ends (IE editorial, emphasis added).

In other words, this demolition has "intensified the morbid fears of some sections" (read Muslims) which their "bigoted leaders" (read Muslim leaders) would put to their "sectarian ends".

The differences in the two reports are subtle, yet graphic, and raise questions about the notion of 'objective' reporting.

In keeping with its headline, the TOI editorial goes on to the need to strengthen the republic and the need to act as per its constitution and emphasises the need for counter measures:

... to heal the wounds inflicted on the Muslim minority and ensure that appropriate obeisance is paid to Lord Ram only within the framework of the constitution. The dismissal of the Kalyan Singh government is a first indication of the government's will. Note must also be taken of the appeal of the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid to his co-religionists to remain calm.

The Muslim response

As subsequent events have shown, the perception of the Muslim response to the demolition was of great significance in the popular mind as a legitimisation for the riots that followed the demolition. As has already been described, the TOI had attempted to bring the attention of the reader to the appeal made by the Imam twice: in its editorial and in the headlines along with a front page report: "IMAM APPEALS FOR PEACE".

The Imam of Jama Masjid, Syed Abdullah Bukhari, urged Muslims to be patient and not resort to violence in the face of damage to the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya.

He made the appeal from the pulpit of the historic mosque after leading the *maghrib* (sunset-time) prayer. Thousands of people had flocked to the mosque soon after they learnt about the incident at Ayodhya.

He began his unscheduled speech by saying: "It is a major tragedy. Our hearts are broken" (TOI, emphasis added).

Compare this with the description of the very same event which appeared as an obscure item on page 9 of the IE, under the title: "TERRIBLE, SAYS IMAM".

Bahut bada hadsa hua hai (something terrible has happened), thundered Syed Abdullah Bukhari, Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid, from the ramparts of the masjid to a surging crowd of over 5,000 down below. For more than two hours, they had waited with bated breath for his unscheduled "*rukba*" (declaration).

However, except for launching a frontal attack on the Prime Minister, the UP Government and "the political party known for its bigotry" for the abrupt turn of events in Ayodhya, the Imam refrained from spelling out what course of action the people should adopt in the situation. "Wait for my decision; it will come after the Babri Masjid Action Committee decides on the matter," he said (IE, emphasis added).

The image of the Imam who "thundered" menacingly from the ramparts (only forts have ramparts, not mosques) to a "surging crowd" (read militant crowd) is well in keeping with the stereotype that Muslims address all issues with militancy, and that a violent reaction could be anticipated; "wait for my decision..." has an ominous ring to it. In the TOI report, the Imam "appeals from the pulpit" to people who had "flocked" to the Masjid. The differences between the two reports show how the same events can be framed entirely differently by the choice of words, which (perhaps unwittingly) articulates the ideological intent of the newspaper. The differences in the two reports are subtle, yet graphic, and raise questions about the notion of 'objective' reporting.

Reading between the lines

This brings us to the "constructed" nature of any media reality in general. News is not a "true" account of "what actually happened", and hence, veracity of the so-called "facts" that it may contain is not the only criterion by which it could possibly be interpreted or judged. "Facts" need to be critically examined to understand what they articulate and reinforce in the guise of "objectivity". If, to cite a purely hypothetical example, a newspaper were to report that "In a riot in Bombay, two Hindus and hundreds of others were killed", it may be stating a 'fact', but articulating an unacknowledged ideological intent.

Both the media and the public operate together in shared cultured contexts of meaning, the media taking account in the way the news is presented. In dealing with conflict the role of the press has often been viewed with ambivalence. It is sometimes felt that the press creates conflict through the way it presents information to the public. On the other hand it is sometimes argued that the press contains conflict by disseminating information to a wider audience and so reducing "misinformation" and rumour. This dual role of the press became particularly evident during the riots in Bombay following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. To some extent, the media themselves appeared to become actors in the situation. As critical consumers of these media outputs, these are the red herrings that we need to be wary of. ■

Co-authored by Nasreen Fazalbhoy, Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Bombay University, Anjali Monteiro, Reader and Head, and K P Jayasankar, Senior Producer, Audio-Visual Unit, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Smita Gandhi and other friends for the Marathi and Urdu translations.

INTERNATIONAL AWARD

The TISS has recently received the Prix Futura Berlin Asia Prize in the TV documentary section of Prix Futura Berlin TV and Radio Festival 1995 for its video production entitled "Identity - The Construction of Selfhood". Directed by Anjali Monteiro and K P Jayasankar the video invites viewers to critically examine various realms such as gender, religion and race, in which our identities are constructed, and concludes with a plea for tolerance, which is much needed in our world today.