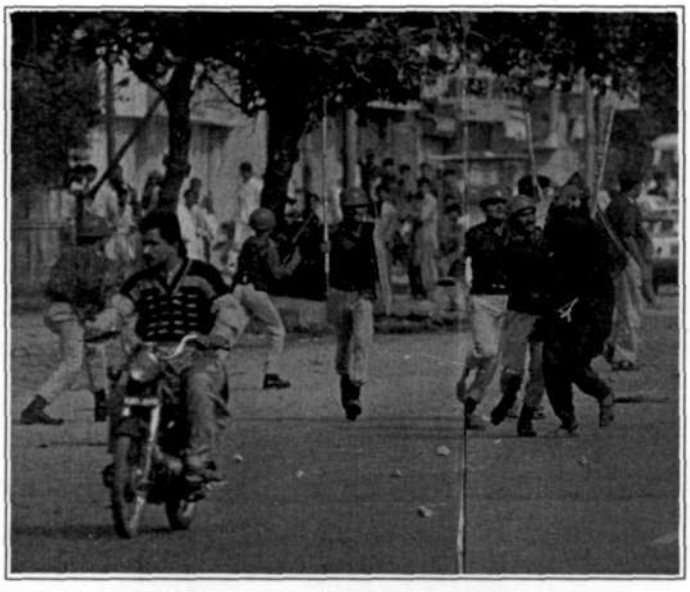
India in strife: the Ayodhya crisis

Sagarika Dutt considers the repercussions of the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque.

For quite a few years now, certain Hindu fundamentalist organisations in India have been wanting to build a *Ram janambhoomi* (birthplace) temple in Ayodhya, which is believed to be Lord Rama's birthplace. Unfortunately, a mosque, the Babri Masjid, already stands at the site they have chosen for building the temple and which they claim is the exact spot where Rama was born. They also claim that a temple had once existed there but was torn down by Babur, the Muslim ruler, in the sixteenth century and the mosque was built in its place.



Police trying to restore order following the mosque's destruction

The demolition of a major part of the 400 year old Babri Masjid by *kar sevaks* (Hindu holy workers) on 6 December 1992 was the culmination of a movement started by these Hindu fundamentalists, aided and abetted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a pro-Hindu political party. The incident took the country by surprise. The central government and the Supreme Court of India had been given an assurance by the Uttar Pradesh government and the BJP that the mosque would be protected and that *kar seva* (a preliminary to the building of the temple) would be only symbolic and consist of the singing of *bhajans* and *kirtans* (Hindu religious songs), and would not include any construction activity, prohibited by an injunction of the Allahabad High Court.

As news of the demolition spread, communal riots broke out all over the country and the army had to be deployed in many areas to maintain law and order. The demolition of the mosque was strongly condemned in all quarters by people who were concerned about the threat to India's secular traditions. The Uttar Pradesh government was dismissed for failing to prevent the incident, and the state was brought under President's rule.

Great betrayal

Addressing the nation soon after the demolition of the mosque, the Prime Minister of India, P.V. Narasimha Rao, blamed the BJP and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) for the 'great betrayal' of the nation. However, other opposition parties, the National Front-Left front combine and the Indian Union Muslim League, also blamed the central government and said that the Prime Minister should have anticipated that the *kar sevaks* would create trouble in Ayodhya and should have dismissed the Uttar Pradesh government before things went out of hand. They accused him of failing to discharge his constitutional obligations and demanded his resignation.

Narasimha Rao, however, refused to take any responsibility for the incident. He said that his government had not dismissed the Uttar Pradesh government in anticipation of the incident because that would have been unconstitutional, and argued that in a federal set-up the central government cannot act on the assumption that a state government is not trustworthy.

Government response

The day after the Ayodhya incident, the central government announced a series of measures to restore the confidence of the minorities, which included a ban on communal organisations and an assurance that the Babri Masjid would be rebuilt. On 8 December, leaders of the BJP and the VHP were arrested on charges of spreading communal disharmony and disturbing peace. Those arrested included the BJP president, Murli Manohar Joshi, the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha, L.K. Advani, the VHP president, Vishnu Hari Dalmia, and its general secretary, Ashok Singhal. The entire complex of the disputed shrine was cleared of *kar sevaks* by the Central Reserve Police Force's Rapid Action Force and commandos.

On 10 December, the central government banned the Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh (RSS), the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, the Jamaat-i-Islami and the Islamic Sevak Sangh, under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, for a period of two years, for 'promoting disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred and ill-will between different religious communities' and for 'participating in the demolition of the structure in Ayodhya on December 6.'[1] The ban was welcomed by all political parties except the BJP. However, the ban will only drive the proscribed organisations, especially the RSS, underground. The RSS has always been a very elusive organisation and this is the third time that it has been banned. But this is the first time that it has decided to challenge the ban, which indicates that it perceives its position to be very strong.

Foreign repercussions

The storming of the Babri Masjid had repercussions in neighbouring Muslim countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, and even in the United Kingdom, where temples were attacked and damaged. The Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) condemned the Ayodhya incident as 'shameful'. At the United Nations, Islamic countries urged the Secretary-General, Boutros Ghali, to use his moral and political authority to ensure the safety of Muslims in India. Taking note of the Indian government's decision to reconstruct the mosque and punish the guilty, the OIC called for immediate steps in this direction, while ambassadors of the Islamic countries said that they would be 'watching' the implementation of the Indian government's decision to rebuild the shrine.[2] Meanwhile, the government of India requested the governments of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom to protect Hindu and Sikh places of worship, in their respective countries.

The foreign media also had a role to play in the Ayodhya crisis. Those who

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are responsible for maintaining law and order in India, the state governments and the police, complained that the coverage given to the incident by the foreign media, especially the BBC and CNN, had aggravated the situation and led to more violence in the country. People in India are also concerned that the incident and the publicity given to it by the foreign media will tarnish India's image abroad. This is especially undesirable at a time when the Indian government has initiated a process of economic reforms and is trying to woo foreign investors.

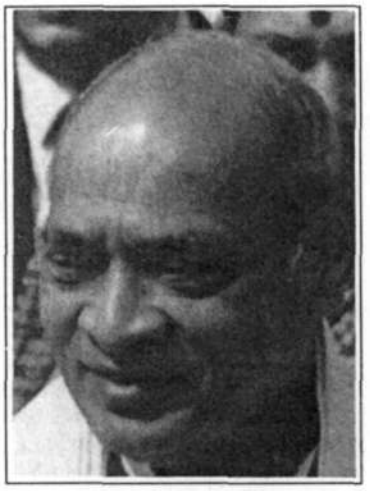
Sensitive issues

Ever since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, along religious lines, Hindu-Muslim relations has been a very sensitive issue in India. Although Hindus and Muslims had co-existed quite peacefully for centuries in India prior to British rule, the British policy of divide and rule, coupled with the Muslim leaders' personal ambitions and their fear of majority rule in a democratic and independent India, sowed the seeds of Hindu-Muslim conflict. Hindu-Muslim riots have often broken out in areas which have a mixed population, and at the slightest provocation. Muslims are the largest minority group in India. Their number exceeds 100 million, and they constitute about 12 per cent of the total population. However, the Indian government has never discriminated against them.

The Constitution of India, which declares that India is a secular state, makes adequate provisions for the protection of the right of minorities. The fundamental rights granted to Indian citizens by the constitution include the right to equality, the right to freedom of religion, and cultural and educational rights. Article 14 of the constitution guarantees equality of all persons before the law. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, as between citizens. Article 25 says that all persons shall be entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to practise and propagate their religion freely. And Article 20 allows all the minorities in India to preserve and promote their language, script and culture. It is indeed remarkable that India, 80 per cent of whose population is Hindu, has not been made a Hindu state.

Reflected ideals

Leaders of the Indian freedom struggle, such as Mahatma Gandhi, had never envisaged a Hindu India, but rather a secular state in which people of all religions would live in harmony. The constitution of India reflects their ideals. However, Hindu chauvinists and fundamentalists have often misunderstood or misconstrued their good intentions. Mahatma Gandhi was himself killed by a Hindu fanatic. In



P.V. Narasimha Rao, the Indian Prime Minister

the days following the Ayodhya incident, the Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, cautioned that India will disintegrate 'if we leave the path of secularism' and that 'being Indian should be equated with being . . . secular.'[3]

The Ayodhya incident has prompted the Indian people to take a fresh look at the BJP and assess anew its role in Indian politics. The BJP's popularity has been increasing over the years, and it fared extremely well at the last general elections held in India, in 1991. Its support base consists mainly of the wealthy trading class and upper caste Hindus, but it has also succeeded in wooing to its fold a section of the middle-class intelligentsia. The Ayodhya incident has cost it some of the good will its supporters had for it, and the manhandling of journalists by the *kar sevaks* has certainly lost it the good will of the media.

Unfortunate incident

Although Advani, the leader of the BJP, has described the Ayodhya incident as 'unfortunate', he has also tried to defend the *kar sevaks*, who he said had become 'exasperated by the tardiness of the judicial process and the obtuseness and myopia of the executive.' He has expressed the opinion that the country has overreacted to the demolition of 'an old structure, which ceased to be a mosque over fifty years ago', and has pointed out that more than 50 Hindu temples have been destroyed in Kashmir and 200,000 Hindu Kashmiris have been displaced without provoking similar outrage in India.[4]

What he has omitted to say, however, is that it was his political party and the Hindu fundamentalist organisations, and not the Indian government or anyone else, which had turned the Ayodhya dispute into a major national issue. It is difficult to say, at this point, whether Advani genuinely supports the actions of the *kar sevaks*, or simply does not want to admit that his party lost control over a section of its followers and that the strategy it had adopted for gaining political power had backfired.

Ideal ruler

Incidentally, Lord Rama, the legendary Hindu king, who is believed to be an incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu, is portrayed as being just and benevolent, the ideal ruler, who sought above all else the well-being of his subjects, and in whose kingdom there was always peace and prosperity. The behaviour of his devotees who stormed the mosque and of those who instigated them is the antithesis of everything Lord Rama stands for. Echoing the sentiments of many Hindus, the editorial of a leading newspaper in India, *The Statesman*, has pointed out that Lord Rama's name has been 'shamelessly misused' and that he is 'unlikely to allow himself to be worshipped in a temple founded on deceit and duplicity'.[5] A survey conducted in five major Indian cities revealed that more than 70 per cent of the people disapproved of the demolition of the mosque. Saner elements in India argue that even if the contention of the Hindu fundamentalists, that the Babri Masjid was built after tearing down a temple which marked the exact spot where Rama was born, is true, it is still no excuse for destroying a place of worship. Ideally, the temple should have been built without damaging the mosque.

There is no doubt about the fact that Lord Rama's name is being exploited for political purposes and that the Ayodhya dispute is a case of politicisation of religion. It is yet to be seen how this issue will be resolved. Whether banning the Hindu fundamentalist organisations, arresting the BJP leaders, and dismissing the BJP state governments is the answer to the problem, only time will tell. That neither the BJP nor the Hindu fundamentalists are ready to accept defeat on this issue is quite obvious. The BJP has already warned the central government not to rebuild the mosque in the vicinity of the proposed temple. The Prime Minister has promised a white paper on Ayodhya soon, but the dispute is likely to drag on for a long time yet.

NOTES

1. 'RSS, Jamaat, Bajrang Dal, VP banned or 2 years', *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), 11 Dec 1992, p.l.
2. 'OIC appeals for restraint', *The Statesman* (Calcutta), 10 Dec 1992, p.12.
3. Narasimha Rao's interview with Dileep Padgaonkar, Editor, *Times of India*, telecast by Doordarshan on 10 Dec 1992 at 9 pm.
4. 'Not all the ambiguity can mask Advani's message', *The Statesman*, 12 Dec 1992, p.l.
5. 'Let History Judge', ibid., 8 Dec 1992, p.8.