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THE RAM JANMABHOOMI-BABRI MASJID DISPUTE
A SECULAR PERSPECTIVE

LOKSHAHI HAKK SANGHATANA

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	1
DEATH MARCH: 'In Defence of Democratic Rights' September-December, 1990	3
THE POLITICAL ABUSE OF HISTORY Statement in 'The Secularist', May-June, 1990	17
HISTORIANS' STATEMENT	23
MEDIEVAL INDIAN HISTORY AND THE COMMUNAL APPROACH by Harbans Mukhia, in 'Communalism and the writing of Indian History'	29
RIOTS: SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER 1990	44

PREFACE

On the one hand, the country today faces an unexpected economic crisis as a result of the policies pursued over the last four decades, and particularly during the last decade. Common people are experiencing this crisis in the form of steep price rise, grave shortages in essentials, and rampant unemployment.

On the other hand, one does not see widespread mass movements against price rise, shortages, and unemployment. Political parties today are instead absorbed in whipping up communal passions. Elections are fought and won, governments are set up and toppled, at the cost of thousands of innocent lives. There is no longer any attempt to disguise this. Says L.K. Advani (India Today, December 31, 1990): "The mood may subside but Ayodhya will influence the electorate. We can fight the election without any alliance. Our vote bank is bound to increase."

Today, communal fanatics are attempting to make the mass of peace-loving citizens accept their dictates and their version of history. At this hour, it is vital that all democratic and organised sections of the people come forward, and, with hard facts, expose the falsehoods behind which these opportunists operate. In fact, the basis for the communalisation of history was deliberately laid during colonial rule. The statements of conscientious historians we have reproduced here are a step towards exposing these falsehoods.

Second, equally importantly, democratic forces need to make clear to the people that their pressing economic problems are entirely unrelated to the diversionary exercises being played out before them. We have reproduced an article on this theme from In Defence of Democratic Rights, bulletin of the All-India Federation of Organisations For Democratic Rights (AIFOODR).

Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana
Bombay, March 1991



From the poster by the People's Union for Democratic Rights, Delhi.

DEATH MARCH

The communal frenzy in which the nation is enveloped at present is a logical consequence of an entire decade of calculated machination. The assault on the masjid at Ayodhya was barbaric, no doubt; but the real barbarism lay in the countrywide celebration of that act. A mere decade ago such a situation would have been difficult to imagine; today, much worse might be feared. More than the exact sequence of the developments at Ayodhya, it is this nationwide, meticulously engineered, madness that is cause for alarm.

Post-1947 India has never been free of violent incidents assuming a communal character, particularly as between Hindus and Muslims. However, unlike the 1947 massacres, these have generally been restricted to one or two urban pockets at a time; they have usually revolved around local electoral rivalries; and the typical pattern has been one of manufactured tension, calculated provocation, wild rumour, sudden attacks, police inaction, and discriminating treatment of minorities. Riots have tended to erupt where there is a sizeable percentage of both communities -- particularly where members of the two communities have trading rivalries, or if plots of urban land can be profitably cleared by

arson. After the mayhem had achieved its purpose, things would usually return to "normal": That is, on the one hand, the two communities returned to living in relative peace; on the other, the criminals went scot-free (it is an axiom of Indian politics that no one ever gets tried for communal rioting or incitement to riot). After each riot, the major political parties having a hand in the riots would form peace committees to apply the "healing touch" and to reaffirm their faith in communal amity.

Such has been the quality of Indian secularism.

NEW PATTERN

The 1980s, however, have seen a significant change in this pattern. An important reason for this change has been the mood of the subject populace. Perhaps at one time the electorate generally believed that India was "sovereign, socialist, and secular", or that it was on its way to becoming so. By the 1980s, however, three decades of planning had left few illusions of social justice, as per capita foodgrain and cloth consumption declined even while production of beer, colour televisions, and watches continuously proliferated. Amid worsening inequalities, sharpening price rise, Mrs Gandhi's resort to the IMF, and deepening unemployment, the slogan of socialism carried little weight with a sullen electorate.

It is over this same decade that a substitute has been fashioned. Mrs

Gandhi, who once vaunted herself a progressive, began an ostentatious temple tour (a practice continued by her son, who performed her televised funeral rites conspicuously displaying his sacred thread). The Ekamata Rath Yatra of 1983, a countrywide procession with the aim of uniting Hindus, enjoyed the active backing of the State wherever it went. It was followed immediately by a programme for the "liberation" of the purported birthplace of the mythological figure Ram at a modern-day town named Ayodhya. The site has been occupied for centuries by a mosque. A Shriram Janmbhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti was formed with Congress-I and BJP politicians prominent among its members. It organised in September-October 1989 a giant rath yatra from Sitamarhi (where Sita is said to have appeared on earth) to Ayodhya. Leaflets were distributed throughout India depicting Ram behind bars and calling upon Hindus to liberate "the temple".

PROVOCATION WITH STATE BACKING

On December 19, 1985, on the occasion of the Ramayan mela, the U.P. chief minister significantly chose to visit Ayodhya. A Vishva Hindu Parishad delegation called upon him there and urged upon him their case: The VHP argued that because idols of Ram and Sita had miraculously appeared in the mosque on the night of December 22-23, 1949, the site was actually a Hindu place of worship. Secondly, they stated that it was only the district

administration that had locked the shrine in 1949, and today there was no justification for continuing to keep it locked. The chief minister reportedly called for the relevant file and found no specific court order requiring the shrine's closure. Interestingly, the then chief minister, Vir Bahadur Singh, chose to advertise that he was a disciple of Mahant Avidyanath of Gorakhpur, a Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader, the then head of the Dhamstan Mukti Samiti (the committee set up by the VHP to "liberate" over 141 mosques which the VHP claims were once temples), and present MP from Gorakhpur.

At the same time, the VHP approached the very highest levels. According to a detailed investigation published by Statesman, April 18-20, 1986, the then prime minister himself "had indicated in no uncertain terms that the gates of Ram Janmabhoomi must open to the devotees before March 8..."

Events thereafter moved fast. A month after the Ramayan mela, a Faizabad lawyer moved the district judge's court for the temple's unlocking -- on the grounds that there was no specific order forbidding it. The collector thereafter testified that he had not come across any document under which the two locks were put up, that to his knowledge the site was not in use as a mosque, and even volunteered that arrangements could be made whether locks were there or not. The district judge then ordered that the locks be removed and devotees be allowed to offer prayer without let or

hindrance: in this order, he stated that the "skies will not fall" if this were allowed.

The Statesman noted that "the local administration had been prepared in advance. The court verdict was announced at 4.40 p.m. on February 1, and the rusty lock was actually being broken at 5.19 p.m. A Doordarshan team was posted on the spot to capture for viewers surging crowds entering the shrine."

Thus was a near-forgotten holy place of Muslims and Hindus thrust once more into the limelight. However, this was by no means sufficient. Doubtless, riots erupted in many parts of U.P. in February itself. According to the then U. P. chief minister, in the four months after the opening of the locks, there were 45 riots in U.P., in which 54 were killed and 327 injured. But the madness had to be spread much further, throughout India.

PROCESSION: TRADITIONAL TRIGGER

The predominant device for their propaganda, adopted by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and other assorted Hindu outfits, was the religious procession. In itself this riot-triggering technique was nothing new. In the past, four judicial commissions had already focussed attention on, and investigated the pattern of, riots resulting from religious processions: the Raghubir Dayal Commission (1967 riots following the anti-Urdu procession); the Madon Commission (1970 Bhiwandi riots

following Shiv Jayanti procession); the Vithagathil Commission (1971 Tellicherry riots following procession); and the Jitendra Narain Commission (1974 Jamshedpur riots following a Ram Navami procession). Each had pointed to the manner in which the procession acted as a trigger, a signal for rioting.

The pattern, typically, is this: a communal organisation, on the pretext of a religious festival, seeks police permission to take out a procession whose route passes by areas inhabited by the other (usually minority) community. The police, knowing full well the implications, nevertheless sanctions the route: As the procession passes, say, a mosque, it slows down; slogans such as "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan, Mullah bhago Pakistan" are raised; stones are thrown from somewhere on the processionists; and the rioting begins. Police swing into action to protect the processionists, while the story spreads through the town and is recorded so by a degenerate press: "a religious procession was attacked..."

The story of such rioting, under the aegis of the State machinery, is by now nauseatingly familiar. In Maharashtra alone, according to statistics given by the minister of state for home in the assembly on July 11, 1986, in just the first six months of that year, the number of rath yatras had risen to 68, compared to just four in all of 1984. The number of Shiv Jayanti processions by 1985 was 656; in 1986 the figure was 944. In 1984, the number of Ram Navami

processions was four; in 1986 the figure was 68. Meanwhile riots took place in Thane, Panvel, Beed, Nashik, Nanded, Aurangabad... (Predictably, with each riot, the minority community has placed more and more faith in communal leaders. With each further assault on the Babri Masjid, the protection of a mosque irrelevant to their daily lives comes to occupy greater and greater significance in the minds of Muslims. Indeed, a whole new crop of Muslim leaders have been able to make their careers on the Ram Janmabhoomi/Babri Masjid movement.)

But these processions served other purposes besides the set pattern of provocations. They have added a fascist hue to the commonplaces of Indian culture. The festival of spring (Holi), the festival of Ganesh, the festival of lights (Diwali), and innumerable other such, are being robbed of the warmth and human exchange usually so visible among members of all communities on these occasions, and are being hijacked instead to the service of Hindu chauvinism. Now the very celebration of these festivals is getting imbued with hurt to the minority community and communal tension.

Secondly, once limited to the urban and semi-urban pockets, these processions and yatras now have become a means to spread communal hatred to the rural areas. Especially during the Meerut and Bhagalpur riots, there was a deliberate attempt to take the killing to the villages.

PROCESSION AS INSTRUMENT OF PAN-HINDU UNITY

Thirdly, and crucially: With considerable planning, sensitivity to the mass media, imagination, and co-operation, Hindu chauvinists have used these processions and yatras as a means of continuously building nationwide "Hindu unity". For if there was a shortcoming (from the standpoint of the instigators) in the old manner of rioting, it was that communal riots took place with suddenness; were restricted to pockets; and tensions tended to die down as the majority of people had to get on with the labour of surviving. However, today's build-up of chauvinism is continuous and step by step; certain occasions are observed nationally; and certain symbols of Hindu "unity" are put to the fore inventively. Thus Hindu outfits could successfully make the Hindu in Bombay feel united with the Hindu of Bihar, the labouring Hindu feel united with the industrialist funding the rath yatra, and so on. Thus devices--such as the Shila puja (brick worship) and the shobha yatras--attempt to manufacture what has never existed before: an all-India Hindu identity.

In this, the state-owned media have played the most important role. On January 25, 1987, in the midst of intense communal tension over the Ayodhya issue and the Muslim communalists' call for the boycott of Republic Day celebrations, the government chose to begin a serial on the Ramayan. This and its successor,

the Mahabharat, were signal contributions by the state to the all-India Hindu chauvinism of which the VHP dreamt. Seventy-five per cent of our country is covered today by television (far more, incidentally, than is supplied with safe drinking water), and the Ramayan became the most popular serial in history.

Continuity is a signal gain for the Hindu chauvinists. For now each programme is linked to the preceding and the next by symbols and signals; and now any other event, however unrelated, is woven into this pattern and intensifies communal hatreds. Thus the issue of Kashmir, which did not essentially involve the Kashmiris as Muslims but rather as Kashmiris, was successfully used by Hindu chauvinists as means of sharpening the Hindu-Muslim divide in the rest of India. (By contrast, neither have Indian Muslims taken up much activity regarding Kashmir, nor have Kashmiri Muslims in the last few months shown much interest in Ayodhya.) Now, after each bout of riot subsides, tension and hatred nevertheless continue at a new and higher plateau. We have witnessed in this period the remarkable communal killings of Meerut, which continued with short lulls, for five months between April and September 1987, and Bhagalpur, which continued for over two months during October and November 1989. Unlike in the past, each riot now is linked to the next by the common cause -- Ram Janmabhoomi. No Hindu-Muslim riot

today is not about the mandir-masjid controversy.

Thus in its all-India scope, its reach to the villages, and its sustained acceleration, the present wave of communal hatred has set the stage for the first nationwide Hindu-Muslim holocaust since 1947.

The links with electoral politics have been blatant. The Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Samiti was established in October 1984, during the run-up period to the Lok Sabha elections (its first campaign had to be postponed with Mrs Gandhi's assassination). The shilanyas (foundation laying ceremony) was scheduled for, and performed, two days before the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, with the blessing of the Congress-I (Rajiv Gandhi even descended to the scene to receive the advice of the VHP mentor Deoraha Baba; there is also a telling picture of the naked Baba placing his foot on the head of Buta Singh, union minister for home). The party most directly involved in the Janmabhoomi programme, the Bharatiya Janata Party, won only two seats in the 1984 Lok Sabha. In the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, with the help of not only an electoral arrangement with the "secular" Janata Dal but also its identification with the Shilanyas, it won 85 seats. The next wave of mandir-building since the 1989 shilanyas (timed with the Lok Sabha elections) was scheduled for the day before the Assembly elections. It was postponed on an appeal by V.P. Singh; but, as it was later concluded, the

government itself fell: the real issue of contention.

DIVERSIONARY DEBATE

The entire debate in the last few months has been regarding the exact location of the mandir to be constructed by the VHP at the site. V.P. Singh has repeated time and again that he is in favour of building a temple at the site ("who would not be?", he asks), but it should not be done by tearing down the existing mosque. A number of leaders professing secularism, including a few well-meaning persons, have advised that the masjid issue be left entirely to the court, forgetting that, since December 27, 1949, a series of court orders have been extremely discriminatory towards the Muslims and have helped to create the problem. Bewilderingly complicated discussions are taking place in the media about various formulae which would satisfy various known and hitherto unknown fanatics of both communities to whom, evidently, we have surrendered the prerogative of deciding what to do about the site. Three successive prime ministers have closeted themselves in secret discussions with assorted holy men and turned up ridiculously contradictory formulae about this obscure plot of land. (For example: On November 6, 1989, the government called the shilanyas site disputed. On November 9, it declared it to be undisputed, and the shilanyas proceeded. The entire discussion by-passed several glaring facts.

First, in the eagerness to appease the VHP, the discussion has revolved entirely around the site of the temple. Apparently, the problem of ensuring the rights of Muslims to pray at their mosque is seen as not even worth discussing. Secondly, the game of Rajiv Gandhi, V.P. Singh, Chandrashekhar, and virtually all the other political leaders, of attempting to chalk out a "settlement" with Hindu fundamentalists whereby the temple is constructed while preserving the mosque, is based on sheer fantasy. The main actor, the VHP, has long made clear, and has refused to retreat from, its claim; this claim includes the entire area of the mosque as well as the graveyard adjoining it (the religious-minded Ashok Singhal, head of the VHP, told India Today, December 15, 1989: "If there is a graveyard, it should be removed along with the mosque"). The VHP's real claim was demonstrated beyond doubt on October 30 when kar sevaks demolished one of the outer walls of the masjid, attacked three of its domes, and planted their flags on top; and when this barbaric act was celebrated throughout India by the VHP as a victory. The intention was never to build a temple on a holy site; it was to smash the mosque and to incite Hindu-Muslim hatreds. Even if, for fantasy's sake, we allow that the Ayodhya issue were settled, the VHP has consistently declared that Ram Janmabhoomi is only the first of a list of, apparently, 300 such sites to be "liberated" of mosques. Immediately on

the list are mosques at Mathura and Varanasi.

The Ram Janmabhoomi "issue" is not intended to be settled. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the various political parties to which it is linked, and its monied backers are not in the least interested in Ayodhya or in any of these other sites. They are interested in political power, and in communal riots as a means of achieving it. Therefore, there can be no settlement, no matter how many the sittings of the National Integration Council or secret talks. In creating this mirage of "negotiations", the entire array of parliamentary parties have shown themselves to be part of the same game.

PRESSING TASK

In this context, the pressing task for democratically minded individuals and organisations is not to place faith in governments or parties subject to the compulsions of electoral politics, nor in a rapidly degenerating state machinery, but in the common sense of ordinary citizens. The mass of ordinary people badly need communal peace for their lives and livelihoods, and are fed up with the present state of affairs. They quite rightly see the entire issue as a manufacture of politicians, and are themselves more preoccupied by their sharpening economic problems, particularly in the wake of the government's austerity measures on the excuse of the Gulf crisis. Thus there is fertile ground

for the exposure of communal politics. However, so anti-democratic and terror-filled has our polity become that there are hardly any opportunities for ordinary people to articulate and press their views.

Democratic rights organisations need urgently to help people to do so, propagating against the diversionary communal politics, and urging people to defend their communal amity in order to be able to struggle on their common material issues. Wherever possible, anti-communal committees actually in the control of ordinary citizens should be set up, which can pre-emptively foil any riot. In the present situation, these tasks assume utmost importance.

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The Political Abuse of History

A document prepared by some members of the Centre for

Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi:

Sarvepalli Gopal, Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Suvira Jaiswal, Harbans Mukhia, K.N. Panikkar, R. Champakalakshmi, Satish Saberwal, B.D. Chattopadhyaya, R.N. Verma, K. Meenakshi, Muzaffar Alam, Dilbagh Singh, Mridula Mukherjee, Madhavan Palat, Aditya Mukherjee, S.F. Ratnagar, Neeladri Bhattacharya, K.K. Trivedi, Yogesh Sharma, Kunal Chakravarti, Bhagwan Josh, Rajan Gurukulal and Himanshu Ray.

BEHIND THE PRESENT Babri masjid-Rama janmabhumi controversy lie issues of faith, power and politics. Each individual has a right to his or her belief and faith. But when beliefs claim the legitimacy of history, then the historian has to attempt a demarcation between the limits of belief and historical evidence. When communal forces make claims to 'historical evidence' for the purposes of communal politics, then the historian has to intervene.

Historical evidence is presented here not as a polemic or as a solution to the Rama janmabhumi-Babri masjid conflict, for this conflict is not a matter of historical records alone. The conflict emerges from the widespread communalisation of Indian politics. Nevertheless it is necessary to review the historical evidence to the extent it is brought into play in the communalisation of society.

I

Is Ayodhya the birth place of Rama? This question raises a related one: Is present day Ayodhya the Ayodhya of Ramayana?

The events of the story of Rama, originally told in the Rama-Katha which is no longer available to us, were rewritten in the form of a long epic poem, the Ramayana, by Valmiki. Since this is a poem and much of it could have been fictional, including characters and places, historians cannot accept the personalities, the events or the locations as historically authentic unless there is other supporting evidence from sources regarded as more reliable by historians. Very often historical evidence contradicts popular beliefs.

According to the Valmiki Ramayana, Rama, the King of Ayodhya, was born in the Treta Yuga, that is thousands of years

before the Kali Yuga which is supposed to begin in 3102 BC:

(i) There is no archaeological evidence to show that at this early time the region around present-day Ayodhya was inhabited. The earliest possible date for settlements at the site are of about the eighth century BC. The archaeological remains indicate a fairly simple material life, more primitive than what is described in the Valmiki Ramayana.

(ii) In the Ramayana, there are frequent references to palaces and buildings on a large scale in an urban setting. Such descriptions of an urban complex are not sustained by the archaeological evidence of eighth century BC.

(iii) There is also a controversy over the location of Ayodhya. Early Buddhist texts refer to Shravasti and Saketa, not Ayodhya, as the major cities of Koshala. Jaina texts also refer to Saketa as the capital of Koshala. There are very few references to an Ayodhya, but this is said to be located on the Ganges, not on river Saryu, which is the site of present-day Ayodhya.

(iv) The town of Saketa was renamed Ayodhya by a Gupta king. Skanda Gupta in the late fifth century AD moved his residence to Saketa and called it Ayodhya. He is said to have assumed the title Vikramaditya. Thus what may have been the fictional Ayodhya of the epic poem was identified with Saketa quite late. This does not necessarily suggest that the Gupta king was a bhakta of Rama. In bestowing the name of Ayodhya on Saketa he was trying to gain prestige for himself by drawing on the tradition of the Suryavanshi kings, a line to which Rama is said to have belonged.

(v) After the seventh century, textual references to Ayodhya are categorical. The *Puranas*, dating to the first millennium AD and the early second millennium AD, follow the Ramayana and refer to Ayodhya as the capital of Koshala (Vishnudharmottara Mahapurana, 1.240.2).

(vi) In a way, the local tradition of Ayodhya recognises the ambiguous history of its origin. The story is that Ayodhya was lost after the Treta yuga and was rediscovered by Vikramaditya. While searching for the lost Ayodhya, Vikramaditya met Prayaga, the king of tirthas, who knew about Ayodhya and showed him where it was, Vikramaditya marked the place but could not find it later. Then he met a yogi who told him that he should let a cow and a calf roam. When the calf came across the janmabhumi, milk would flow from its udder. The

king followed the yogi's advice. When at a certain point the calf's udders began to flow, the king decided that this was the site of the ancient Ayodhya.

This myth of the 're-discovery' of Ayodhya, this claim to an ancient sacred lineage, is an effort to impart to a city a specific religious sanctity which it lacked. But even in the myths the process of identification of the sites appears uncertain and arbitrary.

If present-day Ayodhya was known as Saketa before the fifth century, then the Ayodhya of Valmiki's Ramayana was fictional. If so, the identification of Rama janmabhumi in Ayodhya today becomes a matter of faith, not of historical evidence.

The historical uncertainty regarding the possible location of the Rama janmabhumi contrasts with the historical certainty of the birth place of the Buddha. Two centuries after the death of the Buddha, Asoka Maurya put up an inscription at the village of Lumbini to commemorate it as the Buddha's birthplace. However, even in this case, the inscription merely refers to the village near which he was born and does not even attempt to indicate the precise birthplace.

II

Ayodhya has been a sacred centre of many religions, not of the Rama cult alone. Its rise as a major centre of Rama worship is, in fact, relatively recent.

(i) Inscriptions from the fifth to the eighth centuries AD and even later refer to people from Ayodhya but none of them refers to its being a place associated with the worship of Rama (*Epigraphica Indica*, 10. p.72; 15.p. 143; 1.p.14)

(ii) Hsuan Tsang writes of Ayodhya as a major centre of Buddhism with many monastries and stupas and few non-Buddhists. For Buddhists, Ayodhya is a sacred place where Buddha is believed to have stayed for some time.

(iii) Ayodhya has been an important centre of Jain pilgrimage. To the Jains it is the birthplace of the first and fourth Jaina Tirthankaras. An interesting archaeological find of the 4th-3rd century BC is a Jaina figure in grey terracotta, being amongst the earliest Jaina figures found so far.

(iv) The texts of the eleventh century AD refer to the Gopataru tirtha at Ayodhya, but not to any links with the janmabhumi of Rama.

(v) The cult of Rama seems to have become popular from the

thirteenth century. It gains ground with the gradual rise of the Ramanandi seet and the composition of the Rama story in Hindi.

Even in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Ramanandis had not settled in Ayodhya on a significant scale. Shaivism was more important than the cult of Rama. Only from the eighteenth century do we find the Ramanandi sadhus settling on a large scale. It was in the subsequent centuries that they built most of their temples in Ayodhya.

So far no historical evidence has been unearthed to support the claim that the Babri mosque has been constructed on the land that had been earlier occupied by a temple.

(i) Except for the verses in Persian inscribed on the two sides of the mosque door, there is no other primary evidence to suggest that a mosque had been erected there on Babur's behalf. Mrs Beveridge, who was the first to translate *Babur Nama*, gives the text and the translation of these verses in an appendix to the memoirs. The crucial passage reads as follows: 'By the command of the Emperor Babur, whose justice is an edifice reaching up to the very height of the heavens, the good hearted Mir Baqi built the alighting place of angels. *Bawad [Buwad] khair babi* (may this goodness last for ever)' (*Babur Nam*, translated by A.F. Beveridge, 1922, II, pp. LXXVII ff).

The inscription only claims that one Mir Baqi, a noble of Babur, had erected the mosque. Nowhere does either of the inscriptions mention that the mosque had been erected on the site of a temple. Nor is there any reference in Babur's memoirs to the destruction of any temple in Ayodhya.

(ii) The *Ain-i-Akbari* refers to Ayodhya as 'the residence of Ramachandra who in the Treta age combined in his own person both spiritual supremacy and kingly office'. But nowhere is there any mention of the erection of the mosque by the grandfather of the author's patron on the site of the temple of Rama.

(iii) It is interesting that Tulsidas, the great devotee of Rama, a contemporary of Akbar and an inhabitant of the region, is upset at the rise of the mlechha, but makes no mention of the demolition of a temple at the site of Rama janmabhumi.

(iv) It is in the nineteenth century that the story circulates and enters official records. These records were then cited by others as valid historical evidence on the issue.

This story of the destruction of the temple is narrated, without any

investigation into its historical veracity, in British records of the region (See P Carnegie, *Historical Sketch of Tehsil Fyzabad, Zillah Fyzabad*, Lucknow, 1870; H R Nevill, *Fizabad Gazetteer*, Allahabad, 1905).

Mrs Beveridge, in a footnote to the translated passage quoted above, affirms her faith in the story. She suggests that Babur being a Muslim, and 'impressed by the dignity and sanctity of the ancient Hindu shrine would have displaced 'at least in part' the temple to erect the mosque. Her logic is simple: '..... like the obedient follower of Muhammad he was intolerant of another Faith, (thus he) would regard the substitution of a temple by a mosque as dutiful and worthy'. This is a very questionable inference deduced from a generalised presumption about the nature and inevitable behaviour of a person professing a particular faith. Mrs Beveridge produces no historical evidence to support her assertion that the mosque was built at the site of a temple. Indeed the general tenor of Babur's state policy towards places of worship of other religions hardly justifies Mrs Beveridge's inference.

To British officials who saw India as a land of mutually hostile religious communities, such stories may appear self-validating. Historians, however, have to carefully consider the authenticity of each historical statement and the records on which they are based.

While there is no evidence about the Babri mosque having been built on the site of a temple, the mosque, according to the medieval sources, was not of much religious and cultural significance for the Muslims.

The assumption that Muslim rulers were invariably and naturally opposed to the sacred places of Hindus is not always borne out by historical evidence:

(i) The patronage of the Muslim Nawabs was crucial for the expansion of Ayodhya as a Hindu pilgrimage centre. Recent researches have shown that Nawabi rule depended on the collaboration of Kayasthas and their military force was dominated by Shivaite Nagas. Gifts to temples and patronage of Hindu sacred centres was an integral part of the Nawabi mode of exercise of power. The dewan of Nawab Safdarjung built and repaired several temples in Ayodhya. Safdarjung gave land to the Nirwana akhara to build a temple on Hanuman hill in Ayodhya. Asaf-ud-Daulah's dewan contributed to the building of the temple fortress on Hanuman hill in

the city. Panda records show that Muslim officials of the nawabi court gave several gifts for rituals performed by Hindu priests.

(ii) In moments of conflict between Hindus and Muslims, the Muslim rulers did not invariably support Muslims. When a dispute between the Sunni Muslims and the Naga Sadhus over a Hanuman-garni temple in Ayodhya broke out in 1855, Wajid Ali Shah took firm and decisive action. He appointed a tripartite investigative committee consisting of the district official Agha Ali Khan, the leading Hindu landholder, Raja Mansingh, and the British officers in charge of the Company's forces. When the negotiated settlement failed to control the build up of communal forces, Wajid Ali Shah mobilised the support of Muslim leaders to bring the situation under control, confiscated the property of Maulavi Amir Ali, the leader of the Muslim communal forces, and finally called upon the army to crush the Sunni Muslim group led by Amir Ali. An estimated three to four hundred Muslims were killed.

This is not to suggest that there were no conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, but in neither case were they homogeneous communities. There was hostility between factions and groups within a community, as there was amity across communities.

The above review of historical evidence suggests that the claims made by Hindu and Muslim communal groups can find no sanction from history. As a sacred centre, the character of Ayodhya has been changing over the centuries. It has been linked to the history of many religions. Different communities have vested it with their own sacred meaning. The city cannot be claimed by any one community as its exclusive sacred preserve.

The appropriation of history is a continual process in any society. But in a multi-religious society like ours, appropriations which draw exclusively on communal identities engender endless communal conflicts. And attempts to undo the past can only have dangerous consequences.

It is appropriate, therefore, that a political solution is urgently found: 'Rama janmabhumi-Babri Masjid' area be demarcated and declared a national monument.

BABRI MASJID-RAM JANMABHOOMI
CONTROVERSY:
EVIDENCE LACKING--HISTORIANS

Three prominent scholars from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Prof. Romila Thapar, Prof. Sarvapalli Gopal and Prof. K.N. Panikkar, have reacted sharply to the stand taken by the former director, Allahabad museum, Dr. S.P. Gupta, in an article published in the Indian Express, dated December 1, 'Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid: Archaeological evidence'.

The archaeological evidence given by Dr. Gupta that category of stone pillars used to support the present structure of Babri masjid were in fact part of a unique temple, does not hold good, the JNU scholars maintain.

In a joint statement, Prof. Thapar, Prof. Gopal and Prof. Panikkar say: "It does seem peculiar that 15 years after the excavation of a site adjoining the Babri masjid and claimed as the site of the Ramjanmabhumi, new evidence should now be introduced as having been earlier excavated at the site. So far, there has been no evidence in any of the excavation reports published after the excavation by the director of the excavation, Prof. B.B.Lal, in 'Indian Archaeology Review 1976-77 and 1979-80', nor in any of the subsequent papers presented by B.B.Lal at various academic seminars. One wonders why, if there was such evidence, B.B. Lal is only revealing it now? Could it be that because of the politics of the

Ramjanmabhumi, it is being claimed as fresh evidence?

In his excavation reports, B.B. Lal mentions those who excavated along with him, and curiously, despite his insisting that he was part of the team, the name of Dr. S.P.Gupta is conspicuously absent. B.B.Lal states that the site was first occupied in the seventh century B.C. and continued up to the third century A.D. A possible fortification wall and what might have been a moat cut across the Janmabhumi area. He then mentions that among the finds were half a dozen seals, 70 coins and over 100 terracotta figurines. He makes special mention of pottery of the rouletted ware generally associated with the Roman trade in the early Christian era. He adds that it is rather remarkable that the Gupta period is not significantly indicated at this site, a fact also noticed in the first season's dig in 1975. He continues: "After the early historic deposit, there is a break in occupation, with considerable debris and pit formations before the site was again occupied around the 11th century A.D. Several later medieval brick-and-kankar lime floors have been met with, but the entire late period was devoid of any special interest."

These earlier statements contradict his present claim to having found the pillar-bases on what may have been a temple at the site -- a claim made by

him recently in the RSS magazine, 'Manthan' (October 1990). Could it be that the requirements of VHP politics have occasioned this claim? This claim cannot now be examined by other scholars since the excavated site has been filled in. A re-excavation of the same site becomes extremely difficult given that the sequential layers have been distributed by this covering up. Archaeological evidence is not self-explanatory; it has to be interpreted. The interpretations of the same data by different archaeologists can vary. This is why it is necessary to leave the excavated site open and at any rate to keep a meticulous and exact record of the excavation so that it can be made available to other archaeologists.

As regards the statement by Dr. S.P. Gupta, that too carried contradictions.

1. The fact of the pillar bases running behind the wall surrounding the mosque does not mean that they necessarily run under the mosque as well, as is claimed, since there is a space between the wall and the mosque, and the pillar bases may have terminated just behind the wall. It is equally possible that no more pillar bases will be found even if there were to be excavations below the mosque.

2. The debris associated with these bases is said to have contained glazed potsherds of the blue-and-white Islamic style. This style of pottery first comes into use in Persia in the 15th century,

and, therefore, cannot date to an earlier period in India. Thus, the evidence of the pottery would point to the bases being constructed not earlier than the 15th century and possibly even a later period. Whatever the style of the stone pillars incorporated in the Babri Masjid, the pillar bases cannot be dated to the 11th century . In his article in 'Manthan', B.B.Lal has said that the pillar bases were found in the uppermost levels of the trench: This would certainly not make them as early as the 11th century A.D. since the uppermost levels would be comparatively recently. If the contention is that these pillar bases of the stone pillars (were) used in building a temple, then the temple cannot be dated to earlier than the 15th century since the debris in the bases would be of the earliest period. Therefore, the carved stone pillars, which S.P. Gupta dates to the 11th century, clearly do not belong to this temple, if indeed it was a temple.

3. Brick pillar bases do not in themselves indicate the presence of a temple. The structure supported by such a base could be of any kind. The pillar bases may well have held up a brick structure with arches, the kind of structure common in medieval times, which may have been a hall adjoining the mosque. The size and shape of bricks used in construction in India varied from time to time and a study of the actual bricks used would have been an additional factor in dating the pillar

bases.

4. The photographs of the stone pillars and the doorjamb in the article by S.P.Gupta, come from sites some as far away as a kilometre away and these can hardly be used to illustrate the supposed temple at the site of the Babri Masjid. An early British observer, Carnegie, has mentioned that similar pillars have been found elsewhere and these are not, therefore, confined to the locality of the Babri Masjid. The evidence being quoted in S.P.Gupta's article does not allow one to assume the existence of a unique temple at this site. The decorations on the pillars are not exclusive to temple architecture, for even domestic architecture would have had the same decorative motifs. Load-bearing pillars do not mean that they are necessarily in the position as when they were when they were first used. It is feasible to bring pillars from elsewhere and use them as load-bearing pillars in a new construction.

To sum up: There is no evidence that the brick pillar bases supported a temple and that this temple dedicated to Rama, was destroyed and replaced by the Masjid. It is quite plausible that there was a temple somewhere in the vicinity perhaps dating to the 11th century A.D., which gradually fell into disrepair and disuse, as temples did, and that some of the material from this was picked up to be used in the construction of the mosque. No one has

contested that Babar was in Ayodhya at the time and that the Babri Masjid was built by Mir Baqi who claimed Babar as a patron. What is being contested is the claim that the recently disclosed evidence from archaeology of pillar bases at the site proves that there was a temple dedicated to Rama and meant to mark the birthplace of Rama, which was destroyed by Babar and a mosque built on the same site. The evidence does not support this claim. To that extent, the evidence from archaeology bears out the evidence from other sources which are silent about the existence of such a temple.

The VHP, which was earlier arguing that historical evidence did not matter as the site of the Ramjanambhumi was a matter of faith, has once again shifted its ground and is not contending that the issue should be decided by archaeological evidence. However, the evidence on which they are relying, does not support their contentions.

We would like to reiterate that the Babri Masjid-Ramjanambhumi dispute is not a question to be decided by historical or archaeological evidence. The fundamental aspect of this issue is that the destruction of the mosque and its replacement by a temple, as a means of getting even with Muslim rule, is a return to the politics of medieval times -- and therefore an action which we cannot endorse, either as historians or as citizens of India.

NEW DELHI
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Medieval Indian History and the Communal Approach

HARBANS' MUKHIA

FOR VERY LONG NOW THE term 'Muslim India' has characterised more than seven centuries of our medieval history; and it continues to be very much in circulation.

The apparent rationale of such a communal characterisation of the medieval period of our history is the fact that the religion of the new rulers of India from the 11th or the 13th century A.D. onwards is Islam while the earlier rulers were Hindu. Apart from the serious flaws in such a characterisation pointed out earlier by Dr Thapar, there are two underlying assumptions to it which are open to question:

1. a history of the ruler's life or the ruling family or, at best, the ruling class is considered the equivalent of the history of India and the personal religion of the ruler is taken to be the determining factor;
2. a static view of Islam is taken over a thousand years and from Arabia to India. All the changes wrought in Islam by the centuries and the distances are ignored:

changes from the concept of social equality which was basic to the 7th century Islam in Arabia to the establishment of absolute monarchy and exclusive governing class in India from the 13th century onwards and such monarchies and governing classes elsewhere earlier or later.

And absolute monarchy and exclusive governing class are antagonistic to the concept of social equality. Also Islam really meant different things to different people—to Ala-ud-din Khalji and Muhammad Tughlaq, to Akbar and Aurangzeb, to the ulema and the sufi saints, although they all swear by it.

Thus what is presented to us as the History of Medieval India is really a part of history and what is considered the determining factor is really quite unimportant. What we really should study in history is the stage of the development of society from one point of time to another, the changes in the society's system of production and the resultant social organisation, etc. Such a study would be a study of the whole society in the past and the personal religion of the ruler would indeed become irrelevant. In fact even the political history that we are taught is really a history of the ruling dynasties. There has been little analysis of various groups—regional, religious, racial, etc.—which comprise the ruling class and their points of compromise as well as conflicts which in turn produce various pressures compelling the rulers to follow one policy or another at a given point of time.

One facilitating factor for writing the political history of medieval India the way it has been written is the ready availability of the sources of information, or the works of the contemporary historians,* which also deal almost exclusively with the history of the court. Thus, for example,

* The phrase 'contemporary historians' here refers to historians who were the sultans' contemporaries. For the historians of today or of the recent past the phrase 'modern historians' is used.

we have Zia-ud-din Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi*, Abul Fazl's *Akbar Nama*, etc. However, the character of these contemporary works was seldom analysed before making use of them.

A significant fact about the contemporary historians upon whom we depend for our information is that they were all courtiers or aspired to that position. As such they were aligned with one faction of the court or another. Thus the court was the focal point of their attention and the events they have narrated in their works are directly or indirectly related to it. Therefore even the terminology they used is related to the particular context of the court history.

Let us take a very sensitive term by way of illustration—the term 'Hindu'.

The historians being courtiers and belonging to the nobility were interested in preserving the *status quo* in the complexion and composition of the nobility and in the relationship between the nobility and the ruler. Zia Barani, a great theoretician, apart from being a professional historian of the mid-fourteenth century, insists on both these points in his work the *Fatawa-i-Jahandari* which has been translated into English by Prof. M. Habib and Mrs. Afsar Khan under the title *The Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate*. On the one hand Barani suggests that only persons of high birth, that is persons belonging to a select group of families, be admitted into the imperial nobility thus guaranteeing preservation of the *status quo* in its complexion and composition: and on the other hand he advises the sultans to convene an advisory council the membership of which should be based on high-birth, the meetings be conducted through a laid-down procedure, members should be free to express their opinions without any fear or expectation, etc. The advisory council would thus institutionalise the relationship between the sultan and the nobility in which no arbitrary change would be possible.

Now, the main threat to this *status quo* emanated from the Hindu rajas, raos, ranas, rais, zamindars, etc. who were themselves a very significant part of the larger ruling class as we shall see later. When, therefore, the contemporary historians advocate the annihilation of the Hindus they desire the annihilation only of this section of the Hindu community rather than the entire community including the peasantry, the taxes paid by whom sustained the historians themselves along with the Hindu rajas and Muslim *iqtadars* in their luxurious life. Therefore the term 'Hindu' as used by the contemporary historians has application only to a section of the Hindu community which was politically and socially important; it has been used almost in a political rather than religious sense.

Thus the terminology used by the contemporary historians is relevant only to the internal tensions and conflicts and compromises within the ruling class which consisted both of Hindus and Muslims. These conflicts within the ruling class are not reflections of conflicts at the social level.

Secondly, the subjective element in the works of the contemporary historians is very strong. Often they write not of what had happened but what they wished to have happened.

The modern historians, sometimes even those who were consciously secular in their outlook, understood the terminology used by the contemporary historians to apply to the whole society. Consequently the conflicts within the ruling class were understood to be conflicts at the social level. Thus Sultan Ala-ud-din Khalji, who took some strong measures to suppress the rebellious Hindu zamindars (along with no less strong measures to suppress the Muslim *iqtadars*, including very pious people who had nothing to do with rebellion), is portrayed as a religious fanatic who was utterly intolerant of the Hindus, although his contemporary historian, Zia Barani, keeps wailing

that Ala-ud-din Khalji was a sultan who cared not a thing for the Islamic law whether in matters of state or in his private life. Similarly the attempts by some rulers like Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb to convert some politically important individuals or families are portrayed as attempts to convert the Hindus into Muslims at the social or mass level.

Secondly, these modern historians failed to identify and isolate the wishful element of the contemporary historians thus placing full reliance on every word they had written. Apart from the fact that such reliance is against all norms of historical studies, it is interesting that the more communal a Hindu historian is today the more he relies on the words of contemporary orthodox Muslim historian.

The 'nationalist' historians* of the 1920's, 30's and 40's tried to meet the challenge of the communalists with all sincerity; but unfortunately they chose to fight the adversary on his ground. That is, like the communalists they did not go beyond the court to study the whole society and its dynamics. Secondly, while the communalist historians ignored or deliberately set aside evidence to the contrary, the 'nationalists' did the same although for contrary and certainly better objectives.

Thus the basic approach of the communal and the nationalist historians was the same. This at a certain stage led the nationalist to yield the ground to the communalist.

To illustrate this point: until recently the history of medieval India had centred on individual rulers and the ruler's will or nature was supposed to cause the occurrence of all historical events during his reign. Thus Ala-ud-din Khalji's conquest of vast territories was the result of his ambitious nature. Or, the mad schemes of Muham-

* By 'nationalist' historians is meant those who believed that the medieval Indian history was not a picture of unmitigated communal conflict but of a glorious communal harmony.

mad Tughlaq flowed from an imbalanced mixture of contradictory qualities in his nature. Or, Akbar pursued a liberal religious policy because he possessed a liberal disposition. This is how both the communalists and the nationalists had interpreted the history of medieval India. Once one accepts that the liberal religious policy of Akbar was only the reflection of his own liberal outlook, the conclusion becomes inescapable, for instance, that the fanatic religious policy of Aurangzeb flowed from his fanatic disposition.

Thus considerations of liberalism and orthodoxy enter into the discussion of policies which were not the result merely of the liberal or the fanatic disposition of this ruler or that, but of the compulsions of concrete political situation and the balance of group and sectional alignments prevailing in each case. The communal historian can also afford to shower praises on Akbar's liberalism, for having done that he would be free to condemn every other ruler with the charge of dogmatism. To eulogise Akbar as a 'secular' and a 'national' ruler is firstly unhistorical, for the medieval Indian state (or any other medieval state for that matter) could not, by its very nature, be secular, for the concept of the secular state is a very modern concept: so modern indeed that some of us have not yet been able to adjust ourselves even to the concept itself and probably much less to its practice. Secondly, such an approach defeats its own purpose by implying that barring the fifty years of Akbar's reign, the state during the other six-and-a-half centuries was nonsecular and hence theocratic and therefore Akbar's reign was a mere chance, an aberration.

Thus, our approach to history can be genuinely and logically secular only when we change our whole approach towards history itself and study the history of the society rather than that of an individual ruler or the ruling class. What we need to study is the whole society, its organisation and character which give rise to the contradictory pheno-

mena of communal harmony and disharmony at contiguous points of time, if not simultaneously, the region of this harmony as well as the conflict, etc. If we study the society we do not then have to suppress one aspect of it in order to highlight another as both the nationalists and the communalists tended to do.

II

The rise of Islam in the 7th century Arabia exercised a considerable progressive influence on the contemporary world. When Prophet Muhammad preached the doctrine of one God—there is no God except God—he was suggesting a great social change. For the concept of one God meant the concept of social equality. If there is only one God and He has created all, then everybody is equal before him as children are before the father and therefore everyone is equal to every other. Thus the concept of the Muslim brotherhood (the *millat*) also sprang up from this basic premise. Also Islam did not sanction any exclusive governing class or even an exclusive priestly class.

From the late 7th and the 8th centuries onwards, however, with the extension of Islam into vast areas and the establishment of huge empires, particularly after the conquest of Persia with its highly developed civilisation and administrative system, an exclusive governing class led by an absolutist monarch claiming divine rights begins to make its appearance. Correspondingly, the concept of social equality also begins to recede into the background, for of necessity social equality had to yield the ground to its own antithesis—an exclusive governing class with an absolute monarch on top to protect it. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni is the first sultan normally recognised as such; and this recognition also marks the formal liquidation of the principle of social equality among the Muslims. Thus in the 11th and 13th centuries and later we stood face to face with ambitious empire-builders expanding their empires no less at one another's cost than at the cost of the infidels.

The Turks came to India as a brave, fighting ruling class out in search of territory rather than as religious missionaries with sword in hand.

What was the process of the establishment of the Turkish rule in India? Was it through large-scale massacre of the Hindu population? Or was it through forced conversion of the Hindus? What explains the complete absence of any popular resistance to the advancement of the Turkish arms?

The Turks who established the empire in the 12th-13th centuries came here with roughly 12,000 soldiers. Through superior military organisation and tactics they defeated the Hindu rulers whose military and economic resources, in many cases even of individual rulers, were much larger than those of the Turks. Victory in the field of battle, however, is not the equivalent of the establishment of an empire. And the Turks must have realised that defeating the concentrated military resources of the enemy in the field of battle was comparatively easier; but if they attempted to displace the existing administrative personnel from the central to the village levels, the resistance they would encounter would be too widespread to overcome. Therefore, having defeated the great rulers they made a ready compromise with the lower levels of the old Hindu ruling class—with the rajas, the ranas, the zamindars, the chaudharis, etc. The terms of the compromise were that the zamindars, etc. were not deprived of their lands, nor of their position and privileges, provided that they paid a fixed annual tribute to the sultan. So long as they paid their tribute in full and in time—which also signified the acceptance of the sultan's suzerainty—and so long as they did not attack one another, they were not displaced, nor were they interfered with in the administration of their lands.

Thus the lower rungs of the administration remained completely in the hands of the Hindus. It is the Hindus who thus helped the Turks establish their empire and they ran its administration for them. But for their support

the Turks could not have been able to stay in India for any but a small length of time. Those Hindus became very much a part of the ruling class for they as much as the Turks were living off the surplus produce of the peasant. In fact historians like Barani and others use the term 'Hindu' only to refer to that section of the community which had become a part of the imperial ruling class as has been stated above.

The tensions within the ruling class for obvious political or economic reasons are often given a religious or ideological colour. By way of illustration we might refer to the revolt of one Ali Shah Nathu during the reign of Muhammad Tughlaq. A certain land had been assigned to Nathu, a Khalji, from which he was to collect revenue. Some time later one Bharan, a Hindu, brought to the notice of the authorities the amount of embezzlement in which Nathu had been revelling, and the land was thereupon transferred to Bharan himself. Nathu and his brothers protested to the sultan against the imposition of an infidel over them as administrator, and, failing to dissuade the sultan, they revolted.

There is no evidence, indeed, to suggest that the state engaged itself in converting the Hindus into Muslims on a mass level or in a ferment, zealous effort to propagate the faith. The only conversions, or suggestions to that effect, by the state that we know of are conversion of politically important individuals or families but never at the mass level; and this too strangely enough was not done in the initial stages—when it would have made more sense—but at a much later stage of medieval Indian history. One could perhaps argue that by converting these important individuals or families the rulers would expect their followers also to follow suit. It is noteworthy, however, that invariably only such persons were suggested conversion who had committed a rebellion or shown disloyalty to the state or some such thing. In such cases, because of their importance the state really liked to forgive them and wanted from them some commitment to an unreserved loyalty to the state. And in medieval conditions, when reli-

gion was considered the highest value in life, giving up one's own religion and accepting that of the emperor was considered the most unqualified acceptance of loyalty to the state. Otherwise why is it that such of the Hindu subjects, or rajas and kanas and Rajput nobles, who had been otherwise loyal and efficient, were never asked to accept Islam?

One could perhaps also argue that the jazia was a compulsion on the Hindus to become Muslims. For one thing, however, that by becoming Muslims they would then have to pay the zakat which was a tax exclusively levied on the Muslims. Secondly, the evidence regarding the jazia is very confusing. Ibn Battuta, a fourteenth-century traveller, tells us that in South India the jazia was collected by a Hindu ruler (the Zamorin) from his Jewish subjects. Outside India we know of jazia being imposed by Muslim rulers on their Muslim subjects. Also that the jazia was not collected from women, children, invalids, brahmins (except in the reign of Firuz Tughlaq) and soldiers. Even if one were to concede the jazia as a purely religious tax, did the Hindus really consider their religion so cheap as to exchange it for exemption (which is not even an exemption for as Muslims they would pay the zakat) from paying a paltry sum of money. And finally, if it is argued that the Hindus would accept Islam for saving some money and nothing else, could it not be argued that the state imposed the jazia for making some money and nothing else?

Similarly the demolition of temples. Interestingly the orthodox Hindu historians today revel no less in describing with great fanfare the temples demolished by the sultans than the orthodox Muslim contemporary historians did in their own time. It is obvious that the demolition of temples could not have been meant for winning over the Hindus to Islam. For, how can one imagine that the way of winning over the heart of a people is to go and demolish its temples? The demolition could at best have created a hatred, if anything, certainly not love, for Islam in the hearts of the Hindu subjects. Therefore it could

not have been meant for converting them, but for some other objective. It is significant that generally the temples are demolished only in the territory of an enemy; they are not demolished within the sultan's own empire, unless the temples became centres of a conspiracy or a rebellion against the state as they did during Aurangzeb's reign. Thus the demolition of temples in enemy-territory was symbolic of conquest by the sultan. Incidentally, many Hindu rulers also did the same with temples in enemy-territory long before the Muslims had emerged as a political challenge to these kingdoms. Subhatavarman, the Parmara ruler (1193-1210 A.D.), attacked Gujarat and plundered a large number of Jain temples at Dabhoi and Cambay. Harsha, ruler of Kashmir, who has been referred to earlier, plundered all the temples in his own kingdom barring four in order to replenish his treasury, and not a word of protest was uttered. And when he needed still more money and enhanced the amount of tribute due from his subordinate feudal lords he was dragged down the streets of Srinagar and was done to death.

It is not denied that there was conversion. But mostly, at the mass level, it was voluntary conversion or may be as a consequence of the popularity of the sufi saints who lived among the people and talked to them in their own language. It is only suggested that the state did not engage itself in any mass-scale conversion. If the state had, then the contemporary historians, who were very orthodox Muslims, would have mentioned such facts with great fanfare and manifold exaggeration.

It is interesting to note that while the emperor Ashoka went all out to spread Buddhism and convert people and officially used the state machinery for the purpose we look upon him as a great emperor; but in medieval India the state did not even interest itself in proselytising, yet it stands condemned, as it were, in the popular mind as an agency of converting people to Islam and nothing more. At the back of such an attitude is our own latent communalism which reacts unfavourably to such a 'conversion' and a conscious effort has to be made to fight it.

It is not suggested here that the state in medieval India was a perfectly secular state; it could not have been that for the very concept of a secular state is a very modern concept and historically it is not applicable to the medieval centuries or earlier. Therefore even if the state had engaged in proselytising, one should be able to understand that as one is able to understand it in the case of Ashoka.

The medieval Indian state was, however, negatively secular, so to say, in that it subordinated religion to politics rather than politics to religion. While the sultans employed the ulema in highly paid jobs without much responsibility in order to use their influence on the people for all that it was worth for their political ends, the ulema were, with very few exceptions, eager to carry out the sultan's bidding and interpret the Islamic law to suit his convenience. The ulema are bitterly criticised by the sufis for selling themselves off to the state for some cheap lucre and they are not wrong. An interesting example out of innumerable ones might illustrate the point. Badauni, a courtier-historian of Akbar's time, tells us that the emperor had nine wives while the religious law sanctioned only four. Akbar put the issue to an assembly of the ulema. One of them, obviously overeager to gain imperial favours, suggested that the law had provided that a Muslim could have 2-2, 3-3, 4-4 wives, i.e. 18 in all. Some others thought he was going too far and said the number of marriages permitted was 2, 3, 4, i.e., 9.

III

It is not that simultaneously with conversion, voluntary or otherwise, the neo-Muslims were immediately accepted as full members of the ruling class. In fact, the lower-caste converts were utterly detested by the Muslims belonging to the upper levels of society. Barani, in a *firman* which he fabricates and ascribes to Caliph Mamun, states thus (and what he says applies to the Muslims only for the *firman* is ascribed to a Caliph): "Teachers of every kind are to be sternly ordered not to thrust precious stones

down the throats of dogs or to put collars of gold round the necks of pigs and bears—that is, to the mean, the ignoble and the worthless, to shopkeepers and the low-born they are to teach nothing more than the rules about prayer, fasting... etc.'

On the other hand was the ruling class, consisting of both Muslims and Hindus, or iqtadars (later on mansabdars) and zamindars. The iqtadars initially were all Turks and no non-Turk, Muslim or non-Muslim, was tolerated in the higher echelons of political power. Later on the names of Indian Muslims and even Hindus are heard of in the highest posts. In the time of the Mughals, of course, the Rajputs and others like Raja Todar Mal and Birbal are some of the most illustrious officers of the state. The zamindars were all Hindus to begin with. In the later stages, however, we hear of some Muslim zamindars also.

There were unending battles among the various groups and individuals transcending every limit—regional, religious and racial. The Muslim nobles revolt against the sultans and fight among themselves; so do the Hindus. And they fight with each other no less than among themselves for the sake of revenue and political power. And yet there was much in common among them. They both subsisted on the revenue paid to them by the peasant out of his surplus produce. They both indulged in conspicuous consumption far beyond their enormous means. The amount of indebtedness was a measure of their honour; the larger the amount the more honourable they were. Their life was a replica of their overlords. The immense patronage of the arts was an incidental result of the values of their times; they vied with one another in maintaining large numbers of poets, musicians, etc. And not the least, both of them shared a very contemptuous attitude towards the masses of people, Hindus and Muslims alike.

Earlier we raised a question: Why was there no popular resistance to the Turkish invasion? Or, to the Mughal invasion later on? The only popular resistance movements that we know of belong to the 17th century when

the peasantry revolted in the Maharashtra, the Punjab and the Agra-Mathura regions against the increasing economic burden on it.

There might be two broad reasons for this: (1) the existing social and political system could not inspire the people to the defence of their Rajput masters who, after all, even today form a bare 8 per cent of the population of Rajasthan. At any rate the people were quite familiar with the Turks, through the latter's first cousins—the Rajputs—who originally belonged to the same land, and to the same level of civilisation as the Turks. And there was nothing particularly hideous in the Turks which they had not tolerated in the Rajputs; and (2) the Turks did not disturb the existing political and social structure; they only made marginal superstructural changes.

Thus the region of the conflict was limited to the ruling class. There could be tension within the imperial ruling class as is attested to by the numerous revolts of the jagirdars, both Hindu and Muslim; or, it could be between two ruling groups as is shown by the heroic but futile deeds of Rana Pratap who, after all, was fighting not even for Rajputana, much less for India, but for his own principality.

Significantly, even in the 17th century when great popular uprisings took place like the Maratha uprising, the Sikh and the Jat uprisings, and these led to enormous conflicts between the Marathas and the Mughal state, the Sikhs and the Mughal state, etc. they did not lead to communal riots at the social level even in the worst days of Aurangzeb's 'tyranny'—riots which have been occurring so frequently in our own lifetime as probably to blunt the sensitivity of some to their inhumanity and their reactionary character, that is when our state is officially a secular state. The causes of these uprisings of the Marathas, Sikhs and Jats are economic and political rather than religious and the conflict remains at that level in spite of all the declarations on behalf of the respective parties to the conflict.

One last question before we conclude: While the Rajputs, who had migrated to India much earlier than the Turks, have retained their identity to this day and have no intention of losing it—the Chauhans, the Pariharas, the Solankis, etc. these are all very familiar names to us even in our personal circles—where are now the descendants of the great dynasties which had ruled over India—the 'Slave' dynasty, the Khalji dynasty, the Tughlaqs, the Lodis and even the Mughals who were the focal point of the great Rebellion a bare hundred years ago? Obviously they have all been submerged in the mainstream of Indian life and, while losing their identity in it, have at the same time enriched it as nothing else has done.

COMMUNAL RIOTS
SEPTEMBER 1 TO NOVEMBER 20, 1990

STATE/UNION TERRITORY	PLACES	KILLED
Andhra Pradesh	4	27
Assam	1	7
Bihar	8	19
Delhi	-	8
Gujarat	26	99
Karnataka	22	88
Kerala	2	3
Madhya Pradesh	5	21
Maharashtra	3	4
Rajasthan	13	52
Tamilnadu	1	6
Tripura	1	-
Uttar Pradesh	28	224
West Bengal	2	6
Total	116	564

Source: Newspaper reports

Note: It is not possible to separately ascertain how many were killed in communal violence and how many in police firings.

From the poster by the People's Union
for Democratic Rights, Delhi

LOKSHAHI HAKK SANGHATANA REPORTS

*Repression in Dahanu:

Where It Comes From

*Slum: Workers' Colony

*Communal Riots or Police Repression?

An Enquiry into the Police Firing in
Cheeta Camp, Bombay

*Drought, in Maharashtra:

National Calamity or Government Policy?

*Death in Thane Police Custody: A Report

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ABOUT LOKSHAHI HAKK SANGHATANA

Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana is a democratic rights organisation which has been working in Maharashtra for the last 12 years. It has not only investigated, but also carried out mass propaganda on, issues such as the following: attacks on tribals; deaths in police custody; slum conditions and demolitions; caste and communal riots; firing on workers and slum dwellers; persecution of the Bombay policemen's agitation; repression on textile strikers; massacre of political dissidents in Tamil Nadu; and each of the government's new black laws.

LHS is a member of the All India Federation of Organisations For Democratic Rights (AIFOFR). AIFOFR was formed in 1982. It held its first sammelan in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, in May 1982, and its second at Udaipur, Rajasthan, in September 1990. It has held a number of national campaigns, such as against the missile base at Baliapal, Orissa; against state and communal terrorism in Punjab; and an investigation of the causes of drought.

AIFOFR constituent organisations:
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