

ON the night of November 16, 1993, just two days before Uttar Pradesh was to go to the polls to choose a new government in Lucknow, Baba Lal Das, former *pujari* of the Ramjanmabhoomi temple, was shot and critically wounded in the village of Ranipur Chaltar, police station Chavni, district Basti, some 20 kms away from Ayodhya. The incident occurred at 9.30 p.m. Baba Lal Das died a few hours later around 1.00 a.m. on November 17 while being taken to the civil hospital in Faizabad.

Baba Lal Das was in his late 40s. Born in Shringrishi, a village close to Ayodhya, he underwent his religious education at Raghunathpur in Jammu and Kashmir, and then became a *pujari* in a temple in Mehsana, Gujarat. After Baba Lal Das came to Ayodhya, he served for a while as the secretary of the local Communist Party of India (Marxist) unit, drawn to "their commitment to the traditional ideal of equality."

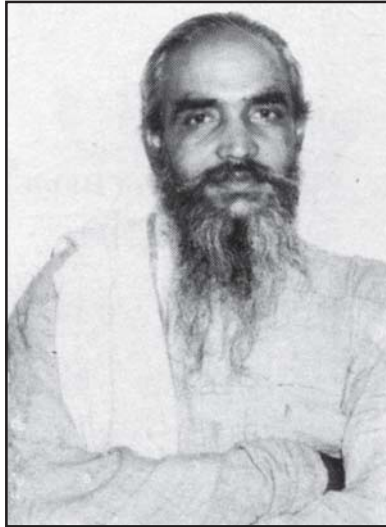
Politically shrewd and articulate, he took the Sangh parivar and its affiliated mahants head-on after the BJP government of Kalyan Singh removed him as the chief priest of the Ramjanmabhoomi Mandir and appointed one of their own men in his place. Baba Lal Das paid a heavy price for not toeing the VHP line on the masjid-mandir issue and taking a secular stand instead. He soon emerged as a key player in the religious politics of Ayodhya.

Lal Das continued to be a bitter critic of the VHP till the very last, arousing their wrath once again recently, when he accused their men in Ayodhya of stealing the idol of Ram Lalla as well as those of some other gods and goddesses during the demolition of the Babri Masjid and replacing them with fakes. Naturally, Lal Das made many enemies amongst the powerful. He continually feared for his life, especially after the BJP

The Murder of Baba Lal Das

An Investigative Report

Shikha Trivedi



government removed his security cover.

If Baba Lal Das' role in public life was controversial, then the circumstances surrounding his death are even more so. The local police allege a four-year-old land dispute as the reason for his murder at the hands of one Shivdas and his accomplice Ram Sumiran Chowdhury. The two have since been arrested.

Baba Lal Das had bought 7.5 *bhigas* of agricultural land in Ranipur Chaltar from one Chatti Din of the same village for Rs 1 lakh, of which he had so far paid Rs 50,000. Chatti Din in turn had been given the land by one Parvati Devi. After her death, Shivdas, the prime accused in the murder, who was her son-in-law, produced a will in which she had left the same property to him. Since this land was now in the name of Baba Lal Das, Shivdas went to court against him with his claim. The legal battle had been going on for some time, and the murder of the mahant, according

to the police, was directly linked to it. They have dismissed it as a simple open and shut 'murder arising out of land dispute' case. The reality, however, could be quite different, as I discovered on a visit to the area as part of a four member team of inquiry investigating the slaying of Baba Lal Das.

From October 30 onwards, Lal Das had been staying in Ranipur Chaltar. The villagers say that the Baba had never spent so much time there before. His earlier visits were never for more than two or three days. His disciples suggest that the Baba decided to stay on, and away from his home in Ayodhya, to avoid pressures being put on him by various political parties to campaign for them in the assembly elections. Obviously the fear of an attack on his life in this somewhat remote village had receded from his mind, for despite the fact that he had no bodyguards or 'shadows' as they are called in this part of the world, he was living in a small rough and ready sort of thatched hut with no doors. It was open to the fields and all kinds of intruders.

The Baba's needs were being looked after by his servant Ramsukh, a local man of about 50, whom he had hired some months back. Ramsukh was the only eyewitness to the shooting of Lal Das. We met him in the same hut 10 days after the murder. In between much wailing and beating of the breast, he told us what had happened. The Baba and he were sitting facing each other at the edge of the hut, a fire burning between them on which they were warming their hands. The flames must have been at



Pawns in the politicians game: a meeting of sadhus at Ayodhya

least a foot and a half high. A lantern had been lit and was hanging behind Ramsukh's head on one of the wooden poles holding up the roof of the hut. At some distance on his right an earthen oil lamp was burning.

Hence, although it was pitch dark outside, the hut itself was brightly illuminated. We saw this for ourselves, as Ramsukh recreated the scene of that night to the last detail. His account of the actual shooting goes something like this: at about 9.30 p.m. two men shot Baba twice in quick succession from behind. The first bullet hit him in the head and the second in the back. Baba clutched his head with both hands and fell backwards. As he did so, his legs straightened out—into the fire. The attackers had by then made good their escape. In the meantime, Ramsukh says that he went running to the house of their nearest neighbour, one Bhagwati Singh, and as he reached it

he heard two more shots being fired.

According to Bhagwati Singh and another villager, Ram Karan Kumhar, Ramsukh came shouting that a bomb had exploded, killing Baba Lal Das. While Bhagwati went off to round up the others in the village, Kumhar, along with their *pradhan*, Ram Pal Yadav, were the first to reach the spot. "Baba's legs were burning in the fire. When we moved them he mumbled 'don't kill me.' There was a lot of blood where he had fallen. We tried to ask him who he suspected, but he could not speak," says Ram Karan.

Some of the other villagers hastened off to the nearest police outpost about 2 kms away at Vikramjyot located on the busy Bastar-Gorakhpur road. There they informed the chowki-in-charge Shiv Prakash Rai who rushed to the village in a jeep being used in the area for campaigning by one of the political parties. It was by then almost 11.00

p.m. "We first thought of taking him to the Basti hospital since the village in which he was shot falls in the same division. But the road to Basti is very bad, besides which Faizabad is closer and the medical facilities there better. So after administering some first aid in Vikramjyot we took him there," says Rai. He claims that he had no idea that Lal Das had bought land in Ranipur Chattar and was living there. "I had only read about him in the newspapers," he added.

Rai had by then informed his senior, Gorakhnath Yadav, the S.O. of Chavni police station, of the shooting. Yadav and his men began investigating at the site of the murder where they found two empty cartridge cases. Four shots had apparently been fired from a country made revolver known as *katta*. Two pellets had got the mahant, while the other two were buried in a cot placed nearby. They picked up the servant for questioning

as well. Rai also sent a message on the wireless to the Ayodhya police. Anil Rai, in-charge of the outpost at Nayaghat under which Lal Das' house falls, recalls the time as being about 11.30 p.m. He immediately telephoned the Baba's house. The mahant's young daughter picked up the phone, and Anil Rai asked to speak to Avdesh Kumar, the principal disciple of the slain mahant, to whom he then conveyed the communique he had just received.

Avdesh recalls that soon afterwards that is around 12.45 a.m, the jeep carrying his guru's body entered their lane. From there he too accompanied the party to the Faizabad Hospital. "It was well after 1.00 a.m the next morning, after all the medical formalities were completed that I, along with two of my friends, Pinku Tripathi and Satish Chandra Pandey, left with Shiv Prakash Rai for the Chavni police station," says Avdesh. The police say that they urgently needed to talk to somebody who could throw light on the incident. Avdesh was known to be the person who would inherit his guru's *gaddi*. He fitted the bill. It was almost 2.00 a.m when they reached the police station where Gorakhnath Yadav was awaiting them.

On reaching there, Avdesh was asked to file the all important First Information Report (FIR). What transpired then is a stark example of the growing travesty of justice in this country, a total violation of the law of the land as we know it by its so-called protectors themselves.

The FIR No 204/93 filed by Avdesh Kumar v/s Shivdas Chowdhury, village Malkanya, police station Hariya, district Basti and Ram Sumiran Chowdhury states that, "The accused came into the hut from the south-west direction where the Baba was sitting, saying, 'We will kill you.' Then they fired the shot from behind. We started shouting, but were too

scared to chase them. After hearing our cries, the villagers rushed to our help. We saw the accused in the light of the lantern and recognised them [as Shivdas and Ram Sumiran Chowdhury]. I brought guruji to the police station in an injured condition and wrote this report."

Now first of all, there are enough witnesses amongst the villagers in Ranipur Chattar, who will bear out the fact that Avdesh Kumar was not present in the hut at the time of the murder. Both Shiv Prakash Rai and Anil Rai, of the Vikramjyot and Nayaghat chowkis respectively, also know that he was in Ayodhya at the time. Besides, there is the editor of the Faizabad daily *Jan Morcha*, Sheetla Singh, whom Avdesh Kumar contacted as soon as he heard of the murder of his guru and on whose advice and persuasion he went with the police to file the FIR. Why then did the police allow Avdesh to put down this lie in writing, even though they knew the truth of the matter?

Secondly, the time of filing the FIR has been given as 10.35 p.m on November 16, when it was actually lodged only after 2.00 a.m on November 17. Besides, the time of Baba Lal Das' death has not been noted anywhere in the FIR.

Thirdly, the FIR was filed under Section 307 of the IPC, which can only

be done if the victim is still alive. However, at the time of filing the FIR, Lal Das was already dead. The section was converted to 302 only at 6.30 a.m the next morning.

When confronted with the first distortion in the FIR, Yadav, whom we met in his quarters just before he was scheduled to leave for counting duty, continued to maintain that Avdesh was an eyewitness to the murder. "In any case, that is what they themselves have said in the FIR," he concluded for good measure. Later on however, Avdesh told us that on that night when he was told to file the FIR he was 'in a state of total shock' and without thinking kept on doing what Shiv Prakash Rai and Gorakhnath Yadav were asking him to. "They kept questioning me rapidly and S.P. Rai wrote down everything on a piece of plain paper. They kept nodding at each other all the time. At the end of it I was just asked to sign the document." Avdesh categorically denies having said that Shivdas and Ram Sumiran committed the murder as the FIR states. "They asked me whether I suspected anyone, and all I said was that it could have been these two men because they were involved in a land dispute with the Baba. I did not say they killed him. How could I, when I was not even there?" he asks.

October 30	Baba Lal Das arrives at his hut in Ranipur Chattar village from Ayodhya.
November 6, 4.00 a.m.:	Villagers report a police raid on the Baba.
November 16, 9.30 p.m.:	Baba Lal Das is shot and critically wounded
11.00 p.m.:	Villagers inform S.P. Rai, the Vikramjyot chowki-in-charge, who in turn informs the S.O. Chavni Gorakhnath Yadav and the Nayaghat police chowki-in-charge Anil Rai, in Ayodhya.
November 17, 12.45 a.m.:	The police jeep carrying Lal Das' body arrives at his house, where Avdesh Kumar joins S.P. Rai and they all leave for Faizabad.
1.00 a.m.:	Avdesh Kumar reaches Chavni police station and files the FIR under Section 307 of the IPC. The time of filing is however put down as 10.30 p.m. the previous night.
6.30 a.m.:	Section 307 is converted to 302.

Other than that, Avdesh claims that he told the police that he also suspected some powerful persons or body with political backing to have been responsible for the murder. If so, this finds no mention in the FIR. Avdesh told us he intends to change his statement.

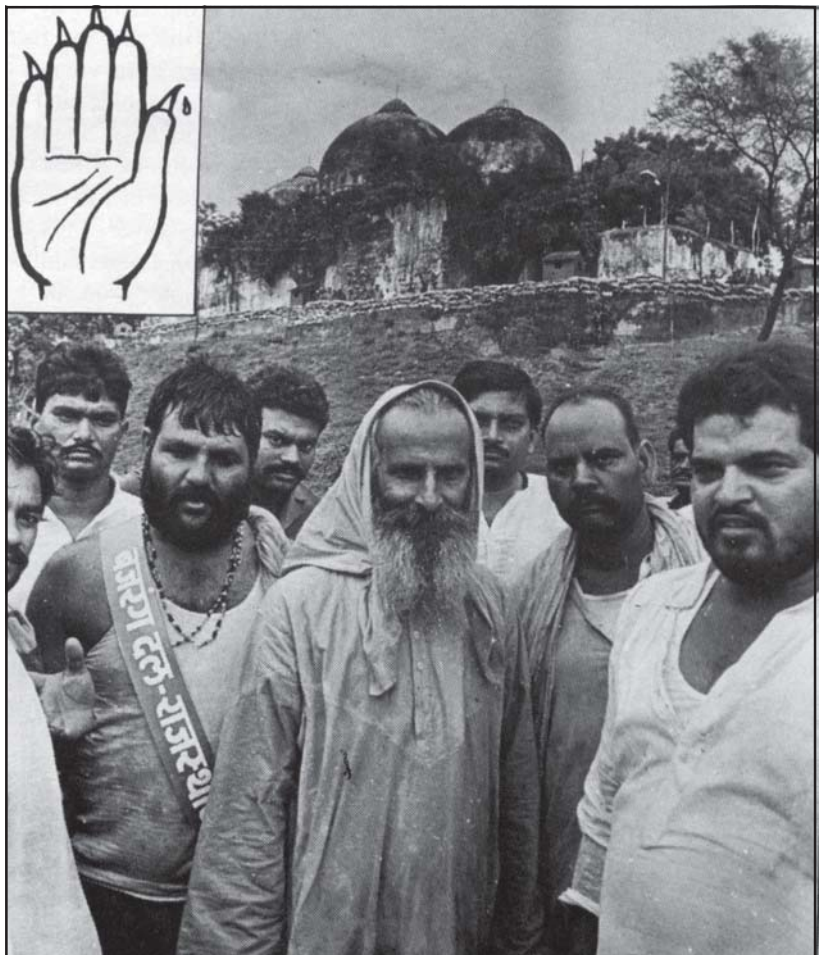
When pressed by us to answer the charge of falsifying the timing in the FIR, Gorakhnath Yadav actually defended his action— thereby admitting to the charge—on humanitarian grounds. “If we had stuck to procedure, we would have had to bring Lal Das to the police station first, prepare the FIR and then take him to the hospital. He was critically injured, so it was more important to get medical help. But officially we can’t do this, and so the time was noted down as per procedure.” Gorakhnath Yadav kept on insisting that the job was that of a small time criminal and therefore linked to the land dispute. “If there was any political conspiracy, then a professional would have been hired who would shoot to kill on the spot.” It is perhaps to prove this very point that the FIR was initially not filed under Section 302 of the IPC but under 307. Yadav admitted after much hedging around that they had not looked into any other angle of the murder nor questioned anyone else who might have had reason to finish Lal Das off. Yet he insisted that he had completed his investigations and he was certain that it was not a political murder.

Apart from the distortions in the FIR, the reluctance of the local police in interrogating Ramsukh needs to be pointed out. It is logical that since Ramsukh was not only present in the hut when Lal Das was shot but that he was also facing the spot from where the killers attacked the Baba, that he saw who they were. In fact, he must have seen them very clearly indeed given that there was ample

light in the hut and that Lal Das’ murderers fired at him from very close quarters, less than 6 feet away. Yet, amazingly enough Ramsukh denies recognising them. If their faces were covered with a cloth or blanket, he could have been given the benefit of the doubt. But he did not once say that this was so. He has offered two versions of what happened to him at that point in time. At first he told the villagers that he was so scared by the shooting that he immediately ran for safety towards Bhagwati Singh’s house; later he related to the Baba’s disciples that he fainted and when he came to his senses he rushed off to get help.

Further more, Ramsukh’s admission that he heard two more

shots when he reached Bhagwati Singh’s house does not ring true. Bhagwati’s house is some five minutes walking distance from the Baba’s hut. And even if one allows for the fact that in the silence of the night, sounds carry much further than otherwise, there was a celebration going on outside Bhagwati’s house for the birth of a child. As he himself pointed out, any noise would have been drowned under the voices of so many women singing, the beat of the *dholaks* and the cries of the children. Shockingly, the police has chosen not to seek any answers from this only eyewitness to the murder. They are benignly disposed towards Ramsukh, who they describe as “that poor backward.” “He is too scared to talk,



Bajrang Dal workers prepared for the demolition of the Babri Masjid

The Pioneer

what will we get out of him?" they ask.

There is yet another curious aspect to this case, which indicates that there is more to the Lal Das murder than meets the eye. On November 6, a police party of some 8 to 10 men raided Lal Das' hut in Ranipur Chattar. According to the villagers, some of whom saw the police jeep, it was around 4.00 a.m. in the morning. All that Ramsukh however says is that the search lasted for about 10 minutes after which the police left empty-handed. Avdesh Kumar claims that a few days after this incident, Baba told him that he had gone to Gorakhnath Yadav at the Chavni police station along with one Tribhovan Das to find out who had sent him to search his house. Yadav apparently named three persons on whose behest he had conducted the raid, but Lal Das did not reveal these names to Avdesh.

Gorakhnath Yadav flatly denies all knowledge of the raid despite the fact that he was seen by the villagers that morning. He admits that because of the elections, some routine searches had been carried out in the area for rounding up of illegal arms, but does not remember Baba's house being on their list. Shiv Prakash Rai stuck to the same story, adding that if any such raid had been carried out, there is no way he would have not been included in the search party. Both Yadav and S.P. Rai suggested to us, that perhaps it was the police from Ayodhya that had gone to Lal Das' hut that morning.

Enquiries at the Ayodhya police station also drew a blank. The S.O., Raja Lal Tiwari said that he was not aware of any such raid and directed us to the Ramjanmabhoomi police *thana* instead. According to him, in September one Ladoo Das of Hanuman Gadhi had been killed by two locals, Pehlaj Das and Ram Prakash Pandey. Subsequently the latter was killed in a police encounter, while the former, who is known to be a friend of

Lal Das, was absconding. "Maybe a police force from there went to look for him at the Baba's hut, since they are handling this case," suggested Tiwari.

Anil Rai, whose *chowki* at Nayaghat falls under the Ramjanmabhoomi *thana*, seemed equally clueless about the November 6 incident "The village Baba was living in is not in Faizabad district and hence it is outside our jurisdiction. In any case, we cannot conduct official work in another district, in this case Basti, without prior intimation to the concerned police officers there," he added. "Which in this case would be the station officer of Chavni, Gorakhnath Yadav?" we asked. "He would have to know," admitted Rai.

So then, who ordered this search, and who carried it out? And why is Gorakhnath Yadav denying the fact that it even took place? The villagers seem to think that it was some kind of signal. According to Shiv Shankar Singh, a teacher at the local school, "Earlier on people were in awe of Lal Das and also a little scared. After all he was a very important and famous man. But after the raid, suddenly he seemed to become less powerful, and this must have made his enemies hold enough to finish him off." The villagers of Ranipur Chattar did not sound very convinced about the land dispute theory and were openly suspicious of the intentions of the local police. According to them, Baba Lal Das had no enemies in the village and even when he and Shivdas met there was no open hostility between them. "It was Shivdas who took the matter to court. Had he wanted to settle it some other way he could have done it years back, when the Baba was not so powerful." said Bhagwati Singh.

Some of Lal Das' other disciples also suggest a similar theory. One of them, Kamlesh, revealed that a couple of months earlier Shivdas had actually

come to the hut while Baba was visiting the village and threatened him. "A few of us were present there at the time, and we beat him up. He ran and hid, but knowing that there was no escape from us, he came out in the open and then challenged us saying that 'we could do whatever we wanted with him and that he was not scared'. We let him go, but were taken aback at his posture. This man, despite fighting a case against Baba had always been very scared of him, and here he was now actually making threats," exclaimed Kamlesh. They are sure, that if at all it was Shivdas who shot Lal Das, then he was being used by somebody very powerful who was aware of the ongoing land dispute between the two.

The general opinion in Ayodhya, even amongst the other mahants is that the land dispute theory is just a cover up for a darker deeper conspiracy, although not a single one of them is willing to say this publicly for fear of reprisal in a town where the criminalisation and politicisation of religion has peaked in the last couple of years. Two factors seem to be uppermost in their minds. Firstly, that the shooting took place in a distant village, when it could have as easily happened in Ayodhya since Lal Das had no security; secondly, that it was timed just before the elections, so that neither would the incident receive as much publicity as in normal times, nor would the police, their hands already full with election duty, do a proper job.

The manner in which the investigations into the murder have been carried out by the police so far, and their unwillingness to be forthcoming on the matter, coupled with the reservations and fears the local people expressed to us regarding a just enquiry, all seem to indicate that an intervention by the government of the day is absolutely essential if indeed the real murderers of Baba Lal Das are yet to be caught. □