

## Baba Bhole Nath

“You would not get a direct conveyance to Ayodhya. Go to Faizabad and from there it is just seven kilometers,” Pramod said to me as I left Delhi for Ayodhya on a wintry night in January 2005.

“Take a tempo from Kaiser Bagh in Lucknow.”

“And how much do they charge?” I asked.

“It is not more than Rs. 70. They are all share tempos. Don’t forget to bargain though.” I remembered his words when I was at the gate to Kaiser Bagh at 6 AM, looking for a share tempo. None was in sight and I did not want to seem too new to the people around me. That would have been a sure invitation to a hiked price. I went up to the chai wallah on the roadside and asked for a bun omelet. As he served me the bun with tea I casually asked, “No tempos here? For Faizabad?”

“New here?” He replied and my stoic calm seemed as useless as the cold tea in my hands. Am sure these people would have spotted me as soon as I got down from the auto rickshaw and waited for traffic to clear before I crossed the road. In Lucknow, the city well known for its ‘pehle aap tehzeeb’, no one waits for the traffic to clear any longer. Still, I realized from the kindness of the tea owner’s voice that maybe it was not such a bad thing to be a new comer here. Many people must be passing through to go to Ayodhya, the town of three thousand temples and Ram Janam Bhoomi.

“The tempos stopped soon after Babri Masjid was demolished. You would be better off taking a bus,” he pointed to a run down bus shelter in front before he got busy placing my vessels in a bucket of dirty water that he stirred with a log.

I looked ahead and saw a few rickety buses with passengers milling around. A bald man in a threadbare brown shawl over khaki uniform was ushering in the villagers into a green-yellow bus. The driver was waiting, smoking his beedi in his seat under a large, frayed, and white ‘No Smoking’ sticker.

“Will this bus go to Ayodhya?” I asked.

Bald man looked me up. “What else am I saying?”

“But by what time will it reach?”

“2’ O’ clock.”

“But it is just 117 kms from here.”

“And the road is very mulayam ...” he added to my sentence, punning on the chief minister’s name. “See, you asked I told. If you do not like my suggestion, take the tempo to Bara Banki. It takes you in one hour instead of three. The bus goes through villages you see.” He was being deliberately patient with me.

“And where will I get the tempo?” I was almost afraid to ask him.

“Take a rickshaw to IT Crossing. Tempos start from there.”

“I see,” I muttered under my breath and made my way to a rickshaw, reached IT Crossing and saw a number of tempos. In the meantime, I checked my Lonely Planet and realized Bara Banki was 40 kms from Lucknow. “At least I shall do one-third of the journey faster,” I thought to myself as the tempo wallah squeezed fifteen of us into the Toyota Qualis. He Qualis had a banner on the side announcing ‘tempo’. It was like small children drawing an apple and writing apple next to it. As if, we could not make out.

I had already lost two hours starting out and had just a day to spend at Ayodhya. My return ticket was booked for nine in the night from Lucknow. Still I did not find myself feeling too hasty about this journey. Often when you travel alone, just for the sake of traveling, you wonder why you are doing something: climbing a mountain, going down vague roads to even vaguer destinations. It hits you hard when a local fails to comprehend your answer to the simple question: why are you here?

It is a bug. Traveling overtakes you. Still you wish to give it a rational reason. To say something to justify why you are doing what you are doing. However, that was not the case with Ayodhya. Everybody around took it for granted that everyone wants to go to Ayodhya, whether for religious purposes, social purposes, political purposes, politico-socio-religio purposes, or like me: just to see what the whole fuss was about.

The Qualis/Tempo ambled on the crowded highway, the road was smooth, and we had no reason to grumble for the first twenty kilometers or so. I calculated the time and hoped to reach Faizabad by 11 ' O ' clock. Suddenly the vehicle screeched to a halt.

“What happened?” I asked noticing a huge pile up of cars, carts, trucks, and two-wheelers ahead of us.

“Phatak closed,” mumbled the driver and slipped off his seat to the road, he was already lighting his beedi when he remembered and peeped into the window. “Half an hour,” he said and walked off behind the tree to take a leak.

“Half an hour?” A man in a peak cap behind me asked.

Nobody answered and I got down to check the status. As I asked around, I learnt that this was a normal situation. The railway crossing fell in the neighbouring district and the Lucknow authorities did not want to spend money making a flyover that shall benefit that district. Hence, every day thousands of commuters spent almost half an hour stranded on the railway crossing. The authorities did not seem to realize that people from Lucknow were suffering. This had been going on for years.

“And no one can do anything about it,” replied my driver beaming at me. “Chai?” He asked as he moved to the temporary tin shed stalls that had mushroomed near the crossing.

After around 20 minutes and after collecting all the people who had left the tempo to stroll in the light sun on the fields we started again and reached Bara Banki by 9.30 AM. In the meantime, the driver had told me if I wanted to book the tempo to Ayodhya and back it would be Rs. 2000. I smiled at the offer and stood on the road to flag down a bus. Another rickety green-yellow bus came, I found a seat, and through a largely green but unchanged view of paddy plantations, I reached Faizabad by 12 Noon.

No sooner had I got down that men and boys of all ages, some even in saffron robes, surrounded me.

“Ayodhya saab? Fifty rupees, this way,” said a young tonsured boy not more than fifteen years of age.

“Nothing in Faizabad, auto to Ayodhya, only rupees sixty,” said a dark man in his thirties with a saffron gamcha on his neck.

“Listen to me sir; I will take you around Faizabad and later to Ayodhya. Complete tour sir. You will like it. Want hotel also?” Asked a paan-chewing fair man in his fifties. He had a huge sandalwood paste tikka on his forehead.

“How much?” I asked unconsciously.

“Only rupees five hundred sir,” he pushed the others away to talk to me face to face.

“Including hotel?”

He smiled as if I was a dimwit. “What are you saying sir? That was only for my services. Okay special rate for you. Rupees four hundred. But will find good cheap hotel, no problem.”

“Thanks,” I muttered and made my way out of the jumble that was now dwindling since the guides saw other people.

I made my way to an old-looking magazine shop and asked for a map of Faizabad-Ayodhya. The owner looked me up and down and said, “Who needs a map any longer? Faizabad is dead, nothing to see here except the Military Temple, Gulab Bari, and Maqbara of Bahu Begam. And in Ayodhya everything is on one road, start with the Janam Bhoomi.”

“Okay,” I mumbled and moved towards the auto rickshaw stand. The original guides who had pursued me came hovering again. I saw none of them had found any customers. I walked fast avoiding them with ‘special rate sir, three hundred rupees’ ringing in my ears.

I reached the auto rickshaw stand, the fare was Rs. 7. I hopped into an auto that picked up more single passengers like me on the way; two of them were men completely covered in saffron robes with huge tilaks on their forehead. Their heads were bald and they were clean-shaven.

My curiosity got the better of me and I asked, “Where are you from?”

“Andhra,” replied one of them turning towards me. The other kept looking out smoking a beedi.

“You stay here?”

“No one stays here forever. Now the winter will come to an end and we have to go to the Himalayas, so we are staying here for a while.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. A new place every night. One can sleep in the doorways of the temples. They also give food.”

“And what about your relations, family and so on. Have you left them and come?”

The sadhu smoking the beedi suddenly turned around and said in chaste English, a little harshly, “We work for God; we do not belong to anyone. This is our life. Travel, meditate, help the Ram Temple construction, and move on. We have no families, no people we call our own.”

I went quiet, and stayed like that through the rest of the journey. We passed masjids and temples on the side of the road. I glimpsed the Maqbara and realized it was not worth stopping to see. The structure looked untouched and had creepers and weeds growing around it. I sat back admiring the buildings, almost all of them either had the triangular or conical head of a temple or the semi-hemisphere of a mosque on top. Three thousand temples was not an exaggeration.

When we reached the bank of Sarayu the same sadhu who had spoken to me harshly earlier came to me and said, “Looks like you have come to visit.” This time he was not rough, “You know, Ayodhya and Benaras are the oldest places in the world which live in mythology, religion and in reality.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, ask people here what they do, do not ask where they come from. This place is old, very old, but it is also new because everyone who comes here lives in the present.”

He and the other sadhu walked off without even hearing my response and left me gaping at them. I adjusted my small kit on my shoulder and walked down to the riverbed.

On the banks of Sarayu, I expected to see a bank of stones but the riverbed was all sand and the only stones there were pieces of plaster of paris from the countless idols broken on the river.

“Please bring us some stones from Sarayu. We shall keep stones on which Bhagwan Ram had walked in our temples,” a relative had asked me on learning I was going to Ayodhya for a visit.

I thought about the demand and laughed at myself. What was I thinking? Did I think that every riverbank or sea beach Lord Ram walked on became stones? And, he could manage to throw them in the water and walk on it to claim Sita?

I sat on the ghats, chatted up a young man in his twenties who owned a teashop. He showed me pictures, in old newspapers, of the time when volunteers riding the Hindutava wave, that the right-wing forces had build up, had brought down the Babri Masjid.

“Did you have the shop here even then?” I asked about his small kiosk on the upper banks of the Sarayu.

“Yes, my father managed it then.”

“You must have made a lot of money? Or were the sadhus free loaders?”

He smiled, “Yes, there were many free loaders but we also made money. Rupees five to six thousand a day.”

“That’s a lot!”

“Yes, for around two months it was a lot, now we do good business only on holy days or when the Hinduvadi parties want.”

“What did you do with the money?”

“It all went away. Though my father could marry off my three sisters.”

“And where is father now?”

“He died gambling away the rest of the money,” the man said with an ironic smile. “What comes easy also goes easy. I was too small then.”

“How many people came when the Masjid was demolished?”

“Now, cannot say for sure but the whole bank, all the temples, every small place was full. Must be five to seven lakhs.”

“And what would be the current population of Ayodhya?”

“Very difficult to say, there are lots of people moving through the town at any time. Still maybe twenty-five thousand.”

I asked him directions to the Ram Janam Bhoomi and bid him bye.

While walking back I realized that my share auto rickshaw had come down the way I was going up. I crossed an elderly old-style chai wallah near Tulsi Udyan. He had a stick on his shoulders, its one end had a huge kettle on a small stove, and the other end had a bag of copper glasses. He took a while to put the apparatus on the road to serve me a cup of tea. Ancient man, ancient patience; I thought to myself.

Near the post office, I reached a barrier on a diversion from the main road. A sign said: Take this route to Ram Janam Bhoomi, no vehicles allowed after this point.

I went past the barrier and crossed Hanuman Garhi. Seeing the crowds for Hanuman I wondered what would happen to Ram. The road, with walls on both sides, became narrower and the number of police personnel started increasing. A few shops jutted onto the road. They were selling patasha prasada, plastic flowers, necklaces with 'Jai Shree Ram' and Lord Ram's idols, golden streamers and so on. Each shop had a 29" TV showing different scenes from the TV serial Ramayan.

I crossed Arun Govil challenging Arvind Trivedi. Dara Singh opening his chest to reveal Ram and Sita's faces. Multi-coloured arrows collapsing into each other and giving rise to rainbow hued fireworks. Many screens froze on Deepika's beatific smile.

As I proceeded, the police personnel around me started stopping me every now and then to check my small bag. I had taken care to carry just the essentials to Ayodhya, leaving the rest at Avadh Guest House in Lucknow. While they were checking me, I quizzed them: "Are you always on guard?"

"Of course, this is a national monument," said Mr. Fatty-type while rummaging through my toilet kit.

I saw shoulder pips announcing: RPF, CRPF, BSF, and UPP. I asked, "No one force here? You seem to be from different types of police."

"Which force alone would be able to provide two thousand men for thirteen years?" Asked back Mr. Inspector from the Central Reserve Police Force.

"So many? Why do you need so many?"

Mr. Dark from Border Security Force answered, "Move on, you shall see."

I moved on, and in a narrow gulley I saw a few men in khaki shorts and white shirts. They all supported huge tilaks on their foreheads. I moved closer and behind them I saw a few stone pillars. My interest was aroused. I asked one of them, "What are these?"

"Pillars," he said, stating the obvious as if I could not see.

"For what?"

"Who are you?"

"I am a traveler, came to see the Ram Janam Bhoomi," I replied in a tone that echoed back to him that he was being foolish to ask me the obvious.

Surprisingly he said, "Want to see more?"

I was game so he pulled me to the ground. There were hundreds of pillars in the ground. Grey monoliths, with carvings depicting scenes from religious texts. "This is the foundation for the Ram Temple," he said with an air of bravado.

"But here, just behind the police?"

"What wrong are we doing? The temple will come up. Let them give us just half a day and we shall build the temple."

"Yes, but . . ."

"But what?" He interjected, and sounded a little irritated with me.

"Nothing," I said and walked away, thinking it better not to ask if the activity was illegal. After all, the case was pending in the courts. How could one say which side was right or wrong, which side was legal or illegal. Obviously, the police knew about the pillars. Who was I to say anything?

I walked back on the path to the temple, this time stopped by two sets of people: one Hindu and one Muslim.

The Hindu ones patiently waited until I finished with the Muslim group. They were not selling anything. They wanted my address. Since I was a Sikh, each of them said I could give my address wherever I wanted: either at the Hindu place or at the Muslim one. Once I gave my address, they politely tried to take fifty rupees from me and give me a book, which contained the account of the Ram Janam Bhoomi struggle from both the Hindu point of view and from a Muslim angle. The cover of the book had two sections next to each other: one had the half moon with its solo star, and the other had a big 'Om'. I opened to the book to see the two versions in English and Hindi. I politely returned the book and they promised to send it to me soon, on my address.

I neared the pink and green Ram Charitra Manas Bhavan and saw that by now there must be two policemen or policewomen for every traveler. Or maybe the visitors were less. A passer by told me that on the fateful day Dec 06, 1992, the attack had started from Ram Charitra Manas Bhavan. As I waited to look up the place, the police ushered me on to the front of a small opening.

"This way?" I asked.

"Yes, leave your cell phone here," a stout policeman said.

"But what guarantee?"

"You will get a token, come back and we shall return the phone."

I did not have a choice. I left the phone with them and they put me through three metal detectors. I crossed them and realized I was entering a cage. The narrow path was barricaded from all sides with thick wire mesh. This did not look holy to me.

It was a long walk, and some others with me were getting irritated. By the time we crossed the path and reached a slightly more open space, I realized the futility of those around me who had bought prasad and flowers. The opening was elevated and I could see a huge maze of wire mesh. The administration must have created kilometers of tunnels in roughly sixty acres of land. The walk was easily three to four kilometers long, and I realized I had just completed one third of it.

"Leave everything here, except your wallet," said an inspector.

I dropped my small bag and the few pamphlets thrust in my hands by strangers. I gave myself up for a body search and the police removed my cigarettes and matchbox. They felt the back pockets of my jeans and to my surprise dug out a namazi topi.

"You Muslim?" A policeman asked.

"No," but I did not know what else to say. The topi had remained in my pocket since last night when I had gone to Ameenabad in Lucknow before visiting the Jama Masjid. "Is it a problem?"

"No, but Muslims hardly come here," the policeman was friendly.

He sent me down another corridor, this one much darker than the earlier one. The iron of the mesh was much stronger and the roof was covered. We men were segregated from the women, each in our own labyrinthine passages. The passages turned abruptly and came back close to where we were a few minutes back, encircling something of importance that we could not see because the ground was covered with tarpaulin. I must have walked half a kilometer and suddenly realized I was in an area lit with tube lights.

All around me, from the narrow slits of the wire mesh I could see tarpaulin covered the mud ground.

I remembered that the High Court of Uttar Pradesh had ordered the Archeological Survey of India to conduct explorations around the site. I could not see much except that the whole surface looked like an earthquake had hit it. The surveyors had dug up the ground as if they were laying the foundation of the multistoried building. The gaps were deep and all that was visible was a bottomless darkness.

I moved on the winding path and noticed that now the walls of the passage had threads tied to it. The walls reminded me of Ajmer Sharif. Guess people worship different Gods but they have almost identical methods of prayer. Two police officers were standing in the way. One of them said, "Look there."

I looked up and on a corner, next to what seemed to the end of the venue I saw a black idol of Lord Ram under a small tent. There was a pujari next to the idol but it was bereft of all the entrapment that accompanies deities in temples. The pujari's arm was outstretched and he was holding some patashas in his hand. Whoever wanted it could get some of them. A line from Nusret's quawalli came to my mind:

*Tum eik gorakhdanda ho ... tumhara naam suna hai, nishan nahin dekha.*

The Hindutava volunteers had taken this idol to be the nishan of Lord Ram being born in Ayodhya. According to them, for a change, God had provided a sign of his being. They had found the idol in the ruins of Babri Masjid, which were on the top of the ruins of an ancient temple. I wondered how the volunteers associated this idol with the image of Lord Ram that every child in the country knows: that of a fair God with a hand extended in blessing. This idol was black and his hands were outstretched. But who was I to question belief?

Ram Lalla seemed like wondering about the hullabaloo surrounding his birth. This demure lord did not look like he would break down a Mosque to find where he was born. However, I knew, this Ram was helpless and those who had found him had also ascribed motives to him.

This Ram Lalla was the fountainhead of political turmoil that had led to a party other than the Congress occupying the seat of power in Delhi for the longest period since independence.

Was this small, lonely, figure of the God even aware of all that he had generated in the last fifteen years?

I had stayed long enough; the police officer pushed me out.

On the way back I collected my belongings and walked the covered path till I found myself on the road surrounded by children aged between eleven and fourteen years, all peddling literature on the Ram Janam Bhoomi.

"Okay, okay, I shall take one thing from each," I said.

They thrust VCDs, pamphlets, picture postcards, picture books, etc. into my hands. I saw each of them had Lord Ram and Sita on the covers, the album on the demolition had the black dome of the Babri Masjid with a monkey on top. Another sign the volunteers had taken to mean that God had meant the mosque to be broken. Some albums had pictures of politicians conferring with each other while kar sevaks were lying dead and injured.

“All about demolition sa’ab,” said a sprightly boy.

“See, help me. Collect one of each kind and tell me how much I should pay. No, not that binocular with pictures. Just the paper stuff. No. What will I do with plastic maze and swords?”

The boy quickly got to work and in a minute, he handed me three books, two sets of pictures, one VCD, and some audiotapes.

“I do not want the audiotapes,” I said in a mock firm voice.

Then I noticed one of the boys with a black cap on his head. “You a Muslim?”

He nodded; I looked at the bright eyes of the boy who was helping me collect things. “What is your name?”

“Bismillah,” he said with a smile.

“Are all of you Muslim?” I was surprised.

“Not all, we four: Imran, Sayeed and Firoz. Those three are Hindu,” Bismillah replied.

“And what are you doing here?” I realized it was a stupid question. I knew what they were doing, but how would they feel selling the stories of their community’s dishonour? Maybe they were not even aware or maybe it was just a day’s work for them.

“Do you go to school?” I asked.

“No sa’ab, we are here only,” Imran replied.

I quickly paid the money for the things I had bought. I did not even wait for the odd rupees ten change.

When I went to the main entrance again to collect my cell phone, I asked the policemen for the best place to catch a bus to Lucknow. They directed me back to the River Sarayu. When I reached there, I realised that a better option would have been to have shared an auto rickshaw to Faizabad. I cursed myself for not remembering how I had come just that morning and fretted for a bus. It was already 4 PM and I wondered if I would make it to the station. The concern was higher because I had left my bag at the guesthouse and going there from Charbagh Railway Station would have been a waste of at least another half an hour.

I finally hailed a bus down to Faizabad that went over a 13 km route. The sights were beautiful, the way one sees the sun set only in postcards but I was in no mood to enjoy. The wait at Faizabad was another fifteen minutes and we finally started out by 5.30 PM. “It would be a miracle if I make it in time,” I thought to myself, pushing back the man sitting next to me as his snoring head kept resting on my shoulder.

After an hour, while I was resigned to my fate, he woke up. The lights were off and he lit a cigarette. I saw him and gained confidence to light one up for myself too.

He again asked me the most obvious question, without preliminaries, “What are you doing here?”

“Just came to see Ayodhya,” I was learning to be brusque.

“Anything special?”

“No, nothing. Just like that.”

“What do you do?”

“Well, I am a traveler. I also write,” I said hoping that would shut him up.

“That is interesting,” and I was just thinking to myself about having to explain that no one had published me yet and I wrote out of interest and I did a job from which I had now resigned. Blah, blah, blah ...

“My mother wrote short stories,” he said and I could see his white teeth in the darkness. Was he smiling?

“You know we never thought much of it and discouraged her.”

“She wrote privately, even my father did not know. Then one day, suddenly, a newspaper editor came home and handed her a cheque. I do not remember the amount but my father was shocked. For three days he kept talking about the money mother had earned. But by fourth day he was back to his earlier stiff self.”

“What was the story?”

“It came in the newspaper over a few weeks. It was about this mad woman who used to sleep on our verandah. She used to eat only from my mother.”

“I see,” thinking that it was amazing how just a meeting could lead to entertaining experiences. I mean, for all practical purposes, I was about to knock on this man’s head just a few minutes ago.

“You know, she got pregnant.”

“Who? The mad woman?”

“Yes, and then she left our town.”

“Which was your town?”

“Lucknow, we have been here for seven generations.”

“So were you there during the Babri Masjid-Ram Janam Bhoomi time? too?”

“Oh yes. We saw everything.”

A question had been puzzling me for a while so I asked him, “I wonder how so many people gathered at Ayodhya suddenly, and not even the police knew about it.”

“You think they came suddenly? They were around for months. It was much more planned than it is made out to be. Even the structure was brought down with great accuracy,” the man said.

“What is your name?”

“Vishnu Nandan. I am a sales manager for Tobu Pumps.”

“Nice meeting you.”

“See can I ask you something? You seem well traveled so I am asking.”

“Sure.”

“My wife is a Ph D. She is at home and wants to teach. Should I allow her?”

“Depends, if you do not want your children to say thirty years later that there mother would have been a good teacher but the father did not allow it,” I said and smiled.

I wondered about how we never change. Mr. Vishnu Nandan shall continue to live his life exactly as his father had lived.

I wondered about what I had learnt by going to Ayodhya that day. I thought of how I stood in the middle of heavily barricaded ruins covered with wire mesh and tarpaulin, surrounded by 2000+ policemen and policewomen from different forces, bereft of all my belongings including the cell phone, staring at a wall of threads tied in anticipation of a good fortune, and understood that this was where the constitution of India was being guarded. Not only now, but this is where the constitution had been guarded for the last thirteen years. Maybe the visit to Ayodhya was, in fact, a search for

that one place in the country where someone was guarding our constitution. What I had found was a cage. The sanctity of a secular nation was being preserved in an elaborate cage.

No body guarded the constitution across the poor villages and towns in the country where crime was rampant and children died of starvation. No body guarded the constitution where there was no education, electricity, or water. No body guarded the constitution in the offices of the bureaucracy where corruption was rampant or in the august offices of the elected members where nepotism ruled the roost.

Was this cage all that 55 years of independence could give us?

We reached Lucknow. I hopped off the bus, ran into the station, and checked the train timing. It was already 9.15 PM, but thanks to the fog in Delhi, the train was delayed by two hours. I heaved a sigh of relief, rushed to the guesthouse and brought my luggage, boarded the train and slept off. The Train Ticket Examiner must have come sometime in the night but my eyes opened only when we reached Old Delhi Railway Station.

I stumbled out of the train and walked down to Kashmiri Gate Metro station. It was 8 AM and because of the cold the crowd was thin. I enjoyed the walk, bought the ticket, and moved to the platform on the largely unmanned station.

The platform was deserted but I found one man in a jacket and cap, looking at some hoarding. I asked him, "Would the train here go to Shahadra?" I was not very familiar with the ways of the metro, and was in no mood to reach somewhere else. He turned around and I was surprised to see he was a sardarji with a ready smile on his face. "I have come for the first time too and have never used the metro before."

"On some work?"

"No, just to see the metro. I thought I better do it on a Sunday morning. It must be crowded on weekdays."

"But it is cold!"

"What does it matter son? I have bought two roundabout tickets. Shall travel for an hour and a half and get back home. Anyway, am retired. There is no work."

"Is it good, the metro?"

"Oh, it is amazing. I never thought something like this would be possible in India," he said with obvious pride. "It is like the roads in Iraq in the 1980s. Wonderful."

"You were in Iraq?"

"Yes, came back in 1985. My son had a hole in his heart. I had to get him treated."

"I am sorry to hear that, but is he okay now?"

"Oh yes, he is fine. Though now there is another hole in his heart," Sardarji said and laughed. "When will these children learn to live?"

"I didn't understand," I said. It seemed okay to pass the time talking to this man. The train would come in a few minutes.

"My son is going through a divorce. What do you do?"

"I work, but these days I am just traveling. Just coming back from Ayodhya."

"Just traveling? Why?"

"I am also a writer. Hope to write some day."

“If you are a writer I shall tell you something: write, but do not think of publishing. It will happen when it has to happen. You know,” he paused, “five years ago I was paralysed. My whole right side was locked.”

“Aha?”

“Yes, and I slowly started cleaning my grandson’s nappies, ironing them and the paralysis vanished.”

“That is interesting. No medicines?”

“Nothing at all. Just work, work, work, and not even with any expectation to get anything. Then three years back I thought of feeding people. You know, as thanksgiving.”

“That is nice.”

“Everyday I would cook. Personally cook for three to five hundred people. They would eat and go.”

“Then what happened? Do you still cook?”

“No, I got bored. I stopped cooking.”

“What is your name Sir?” I was curious about how this man would have seen life.

“Well people call me Baba Bhole Nath.”

“Do you do discourses?”

“No. Organized religion is a crime. Does anyone ever learn anything? Moreover, who are we to teach?”

“I don’t know. People like you who go through a difficult life end up preaching sometimes.”

He smiled and pointed upwards. “Only he teaches.”

“Who? God?”

“God has many names. I do not know who he is, but some force. You are a writer?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Okay I shall tell you three things. Will you remember them?”

“Depends, if they are useful.” By now the train had come and we boarded it. Sitting next to me he said, “Maybe it will help you to write, love yourself.”

“What?”

“Yes, love yourself. You know we go around the world looking for love but we miss it somewhere inside ourselves. The only way to find love is to love your own self.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Second: respect yourself.”

“Respect yourself?”

“Yes, because after love we look for respect. We do not get it because we do not learn to respect ourselves. Then, even if we get it, we cannot see it. We do not feel it. So it is important to be able to respect ourselves.”

“Thanks Babaji,” I said.

“Third: know that you are very small, miniscule, nothing. I think there is some force that has created the whole universe. We are very minute specks in that force. Nothing depends on us. Once we go, it is all over.”

I do not know what came upon me, but I stood up looking at him. My train stopped at Shahadra and even before I could bid him bye he said, “You went to

Ayodhya? It is a circus. India is amused by it. Like Hollywood amuses America. Every nation needs a myth . . .”

Indeed, if the constitution of a nation could be preserved in a cage then Ayodhya was a circus. The train moved on and I saw its back disappearing in the fog.