

MY name is Lal Das. I was appointed by the court as the chief priest of Ramjanmabhoomi temple in 1983 and continued in that position until March 1, 1992. Before that I used to oversee the work of the Ramjanmabhoomi Seva Samiti. I was attending to the court case [relating to the disputed site] from 1969 to 1983, before being appointed the chief priest. On paper I am still the chief priest. This appointment was made by the Government Receiver. Earlier, a magistrate or a judge used to be the Receiver. In 1992 the BJP government removed me and appointed their own supporter as the priest there.

Why did they do such a thing? Why did they feel that you would not work in their interest?

The question of working in anyone's interests did not arise. I was not under them. I was appointed by the court and the courts appoint an impartial person. Whatever they wanted from me and whatever expectations they had that I would work for them were not possible.

What expectations did they have from you? How did they want you to work in their favour?

They had two expectations, one that I should issue statements to the press in their favour and second, that I should tell everyone that all income the Ramjanmabhoomi *pujari* receives belongs to the VHP.

How much was received annually as offerings?

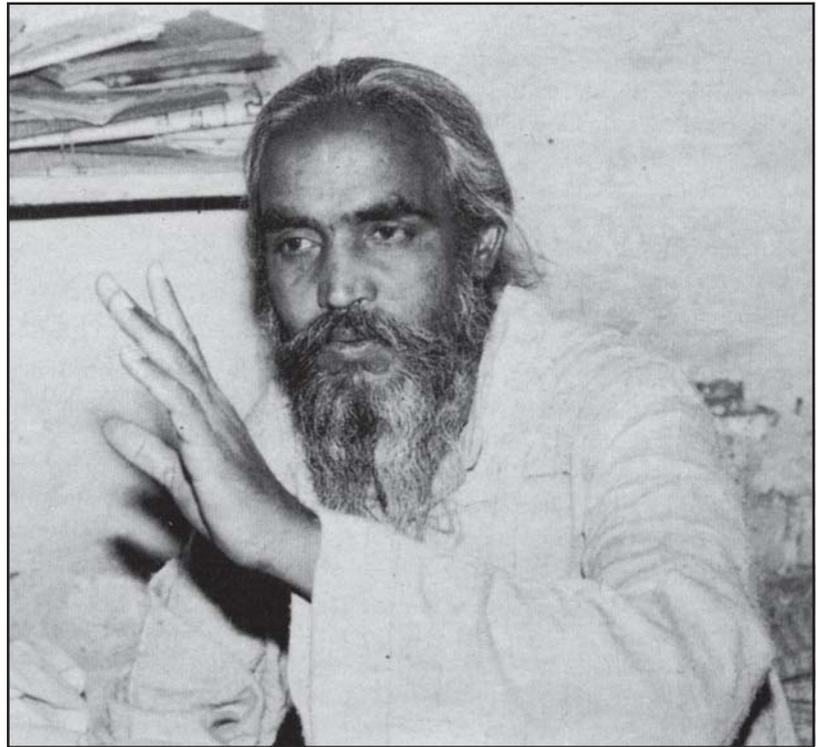
Initially it was not much. After the locks were opened, the amount of offerings increased to between Rs 5 to Rs 10 lakhs a year.

How much was received before the locks were opened?

Before that, whatever used to come used to be at the *chabutara* of the *akhara*. People did not go inside the *mandir*. When we opened the donation boxes after five or six

‘I Wonder How I am Still Alive’

Baba Lal Das interviewed by Madhu Kishwar
a few months before his murder



Baba Lal Das

months, we would get about Rs 10,000 to Rs 12,000. On an average we received about Rs 30,000 to Rs 35,000 a year. This was used for our expenses.

Did they want whatever money that came to go to them?

No, they were interested in propaganda. What they wanted was

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that we should tell all the visitors that the VHP owned the *mandir* because they had already announced all over India that they had rights over the *mandir*.

Since when did the VHP start coming to Ayodhya?

From 1984 onwards.

Before that there was no interference from them in Ayodhya?

All the rioting and violence started in 1984. Before that there was no dispute or trouble. There was a small dispute in 1949 and both sides went to court to argue out their case. There was no fighting or slogan shouting on the roads, neither was there any violence.

What happened in 1984 to cause them to suddenly remember this place?

It all started at Sitamarhi in Bihar. There they took out a *rath yatra* to generate propaganda to get the locks on the Ramjanmabhoomi opened. They got popular support and also a lot of money. They got to realise that they could make a lot of money out of this and also get publicity. So, with more money flowing in their programmes also went on increasing.

How did they remove you?

I was forcibly removed. It's like having some dacoits enter your home and take away everything.

What about the police?

What about them? The police was on their side and the state government was theirs.

Did the other mahants of Ayodhya not protest about this?

What can the *mahants* do? Those who are on our side cannot come out

on the streets to fight. But they did raise moral objections.

How did they do it? There have not been many statements from them.

There are nearly 8,500 big and small *mandirs* in Ayodhya. The press people come and meet a few people, generally those who are in the limelight. The Sadhu Samaj gave us moral support and protested against the VHP action, so did many members of the public and political parties. *Which political parties supported you?*

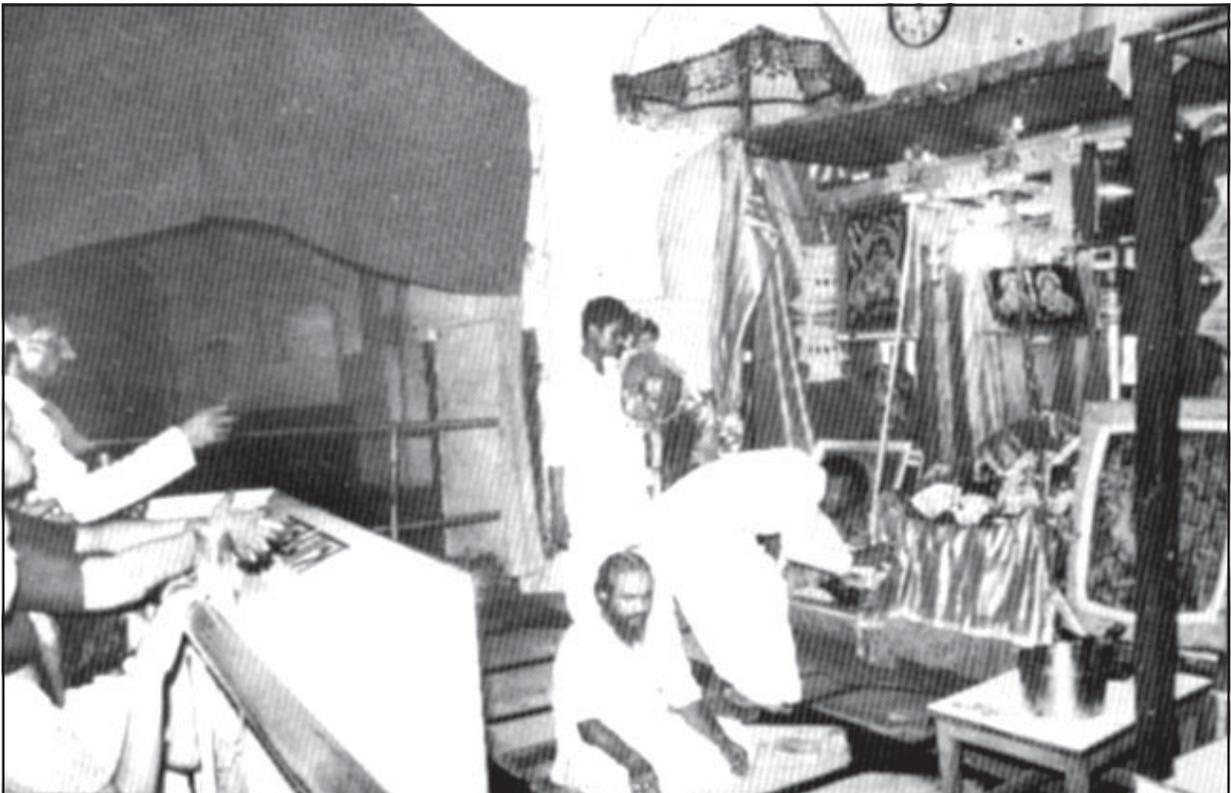
We received support from the S JP, Janta Dal, Janta(S) and the Bahujan Samaj Party. Only the Congress and the BJP were silent. *How come the Congress party did not support you even though you were appointed by their government?*

The Congress and the BJP have similar policies. What one does is supported by the other. All the troubles have been created by the

Congress. Right throughout till the demolition, the Congress has fully supported the BJP. Today also the BJP has the full support of the Congress. They have an internal arrangement—whatever the BJP does the Congress supports. But to show the public that they do not support the BJP they make a big drama like the Ramlila. In the Ramlila you bring Meghnad, Ravan and Sita on the stage to show the public a good drama. But behind the curtain the actors are neither Ravan nor Sita. Just in that manner, all this drama is meant for public consumption. Behind the scenes both BJP and Congress are one and the same.

Supposing you were asked to resolve the dispute in your personal capacity, what steps would you have taken to settle the dispute?

Since the Muslims have never fought over it, the problem resolves itself. The Muslims had not used the



Baba Lal Das praying in the Ram Janamsthan Mandir

Babri Masjid since 1949. The Muslims of Faizabad did not even know where Babri Masjid was situated, leave alone the Muslims from the rest of India. The older generation of Faizabad may have known where the Babri Masjid was but the younger generations did not know anything about it. The Sangh parivar started propaganda to take revenge on the descendants of Babar and to send them to Pakistan. Their propaganda brought attention to the fact that Babri Masjid existed in Ayodhya. It is they who united all the Muslims in India. When they brought the Muslims together, the Muslims gave the expected reaction that it was a royal *masjid* and that it should not be touched while there was a case going on in the courts over it. The Muslims did not come out in the streets to fight over it till they were attacked openly.

On February 1, 1986 the district court ordered the locks opened. The BJP-VHP *rathayatra* processions had to be cancelled. They were silent till February 7, wondering what to do, as their source of income had dried up. They used to collect a lot of money through the *rath yatra*; the villagers used to pay for getting the *mandir* opened. Now that the *mandir* was unlocked, what should they do?

Did the Muslims not create any trouble in all this time?

No, they were mourning, but they did not come out on the streets. They were fighting a legal battle in the courts.

There was a meeting in Lucknow on February 6, 1986. At this meeting, the VHP decided that the establishment of a *mandir* on the disputed site was the basis of their movement. They had already gotten a lot of money and political mileage out of the dispute. They now called for the construction of a *mandir*, and announced that their struggle would continue for as long as the *mandir*

was not constructed. Their slogans changed from that point onwards. They held processions all over India announcing that they would continue their fight as long as the *mandir* was not constructed. They also used a slogan: "This is just for starters — Mathura and Kashi are yet to come." (*Abhi to yeh jhanki hai, Mathura Kashi baki hai.*) After this they started taking out processions in the Muslim dominated areas and started abusing them. The Muslims, who were in mourning, became upset at these attacks. From February 7, 1986 riots started.

One result of these riots was that many Hindus were attacked in Kashmir. The state government was dismissed in Kashmir as a result of the riots. Elections have not been held in Kashmir ever since then. Even now there is governor's rule in Kashmir.

When the riots broke out on February 7 and continued till February 20-22, the *rath yatra*s were stopped by the then chief minister Vir Bahadur Singh. It was a Congress government then. When the locks were opened on the orders of the central government, Vir Bahadur Singh stopped the processions. Otherwise there would have been more violence. After the locks had been opened, the VHP started a campaign to lay the foundation stone for the construction of the *mandir* at the disputed spot.

They never showed their real intentions. In their affidavit to the government they announced that they would only lay the foundation stone of the *mandir* on three feet of land. They claimed they would not disturb anything else; they would not destroy or cause any harm to the disputed structure; there would be no violence of any kind. But their real intentions were different. Their thinking was that after they laid the

foundation stone there would be more violence. Then construction would be halted. After construction was halted, the Hindus would get angry and join their side in the dispute.

They started construction work after they laid the foundation stone. Vir Bahadur Singh stopped the construction work. Then the VHP announced that they had been prevented from building a *mandir*. After that Rajiv Gandhi was killed. Then the elections were held. The Congress formed the government at the Centre and the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. That the Congress and BJP have a common programme was not known to the common man. The Indian public could not see through the BJP-Congress deceptions as they would alternately blow hot and cold.

The lock was not put on because of anyone's order. The lock was put on in 1971. It was not locked in 1949. The legal aspect of this situation was that the place was in charge of a "Receiver." The food was cooked in the kitchen of the Ram Chabutra. The sentry would open the lock for the *bhog* (food offering to deities).

In 1971, Priya Dutt Ram, who was the Receiver, expired. There was a dispute between the new Receiver and the Nirmohi Akhara. The police intervened, put their own lock on, and kept the key. The sentry on duty was changed; he handed over the key to the new sentry. There were two doors. One door used to remain open for *bhog* offering and prayers. This system was continuing. The BJP and the VHP found a very good opportunity in this to publicise and propagate their ideas and then the other lock was taken off. So it was not that the place was completely locked. Only from the point of view of security was the place locked at times.

It could have been opened without fanfare and all the propaganda on TV.

It was all done for political gains. They have no love for Ram, these people from the RSS, Bajrang Dal, Vidyarthi Parishad, Shiv Sena and so on. These people are of the Arya Samaji faith, they do not believe in idol worship. But because they were getting a lot of money and political gain, they whipped up Hindu sentiments. In the entire history of the RSS they have not constructed a single *mandir* anywhere in India.

Our flag of the Devi is hexagonal and flags over the *mandirs* of Ram or Krishna have the symbol of Hanuman. Their saffron colour flag is not a symbol of the Vaishnavs but of the Arya Samajis. *Om* is part of our *mantras* also, but they have made *Om* the basis of everything, setting aside all the *mantras*. Thus the way we pray has no similarity with the way they pray. They consider Ram to be human while we think of Him as a Brahmin (God). We consider Krishna to be God, they think of him as a man.

Dr Golwalkar has written in his book that the biggest mistake of the Hindus is that they think of Ram and Krishna as gods. If, according to him, this is the Hindu's biggest mistake, then it is clear that they think of Ram and Krishna as ordinary mortals.

Whenever they talk of Ram they always say Bhagwan Ram.

All that is just play acting, as I have already told you.

If you say that Ram is God, how can he have a birthplace?

Whether this is so or not is a subject of intellectual debate, I do not want to go into that. It is a matter of belief; we treat them as gods and they treat them as ordinary mortals.

You said earlier that there was no dispute about the mandir at all. When I asked you how you would resolve the crisis, you said that this dispute is an artificial crisis. Are you in favour of this campaign that has been started to construct the Ram Mandir there?

I think that a grand Ram Mandir must be constructed. Ayodhya is a city of *mandirs*. In Ayodhya, Ram Mandirs are everywhere.

Is there need for one more mandir when there are already over 8,000 mandirs there?

The question is that of a Ramjanmabhoomi Mandir. Ayodhya is a city of 8,500 *mandirs*. The Muslims have never objected to the construction of a new Ram Mandir although 42 acres of land adjacent to the disputed site are even now recorded as a Muslim graveyard (*kabristan*) in the books of the revenue department.

But the Babri Masjid also comes in the disputed area.

That is part of the dispute. But the whole area is recorded as a graveyard. Eight *mandirs* were constructed in the graveyard after 1949. They were demolished by the BJP, who wanted to show the people that they were doing something.



Demolishing a mandir is not considered to be a good thing,

That is, only if they believe in Ram. But as they do not believe in Ram

Was there no protest in Ayodhya?

There was a lot of protest. They demolished eight *mandirs*, including the Sakshi Gopal Mandir, Hanuman Mandir and Keshavdas Mandir.

All these were recent constructions?

Most were recently constructed. Sakshi Gopal was an ancient *mandir*. The ancient *mandir*, Sita ki Rasoi, was destroyed by them during the *kar seva* on December 6.

The Muslims never objected to the construction of *mandirs* in their graveyard; rather, they had willingly handed over the land to the *maths* in Ayodhya. In that area behind the Janambhoomi there is a Shanti Bhavan and next to it is a temple. The area was given willingly by the Muslims to the Hindus to construct their temples. They may have received some compensation but the fact remains that the land was given willingly by the Muslims to the Hindus. There was no dispute at all between the two communities over the construction of these *mandirs* in the graveyard. Whatever dispute existed was being sorted out in court. They never objected to our praying at the disputed site.

How many Muslims are there in this area?

In Faizabad and Ayodhya the total population would be around 1.25 to 1.30 lakhs. In Faizabad, the Muslims would be 25 to 30 percent. In Ayodhya there would be around 5,000 Muslims. There has never been any dispute or quarrel with the Muslims. In fact there was a great deal of cooperation from the Muslims in the maintenance of the *mandir*. They owned flower gardens and they sold flowers to the *mandirs*. Other ingredients required for prayers were also provided by the

“There is no difference between them and Khalistanis. The Khalistanis want total control over Punjab. The RSS wants total dictatorial control over Hindu society. They want people to agree to whatever they say.”

Muslims. Things were going on smoothly; there was no discrimination. In fact, for the last 40 years the manager of one of the *mandirs* (Mangal Bhavan) is a Muslim.

In Ayodhya there was peace between the Hindus and the Muslims. People from outside have created the rift. For them the issue proved to be one which could arouse passions and create a rift between the Hindus and the Muslims. For them it was an opportunity to unite the Hindu votes behind them—they wanted to form their own government even though it meant a holocaust which may ruin the country. They were not concerned about the consequences. They had only one aim—votes.

This money that they have collected in the name of the Ramjanmabhoomi Mandir, some say it is Rs 800 crores. Is there any account of that?

I have all the documents and proofs. The VHP had an office near the Bharat Sadhu Samaj. They received Rs 21 million from West Germany. Apart from that they received bricks of gold and silver. Hindu families all over India donated money to them. They have collected hundreds of crores of rupees, divided the money before the 1991 elections

What would be the total amount?

The total can be found out from the banks here.

But you said that you had all the accounts.

I know about the money received from Germany and I know that Ramchandra Paramhansa took Rs 30 lakh as commission. Then only did he sign an authorisation to let the BJP withdraw the money before the elections. They withdrew the money from here and deposited it in other banks.

The money collected for the Ramjanmabhoomi was withdrawn and deposited in banks in Delhi and used for the elections.

How much annual income are they getting now?

They have no income from the Ramjanmabhoomi at the moment as it is under the control of the government.

But aren't they still collecting money all over the country in the name of the Ramjanmabhoomi ?

All the capitalists like Tata, Birla, Dalmia are giving them a lot of money. They give them money because they want the problem to continue so that public attention is diverted from the real issues and they can keep making money the way they want to.

In the film Ram Ke Naam in the interview with you, you were told that you sound like a communist.

Is speaking the truth speaking like a communist? I am just saying what is actually happening.

The VHP has removed you and forcibly taken over the mandir; similarly, it is said that they have removed many mahants from the mandirs in Ayodhya and installed their goons in their place. Is it true?

This is true. Not only in Ayodhya, but their idea was that everywhere in India, wherever there is a big *mandir* or *math*, they intend to send their men to take over the *mandirs* and *maths* so that their writ runs everywhere.

How did they take over the mandirs?

First of all the VHP and RSS people

asked for places to stay. They said they were working for a Hindu society. People here are not so shrewd or clever so they gave them a room to stay. After that one by one they started bringing in more of their workers into the *mandirs* and *maths*. Since we don't have family dynasties but a guru tradition, they chose one of their own disciples, made him the *mahant* and threw out the original *mahant*.

This could have been done only if the guru agreed.

There is no consent of the guru; it's all happening on the basis of force. The gurus have been thrown out on the streets; no one is concerned about them. For these people there is neither God nor guru (*na guru, na Gobind*). What can the gurus do? The police will not listen to them; they can't get justice.

Out of the 8,500 mandirs, how many have they taken over?

I know of eight *mandirs* they took over just as they took over the *janamsthaan*.

There was no internal resistance over this?

Who will protest? Lakhs are protesting against Khalistanis but what is happening? These people are another incarnation of the Khalistanis.

What similarity do you see between them and Khalistanis?

There is no difference between them and Khalistanis. The Khalistanis want total control over Punjab. The RSS wants total dictatorial control over Hindu society. They want people to agree to whatever they say.

“I hate all political parties because they are the root of all our problems.”

What would be the solution to this problem according to you?

Both Congress and the BJP should keep quiet and stay out of this. We the people of Ayodhya and Faizabad together will resolve the matter. The *mandir* will be constructed and the Muslims will not object.

Were you in favour of demolishing the Babri Masjid?

No, not at all.

You felt that without demolishing it a mandir could have been constructed?

The *mandir* was already there. Prayers were being offered while the court case was going on which was dragged on by the government. They wanted to keep the issue alive because at any lime they could raise it and start riots.

Is it true that murders are routinely taking place in Ayodhya ?

This is all their doing. They have goons and murderers on their side. Any *mahant* who does not obey them

or toe their line is murdered.

In the last two years how many mahants have been murdered?

At least 50 to 60 *mahants* have been murdered, such as the *mahant* of the big cantonment, Ram Pratap Das, Maithli Sharan of Jana ki ghat. Bajrangdas at Hanumangarhi was murdered some time ago. Recently many people have been murdered. How many people can one name?

There should be some list somewhere.

I have a list. I cannot remember the names without the list. Every week there are murders—if not every week, every month. I wonder how a person like me is still alive.

Yes, it is a wonder that they have left you alive after what you said about them in public.

I am alive by the grace of God. They have tried to do everything to kill me. They have attacked my home, taken away my land and house. They have thrown bombs at my house and tried to burn it. They have tried all methods to destroy me. Vinay Katiyar of the VHP even organised a *yagna* to kill me.



Ramjanambhoomi Mandir

Was this agricultural land?

No, it was land to build a house on. I am staying in someone else's house.

What are you doing these days?

I am looking after the *mandir* of the *riyasat*.

You mean the government?

No, not the government, the erstwhile king.

Do you have a leaning towards any political party?

I have no leaning towards any political party. I hate all political parties because they are the root of all our problems.

In your eyes is there any party that would reduce tensions?

I don't see any such party.

Not even the communists?

The communists have also become corrupt.

I had read in the newspapers that the communist MP from Faizabad had done a lot of good in Ayodhya.

He is a sinner. In this moment of crisis he never issued a statement that what is happening is wrong. He did not even go to the Muslims. He did not go to anyone—neither the Hindus nor the Muslims. He is MP only of the Ahirs and Yadavs, not of the whole region.

Have the Muslims whose houses were burnt down returned to Ayodhya? Most of them have returned.

How is the situation now?

The situation is still not good. They are still unprotected. They will remain insecure as long there is Congress rule.

Will they be unprotected even under the BJP?

Yes, even then they will be unprotected.

What should be done? Should we banish the Congress and BJP for a hundred years?

If the Congress and BJP are not removed by their roots from this

country, if the system does not change fully, if the IAS and PCS people remain here the total revolution that Jaiprakash Narayan had spoken about cannot occur; India cannot change without these things happening first.

Why do you want to abolish the IAS and the PCS?

Because the the IAS and PCS think they rule the country. The thinking amongst them is: "While we are in service, we rule the country, and after we retire, we should get a ticket from the BJP or Congress so we can rule again." Their wish is that from childhood to their death they should be the rulers. They want money and power. Both the Congress and the BJP have money and power. The capitalists are providing the money to these parties. The common man, the worker, the peasant has still not been able to understand why we have the vote. It is fools like me who have understood this.

Did the Mulayam Singh government do any good, in your opinion?

The Mulayam Singh government did its duty well. If I had been in his place I would have done more. By more I mean that I would have had so many bullets fired that people would not have dared to raise their eyes. He was a fool — he got scared. If I had been the chief minister in his place, I would have had thousands of people killed so that they would not have dared to look towards Ayodhya during their lifetimes.

Do you see any chance of Mulayam Singh coming back to power?

It is possible.

What about the hatred the Hindus have towards him?

Where was the hatred among the Hindus? It was all a creation of propaganda. Even today the people of Uttar Pradesh realise that Mulayam Singh was a good person. He worked

for the farmers. He worked for the interests of the poor and the farmers. He did a lot—like waiving agricultural loans upto Rs 11,000 and removing octroi. The things that farmers needed were made available at cheap rates.

In case he comes back to power, will this problem be solved?

Until a different government is formed at the Centre, how can the problem be solved? The condition of the *mandirs* depends on the people who control them. If they are corrupt, the *mandirs* will perish; if they are honest, *mandirs* will improve.

What do you feel about the politicisation of the mandirs in the last 50 years or so?

Earlier thoughtful people used to come to the Sadhu Samaj, good people who had become tired of this material world and wanted to devote their thoughts to prayers. They stayed away from jealousy and hatred. Today society has become such that on the one hand there are these so called followers of BJP who want to bring about Ramrajya through bloodshed and on the other hand you have the Sadhu Samaj which is becoming the home of criminals. Until the time there are good people in them there is no chance for improving political parties or mandirs.

How will people improve?

When there is change in society, when there is a total revolution, when the system changes, only then will people change. □

Along interview with Baba Lal Das is included in Anand Patwardhan's film, Ram Ke Naam. A video cassette of this film is available for Rs 350 from: P.O.Box No. 5216 Dadar (E), Bombay 400 014