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Ayodhya

The Modernity of Hinduism

Pankaj Mishra

1. History as Myth

Ayodhya is the city of Rama, the most virtuous and austere of Hindu gods. Traveling to it in January 2002 from Benares, across a wintry North Indian landscape of mustard-bright fields, hectic roadside bazaars, and lonely columns of smoke, I felt myself moving between two very different Hindu myths, or visions of life. Shiva, the god of perpetual destruction and creation, rules Benares, where temple compounds secrete Internet cafés and children fly kites next to open funeral pyres by the river. But the city's aggressive affluence and chaos seem far away in Ayodhya, which is small and drab, its alleys full of the dust of the surrounding flat fields. The peasants with unwieldy bundles under their arms brought to mind the pilgrims of medieval Indian miniature painting, and sitting by the Saryu River at dusk, watching the devout tenderly set afloat tiny earthen lamps in the slow-moving water, I felt the endurance and continuity of Hindu India.

After that vision of eternal Hinduism, the numerous mosques and Moghul buildings in

Ayodhya came as a surprise. Most of them are in ruins, especially the older ones built during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Ayodhya was the administrative center of a major province of the Moghul empire, Awadh. All but two were destroyed as recently as December 6, 1992, the day, epochal now in India's history, on which a crowd led by politicians from the Hindu nationalist BJP demolished the mosque they claimed the sixteenth-century Moghul emperor Babur had built, as an act of contempt, on the site of the god Ram's birthplace.

None of the mosques is likely to be repaired anytime soon; the Muslim presence in the town seems at an end for the first time in eight centuries. This was the impression I got even in January 2002, a month before anti-Muslim rage exploded in the western Indian state of Gujarat, at Digambar Akhara, the large, straw-littered compound of the militant sadhu sect presided over by Ramchandra Paramhans. In 1949, Paramhans initiated the legal battle to reclaim Babur's mosque, or the Babri Masjid,

for the Hindu community; in December 1992 he exuberantly directed the demolition squad.

The sect, Paramhans told me, was established four centuries ago to fight the Muslim invaders who had ravaged India since the tenth century AD and erected mosques over temples in the holy cities of Ayodhya, Benares, and Mathura. The sadhus had been involved, he added, in the seventy-six wars for possession of the site of the mosque in Ayodhya, in which more than two hundred thousand Hindus had been martyred.

Two bodyguards nervously watched my face as Paramhans described this history. More armed men stood over the thin-bricked wall of the compound. The security seemed excessive in what was an exclusively Hindu environment. But as Paramhans explained, caressing the tufts of white hair on the tip of his nose, the previous year, he had been attacked by homemade bombs delivered by what he called "Muslim terrorists."

Paramhans, who died in 2004 at the age of ninety-three, headed the trust in charge of building the temple, which the leaders of the BJP had vowed to build on the site of Babur's mosque. When I spoke to Paramhans in late January 2002, he expected up to a million Hindu volunteers to reach Ayodhya by March 15, defying a Supreme Court ban on construction at the site of the mosque, and to present another *fait accompli* to the world in the form of a half-built temple.

Thousands of Hindu activists from across India traveled to Ayodhya through the first few weeks of February. Many of them were from the prosperous state of Gujarat, whose entrepreneurial Hindus, often found living in Europe and the United States, have formed a loyal constituency of the Hindu nationalists since the 1980s. On February 27, some of these activists were returning on the train from Ayodhya when a crowd of Muslims attacked and set fire to two of the cars just outside the town of Godhra in Gujarat. Fifty-eight Hindus, many of them women and children, were burned alive.

Murderous crowds of Hindu nationalists seeking to avenge the attack in Godhra rampaged across Gujarat for the next few weeks. Wearing the saffron scarves and khaki shorts of Hindu nationalists, they were often armed with swords, trishuls (tridents), sophisticated explosives, and

gas cylinders. They had the addresses of various Muslim families and businesses, which they attacked systematically. The police did nothing to stop them and even led the charge against Muslims. A BJP minister sat in police control rooms while pleas for assistance from Muslims were routinely disregarded. Hindu-owned newspapers printed fabricated stories about Muslim atrocities and incited Hindus to avenge the killings of Hindu pilgrims.

In the end, more than two thousand people, mostly Muslims, were killed. About 230 mosques and shrines, including a five-hundred-year-old mosque, were razed to the ground, some replaced with Hindu temples. Close to one hundred thousand Muslims found themselves in relief camps. Corpses filled mass gravesites; they often arrived there mangled beyond recognition, with fetuses missing from the bellies of pregnant women that had been cut open.

The chief minister of Gujarat, a young up-and-coming leader of the Hindu nationalists called Narendra Modi, quoted Isaac Newton to explain the killings of Muslims. "Every action," he said, "has an equal and opposite reaction." The Indian prime minister at the time, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who visited the site of the massacres a whole month after they began, expressed shame and lamented that India's image had been spoiled. "What face will I now show to the world?" he said, referring to his forthcoming trip to Singapore. Later, at a BJP meeting, he rejected demands from the opposition and the press for Modi's sacking and proposed early elections in Gujarat. In a public speech, he seemed to blame Muslims. "Wherever they are," he said, "they don't want to live in peace." He added, referring to Muslims and Christians, "We have allowed them to do their prayers and follow their religion. No one should teach us about secularism." A resolution passed by the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh - National Volunteers Organization), the parent group of Hindu nationalists, from which have emerged almost all the leaders of the BJP, the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), and the Bajrang Dal, and whose mission is to create a Hindu state, described the retaliatory killings as "spontaneous," stating, "The entire Hindu

society had reacted," and even making the following declaration: "Let Muslims understand," the RSS said, "that their real safety lies in the goodwill of the majority." Both Vajpayee and his senior-most colleague, L. K. Advani, are members of the RSS, which was involved in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948.

In Ayodhya in January, Paramhans had told me, "Before we take on Pakistani terrorists," he said, "we have to take care of the offsprings Babur left behind in India; these one hundred thirty million Muslims of India have to be shown their place." This message seems to have been taken to heart in Gujarat, where the Hindu nationalists displayed a high degree of administrative efficiency in the killing of Muslims. In Gujarat's cities, middle-class Hindu men drove up in new Japanese cars, the emblems of India's globalized economy, to cart off the loot from Muslim shops and businesses.

The rich young Hindus in Benetton T-shirts and Nike sneakers appeared unlikely combatants in what Paramhans told me was a *dharma yudh*, a holy war, against the traitorous 12 percent of India's population. Both wealth and education separated them from the unemployed, listless small-town Hindus I met in Ayodhya, one of whom was a local convener of the Bajrang Dal (Hanuman's Army), the storm troopers of the Hindu nationalists, which has been implicated in several incidents of violence against Christians and Muslims across India, including the 1998 murder of an Australian missionary in the eastern state of Orissa. In response to a question about Muslims, he dramatically unsheathed his knife and invited me to feel the sharpness of the triple-edged blade, in the form of the trident of the Hindu god Shiva.

But despite their differences, the rich and unemployed Hindus shared a particular worldview. This was outlined most clearly for me, during my travels across North India in early 2002, by students at Saraswati Shishu Mandir, a primary school in Benares, one of the fifteen thousand such institutions run by the RSS. The themes of the morning assembly I attended were manliness and patriotism. In the gloomy hall, portraits of the more militant of Hindu

freedom fighters mingled with such signboarded exhortations as GIVE ME BLOOD AND I'LL GIVE YOU FREEDOM, INDIA IS A HINDU NATION, and SAY WITH PRIDE THAT YOU ARE A HINDU. For over an hour, boys and girls in matching uniforms of white and blue, marching up and down in front of a stage where a plaster of paris statue of Mother India stood on a map of South Asia, chanted speeches and songs about the perfidy of Pakistan, of Muslim invaders, and of the gloriousness of India's past.

This message clearly resonates at a level of caste and class privilege, flourishing in a society where deprivation always lies close at hand. But the school and most of its pupils and the surrounding area were firmly middle-class; just beyond the gates, banners advertising computer courses hung from electric poles bristling with illegal connections. The out-of-work upper-caste advertising executive I met at my hotel in Benares seemed to be speaking of his own insecurities when he suddenly said, after some wistful talk of the latest iMac, "Man, I am scared of these mozzies. We are a secular modern nation, but we let them run these madrassas, we let them breed like rabbits, and one day they are going to outstrip the Hindu population, and will they then treat us as well as we treat them?"

The Muslims of course have a different view of how they have been treated in secular, modern India. In Madanpura, Benares's Muslim locality, a few minutes' walk from Gyanvapi, one of two Moghul mosques the Hindu nationalists have threatened to destroy, I met Najam, a scholar of Urdu and Persian literatures. He is in his early thirties and grew up with some of the worst anti-Muslim violence of postindependence India. In the slaughter in Benares in 1992, he saw Hindu policemen beat his doctor to death with rifle butts.

"I don't think the Muslims are angry anymore," he said. "There is no point. The people who demolished the mosque at Ayodhya are now senior ministers in Delhi. We know we will always be suspected of disloyalty no matter what we say or do. Our madrassas will always be seen as producing fanatics and terrorists. We know we are helpless; there is no one ready to listen

to us, and so we keep silent. We expect nothing from the government and political parties. We now depend on the goodwill of the Hindus we live with, and all that we hope for is survival, with a little bit of dignity."

Hindu devotees throng the famous Viswanath Temple in Benares all day long, but few, if any, Muslims dare to negotiate their way through the scores of armed policemen and sandbagged positions to offer namaz at the adjacent Gyanvapi Mosque. It is not easy for an outsider to enter the Indian Muslim's sense of isolation. There was certainly little in my own background that could have prepared me to understand the complicated history behind it. As Brahmins with little money, we perceived Muslims as another threat to our aspirations to security and dignity. My sisters attended an RSS-run primary school where pupils were encouraged to disfigure the sketches of Muslim rulers in their history textbooks. At the English medium school I went to, we were taught to think of ourselves as secular and modern citizens of India and view religion as something one outgrows.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when I heard about Hindu-Muslim riots or the insurgencies in Punjab and Kashmir, it seemed to me that religion was the cause of most conflict and violence in India. The word used in the newspapers and in academic analyses was "communalism," the antithesis of the secularism advocated by the founding fathers of India, Gandhi and Nehru, and also the antithesis of Hinduism itself, which was held to be innately tolerant and secular.

Living in Benares in the late eighties, I was unaware that this ancient Hindu city was also holy for Muslims, unaware too of the seventeenth-century Sufi shrine just behind the tea shack where I often spent my mornings. It was one of many in the city, which both Hindus and Muslims visited, part of the flowering of Sufi culture in medieval North India. It was only in 2002, after talking to Najam, the young Persian scholar I met in Benares, that I discovered that one of the great Shia philosophers of Persia had sought refuge at the court of a Hindu ruler of Benares in the eighteenth century. And it was only after returning from my most recent trip to Ayodhya that I read that Rama's primacy

in this pilgrimage center was a recent event, that Ayodhya was for much of the medieval period the home of the much older and prestigious sects of Shaivites, or Shiva worshipers (Rama is only one of the many incarnations of Vishnu, one of the gods in the Hindu trinity, in which Shiva is the most important); many of the temples and sects currently devoted to Rama actually emerged under the patronage of the Shia Muslims who had begun to rule Awadh in the early eighteenth century.

Ramchandra Paramhans in Ayodhya had been quick to offer me a history full of temple-destroying Muslims and brave Hindu nationalists. Yet Paramhans's own militant sect had originally been formed to fight not Muslims but Shiva-worshiping Hindus, and it had been favored in this long and bloody conflict by the Muslim nawabs, who later gave generous grants of land to the victorious devotees of Rama. The nawabs, whose administration and army were staffed by Hindus, kept a careful distance from Hindu-Muslim conflicts. One of the first such conflicts in Ayodhya occurred in 1855, when some Muslims accused Hindus of illegally constructing a temple over a mosque, and militant Hindu sadhus (mendicants) massacred seventy-five Muslims. The then nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, a distinguished poet and composer, refused to support the Muslim claim on the building, explaining:

We are devoted to love; do not know of religion.
So what if it is Kaaba or a house of idols?

Wajid Ali Shah, denounced as effeminate and inept and deposed a year later by British imperialists, was the last great exponent of the Indo-Persian culture that emerged in Awadh toward the end of the Moghul empire, when India was one of the greatest centers of the Islamic world, along with the Ottoman and the Safavid empires. Islam in India lost some of its Arabian and Persian distinctiveness, blended with older cultures, but its legacy is still preserved amid the squalor of a hundred small Indian towns, in the grace and elegance of Najam's Urdu, in the numerous songs and dances that accompany festivals and marriages, in the subtle cuisines of North India, and the fineness of the silk saris of Benares, but

one could think of it, as I did, as something just there, without a history or tradition. The Indo-Islamic inheritance has formed very little part of, and is increasingly an embarrassment to, the idea of India that has been maintained by the modernizing Hindu elite over the last fifty years.

That idea first emerged in the early nineteenth century, as the British consolidated their hold over India and found new allies among upper-caste Hindus. In India, as elsewhere in their empire, the British had largely supplanted, and encountered stiff resistance from, Muslim rulers. Accordingly, the British tended to demonize Muslims as fanatics and tyrants and presented their conquest of India as at least partly a humanitarian intervention on behalf of the once-great Hindu nation that had been oppressed for centuries by Muslim despots and condemned to backwardness.

Most of these early British views of India were useful fictions at best since the Turks, Afghans, Central Asians, and Persians who together with upper-caste Hindu elites had ruled a variety of Indian states for over eight centuries were rather more than plunderers and zealots. The bewildering diversity of people that inhabited India before the arrival of the Muslims in the eleventh century hardly formed a community, much less a nation, and the word "Hinduism" barely hinted at the almost infinite number of folk and elite cultures, religious sects, and philosophical traditions found in India.

But these novel British ideas were received well by educated upper-caste Hindus who had previously worked with Muslim rulers and then begun to see opportunities in the new imperial order. British discoveries of India's classical sculpture, painting, and literature had given them a fresh invigorating sense of the pre-Islamic past of India. They found flattering and useful those British Orientalist notions of India that identified Brahmanical scriptures and principles of tolerance as the core of Hinduism. In this view, such practices as widow burning became proof of the degradation Hinduism had suffered during Muslim rule, and the cruelties of caste became an unfortunate consequence of Muslim tyranny.

A wide range of Hindu thinkers, social reformers, and politicians followed the British in dismissing the centuries of Muslim domination as a time of darkness and upholding imperial rule with all its social reforms and scientific advances as preparation for self-rule. Some denounced British imperialism as exploitative, but even they welcomed its redeeming modernity and, above all, the European idea of the nation – a cohesive community with a common history, culture, values, and sense of purpose – which for many other colonized peoples appeared a way of duplicating the success of the powerful, all-conquering West.

Muslim leaders, on the other hand, were slow to participate in the civilizing mission of imperialism; they saw little place for themselves in the idea of the nation as espoused by the Hindu elite. British imperialists followed their own strategies of divide and rule; the decision to partition Bengal in 1905 and to have separate electorates for Muslims further reinforced the sense among many upwardly mobile Indians that they belonged to distinct communities defined exclusively by religion.

It is true that Gandhi and Nehru worked hard to attract low-caste Hindus and Muslims; they wanted to give a mass base and wider legitimacy to the political demands for self-rule that intensified in the early twentieth century under the leadership of the Congress Party. But Gandhi's use of popular Hindu symbols, which made him a mahatma among Hindu masses, caused many Muslims to distrust him. Also, many Congress leaders shared the views not of Gandhi or of the poet Rabindranath Tagore, who criticized Western-style nationalism, but of such upper-caste ideologues as Veer Savarkar and Guru Golwalkar, the spiritual and ideological parents of Hindu nationalists of today.

2. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh: Indian-Style Fascism

On the evening of January 30, 1948, five months after the independence and partition of India, Mahatma Gandhi was walking to a prayer meeting in the grounds of his temporary home in New Delhi when he was shot three times in the

chest and abdomen. Gandhi was then seventy-nine years old and a forlorn figure. He had been unable to prevent, and so was widely blamed by many Hindus for, the bloody creation of Pakistan as a separate homeland for Indian Muslims. The violent uprooting of millions of Hindus and Muslims across the hastily drawn borders of India and Pakistan had tainted the freedom from colonial rule that he had been so arduously working toward. When the bullets from an automatic pistol hit his frail body at point-blank range, he collapsed and died instantly. His assassin made no attempt to escape and even, as he would later claim, shouted for the police.

Millions of shocked Indians waited anxiously for further news that night, fearing unspeakable violence if Gandhi's murderer proved to be a Muslim. There was much relief, and also some puzzlement, the next morning when the assassin was revealed as Nathuram Godse, a Hindu Brahmin from western India, a region relatively untouched by the murderous passions of the partition.

Born in a lower-middle-class family, Godse began his career in 1932 as a Hindu activist with the RSS, which had been founded by a Brahmin doctor called Hegdewar in the central Indian city of Nagpur seven years previously. The RSS was, and remains, dedicated to establishing a Hindu nation by uniting Hindus from all castes and sects and by forcing Muslims, Christians, and other Indian minorities to embrace Hindu culture. Godse received both physical and ideological training from members of the RSS and absorbed their ideas about the greatness of pre-Islamic India and the havoc wrought upon Hindus by eight centuries of Muslim invasions and tyranny.

During his trial, Godse made a long and eloquent speech in English explaining his background and motives. He claimed that Gandhi's "constant and consistent pandering to the Muslims," whom he described variously as fanatical, violent, and antinational, had left him with no choice. He blamed Gandhi for the "vivisection of the country – our motherland" and denounced the latter's insistence upon nonviolence, saying that it was "absurd to expect [four hundred million] people to regulate

their lives on such a lofty plane." He claimed it was the terrorist methods of Hindu and Sikh freedom fighters, not Gandhi's nonviolence, that had forced the British to leave India, and hoped that with Gandhi dead, "Indian politics would surely be practical, able to retaliate," and the nation, he claimed, "would be saved from the inroads of Pakistan."

Godse requested that the judge at his trial show him no mercy, and he did not appeal against the death sentence passed on him. He went to the gallows in November 1949 shouting such slogans as "Long Live the Undivided India" and singing paeans to the "Living Motherland, the Land of the Hindus." The Indian government under Pandit Nehru banned the RSS a few days after Gandhi's murder and arrested thousands of its members. The ban was lifted a year later, after the RSS agreed to have a written constitution and confine itself to "cultural" activities, a promise it quickly broke.

Not much is known about the RSS in the West, although both the former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his deputy, L.K. Advani belong to it and have never repudiated its militant ideology, the ideology of Hindu nationalism that seeks aggressively to "Hinduize" South Asia and has often threatened to plunge the region, which has the largest Muslim population in the world and two nuclear-armed nations, into catastrophic war.

After September 11, 2001, the Hindu nationalists presented themselves to the West as reliable allies in the fight against Muslim fundamentalists. But in India their resemblance to the European fascist movements of the 1930s has been clear for a long time. In his manifesto *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (1938), Guru Golwalkar, director of the RSS from 1940 to 1973, during which time both Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Advani joined the organization and rose to become senior leaders of its political wing, said that the Nazis had manifested "race pride at its highest" by purging Germany of the Jews. According to Golwalkar, India was Hindustan, a land of Hindus where Jews and Parsis could only ever be "guests," and to which Muslims and Christians came as "invaders." Golwalkar

was clear about what he expected from both the guests and the invaders:

The foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e. of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizen's rights. There is, at least should be, no other course for them to adopt.

Golwalkar and his disciples in the RSS and Congress saw India as the sacred indigenous nation of Hindus which had been divided and emasculated by Muslim invaders, and which could be revived only by uniting India's diverse population, recovering ancient Hindu traditions, and weeding out corrupting influences from Central Asia and Arabia. This meant forcing Indian Muslims to give up their allegiance to such alien lands and faiths as Mecca and Islam and embrace the so-called Hindu ethos, or Hindutva, of India, an ethos that was, ironically, imagined into being with the help of British Orientalist discoveries of India's past.

By the 1940s the feudal and professional Muslim elite of India had grown extremely wary of the Hindu nationalist strain within the Congress. After many failed attempts at political rapprochement, this elite finally arrived at the demand for a separate homeland for Indian Muslims. The demand expressed the Muslim fear of being reduced to a perpetual minority in a Hindu majority state and was, initially, a desire for a more federal polity for postcolonial India. But the leaders of the Congress chose to partition the Muslim-majority provinces in the west and east rather than share the centralized power of the colonial state that was their great inheritance from the British.

This led to the violent transfer of millions of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims across hastily drawn artificial borders. The massacres, rapes, and kidnappings further hardened sectarian feelings; the RSS, which was temporarily

banned after Gandhi's assassination, found its most dedicated volunteers among middle-class Hindu refugees from Pakistan, such as the former home minister, Lal Krishna Advani, who was born in Muslim-dominated Karachi and joined the RSS as early as 1942. The RSS floated a new party, the Jana Sangh, later to become the BJP, which entered electoral politics in independent India in 1951 with the renewed promise of a Hindu nation; although it worked for much of the next three decades in the gigantic shadow of the Congress Party, its sudden popularity in the 1980s now seems part of the great disaster of partition, which locked the new nation-states of India and Pakistan into stances of mutual hostility.

In Pakistan, a shared faith failed to reconfigure the diverse regional and linguistic communities into a new nation. This was proved when the Bengali-speaking population of East Pakistan seceded, with Indian help, to form the new state of Bangladesh in 1971. Muslims in India continue to lack effective spokespersons, despite, or perhaps because of, the tokenist presence of Muslims at the highest levels of the government. Politically, they are significant only during elections, when they form a solid vote bank for those Hindu politicians promising to protect them against discrimination and violence. Their representation in government jobs has steadily declined.

Secularism, the separation of religion from politics was always going to be difficult to impose upon a country where religion has long shaped political and cultural identities. But it was the only useful basis on which the centralized government in Delhi could, in the name of modernity and progress, establish its authority over a poor and chaotically fractious country. However, when Sikh and Muslim minorities in the states of Punjab and Kashmir challenged the great arbitrary power of the Indian government, Nehru's heirs, his daughter, Indira, and grandson Rajiv, were quick to discard even the rhetoric of secularism and to turn Hindu majoritarianism into the official ideology of the Congress-run central Indian government.

The uprisings in Punjab, and then Kashmir, were portrayed by the Indian government and

the middle-class media as fundamentalist and terrorist assaults on secular democracy. In fact, although tainted by association with Pakistan and religious fanaticism, the Sikhs and Kashmiri Muslims expressed a long-simmering discontent with an antifederalist state in Delhi, a state that had retained most of the power of the old colonial regime and often wielded it more brutally than the British ever had. The uprisings were part of a larger crisis, one that has occurred elsewhere in postcolonial nations, the failure of a corrupt and self-serving political and bureaucratic elite to ensure social and economic justice for those it had claimed to represent in its anti-colonial battles.

By the 1980s, when the Hindu nationalists abruptly rose to prominence, the Congress had disillusioned lower-caste Hindus and looked incapable of preserving even the interests of its upper-caste Hindu constituency. It kept raising the bogey of national unity and external enemies. But the disturbances in the border states of Kashmir and Punjab only gave more substance to the Hindu nationalist allegation that the Congress with its "pseudosecularism" had turned India into a "soft state," where Kashmiri Muslims could blithely conspire with Pakistan against Mother India.

It was in the 1980s, with the Congress rapidly declining and the pseudosocialist economy close to bankruptcy, that the Hindu nationalists saw a chance to find new voters among upper-caste Hindus. Like the National Socialists in Germany in the early 1930s, they offered not so much clear economic policies as fantasies of national rebirth and power. In 1984 the VHP announced a national campaign to rebuild the grand temple at Ayodhya; the mosque the first Moghul emperor Babur, had erected was, they said, a symbol of national shame; removing it and rebuilding the temple were a matter of national honor.

Both history and archaeology were travestied in this account of the fall and rise of the eternal Hindu nation. There is no evidence that Babur had ever been to Ayodhya or that this restless, melancholic conqueror from Samarkand, a connoisseur of architecture, could have built an ugly mosque over an existing Rama temple. Rama

himself isn't known to recorded history; the cult of Rama worship arrived in North India as late as the tenth century AD, and no persuasive evidence exists for the Rama temple that apparently once stood on the site of the mosque.

But the myths were useful in reinforcing the narrative of Muslim cruelty and contempt. At first, they found their keenest audience among wealthy expatriate Hindus in the UK and the United States, who generously bankrolled a movement that in upholding a strong self-assertive Hinduism seemed to allay their sense of inferiority induced by Western images of India as a miserably poor country. In India the anxieties that persuaded many upper-caste Hindus to support the BJP were much deeper. In 1990 the government in Delhi, then headed by defectors from the Congress Party, decided to implement a long-standing proposal to reserve government jobs for poor "Backward-caste" Hindus. Upper-caste Hindus were enraged at this attack on their privilege. The BJP saw the plan for affirmative action as potentially destructive of its old goal of persuading lower-caste groups to accept a paternalistic upper-caste leadership as part of presenting a united Hindu front against Muslims.

Later that year the leader of the BJP, L.K. Advani, decided to lead a ritual procession on a faux chariot – actually a Chevrolet – from Gujarat to Ayodhya, where he intended to start the construction of the Rama temple. Appropriately, he set out from the temple in Somnath, Gujarat, which, looted by a Turk conqueror in the eleventh century AD, was lavishly rebuilt in the early 1950s by devout Hindu leaders of the Congress Party. This wasn't just playacting, however; more than five hundred people, most of them Muslims, were killed in the rioting that accompanied Advani's progress across India. Hindu policemen were indifferent and sometimes even participated in the violence. When I was in Benares recently, a friend casually pointed out a distant relative of his walking down the street. He was a retired police officer who liked to boast of how he had shot and killed fourteen Muslims during a riot in the city of Meerut.

It is strange to look back now and recall just two decades ago the temple-mosque controversy was hardly heard of outside Ayodhya. Local Hindus first staked a claim on the mosque in the mid-nineteenth century, and British officials allowed them to worship on a platform just outside the building. In 1949, two years after independence, a Hindu civil servant working together with local abbots surreptitiously placed idols of Rama inside the mosque. The story that Lord Rama himself had installed them there quickly spread. The local Muslims protested. Prime Minister Nehru sensed that nothing less than India's secular identity was threatened. He ordered the mosque to be locked and sacked the district official, who promptly joined the Hindu nationalists.

The idols, however, were not removed, and Muslims gradually gave up offering namaz at the mosque. During the three decades that followed, the courts were clogged with cases concerning Hindu and Muslim claims on the site. In 1984 the VHP began a campaign for the unlocking of the mosque. In 1986 a local judge allowed the Hindus to worship inside the building. A year later Muslims held their largest protest demonstration since independence in Delhi.

Until 1984, however, Babur's mosque remained relatively unknown outside of a small circle of litigious, property-hungry abbots in Ayodhya. Religion was a fiercely competitive business in Ayodhya. The local abbots fought hard for their share of donations from millions of poor pilgrims, and, more recently, wealthy Indians in the United States and the UK, and they were notorious for murder and pillage; the attack on Ramchandra Paramhans that he blamed on Muslim terrorists was probably the work of rival abbots. But as the movement for the temple intensified, entrepreneurs of religiosity such as Paramhans were repackaged by Hindu nationalist politicians as sages and saints and turned into national celebrities. Rama himself suddenly evolved from the benign, almost feminine, calendar art divinity of my childhood to the vengeful Rambo of Hindu nationalist posters.

The myths multiplied in October 1990, when Advani's Chevrolet chariot procession was stopped and police in Ayodhya fired upon a

crowd of Hindus attempting to assault the mosque. The largest circulation Hindi paper in North India, *Dainik Jagran*, spoke of "indiscriminate police firing" and "hundreds of dead devotees" and then reduced the death toll the next day to thirty-two. The rumors and exaggerations, part of a slick propaganda campaign, helped the BJP win the elections in four North Indian states in 1991. The mosque seemed doomed. When on December 6, 1992, a crowd of mostly upper-caste Hindus, equipped with shovels, crowbars, pickaxes, and sometimes just their bare hands, demolished Babur's mosque, the police simply watched from a distance.

Uma Bharti, one of the more vocal of Hindu nationalist politicians cheer-led the crowd, shouting, "Give one more push and break the Babri Masjid." The president of the VHP announced the dawn of a "Hindu rebellion," while a leader of the BJP said for "those who want to see the flag of Pakistan flutter over Kashmir, the process of showing them their right place has begun."

That evening the crowd rampaged through Ayodhya, killing and burning thirteen Muslims, some of whom were children, and destroying scores of mosques, shrines, and Muslim-owned shops and houses. Protests and riots then erupted across India. Altogether two thousand people, mostly Muslims, were killed. Three months after the massacres Muslim gangsters in Bombay retaliated with bomb attacks that killed more than three hundred civilians.

In Delhi, the elderly Congress prime minister, Narasimha Rao napped through the demolition. The next day he dismissed the BJP governments, banned the RSS and its sister organizations, and promised to rebuild the mosque. The leaders of the BJP tried to distance themselves from the demolition, saying that it was a spontaneous act of frustration, provoked by the anti-Hindu policies of the government. However, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) concluded that such senior leaders of the BJP as L.K. Advani, subsequently home minister of India, had planned the demolition well in advance. As for the anti-Muslim violence, Advani claimed in an article in *The Times of India* that it would not have taken place had Muslims identified

themselves with Hindutva, the same sentiment echoed after the riots in Gujarat.

Six years after the demolition, the BJP, benefiting from India's "first past the post" electoral system, became the dominant party in the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Delhi. Despite its being forced to share power with more secular parties, the BJP's ideological fervor seemed undiminished, if ultimately unfulfilled. Certainly, the Hindu nationalists have tried hard to whip up Hindu passions. In early 1998, during their first few months in power, they conducted nuclear tests, explicitly aiming them against Pakistan, which responded with its own tests. The VHP and Bajrang Dal distributed radioactive earth from the nuclear test site as sacred offerings; they were also responsible for an unprecedented series of mob attacks on Christians across India. About half of these occurred in Gujarat, but Advani claimed that there was "no law and order problem in Gujarat" and at a meeting of Hindu nationalists shared the dais with the new chief of the RSS, K. S. Sudarshan. The latter spoke of "an epic war between Hindus and anti-Hindus," asked Christians and Muslims to return to their "Hindu roots," and also attacked secular intellectuals as "that class of bastards which tries to implant an alien culture in their land."

John Dayal, the vice president of the All India Catholic Union, told me that the RSS has spent millions of dollars in trying to convert tribal people to Hindu nationalism. Dayal, who monitors the missionary activities of the RSS very closely, claimed that in just over eighteen months the RSS distributed 350,000 trishuls, or tridents, in three contiguous tribal districts in Central India.

Dr B. L. Bhole, a political scientist I met at Nagpur University, saw a Brahminical ploy in these attempts. He told me that the RSS had tried to turn not just Gandhi but also Dr Ambedkar, the greatest leader of the Dalits, into a Hindu nationalist icon. K. S. Sudarshan, the current supreme director of the RSS, had recently garlanded the statue of Dr Ambedkar at the park in Nagpur where the latter rejected Hinduism and converted to Buddhism in 1956.

Dr Bhole thought this outrageous. He had joined local Dalit activists and intellectuals in ritual "purifying" the statue after Sudarshan's visit.

Dr Bhole said, "The RSS can't attract young middle-class people anymore, so they hope for better luck among the poorest, socially disadvantaged people. But the basic values the RSS promotes among low caste people and tribals are drawn from the high Sanskrit culture of Hinduism, which considers the cow as holy et cetera and which seeks to maintain a social hierarchy with Brahmins at the very top. The united Hindu nation they keep talking about is one where basically low-caste Hindus and Muslims and Christians and other communities don't complain much while accepting the dominance of a Brahmin minority. But the problem for the RSS is that most of the low-caste Hindus and tribals don't want to learn any Brahmin mantras. They form an increasingly independent political group within India today; they no longer want any kind of Brahmin paternalist leadership. Even such low-caste leaders of the BJP as Uma Bharti want to focus on tangible rights for their community; they won't be fobbed off with nationalist ideology. Their assertiveness is really the greatest achievement of democratic politics in India, which has so far been dominated by upper-caste Hindus."

Dr Bhole said, "The RSS has been most successful in Gujarat, where low-caste Hindus and tribals were indoctrinated at the kind of schools you went to; they were in the mobs led by upper-caste Hindu nationalists that attacked Muslims and Christians. But the RSS still doesn't have much support among low-caste people outside Gujarat. For the RSS, this is a serious setback, and the only thing they can do to increase their mass base is keep stoking anti-Muslim and anti-Christian passions and hope they can get enough Hindus, both upper-caste and low-caste, behind them."

The consistent demonizing of Muslims and Christians by Hindu nationalists may seem gratuitous – Christians in India are a tiny and scattered minority, and the Muslims are too poor, disorganized, and fearful to pose any kind of threat to Hindus – but it is indispensable to

the project of a Hindu nation. Hindu nationalists have always sought to redefine Hindu identity in opposition to a supposedly threatening "other." They hope to unite Hindu society by constantly invoking such real and imagined threats as are posed by the evangelical Christians and militant Muslims.

Visiting villages and towns across North India in the last few years, I found Muslims full of anxiety about their fate in India. They spoke to me of an insidious and regular violence, of the frequent threats and beatings they received from local Hindu politicians and policemen.

The growth of religious militancy in South Asia is likely to enthuse many Hindus. As they see it, Gujarat proved to be a successful "laboratory" of Hindu nationalism, in which carefully stoked anti-Muslim sentiments eventually brought about a pogrom, and a Muslim backlash seemed to lead to even greater Hindu "unity."

The victory of the BJP in Gujarat indicated that this plan was going well. It hinted that well-to-do Indians were likely to support the Hindu nationalists, even the extremists among them, as long as they continued to liberalize the Indian economy and help create a consumer revolution. But neither the BJP nor their supporters had reckoned with the larger, neglected majority of India's population, which expressed its skepticism about Hindu unity by voting out the BJP in the general elections in May 2004.

Opinion pollsters, political pundits, and journalists had predicted an easy victory for the ruling NDA (National Democratic Alliance), the coalition of BJP and its allies, which claimed in its advertising campaign to have created an "India Shining" in the previous six years. But it was the opposition Congress that emerged as the single largest party in the 545-seat Indian Parliament. These results surprised most middle-class Indians, for it was during the BJP's six years in power that India's urban prosperity achieved by the economic reforms initiated in 1991 became most visible. The BJP had supported the reforms, which benefited greatly those who were best placed to take advantage of new opportunities in business and trade and the economy's fast-growing service

sector (information technology, jobs offshored by Europe and America), the educated middle class, the BJP's primary constituency, which, despite growing fast in recent years, still makes up less than 20 percent of India's population.

The reforms also attracted a generation of rich Indians who live in the United States and the UK and were eager for cultural and economic links with their ancestral land, a desire that turned nonresident Indians into the BJP's most devoted followers and sponsors and helped the BJP itself evolve rapidly, despite its Hindu nationalism, into a keen advocate of economic globalization. During its six years in power, new freeways, shopping malls, brand-name boutiques, Starbucks-style coffee bars, and restaurants with exotic cuisine and London prices transformed the cities of Bangalore, Hyderabad, Delhi, Chennai, and Bombay. Newfound wealth created a heady mood among the middle class, what the leaders of the BJP called the "feel-good factor" (so important that in March 2004 the BJP was initially reluctant to send the Indian cricket team to Pakistan out of the fear that it might lose and make the cricket-obsessed nationalist middle class feel not so good anymore). Most English-language newspapers began to print entire daily supplements in order to cover film premieres, fashion shows, champagne-tasting sessions in five-star hotels, and the lifestyles of beauty pageant winners, models, Bollywood actors, and other celebrities. The general air of celebration overwhelmed many formerly left-wing intellectuals, academics, and journalists. Convinced that the BJP would be in power for many years, they aligned themselves openly with the party and lobbied for political and diplomatic posts. Some of the most influential TV news channels, newspapers, and magazines, including *India Today*, once India's best news-magazine, were content to become an echo chamber for the BJP's views.

Not surprisingly, the BJP, and its supporters and advisers in the media, couldn't see beyond the "India Shining" of the Hindu middle class and turn their attention to the 70 percent of Indians living in the countryside. They barely noticed the Indians who live in slums or in

equally degrading conditions in the big cities, the fact that while high-tech hospitals in the big cities cater to rich Indians and foreigners, or medical tourists, public health facilities in small towns and villages decline rapidly; that communicable diseases such as malaria, dengue, and encephalitis have revived; that half of all Indian children are undernourished and more than half a million of them die each year from diarrhea; that an estimated five million Indians are infected with HIV/AIDS.

A powerful ideology often shaped the reforms the BJP espoused: that the free market can usurp the role of the state. This meant that government often withdrew from precisely those areas where its presence was indispensable. Though India had more than sufficient food grains in stock, the government's failure to distribute it effectively led in recent years to an unprecedented rise in the number of drought-affected villagers starving to death in many of the most populous states.

As for the mosque, which appears now in memory as a melancholy symbol of a besieged secularism, there seems little hope it will ever be rebuilt. It has fallen victim not just to the ideologues but to less perceptible changes in India's general mood in the last decade. The talk of poverty and social justice; the official culture of frugality; the appeal, however rhetorical, to traditions of tolerance and dialogue – all these seem to belong to the past, to the early decades

of idealism. A decade of proglobalization policies has created a new aggressive middle class, whose concerns dominate public life in India. This class is growing; the current numbers are between 150 and 200 million. There are also millions of rich Indians living outside India. In America, they constitute the richest minority. It is these affluent, upper-caste Indians in India and abroad who largely bankrolled the rise to power of Hindu nationalists. In the global context, middle-class Hindus are no less ambitious than those who in the Roman Empire embraced Christianity and made it an effective mechanism with which to secure worldly power. Hinduism in the hands of these Indians has never looked more like the Christianity and Islam of popes and mullahs and less like the multiplicity of unselfconsciously tolerant faiths it still is for most Indians.

It was this modernized Hinduism that Gujarat in 2002 provided a glimpse of, as Benetton-clad young Hindus carted off the loot of digital cameras and DVD players in their new Japanese cars. It is this Hinduism that Ayodhya presents both a miniature image and a sinister portent of, with its syncretic past now irrevocably falsified, its mosques destroyed, its minorities suppressed, an Ayodhya where well-placed local abbots helped by elected politicians wait for new lucrative connections to the global economy and prove, along with much else, the profound modernity of religious nationalism.

Identity on the Borderline: Modernity, New Ethnicities, and the Unmaking of Multiculturalism in Sri Lanka

Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake

Borders Old and New and the Problem of Hybridity

Stories at the border and peripheries of the modern nation-state often problematize nationalist narratives of history and identity invented at hegemonic centres, in this case Colombo and Jaffna, to justify and legitimize violence. As the battle for territory, between the government's armed forces and the LTTE fighting for a separate state, has progressed, Lanka's internal regional and administrative borders have shifted, hardened and softened as a de facto partition has been established and slowly eroded across the Vanni region. The border constitutes a broad swath of land between territory controlled by the government in the south, and the LTTE in the north. Sometimes it has harbored the clandestine headquarters of the LTTE leadership. The border for many years prevented the movement of persons from north to south and vice versa. The border-partition

was also constituted of displaced persons, refugee camps and military camps, which alternatively plot a new perimeter across the island. Estimates were that 78% of the internally displaced due to the armed conflict that escalated in 1983 are ethnically Tamils, 13% are Muslims, and 8% are Sinhalas.¹

Forced population displacement due to violence between the armed groups has resulted in the destruction of multicultural and hybrid communities and traditions of co-existence along the border. Yet in *purana* (old) villages and settlements Sinhals, Tamils, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, continue to co-exist, speak each other's languages, worship one another's gods, albeit with increasing difficulty and a great deal of ambivalence. Many on the border have been repeatedly displaced during cycles of war and détente between the government and LTTE (Deng 1994). Those who have returned to their villages do so because they are tired of living on handouts in