

History and the Politics of Hindutva

jeudi 6 décembre 2007, par [MARIK Soma](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : février 1993).

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Within a short while after the destruction of the Babri Masjid on 6th December 1992, Lal Krishna Advani boldly announced that on 6th December, a “national shame” had been abolished. The extremist fundamentalists are all agreed that by overthrowing a hundreds of years old symbol of “foreign chains”, India’s ‘Hindutva’ has today regained its lost prestige. Behind this utterance is an entire complex of claims – that in India there is an integral ‘Hindu’ race or nation, whose greatness, supremacy and novel tolerance required no proof ; but whose tolerance has been abused by Muslim “rulers”, who have kept the Hindus subjugated for ages ; that the chief and most offensive symbol of this Muslim domination was the destruction of the temple at Lord Rama’s birthplace and the creation of a mosque in its place. So what happened on 6th December, far from being the work of a party, was allegedly the spontaneous and united action of Hindus to take historic revenge for the accumulated insult of their ages long subjugation. So truly the struggle to liberate the Ram Janmabhoomi, is an indispensable aspect of the total struggle to unify the Hindu nation or to re-establish their national self-respect.

In order to buttress this claim, the BJP-RSS-VHP and other communalists’ bloc claims that history is on their side. According to them, the Babri Masjid was constructed exactly where Rama was born. At the end of the treta age, we are told, Ayodhya was lost. But later on, the emperor Vikramaditya learnt from Prayag, the king of the holy places (teertharaj) that Rama’s birthplace was close to the Sarayu river, (itself so holy that even Prayag bathed in it so that he could be cleansed), in Ayodhya. Though he lost this holy place, Vikramaditya found it again with the help of a yogi in a miraculous way. There he built a beautiful Rama temple with 84 pillars. Thereafter, during the tyrannical rule of Babar, (a form of rule wherein he was not distinguished from any other Muslim ruler), by his own orders, in 1528 A.D., his general Mir Baki smashed up the temple and sowed the temerity of building a mosque on that very spot. From that very period, Hindus have fought valiantly to rescue this sacred place. For example, there were twenty attempts to liberate the Jamasthan during the reign of Akbar. Vijay Raje Scindia wrote in the *Organiser* (6th July, 1986), that hundreds of thousands of Hindus have fought and died for the Rama Janmabhoomi for centuries. But it proved impossible to ‘liberate’ Rama Janmabhoomi even at the end of the British rule. And so, on the night of 22-23 December 1949, Ram Lalla appeared in his own place in order to remind Hindu society of its sacred national task.

To firmly establish this long tale, a number of popular “histories” have been written, like *Ram Janmabhoomi Ka Rakta Ranjit Itihas* by Ramgopal Pandey, or *Ayodhya ka Prachin Itihas* by Acharya Gunduji Sharma. Initially, the emphasis was on the historicity of Ayodhya and of the spurious Ram temple. But in an influential pamphlet circulated by the VHP and written by Justice Deoki Nandan, the secretary of the Sri Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yajna Samiti, the author comments that there can be no dispute over the existence of an ancient Ram temple in Ayodhya. It is an historical truth beyond controversies. Such a comment, and a repeated emphasis on “true” history, shows that these

fundamentalists are not really concerned about authentic history. [1]

History is certainly factual. But that is why it has no space for axiomatic conclusions. All conclusions of history are subject to verification. They have to be measured in the yardstick of facts. And that is why, history needs no special adjective like “true”, unless the use of such of terms is a deliberate attempt to pass off falsehoods.

The “true” history of the makers of the “Hindutva” ideology must therefore be checked against facts. To start with, it is necessary to say that Sri Ramchandra, who is being put forward as India’s ‘*rashtrapurush*’, was in no way an historic character. He does not even have an analogue in history. Ram is the hero of an epic. A speciality of the epic Ramayana is the multiplicity of versions, both in India and outside India. The Ram Katha is the sum of a number of tales, which different poets have used in different ways in accordance with their views. The Valmiki Ramayana was neither the only version, nor a sacred text.

Ram’s transition from an imaginary hero of a fictitious epic to an incarnation of Vishnu came about in the Gupta age, during the reassertion of Brahmanical power, when the epics were given a written form in place of the oral tradition of the past. There was thus a definite political motivation behind the privileging of one of the variants as the only truthful tale instead of acknowledging the multiple versions. Besides this, the real link between Ramayana and history was snapped. Instead of Ramayana as a creation of history, it seemed as though history is guided by Ram and Ramayana.

Neither archaeological nor literary sources actually provide any link between the present day Ayodhya and the Ayodhya of the treta age. The excavations of B.B. Lal and A.K. Narain (done independently) show that the oldest layer of the present Ayodhya does not go back further than the 7th Century B. C. And if we are to take the myth as history, the treta age was thousands of years in the past – way beyond 7th Century B.C. Moreover, the earliest settlements in Ayodhya bear no resemblance to the highly developed urban centre described by Valmiki. Urbanisation did not begin here before the 5th century. And even then, it was not the kind of urban centre that Valmiki depicts. In the list of dynastic names of this place, we find neither Ram nor Dasarath.

The geographical location and the history of the place called Ayodhya is very close to the ancient Buddhist centre of education, Saket near the Sarayu. The Chinese travellers Fa Hien and Hiuen Tsang refer to the place. It can be assumed that king Vikramaditya (by which is meant in this case probably the emperor Skanda Gpta) changed the name of the place in order to show his association with such a valorous hero and a Rajchakravartin (universal emperor) as Ram. Thus, the naming of Saketa as Ayodhya, too, was a political action in its day.

In Buddhist and Jain literature, Saketa / Ayodhya appears repeatedly as the centre of Buddhist and Jain religions, not as the nerve centre of a Rama cult. Thereafter one finds Saivite and particularly vaishnava religions, but till the growing influence of the Ramanandi community in the 18th Century A.D., Ayodhya had no tradition of Ram-worship or any cult of Ram. So, quite naturally, before this period one finds no reference to any Ram temple. No contemporary or near contemporary literary source admits such an event as Mir Baki’s “destruction” of a Ram temple and the construction of a mosque on that spot. Babar’s memoirs are silent on this. It is in the annotation by Beveridge, not in Babar’s own writings, where the claim about the alleged temple destruction is made. Nor do other writings of his or his successor’s period mention either the destruction of a temple, or the so-called inherent tendency of Muslims to smash up temples. Even Abdul Qadir Badauni, the very orthodox Islamic writer, who strongly disapproved of Akbar’s liberalism, has nothing to say about this act of Babar, which was surely one that, had it really been committed, should have gladdened him as an exemplary performance of duty. In the same period, Tulsidas was composing his Ramcharitmanas, the version that really popularised the Ramkatha in the Hindi belt. Had it been true that the

“barbarity” of the Muslim rulers, and specifically the act of Babar in destroying the Ram temple, had really shocked the Hindus of contemporary North India, one should have expected Tulsidas to rue the humiliation of his beloved Ram. It is gratifying that neither Advani nor Singhal has so far discovered any “unpublished works” of Tulsidas proving the destruction of the temple.

However, some professional archaeologists have joined the RSS-VHP bandwagon. They are all trying to prove that below the Babri Masjid, there are the ruins of a Ram temple constructed in the 11th Century. The name most strongly associated with this effort in the annals of Indian archaeology is that of B.B. Lal. Having done his actual work in 1975 – 80, Lal jumped into the fray only in 1990, when he wrote that as a result of his excavations, brick pillars had been found to the south of the masjid, at the top most layer, giving evidence of having been built in the 11th Century. Interestingly, this revelation by Lal appeared in an RSS journal, *Manthan*. From this, he concluded that a temple had indeed been destroyed in order to build a masjid.

Yet the same B.B. Lal, when he published his preliminary report on the Ayodhya excavations in the *Indian Archaeological Review* in 1976-77, disclosed that in the middle ages, between 11th and 16th Centuries, Ayodhya played no historically significant role. Just under the level of the masjid, that is, in the 13-15th Century layer, no specifically Hindu motifs are available. Rather, this layer had a thick deposit of Muslim Glazed Ware Pottery. The work under the guidance of A.K. Narain (1969-70) came to the same conclusion. The natural question is, why in that case did B.B. Lal keep silent for 15 years or so, even if he had obtained some new data after his preliminary report ? And if at all he had new historical facts why did he select, not an academic journal but an RSS propaganda sheet and that at a time when the mandir-masjid dispute was rapidly rising to a peak ? [2] So we can state emphatically that just as Kasalya’s labour room cannot be located in history, so can history not provide the directions to the Ram mandir. It never existed, and it can only be imagined with difficulty. Whatever existed, prior to the building of the Babri Masjid, it was not a temple, and no structure at all seems to have existed in period 13th-15th Centuries.

Defeat in the academic battlefield has led to the construction of “true history” on the ground of faith. Obviously, with faith in the authenticity of Ram, his birthplace and the existence of a temple prior to its destruction by Babar or his general, there can be no dispute based on mere reason.

The Origins of the Myth

If the story of Ram’s birthplace and a temple there is a pure fable, a lie, who raised it and why ? The origin seems to have been a follow up of a Hindu-Muslim conflict over the Hanumangarhi temple, which the local Muslims claimed was built over a mosque. This was proved to be untrue. But local Hindus, led by the mahant of Haumangarhi, raised a counter claim, in order to put the Muslims on the defensive, that the Babri Masjid had been built over a temple. At the same time, they forcibly occupied a part of the land surrounding the Masjid to build the Ram Chabutara.

This localised conflict was utilised by the British imperialists. Their initial aim was to prove the break down of law and order in states administered by Indians (since Ayodhya was part of the domain of the Nawab of Oudh). Later, they used the story of Babar’s supposed vandalism (e.g., by Colonel Sleeman) to stoke the embers of communal hatred. It was Sleeman who encouraged the beginning of Ram worship in the Chabutara. They did not stop here. In 1902 the district magistrate of Faizabad created a local committee whose task was to “identify” Hindu places of worship. It goes without saying that they put a sign in front of the Babri Masjid : ‘Ram Janmabhoomi : No.1’.

Local tradition was also turned into a redoubtable “fact of history” by the use of techniques of scholarship, in various writings from the history of the Faizabad tehsil to the translation of the

Baburnama. In the case of Beveridge, a mere “assumption” was granted the status of historical fact. According to her, Babar passed through Aodhya and since he was a Muslim, he must have been intolerant to other religions, and so it was perhaps natural for him to have built a masjid by destroying a temple. This is a note appended by Beveridge, not a part of Babar’s own text. The total illogical nature of the claim becomes a little more understandable if we look at it as part of the imperialist viewpoint, where the distortions of history had to serve the purpose of creating myths like the oppression of Hindus by Muslims etc., in order to create or accentuate Hindu-Muslim differences and to increase thereby the life span of the British empire.

Though our task here is not chiefly to focus on the role of the British, by showing their role, we have been able to establish the fact that the development of the mandir-masjid dispute, from a local conflict to a national issue, has been mediated by political motives. The “disputed structure” was an indisputable masjid till the fascist mob pulled it down on 6th December, 1992. Even after independence, it has been used as a mosque. Till a week or so prior to 22nd December, Muslims had prayed there. But then, by the morning of 23rd December, the idol was smuggled into the mosque. The mosque was promptly declared a “disputed structure” and by order of the district magistrate K.K. Nayar, the Hindus were allowed entry into the Chabutara for purposes of worship but the right of the Muslims to offer namaaz in the over 400 years old masjid was taken away. Nayar’s plea was certainly excellent. He wanted to maintain peace. Truly, appeasing Hindu communalists is the best way to keep peace. This also shows how much “Muslim appeasement” has been done by any government, for at that time the Chief Minister of U.P. was G.B. Pant and the Prime Minister was Jawaharlal Nehru.

For his valour, K.K. Nayar was later picked up by the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the direct predecessor of the BJP, to become one of its MPs. On the other hand, the role of the Congress is also evident. The communalisation of the situation in Ayodhya was of its creation. Shortly after the extremely bloody partition of the country, the Congress sought to use the Ram cult to heighten communal feelings and thereby to defeat the Socialist candidate, Acharya Narendra Dev, in a by-election in 1948. The Congress candidate Baba Raghavdas and his band of bairagis and mahants everywhere went on a spree of communal campaign to win the polls.

The Making of Hindutva

However, it was a long step from this sporadic use of Hindu sentiment for electoral purposes to the creation of a systematic Hindutva ideology. While in recent years the Ram Janmabhoomi myth has been central to this creation, it is part of a wider project. In about 5000 schools controlled by the RSS, a new history is taught. Ancient India is being shown as an age of uninterrupted progress in the sciences and arts, in intellectual activities, etc. The Hindu glory of the Aryans and its revival in the Gupta age is supposed to be at its roots. The Aryans are turned into indigenous people, and the Harappa civilisation credited to them. So great was this glory of Hindutva, that we are expected to forget varna and jati based discriminations and oppression, the subordinate status of women etc., not to speak of the class domination of the land owning rulers. Moreover, the actual course of history shows the rise of religions of protest, of the absorption of Greeks, Sakas and others in defiance of a strict definition of the caste system. If casteism is supposed to have acted as a force of integration, as M.S. Golwalkar once claimed in his Bunch of Thoughts, if ancient India was free of social conflicts, why did Asoka find it necessary to preach the virtues of toleration ? Does one preach peace to peace lovers ?

All this required some amount of critical thinking, which is the last thing that the RSS wants. So the creation of heroes takes a standard pattern, and so does the parallel demonology. The “greatness” of

the “Hindu age” was supposedly followed by the dark ages as soon as the Muslims came to India, as “murderers”, “forces of destruction”, “plunderers”, and the like. The history of the medieval states shows that the rulers looked after the interests of the ruling class and the state. During the Mughal period, Rajputs, Marathas, Sikhs, Jats, clashed with the Mughals primarily due to political –economic causes, not over religion. But Savarkar for instance, turned Shivaji’s struggle for power into a “great movement” for national liberation.

As for the destruction of places of worship, this was not confined to Muslim rulers. The Paramar king Subhaga Barman attacked Gujarat and destroyed a number of temples. On the other side, one can find evidence of Aurangzeb issuing firmans for the grant of land for the upkeep of the Mahakaleswar temple in Ujjain, the Balaji temple in Chitrakut and other temples. Similarly just as a number of Muslim Sultans and Badshahs imposed the jiziya on their Hindu subjects, the Hindu Zamorins of the Malabar region levied religious taxes on their Jewish subjects. The myth of the “Muslim dark ages” obscures actual social, economic and cultural developments of this period. Socialists have no need to applaud old ruling classes for any progress the wrought, for all such progress everywhere is at the cost of the producing and exploited classes. But still less is there any reason to falsify the reality of such progress.

The new history of the RSS is old communalist mythology. Its aim is the desecularisation of civil society without which, at the merely political level, the fascist form of communal politics cannot succeed. That is why it debunks the actual progressive content of the national movement, its anti-imperialism, however limited and truncated that may have been, and claims that the real freedom struggle was the anti Muslim struggle. In this, they are true to their origins for they never fought against imperialism in the least. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, founder of the Jana Sangh, even actively opposed the Quit India moment as a member of the Bengal cabinet.

The distortion of history has served to create two imagined, ‘eternally opposed’ communities, of whom the minority is allegedly by nature a community of murderers, rapists and the like, while the majority is soft and pacific, weak, disunited, disorganised. Hence, it is claimed, Hindus must cease to be weak, disunited, disorganised. It is ‘legitimate’ for them to be angry. They must redress past errors by teaching such a lesson to those who are “Babar’s children” that they can never again behave in an uppity manner.

The ideology round which such militant Hindu unity is to be achieved is Hindutva. It is the struggle for the retention of ‘Hindu’ values, ‘Hindu’ interests. True nationalism resides in militant politics of Hindutva, because according to the RSS theorists, culture is at the root of nationality, and religion is the basis of culture. In 1923, in his pamphlet *Hindutva*, Savarkar defined as Hindus those who accept India as their “pitribhoomi” and ‘punyabhoomi’. [3] Similarly, Golwalkar claimed that Hindus alone are truly Indians, because they alone are the creators of India’s holy social and cultural heritage. These theorists of “cultural nationalism” strenuously deny equal status to non-Hindus, because their “holy land” lies outside India. The necessity of the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation flows from this. According to the proponents of Hindutva, Muslims, Christians and Communists are not true Indians, because they derive inspiration from Mecca, or Jerusalem, or Russia. Muslims, in particular, have been constantly held up as an eternally hostile and “non-National” part of the social and political structure, for whom the options are either to accept a subordinate status, or to abandon Islam, or, finally, to face expulsion from the country.

Golwalkar learnt the lessons of fascism from abroad, and exulted that Germany and Italy showed Hindus the way ahead. Hailing the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazis, he said that it is not possible for different races and cultures to mix, and asked the people to draw appropriate lessons.

Thus, the myth of “Muslim invaders/Hindu resistance” was used deftly to establish as truth the

blatant lie that Hindutva is the real face of Indian nationalism. To establish one central lie, supporting lies are required. So “true history” was called on to provide another lesson, namely, that without the awakening of a fierce spirit among the Hindus the reestablishment of the great religious tradition of India is impossible. So the very existence of the Hindus as an entity comes to depend on the battle for Hindutva. Ram became a crucial element in this battle. As historian Neeladri Bhattacharyya points out, the programme of Hinduisation is a project to create an artificial “Hindu essence”. This was to consolidate a macho and offensive communal spirit.

Thus, the struggle for “Ram Janma Bhoomi” is part of a wider political struggle to build a “Hindu” identity. Why is this necessary ? This is not a religious issue. The RSS pamphlet, “*Angry Hindu*” ? *Yes, Why Not ?*” gives an answer. It is an all out attack on secularism. It says, to start with, that Hindus have always been tolerant, liberal and so on. But these very traits are then depicted as symptoms of weakness, which has been utilised by Muslim rulers to destroy the great culture and civilisation of ancient India. So the time has come to stand up and resent. Not “womanly tolerance”, but manly aggressiveness is required. Hence every yatra organised by the V.H. P. Has caused riots. For the same reason, in Surat, not only have women been brutally raped and tortured, but the process has been videotaped to show the masculine prowess of the new Hindutva. Perhaps we can now place Ram in context. As the authors of the recent book, *Khaki Shirts, Saffron Flag* point out, the V.H.P. portrayal of Ram is two-fold – Ram the warrior, standing on a backcloth of storm to wrest his right, and Ram as the king of a “golden age”. In both cases, he stands alone – the epitome of masculinity. Sita has no space. Truly, how can she have space ? Ram fought to repossess her, but after the war he abandoned her because she had been “sullied” by the touch of another man. The spokespersons of Hindutva explain this away after Golwalkar, for whom it is bad to be an honest, even a religious man in private life if you collaborate with Muslims, while a man who in personal life is a scoundrel should be unquestioningly obeyed if he is the “leader” of the “national struggle” for Hindutva. In the RSS shakhas, the authors of *Khaki Shirts, Saffron Flag* relate, a part of the training is to ask, what will you do if your leader asks you to jump in a well ? The person to whom the question is asked must immediately answer that he will do so. From this moronic obedience it is but a step to killing “enemies” under the instructions of the leaders. This reminds one of the Nazi Fuhrerprinzip and the defence put up by the accused in the Nuremberg Trials, or by Eichmann.

Thus, Hindutva in its current incarnation is a fascist ideology aiming to establish, in the name of “Hindu Rashtra”, a fascist state. Ram, the leader, could treat his wife shabbily. So what ? He had done his duty by repossessing her after defeating the enemy had he not ? This is the role model for the future.

Class, caste or gender exploitations are glossed over in the name of a unity against “the enemy” As Islam is an “organised force” a counter organisation is called for. The RSS and V.H.P. are the models for this. Through the unity of the sants, the V.H.P. is portrayed as, not an organisation in society, but the organisation of Hindu society. After this claim is peddled repeatedly, the demands and orders of the VHP can be passed off as the demands of Hindus en bloc. Romila Thapar, the well known historian, has shown that this VHP model Hindutva is being presented as an ideology of modernisation. It is being claimed that modernisation is the outcome of capitalist development, which in turn has been made possible through the influence of semitic type organised religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam). Thus Hindutva must take on a semitic organisational shape. For this it requires a founder, a central religious text, a geographically definite place of origin, a structure and conversions. Ram substitutes for a founder. Ramayan, Ayodhya, and the VHP do the rest.

Religion is not the end for the VHP, only a means to fight the organisations and the struggles of the oppressed. Golwalkar recognised the danger inherent in reservations, and called it separatism. To say only that all Hindus are equal, and to oppose actual attempts, however limited, at social equality, points to the upper class – upper caste – male dominated character of this ideology. It is not

surprising that Sankar Guha Neogi could be murdered and the struggle in Chhattisgarh continuously attacked, both by state agencies and by goondas in BJP ruled Madhya Pradesh.

The class equality that Golwalkar preaches is simple. It is not right that a clerk should be called 'aap', while a rickshaw-puller is called 'tu'. But as for actual reforms, let alone class struggle, that is to be fought against. Along with this, the RSS, and its wings, including the BMS, fight to obliterate all consciousness of class identity among workers.

On women's liberation Hindutva is even sterner. How could it be otherwise for those who uphold Ram as the symbol of struggle? It is true that this counter-revolutionary struggle has mobilised many women. But they are told that they can do so only after ensuring that this does not upset domestic peace. "We do not tear up the home" – is a refrain of the sevikas. The women are ultimately fully under male control. For Golwalkar, the ideal of womanhood are the Rajput women who observed Jawahar Vrata (committed self-immolation). Naturally, in an area of strong RSS influence like Rajasthan, Roop Kanwar was burnt to death as a "sati". Even the BJP stand on the Shah Bano case shows, the BJP did not support her struggle as a woman who had been deprived. They only wanted to make political capital out of so-called concessions to Muslims. In reality, concessions to Muslim communalism go against the interests, above all, of ordinary Muslims, particularly Muslim women. The civil code the BJP-RSS want, has a great difference with the Non-sexist Secular Code that we, along with feminists, demand, for Hindutva is by no means non-sexist.

History is not the sole constituent element of the fascist ideology. But is an important ingredient. The Goebbelsian technique of continuous lies in the name of history is important for the fascists in consolidating a general mood in their favour. Out of this come the disciplined storm troopers, those who fight as their leaders dictate.

The events surrounding the destruction of the Babri Masjid show how far fascism has progressed. To fight fascism, it is necessary to regain the terrain of civil society, to secularise it. It is not useful to call the fascists names, if the left also takes to the politics of quoting Gita and Koran. The basis of communism is materialism, not idealism. Unless we start from that base, and put forward a positive programme of struggles capable of enhancing class unity, the ideological challenge of Hindutva cannot be countered. At best, "Liberal Hinduism" will serve "democratic" capitalism. At worst, the failure of class-consciousness will lead to increasing fragmentation of the working class and the other working people, with religion serving a possible fascist takeover.

P.-S.

* Written in early 1993, condensed text published in Alternative Viewpoint, No.2, 1993. Reprinted from Alternative Viewpoint.

Notes

[1] Since 1992-3, much has happened. There have been major attacks on the writing of history. Space does not allow a proper discussion of that theme. See however the contributions of Romila Thapar, Sumit Sarkar, and Praful Bidwai in the section entitled Rewriting History

[2] Under the dispensation of Murli Manohar Joshi, a leading RSS and BJP figure, who is now the Union Human Resource Development Minister, Lal received a high position in the Indian Council of Historical Research, which might explain why he had selected Manthan, not an academic journal. Lal's most recent exploit is to explain the Aryan origins of the Indus Valley Civilisation, and the claim that the people of IVC spoke Sanskrit. How a civilization whose script remains

shrouded in fog and about whom all our information comes from archaeology can be said definitively to have *spoken in* Sanskrit is a mystery that only those possessing an inner eye (or inner ear of a special kind) can vouch for.

[3] Fatherland and Holy Land. Muslims and Christians, with their Holy Lands outside India, were redefined into second rate citizenship by this strategy.