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Rituals between Religion and Politics

The Case of VHP's 2001–2002 Ayodhya-campaign

The present paper deals with rituals in a political discourse, namely the rituals employed by the right wing, Hindu nationalist movement, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (hereafter VHP), in its campaign for a Rama temple in the north Indian town of Ayodhya. As is probably well-known, VHP is part of a group of organizations known as the Sangh Parivar, or *sangh*¹ family, which also includes the presently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (hereafter BJP), and the ultra-nationalistic organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS.

The sources used are different from those ordinarily used within studies of the history of religions, namely running coverage in Indian newspapers combined with the web pages of the organizations concerned, especially VHP. Considering the fact that a large part of the discourse about the rituals dealt with actually takes place in the media, these sources are, of course, unavoidable.²

There is nothing new in pointing to the importance of rituals in the campaigns of VHP. From the point of view of an “inclusive operational definition of ritual that does not separate religious ‘ritual’, as addressing postulated beings, from secular ceremony”, Jan Plaetvoet (1995) has in a very general way dealt with VHP’s use of “rituals of confrontation” in its Ayodhya campaign. Although he notes some of the characteristics of these rituals, such as their simultaneously unifying and divisive intentions, the weakness of his approach is its general aim, namely to show the usefulness of his very broad ritual definition. Thus, on the whole, we do not obtain a closer understanding of the specific religio-political character of these rituals.

1 Except when using them as scholarly concepts, I quote Indian words and names without diacritics and in the form they are presented by my sources.

2 All references in this paper are to the Internet editions of Indian newspapers. The bulk of my references are to *Rediff.com*'s news page. In these cases, I quote only the dates of the report. Wherever I quote other newspapers, I refer to them by the following abbreviations: IE (*Indian Express*) and TOI (*Times of India*).

Of more use are both Peter Van der Veer (1994: 119–28) and Richard H. Davis (1996), who both have pointed to the importance of the concept of pilgrimage (*tīthayātrā*) and religious symbolism in VHP's success in mobilizing Hindus. Van der Veer took as his example the so-called *ekātmātāyajña* (or "sacrifice for unity") in 1983 in which by way of three major pan-Indian processions, from Kathmandu in the north to Rameshvaram in the south, from Haridvar in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, and from Gangasagar in the east to Somnath in the west, and 47 lesser subsidiary ones, they sought to underscore the Hindu unity of India, reaching out to an estimated 60 million Indians. A major unifying symbol in this campaign was the Ganges, whose water in each of the greater processions were transported around and united with waters from the local rivers, thus symbolizing the unity of India. Another symbol was Bharat Mātā, or Mother India, conceived as a deity, whose image was carried along in each of the processions.

Davis dealt primarily with the crucial Rath yatra in 1990 from Somnath in Western India to Ayodhya, an important element in the Ayodhya campaign, showing how it was "dominated by religious imagery – from the primary terms of the procession, through the ritual idiom of pilgrimage, sacrifice, and initiation, to the devotional responses toward Rāma's chariot" (Davis 1996: 51).

From a more political angle, Neera Chandhoke (2000), in a comparatively recent survey article about the Ayodhya campaign, has a very useful characterization of the VHP-rituals when she says that the history of India since the mid-1980s, when the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation was initiated, has been marked by "a cynical abuse of the religious idiom" and also characterizes parts of the campaign as "politics as theatre, replete with symbolism and suffused with ritualism".

Although the use of the pilgrimage idiom is also found in the events which I am about to describe, I shall mainly focus on another overall ritual idiom which has been effectively used by VHP in its Ayodhya campaign, namely the set of rites employed in connection with the building and construction of houses and temples.

The Ayodhya conflict: A brief history

As I presume that most readers are familiar with the main features of the Ayodhya conflict, I shall here only present the most necessary facts.³ The Ayodhya conflict is about the right to a piece of land in the small town of Ayodhya in northern Uttar Pradesh, on which, from 1528 and until Decem-

3 For fuller introductions, see e.g. Van der Veer 1994: 1–12; Platvoet 1995; Nandy *et al.* 1995: 1–55.

ber 6, 1992, there stood a mosque built by one of the generals of the first Mogul emperor, Babar, and known under the name the Babri Masjid, or Babar Mosque. According to Hindu mythology, Ayodhya was the birthplace of the Hindu hero, or god, Rāma, and, in the opinion of some Hindus, the Babri Masjid was built on the spot of a former temple commemorating the birth of Rāma.

Exactly how old the conflict about the Babri Masjid may be is difficult to say. However, it seems to go back at least to the period of the British annexation in 1856 (Van der Veer 1994: 2). After being dormant for almost a century, the conflict was reawakened after independence when, in December 1949, an image of Rāma was placed inside the mosque by a group of young Hindus. This image has been allowed to remain since then, while since 1950, several lawsuits about the right to the image, to its worship, as well as to the mosque itself, have been going on in the Allahabad High Court.

In 1984, however, the conflict changed from a local to a national one. Instrumental in this change was the Hindu nationalist organisation, the VHP, which had been formed in 1964 with the aim of uniting and strengthening the Hindus who, they thought, had earlier been divided into many different sects and casts.

In 1984, VHP launched a campaign for the construction of a temple of Rāma on the Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya. The initiative became known as the Ramjanmabhumi-campaign, meaning "the campaign for the birthplace of Ram". In October of the same year they staged a procession from Sitamarhi, "the birthplace of Sitā", Rāma's wife, to Ayodhya, where an oath-taking ceremony took place (*India Today* 25.3.2002: 28). After this, the procession moved on to the state capital, Lucknow, and further on to Delhi in order to obtain political support.

In 1986 one of the earlier mentioned law suits at the court in Faizabad was finished, allowing the Hindus to worship the images installed in the Babri Masjid in 1949. Although VHP was not a party in the case, they celebrated the decision as a victory and formed a committee to organize future actions in connection with the Babri Masjid question (*India Today* 25.3.2002: 28).

VHP's use of building rituals

The use of building rituals in the campaign for a Rāma temple in Ayodhya seems to have been conceived in connection with the Kumbha Mela festival in Allahabad in 1989.⁴ Here it was decided to perform the ritual of

4 The following information has been culled from the article "Sri Ram Shila Pooja Plan" of the official website of VHP (<http://www.vhp.org>); cf. e.g. Chandhoke 2000.

laying the foundation stone (*shilanyas*) of the proposed Rāma temple at Rāma's birthplace (*ramjanmabhumi*) later that year on November 9th. In this connection, it was also decided to launch a large country-wide programme of collecting and consecrating stones for the Rama temple from all over India and from Hindus abroad. For this purpose, the whole of India was divided into smaller units of about 2,000 people, and during September and October worship of stones (*shila puja*) was performed in 297,705 places all over India. From all these places, the stones were brought to 4,251 greater so-called divisional centres where great sacrifices (*mahayagya*) of 3–5 days took place. Finally, from these centres the consecrated stones were transported in chariots (*raths*) to Ayodhya, where the foundation ritual was allowed to take place on the disputed site by the Rajiv Gandhi government that by this move apparently wished to win some votes on the popular Rama theme.

The symbolism of this campaign is, of course, clear, namely to let the whole of India, even the most remote villages, contribute to the building of the Rāma temple. The same motive is also clear from the parallel running collection of funds for the project. Here VHP declares that in Bharat (i.e. India) "there are many individual donors who can undertake to finance the entire construction of the proposed grand temple. Since the temple is to be constructed at the birthplace of Shri Ram, every Hindu would like to participate because of his great devotion to the Lord. Bearing this popular urge in mind, it was decided to fix offering norms of Rs 1.25, Rs. 5 – and Rs. 10 per head, per small and large family respectively." Thus, the idea clearly seems to be that the whole Hindu nation should contribute to the financing of the temple, and, we may add, thus acquire a share of the merit. The other side to this is, of course, that VHP and the Ram Janmabhumi Nyas (hereafter RJN), with whom the 82.931.000 rupees collected are posited, may declare themselves as representatives of the Hindu nation. Furthermore, we notice that, as in the case of the Ekātmatāyajña, the basic idea behind the project of temple construction is the idea of Hindu unity, only the flow of sacredness and resources goes in the opposite direction. In the Ekātmatāyajña the flow was from a sacred centre (i.e. the Gaṅgā) to the periphery, whereas here it is from the periphery to the sacred centre in Ayodhya.

From the point of view of VHP, an advantage of this concept is that it provides a frame of reference for a series of repeated campaigns to pressurize the authorities into allowing a Rama temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya. The fact that rituals are traditionally involved in several of the practical preparations of a Hindu temple, leaves VHP with many possibilities for stopping and reopening its campaign, which has been characterized from the very beginning by threats and aggression. Thus, in 1989 the campaign started with the preparation and consecration of the stones for

the temple and ended with the laying of the foundation stone at the disputed site. Since then, the production of carved stone pillars has been going on in VHP workshops in Ayodhya and Gujarat, thus helping to keep the campaign rolling. Since the *garbha griha*, or *sanctum sanctorum*, of the proposed temple was actually situated within the Babri Masjid (Sachar 2002), the removal of this became a necessity for the continuation of the construction process. This was the background of the *Rath yatra* in 1990 which was unsuccessful in the sense that Advani was arrested and VHP was not allowed to pull down the masjid. As is well known, however, they succeeded in doing this in December 1992, when a mob of more than 100,000 supporters broke through the police lines around the masjid.

The 2001–2002 campaign

In the remaining part of this paper, I shall deal with the most recent developments in the conflict which took place during the first three months of this year, and amply illustrate the theatrical and political nature of VHP's campaign as well as the focal role which rituals always seem to play.⁵

The campaign began on the 20th January 2001 during the Kumbha Mela in Allahabad where the so-called Dharma Sansad, or Dharma Board, of VHP decided to reopen the campaign for a new Rama temple and set the 12th March 2002 as the *terminus ante quem* for the removal of all obstacles towards the building of the Rama temple. The declared purpose of this deadline was to give the Central Government time to make the necessary decisions. The main obstacle to the building of the temple would seem to be the fact that the Supreme Court in 1993 had decided to put an area of 67 acres around the Babri Masjid, also called the undisputed or acquired land, under the protection of the Central Government.⁶ For the building of a temple to take place, VHP demanded the restitution of this area, along with the so-called disputed land, i.e. the land on which the remains of the Babri Masjid were lying.

Politically, this move was no doubt an attempt to put pressure on the BJP-led central government, which, however, was bound both by the previously mentioned Supreme Court judgement to maintain the *status quo* in both the disputed and undisputed areas, until the question of the ownership of the disputed land had been settled, as well as by the fact that its coalition

5 The theatrical and dramatic character of these events is so explicit that, at one stage of the preparation of this paper, I thought of calling it "drama of ritual" and dealing with the events like a play with a list of *dramatis personae* etc.; cf. also Chandhoke 2000.

6 Out of these 67 acres, VHP had leased 42 acres from the State of Uttar Pradesh in March 1992.

partners and the opposition were against the building of a Rama temple on the disputed land. As might be expected, no substantial initiatives were taken on the part of the government, and on the 10th September, VHP further stepped up its campaign when its vice-president, Acharya Giriraj Kishore, told the press that they would in fact start the construction of the temple any time after 12th March 2002. Twenty thousand volunteers would daily for two months camp in Ayodhya and help in the construction, after which it would be finished. As a means of nation-wide mobilization, he also announced a major festival of recital of the name of Rama (*Sri Rama Japa Yagya*) which would take place from 18th October to 18th January.

As a further provocation, on 17th October some leaders of VHP, including the president, Ashok Singhal, and the international general secretary, Praveen Bhai Togadia, along with a couple of hundred Hindu activists, illegally forced their way into the makeshift temple in Ayodhya.

The next major occurrence in the drama was the so-called "Holy men's warning march" (*Sant chetavani yatra*), a motorized procession from Ayodhya to Delhi, starting on the 21st of January and reaching Delhi on the 26th. The procession was led by VHP-president Ashok Singhal, followed by about 3,000 sadhus and VHP-supporters in various vehicles. At the centre of the procession was an open truck on which a makeshift Rama temple had been constructed, guarded by a man dressed up as Lord Hanuman, Rama's loyal helper and servant. According to VHP's international secretary general, Pravin Bhai Togadia, the *yatra* was "aimed at expressing the legitimate demand of Hindus that the Government hands over the entire land to Ram Janam Bhoomi Nyas (trust) to facilitate the construction of the temple at the earliest". Togadia also clearly threatened the government in the matter saying: "We cannot wait beyond a point. Now, it will be a fight to finish" (21.1.2002). Passing through Lucknow, Kanpur, Etawah, and Aligarh, the procession reached Delhi on 26th January. On the 27th, a delegation from VHP met with the prime minister and demanded the land for the construction of the temple. As could be expected, Vajpayee did not yield to the demands of VHP, but instead promised to find out whether the court case relating to the disputed land could be expedited, and to let his law minister have a look at the legal aspects of handing over the undisputed land to the RJN.

On 30th January, a compromise formula between the BJP and VHP was announced. VHP was to drop its deadline for building a temple while the government, on its part, would ensure expedition of the high court case in progress. On February 7th, the Union Law ministry turned down the claims of VHP and RJN on the 67 acres of undisputed land. According to the ministry, the RJN "forfeited its legal claim on the land after it was acquired by the government". This was a serious drawback for VHP who, on 10th February reacted by reiterating its original stand of beginning temple con-

struction on 15th March by transferring the carved stone pillars (*shilas*) from their workshop in Ayodhya to the site of the shrine.⁷

On February 24th, VHP further escalated its pressure on the government by initiating a 100-day ritual of reciting the name of Rama, attracting thousands of "devotees" or so-called *karsevaks* to its camp in Ayodhya. This ritual was called *Purnahuti yagna* and was, according to VHP, to be seen as a "prelude to the commencement of construction of the Ram temple at the disputed site" (26.2.2002). Strategically, the ritual both gave VHP a longer deadline for putting pressure on the authorities, as well as an ongoing activity to attract its supporters and thus demonstrate its sympathy among the Hindu population. The response of the government was to increase the presence of security forces in Ayodhya by sending an extra 2,000 people from the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force to Ayodhya (25.2.2002), as well as taking measures to prevent the arrival of new VHP-supporters by asking the Uttar Pradesh government to stop group reservations for trains stopping at the nearby Faizabad station. Finally, they also decided to ban all movement of stone pillars and other building materials within Ayodhya town.

Then on February 27th there occurred the awful tragedy in Godhra in Gujarat, where about 57 *karsevaks* returning from Ayodhya were killed by arson. This probably put things into perspective, and already on the 28th the UP chief minister, Rajnath Singh, ordered all *karsevaks* to be flushed out of Ayodhya. On the 28th, RSS agreed to mediate between VHP and the government, and on March 1st VHP announced its willingness to postpone its temple construction plan against a written assurance either from the government or RSS that worshipping of pillars would be allowed on the acquired land within three months. Instead of giving such a guarantee, the authorities chose to tighten security measures by sending 100 extra companies of paramilitary forces, locking up the gates of the VHP workshop in Ayodhya, and cancelling trains connecting with Faizabad. As a result, VHP on March 3rd again shifted its position, saying that it would "go ahead with its plan to shift the carved stones to the Ramjanmabhoomi site at Ayodhya on March 15" (Singhal). In the following days both VHP's international secretary general Mr Togadia and vice-president Kishore told the press that they would go ahead with the plan of shifting the stone pillars to the undisputed land on 15th March. According to one report (TOI 5.3.2002), Kishore said that "the shila puja yagna would begin on March 15th, and that within 100 days, construction of the Ram temple on the undisputed land would begin".

However, on 4th March a new and interesting development took place. The so-called Shankaracharya of Kamakoti Peetham in Kanchi, South In-

7 Cf. interview with Togadia (13.2.2002), and interview with Paramhans (14.2.2002).

dia, Jayendra Saraswati, stepped in as mediator in the conflict, presumably on the initiative of the government (Prasannarajan 2002). He held talks with several parties in the conflict, representatives of the government, VHP, All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), the All India Imams Organisation, and others. The Shankaracharya came up with a proposal according to which VHP should accept the court decision regarding the disputed area. In return they would be allowed to transport the carved stones to the undisputed area and perform, what he called, a *bhumi puja*, and after June 2nd, they would have their 43 acres returned, after which they could start constructing the temple. This solution was, however, very sympathetic towards the claims of VHP, giving them the opportunity to build their Rama temple just close to the demolished masjid, in return for a promise to accept the rule of the court. On the 10th the AIMPLB rejected the Kanchi acharya's formula.

In the meantime, the Supreme Court on March 8th had fixed the 13th for hearing two petitions regarding the Ayodhya dispute, one seeking army deployment in Ayodhya and seizure of the stones laying at Karsevakpuram, the other concerning contempt of court proceedings against the VHP leadership. This naturally had an effect on VHP's plans to move the stone pillars to the temple site and a related ritual, whatever its name and objective. On March 11th we see representatives of the Sangh Parivar on retreat. Had Vajpayee hoped for a negotiated solution allowing a start of the temple construction, he now had to wait for, and accept, the ruling of the court in the matter. Thus a representative of the home ministry told the press that puja of the stones had already begun in the VHP-workshop, and if the court went against them, it was likely that they would take "just one stone to the *puja* site and consecrate it" (11.3.2002). A more radical attitude was taken by the potential main ritual agent, the president of the RJN, Ramchandra Paramhans, who in several interviews with the press said that he would not accept a court decision if it went against temple construction, and also ridiculed the idea of a symbolic puja, and said he would not take part in it. In an interview with *rediff.com*, he said that he would now donate the *shilas* at the Ramjanmabhoomi site on March 15th and take a receipt from the receiver, after which it would be their responsibility to protect the stones (11.3.2002; cf. also TOI and IE). In a joint statement by VHP and RJN on 12th March, it was stated that Paramhans would lead around 2,000 people to the undisputed land and offer one *shila* to the government against a proper receipt.

On the 13th March, the Supreme Court, with reference to the so-called undisputed land in government custody, ruled that "no religious activity of any kind by anyone, either symbolic or actual, including *bhumi puja* or *shila puja*, shall be permitted or allowed to take place" (TOI 13.3.2002). Afterwards, it turned out that in fact the Attorney General, Soli Sorabjee, who

is himself a Parsi, on the part of the central government had argued in favour of allowing a "symbolic" *puja* on the disputed site, something for which both he and the government were much criticized by the opposition and its coalition partners. It thus looked very much like a defeat for both the Vajpayee government and VHP.

Under pressure from coalition partners and opposition, Vajpayee on 14th March assured the Lok Sabha (Lower House) that the government would implement the Supreme Court order in "letter and spirit". In the afternoon, the president of the RJN, Ramchandra Paramhans, made a last attempt to put pressure on the government, telling the Indian press that he would end his life the next day if he were not allowed to leave the VHP workshop in order to donate a *shila*. As a devout Hindu, offering prayers was his birthright and by offering a *shila* he was not offending the Supreme Court directive for maintaining the *status quo* on the acquired land. Paramhans' threat seems to have been taken seriously by many important persons. Thus, he was visited in the evening by the titular king of Awadh, Pratap Mishra, and had phone calls from home minister Advani, Vajpayee and other ministers. Negotiations were going on and the possibility of letting a small group perform a prayer the next day in the make shift temple appeared.

To judge from the description of the events on the 15th in the news magazine *Frontline* (Muralidharan 2002), Paramhans, although seemingly a little unbalanced and unpredictable, was the absolutely central person with regard to performing the rituals. Whether the whole thing would end peacefully or with violence and arrests was seemingly in his hands and dependent on his whims. Up to the last moment, he kept everyone, including the few hundred VHP-supporters who had managed to pass the police lines, in uncertainty as to what his plans were. It seems that he had an agreement with the administration to hand over a *shila* to them. The only question was where.⁸ All the time, he and other VHP-leaders had insisted that it be done at the site of *shila-dan*, i.e. on the disputed land, but the district administration correctly insisted that this would be a violation of the Supreme Court decision. Furthermore, as he was not on good terms with the Divisional Commissioner of Faizabad, Anil Kumar Gupta, the central government had to fly in from Delhi Mr Shatrughan Singh, an officer of Vajpayee's Ayodhya office. The whole thing ended peacefully, however, as Paramhans, when he and his followers passed by his Math, or monastery, which is just outside the disputed area, suddenly got the "inspiration" to perform the pillar donation there, after which he and the more

8 This was, of course, a highly charged move, since it symbolically transferred the responsibility and agency of building the Rama temple from Paramhans and RJN to the government.

important among his followers were allowed, in small groups, to pay their respects to Rama in the make-shift temple.

Analysis

Even though one could, of course, have gone into much more detail, I have described the recent events in and around Ayodhya at some length, because, I think, it is important to get a sense of how ritual, as applied by VHP, is imbedded in a political context. The events described also clearly have a dramatic or theatrical character (cf. Chandhoke 2000). They follow a more or less fixed scheme by which VHP puts pressure on the government and authorities representing the secular constitutional system. This scheme had been developed by VHP ever since its 1989-campaign, included issuing demands, deadlines, and threats, and was accompanied by mass mobilization of supporters, most of whom are young men recruited by the militant VHP youth-organisation, Bajrang Dal. The present episode in the Ayodhya-conflict naturally drew extra public attention in the light of the 1992 events when the masjid was actually destroyed. Furthermore, the fact that the government in charge this time was led by the Hindu nationalist BJP, who themselves had come into power on the Ayodhya issue, made the outcome much more insecure, and, in fact, it seems that at some points in the events, e.g. the negotiations by the Kanchi Shankaracharya, the government did try to influence matters to the advantage of VHP.

From an overall point of view, the campaigning of VHP may, of course, be characterized as a confrontation between religious sentiments, represented by VHP, who claim to represent the feelings of Hindus as such, and the secular state, involving both the government and the judiciary, which is responsible for taking care of both secular and minority interests. VHP is, however, overstating this conflict when they argue that their rights to perform worship and prayer are being subdued. The state is not prohibiting Hindus from praying, it is only restricting them from performing their prayers in sacred areas belonging to adherents of another faith, *in casu*, the Muslims. Furthermore, one must not forget, that on the part of leading members of VHP there is also a good deal of politics involved. In the recent episode there is little doubt that the local elections to the UP parliament played a role in the timing of the campaign.

Now, let us turn our attention to the rituals employed by VHP in its latest campaign. It seems that they fall into three categories. First, we have the earlier mentioned pilgrimage (*yātrā*) type. To this type belongs the so-called *Sant Jethavani yatra* from Ayodhya to Delhi with its procession of sadhus and the transportation of a copy of the make-shift temple of Rama guarded by a man dressed up as Hanuman. However, it seems that this

yātrā had more the character of a political demonstration than VHP's earlier *yātrās*, starting, as it did, at a sacred place and ending at the secular seat of government.

Second, we have common Hindu rituals of worship, such as fire sacrifices (*yagnas* or *havans*) and mantra recitals. These rituals we met in connection with the preparations taking place in the VHP workshop in Ayodhya, as well as in the great 100-day recital of the name of Rama, performed from 18th October to 18th January, and in the 100-day *Purnahuti Yagna* started on 24th of February. In Hindu tradition, rituals such as these are a kind of adjustable component often included in the scheme of festivals or performed as a result of an individual vow.⁹ The same may be said of the way they are employed by VHP in its campaigns. Clearly they are a kind of tool-box from which the leaders pick when mobilising their cadres and putting pressure on the authorities. They are not always part of a fixed, greater scheme, but may be employed in improvisations during a campaign.

Third, we have the building rituals connected with the construction of the proposed Rama temple. It seems that they are of two kinds as evidenced by the original campaign in 1989. First of all, there are the rituals to consecrate the stones (*shilas*) manufactured and collected for the building project. These are termed *shila-puja*. Second, there are what in a broad sense could be called the foundation rituals. These consist of rituals of worshipping the earth and various deities, depositing various materials in a pit and the actual laying of the foundation stones. This group of rituals in modern practice goes under the name of *shila-nyas* and is generally based on the model of classical architecture (*śilpaśāstra*). This ritual was already performed at the climax of the 1989 campaign with the acceptance of prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. The only problem with this, as seen from the point of view of VHP, was the fact that it was performed on the undisputed land, and not at the place of the make-shift temple.

Judging from news reports, it is difficult to know whether the original intention of VHP was to perform a ritual, and if it was, which one. The original goal of the campaign seems to have been to try to force the government to hand over the land for the temple, either the disputed or the undisputed part, in order to continue the construction where it had stopped in 1989. Since, in the meantime, a lot of pillars for the temple had been carved in the workshops of VHP, it is quite probable that the ritual element considered by them may only have been some kind of consecration of the pillars. This idea first time crops up in connection with the RSS-led negotiations between VHP and the government on 28th February. One report

9 In this way they are similar to *pūjā* which is also an element of most Hindu festivals and ceremonies (Babb 1975: 31–67), only their "style" is more Vedic.

in this connection talks about a proposed *shila puja yagna* or stone/pillar worship sacrifice (TOI 5.3.2002). Interestingly, the term *bhumi puja* appears for the first time during the negotiations by the Kanchi Shankaracharya, as his name for the proposed ritual. This ritual consists in a worship of the Earth in the form of the goddess Śrī or Lakṣmī and is often a substitute for, or element in the earlier mentioned *shilanyas*-ritual. Why a high ranking religious leader like the Shankaracharya should introduce this ritual into the negotiations, is difficult to say. Naturally, one possibility is that he did not care to find out what exactly VHP proposed to perform and from his preconception concluded that it must have been *bhumi puja*. Another possibility is, of course, that he knew very well, but found it better to identify the rituals with the more common ritual of construction. Whatever the reason, henceforward all reports, and even the following Supreme Court decision, talked about the proposed ritual as *bhumi puja*, and VHP did nothing to correct this misconception (5.3.2002; TOI 8.3.2002). Only on 12th March did the leader of the Bajrang Dal, Mr Katiyar, correct this and say that there was not going to be a *bhumi puja*, but only a donation of pillars (IE 12.3.2002). But that was the day before the Supreme Court hearing, when VHP naturally wanted to scale down the matter. After the Supreme Court decision, VHP further scaled down the ambition of the proposed ritual, and in the end Ramchandra Paramhans no longer spoke of *puja*, but instead consistently used the expression *shila dan*, or the "gift of pillars", for the ritual to take place on March 15th.

If we compare VHP's use of rituals with the same rituals in a more traditional Hindu setting, it is obvious that they differ in several respects. First of all, the occasion and time for the performance is different. Whereas in the traditional context, the rituals are normally fixed according to the calendar or personal vows, the rituals we are dealing with here are much more flexible and fixed according to political considerations, and with regard to the overall Ayodhya campaign. Second, the motives for the performance are different. In the case of traditional Hindu rituals, they are normally personal, i.e. they are performed either out of duty or because of personal merit. In the case of VHP's rituals, there is no individual performer. The people acting consider themselves, rightly or wrongly, as acting on part of a greater personality, namely the Hindu majority or Hindu nation,¹⁰ and their motives are partly religious and partly political. Furthermore, whereas in the case of traditional rituals, the motive may either be material or soteriological, in the VHP case the rituals mainly serve as a means of propaganda and recruitment, as well as to mark the participants off against

10 According to representatives of the local religious institutions, this has consequences for the legitimacy of VHP. Since VHP has no part (*locus standi*) in the running law suits, they question their motives for running the campaign; cf. Muralidharan 2002.

the secular authorities and adherents of Islam, and other non-Indian religions.

Typically, the VHP-rituals are used as occasions for fixing future deadlines in order to put pressure on the secular authorities. The fact that the rituals are normally placed in the future, of course, contributes to their often flexible character. This is clearly attested to in the case of the proposed ritual dealt with in this paper. Here we saw that the exact name and character of the ritual was not the important thing. It shifted from consecration of pillars (*shila puja*), over *bhumi puja*, to end with the donation of a pillar (*shila dan*). The main thing was apparently to maintain the threat and the anxiety with regard to what was going to take place. In a sense, one could also say that what we are dealing with here is an example of a ritual which is being negotiated in public space. What exactly it is is not as important as the fact that the discourse is going on.

If, finally, we look at the question of the efficacy of these rituals, it follows from the difference in motives that their efficacy is not so much to be found in material or soteriological results, but more in their ability to create political and popular attention, intimidation, and sometimes even violence. In this sense they must surely be judged to be very efficient. With regard to the building rituals, their success, of course, will have to be judged also on whether or not a temple is actually built.

In this connection it is, furthermore, interesting that the material suggests that in some respects the representatives of the secular political system and the judiciary seem to be more convinced of the efficacy of the building rituals involved than the VHP-leaders. E.g. VHP, the Kanchi Shankaracharya, and the Attorney General argued in favour of accepting a "symbolic *bhumi puja*", on the undisputed land, whereas members of the opposition, the governments coalition partners, and the Supreme Court would not accept any ritual, "symbolic or actual", to quote from the Supreme Court decision. Although it is more than possible that VHP is speaking against better knowledge,¹¹ these politicians and judges are, of course, right in the sense that as building rituals these rituals create a precedence and in a way may be said to establish the claims of VHP to the contested land, disputed or undisputed.

Conclusion

To sum up, the rituals dealt with in this paper are rituals between religion and politics. They are certainly not political rituals in the sense given by Catherine Bell, i.e. they are not rituals "which are used to construct, display

11 This seems also to be testified by Ramchandra Paramhans who declared that he would have nothing to do with a symbolic ritual (11.3.2002).

and promote the power of political institutions" (Bell 1997: 128). They may be said to share contextual features with the rituals of countercultural and antimodern movements dealt with at the end of her paragraph about political rituals. Thus, the rituals of VHP are also instruments of the construction of an ideal Hindu society and part of an encounter between Hindu-nationalist tenets and the secular, political establishment. However, the rituals employed by VHP can not be said to represent a separate ritual genre, since they are not different from similar, traditional Hindu rituals. What makes them different is their context and their motives, the fact that they do not serve ordinary material, eschatological, or soteriological aims, but rather political aims, as well as the fact that the ritual agents in this case do not seem to have a satisfactory juridical legitimacy to perform the rituals.

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