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## A.G. Noorani: Scholar, Jurist and Conscience Keeper of the Nation

By: Siddharth Varadarajan

*The canvas of Noorani's erudition, reflected in an astonishing output of books & articles, was vast: the Kashmir question, the Indian constitution, India's relations with China and Pakistan, Islam, human rights, political trials, the freedom struggle, the Babri Masjid, Hindutva, and much more.*

With the passing of Abdul Ghafoor Noorani, scholar and jurist – known to readers of his brilliant columns and books over an astonishing seven decades as A.G. Noorani – we have lost a walking encyclopaedia of Indian and global diplomatic and constitutional history, a scholar who was not just a chronicler but also a conscience keeper who believed that states which disregard universal values such as respect for human rights and international law were the worst enemies of their own people.

Known to his friends simply as Ghafoor, Noorani had been ailing for some time but was still working – as furiously as his deteriorating condition would allow him – on a book on the Supreme Court's [atrocious Babri Masjid judgment](#). He knew death was knocking on his door but that it was essential that he complete his manuscript. The book, perhaps, remains unfinished but we hope he has left enough for a competent scholar or publisher to work with.



Independent India has produced plenty of outstanding intellectuals but Noorani was unique: a legal scholar, historian, political analyst and human rights defender—all wrapped in one. The canvas of his erudition, reflected in an astonishing output of books, articles, op-eds and book reviews, was vast: India's relations with China and Pakistan, the Jammu and Kashmir question, the Indian constitution, British constitutional history, jurisprudence, Hyderabad, Islam, human rights, political trials, the Indian freedom struggle, the Babri Masjid and Hindutva. He was equally at home discussing [Lord Denning](#), [Judge Winograd](#) of the Israeli Supreme Court or the Indian judiciary. Each and every one of his books went on to become valuable reference material for lay readers and scholars alike.

As a scholar, Ghafoor bhai knew nothing of computers and the internet. He never even knew how to use a typewriter and wrote all his articles out by hand. His primary research material consisted of newspaper cuttings on an enormous number of subjects, a habit he developed in the 1940s as a schoolboy, and which he stuck to for decades. He read widely and took copious notes, judiciously discarding volumes which he felt were no longer of use – a sensible strategy for a writer who had no institutional backing and whose flat on Nepean Sea Road in Bombay grew steadily more cramped as his research interests widened over the years.

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Noorani was also a relentless – and ruthless – seeker of official documents (unclassified but hard to find) such as statements and gazette notifications, distrustful as he rightly was with the quality of newspaper reportage, especially on foreign policy and Kashmir. Sometimes, officials in South Block who respected his meticulousness, obliged him. Otherwise, prompted by a stray reference in a news report to, say, a document the Iranian government had given to the International Atomic Energy Agency, he would badger a friend in Delhi for not just that particular document but the complete chain of ensuing communication. After the failed India-Pakistan summit in Agra, so determined was he to assemble as complete a record of what had happened between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pervez Musharraf that he even made a trip to Islamabad to obtain a copy of the elusive, aborted draft declaration. He [published the results of his efforts](#) in *Frontline* magazine in 2005.

# The RSS

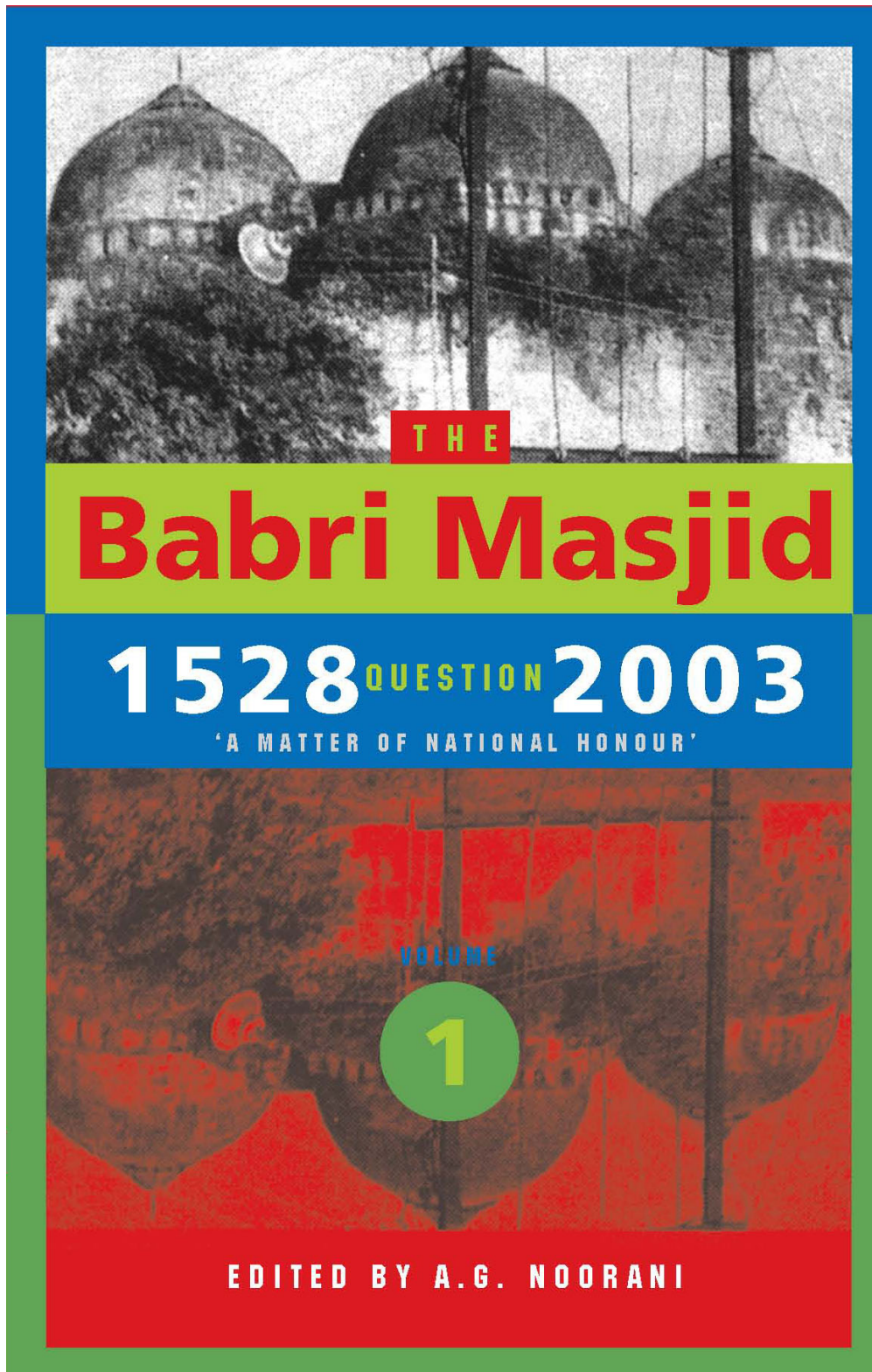
A Menace to India



A.G.Noorani

His tradecraft as a writer was straightforward. Apart from primary documents and other conventional methods of study, he used personal interaction as a research tool and his trips to Delhi were always crammed with meetings – with officials, diplomats, journalists, scholars – always tightly scheduled, always one-on-one, never in a group. He also made frequent trips to Jammu and Kashmir, where he had a vast array of contacts and where he was widely respected because of the steadfastness with which used to write in defence of the rights of the people of the erstwhile state.

Noorani trained as a lawyer and worked as an advocate at both the Bombay High Court and the Supreme Court, though, truth to tell, he didn't handle very many cases even when he was active and hardly any at all once he discovered his calling as a columnist and then as a scholar. When he was practising, he was, famously, the lawyer for Sheikh Abdullah during the latter's incarceration in the 1960s. Noorani too spent a brief stint in jail under the very preventive detention rules about whose unconstitutionality he had written about earlier.



For over four decades, Noorani was close to the world of journalism. He started writing regularly for the *Indian Express* under Frank Moraes and then C.R. Irani ran his column in *The Statesman* till the late 1990s. Ghafoor fell in with all – and fell out with most – of the top editors in Bombay, Delhi, Chennai and Calcutta from the 1960s onwards: Moraes, Sham Lal, Lindsay Emerson, Girilal Jain, S. Mulgaokar, Kuldeep Nayyar, Inder Malhotra, Hiranmay Karlekar, Saeed Naqvi, Prem Shankar Jha, S. Nihal Singh, Dina Vakil, N. Ram, Khushwant Singh and Dileep Padgaonkar, keeping up a love or hate relationship with many of them. He had nick-names for some, mostly unflattering, which he took great delight in using whenever he would speak about them many decades later.

I first met Noorani at a workshop organised by the Press Institute of India on the UN Convention Against Torture, around 1997. Perhaps he warmed to me because he knew and admired a report on human rights violations in Kashmir that my brother, then a law lecturer at Oxford, had prepared for a French NGO, FIDH, in 1993. Our friendship deepened over the next few years during his frequent visits to Delhi and that is when I discovered another side to his personality: his love, or rather, obsession with great food.

In any other country, a public intellectual like Noorani would have been considered a revered national treasure, his brilliant columns sought after. But in India, his sharp tongue and sharper pen made him many enemies on all sides...

I had the good fortune to accompany him more than once on wild goose-like chases of a *kebabchi* or a *qorma* in Old Delhi. Before those trips, he would present me with a small chit which had the name of the ‘restaurant’ we were supposed to find with very rudimentary and often useless directions. We would then set off in my Ambassador towards Jama Masjid or Nizamuddin. Ghafoor was always impeccably dressed. Once he came down from his room at the India International Centre and realised the weather was cool. So he went back to his room and came down in a jacket – and tie. Why the tie, I asked. “Only a bounder will wear a jacket without a tie,” he replied! Of course, his tie drew unnecessary attention to us once we alighted near Urdu Bazaar and began our hunt for the maker of gola kebabs that someone had once told Ghafoor about. He would stop at the tiniest of dhabas and insist on looking into their pots to judge the quality of the meat dish. As he grew older and less mobile, of course, these expeditions became more and more difficult to undertake and eventually ended.

Volume 1

The Kashmir Dispute

A.G. Noorani



Volume 1

# The Kashmir Dispute

1947-2012



A.G. Noorani

Noorani was a creature of habit, of firm likes and dislikes. At the IIC, he had to have Room 38, nowhere else. If he was meeting you for a meal, he would not allow anyone, not even an acquaintance, hover around the table for a second. He had a low tolerance level for any kind of bad behaviour, impertinence or impropriety and once someone crossed that Rubicon they would remain banished from his life forever. I know a few veteran journalists or scholars whom Ghafoor cast aside and I even interceded on behalf of one of them once, to no effect. “But, Ghafoor,” I protested, “What did Mr X do to offend you?” True to form, he didn’t remember the specifics, except that the said offence had occurred more than a decade earlier.

In any other country, a public intellectual like Noorani would have been considered a revered national treasure, his brilliant columns sought after. But in India, his sharp tongue and sharper pen – deployed with impeccable if old fashioned prose – made him many enemies on all sides (and especially ‘the establishment’, whatever the party in power) and in the end he was largely confined to *Frontline* in India and *Dawn* in Pakistan (excellent publications, both), till ill health two years ago forced him to devote all his energies to the books he wanted to write.

In several conversations, he had expressed the hope that his papers and books would find place in a good research library in Delhi. He had mentioned the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library as a possible destination but that was before NMML had become PMML and acquired various questionable associations and practices.

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