

Indian City Shaken by Temple Bombings

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VARANASI, [India](#), March 8 — Their hushed voices were drowned out by the howls of demonstrators. Just a stone's throw away lay the gory wreckage of Tuesday's temple blast.

But inside a small square chamber on the compound of the Sankat Mochan temple on Wednesday afternoon sat four men facing their monkey god and carrying out a job they had been paid to do: chanting the name of a Hindu god as a prayer for a stranger who was sick.

"Om Sri Ram, jai Ram, jai jai Ram," the men muttered through the din and sensation. An interruption of the incantation could not be allowed.

Modern terror more than interrupted the rhythm of this 400-year-old institution, as it did, in smaller ways, the rhythm of daily life in this 2,500-year-old city. A pair of homemade bombs on Tuesday evening tore through the Sankat Mochan temple and the nearby city railway station, killing at least 14 and injuring more than 100.

Law enforcement authorities on Wednesday said explosives had been stuffed inside a pressure cooker and left inside an inconspicuous bag at each site. The police found a similar unexploded device at a busy city market. The bomb at the train station left a wide shallow crater at the terminal; shrapnel pockmarked the ceiling above. The police said they did not know who was responsible.

The other bomb was set off at dusk in the courtyard of the Sankat Mochan temple, dedicated to the Hindu monkey deity, Hanuman, as thousands of worshippers gathered for the evening oil-lamp prayers. Tuesday is the most auspicious day at the Hanuman temple, and dozens of couples had come to be blessed in marriage.

The blast forced all services to be suspended for four hours. "For us what could be a more shattering experience?" the temple's head priest and administrator, Veer Bhadra Mishra, 68, wondered aloud on Wednesday. Hindus believe the temple compound, surrounded by woods, is Hanuman's home.

Clashes between Hindus and Muslims did not come to pass, as feared, despite protest marches called by Hindu radicals and their politician allies. Varanasi, also known as Benares, was free of violence Wednesday.

But the city was also missing its usual chaotic, vibrant and intense character. With a strike called by a number of Hindu nationalist groups, schools and businesses across the city were closed. Boatmen at the Ganges River, a daily draw for pilgrims and tourists, complained bitterly that business had dropped off. Varanasi's narrow, normally impassable streets could be easily navigated.

Several Muslim shopkeepers said they had shuttered their businesses as a gesture of respect for the dead and their families, and they sat on the stoops of their shops chewing betel leaves, chatting, watching the day pass. Riot police officers stood at street corners.

Politicians quickly seized upon the Varanasi blasts, coming as they did in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, where elections are expected to be held later this year.

L. K. Advani, the leader of the opposition Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, on Wednesday accused the government, led by the Congress Party, of not being tough enough on terrorists and announced a procession to denounce the blasts.

[Sonia Gandhi](#), leader of the Congress Party, wasted no time in rushing to the city to commiserate with victims and their families and review the damage. With Congress eager to reclaim Uttar Pradesh from a local rival political party, Mrs. Gandhi pressed both the state and federal governments to capture the culprits and mete out "very strict punishment." The Congress Party's main rival, Uttar Pradesh's chief minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, called for unity.

Meanwhile, state officials announced that the police in the town of Lucknow, also in Uttar Pradesh, had shot and killed a wanted man suspected of being a militant and for having links to Kashmir insurgents. They offered no concrete evidence linking the dead suspect to the Varanasi bombing. "We are collecting evidence," said Yashpal Singh, the state police chief. "We do not have any solid proof to move in a particular direction."

At the normally bustling commercial strip called Bengali Tola, the shopkeepers, most all of them Muslims, had closed their shops and headed home Tuesday night as soon as the news of the blasts came. By the end of the night, they said they had resolved to take the day off. There was no telling, they said, what violence could flare up.

"We want that you should write we also regret this very deeply, we also feel the sorrow," said Muhammad Yusha, 45, who makes his living as a polisher of Varanasi's famous silk saris.

Never before, said a sari shop owner, Mumtaz Ahmed, 38, had he seen virtually every Muslim-owned shop closed for the day. "This kind of shutdown has never happened before," he said. "But nor has this kind of attack."

By midafternoon, Sankat Mochan was thick with visitors, but they were by and large visiting politicians, gawkers, journalists from afar and crowds of Hindu hard-liners who noisily denounced their political opponents and waved flags.

A small stream of worshippers sat before the altar, mumbling quiet prayers amid the bustle. "For a devotee there's no disturbance," Surender Singh, a timber merchant, said. "I'm doing my worship in God's house." He said he could not be bothered with protests.