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## **The Ayodhya Conflict and Muslim Leadership**

Hartung, J.

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India

JAN-PETER HARTUNG

When on 27 February 2002 the Sabarmati Express at the train station of Godhra in the Indian state of Gujarat was assaulted and set on fire, and when, as a result, the whole state of Gujarat turned into the most severe riots in India since about 10 years, an issue was brought back to the awareness of the world community, that had long been forgotten outside India: the so-called 'Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi', or Ayodhya conflict.

The Ayodhya conflict is a dispute over sacred space between the two largest religious communities in South Asia: Hindus and Muslims. It is, moreover, tightly bound to colonial thinking and colonial politics in 19<sup>th</sup>-century British India, and thus nowadays an inseparable part of what has been named the 'post-colonial predicament'. Taking both together, the Ayodhya conflict is the paradigmatic embodiment of a phenomenon known as 'communalism': an ideology that perceives society entirely as divided into distinct religious communities which have nothing in common. In India, this ideology found its most pithy expression in the so-called 'Two Nations Theory' by Muhammad Iqbal in 1930.

► **Craftsman working for a new Hindu temple, Ayodhya.**

After the tragic events that accompanied the partition of India in 1947, and the creation of Pakistan as the state of Indian Muslims, the vision of the first prime minister of the Indian Union and leader of the National Congress Party, Jawaharlal Nehru, that India shall become a secular democracy, seems from the very beginning to have fallen prey to communalist tendencies within Indian society. Hindu communalism became a major tendency in post-independence India, taking up this assumption and arguing that the Indian Union was to politically safeguard the interests of the Hindu religious majority. Thus the idea of a unified, strong and self-confident Hindu 'nation' came into being, and turned communalism into Hindu 'nationalism'.

The bundling of the various Hindu nationalist forces was achieved by the Sangh Parishad, an umbrella organization, under which outfits like the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) or the Shiv Sena, could coordinate their activities and work out strategies to reach different layers of society. Out of one such strategy today's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged in 1980. The rhetoric of this new political association included, besides a national political economy and the topos of 'justice versus corruption', more and more religious symbols as core strategies of political mobilization within the process of communalization of the political sphere.<sup>1</sup> Major symbols are sacred law and sacred space; the first became manifest in the debate on Uniform Civil Code versus Muslim Personal Law which reached its peak so far in the so-called Shah Bano case in 1985,<sup>2</sup> the second, sparked off by the mosque-temple dispute, found its climax with the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992 by militant Hindu nationalist outfits.

#### Background to the conflict

Much has been written about the issue since the culmination of the conflict in the early 1990s, which centres around the question of whether the mosque in Ayodhya, erected in 1528 by order of the first Mughal emperor Babur, replaced a Rama temple which had been destroyed only for this purpose.<sup>3</sup> Nineteenth-century colonial constructions of the Orient historicized religious myths and, introducing different topoi, helped create distinct religious communities competing for political and social superiority.

# The Ayodhya Conflict and Muslim Leadership



PHOTO: JASON REED, ©REUTERS 2002

Growing self-confidence among Hindus in this process became evident in the utilization of sacred space in Ayodhya when a part of the Babri Masjid was occupied by a renowned Hindu priest that year, setting up a raised platform for worship in its courtyard, claiming the place to be the historical birthplace of Rama (*ramjanmabhumi*). This incident, 145 years ago, marked the beginning of the actual Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi dispute.

#### Communal polarization

What followed, up to today, might be described as flux and reflux of juridical and activist conflict. For about one hundred years the issue was left to the court, while the sources prove that the British colonial administration was more concerned with maintaining a status quo than with taking sides with one of the conflicting parties. But when, on the morning of 23 December 1949, idols of Rama and his wife Sita were found under the middle dome of the mosque, the Indian government took occasion of the riots following, declared the mosque a disputed area and closed it down for both conflicting communities. Another three decades of juridical struggle followed, during which Hindu nationalist thought entered almost every strata of the Indian society. As its clear expression, the VHP in 1961 openly called for the demolition of the mosque. In 1984, a 'Committee to Sacrifice for the Liberation of Rama's Birthplace' was founded and, finally in 1986, by decision of the district court of Faydabad, the mosque reopened for Hindus only. From here it took only a short step to a secret agreement between VHP and the Union Home Minister in 1989 to erect a temple in place of the mosque and to the demolition of the mosque in 1992.

The Indian Muslim intelligentsia was aware of the danger of communal polarization of Indian society at quite an early stage. Attempting to jointly face these developments, a number of non-governmental bodies were set up, comprising otherwise even hostile fractions within the Muslim community. As early as 1964 the All-India Muslim Majlis-i Mushawwarat (AIMMM) was founded, followed by the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) in 1972. Even though

the latter refers primarily to another issue within the communalist dispute, it cannot be seen as separate from a joint effort of the Muslim communities in India to unite in view of the menace to their cultural identity which was equally perceived as an attempt by Hindu nationalist forces to violate the secular basis of the Indian Constitution, granting equality and freedom of religion. Indira Gandhi's second legislative period as prime minister made, for example, Sayyid Abu I-Hasan 'Ali Nadwi (d. 1999) – president of the AIMPLB and internationally renowned head of the Nadwat al-Ulama – understand that even the Congress Party was on its way to discharge the main values that have made up the foundations of Indian national identity. This latent communalism made it possible for Hindu nationalist movements to 'work out strategies for a cultural and political genocide on Muslims, in the result of which Muslims would no longer persist as a culturally distinct community within this society.'<sup>4</sup> One of these strategies, as Muslim leaders were quite aware of, was the conversion of historic mosques – symbols of Muslim cultural identity – into temples, which was tolerated, if not even encouraged, by the central and local governments. Exemplary for this was Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's assurance to Muslim leaders during talks in February 1986 that he would strongly vote for the Muslims in the Babri Masjid dispute, which almost coincided with the re-opening of the mosque for Hindus only.<sup>5</sup>

To face this particular threat, at least two bodies were set up in 1986: the Babri Masjid Movement Coordination Committee (BMMCC) was founded under the auspices of the AIMMM on the initiative of the then member of parliament Sayyid Shahab al-Din; and the advocate Zafar Yab Jilani from Lucknow called in a Babri Masjid Action Committee (BMAC) which in the meantime has become a national platform too. Nevertheless, they were not able to prevent political instability, following the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1990, from opening the floor to the triumph of communalist politics. The BJP increasingly used communalist symbols in its electoral propaganda. From 1989 onwards

the Babri Masjid issue became crucial herein, and was thus transferred from a regional controversy to a national issue; BJP rule in Uttar Pradesh during 1991–1992 finally provided the political framework for the demolition of the mosque.

#### Continuing dispute

The controversy over the site, officially named 'disputed site', nevertheless continues; it has now become a court case again which, as Zafar Yab Gilani is convinced, will be decided this year. But although efforts of bodies like the AIMPLB, BMMCC and BMAC succeeded in launching effective public campaigns, and became a major factor for at least maintaining a legal status quo, it cannot be denied that the Muslim community lacks a charismatic leader who could be accepted by all different factions, and who could keep together a strong alliance in order to build a front against the Hindu nationalist threat. Another aspect is reflected by the fact that the current carnage in Gujarat, following the Godhra assault, did not cause extraordinary alert among the Muslim élites. Recently conducted interviews with different leading Muslim personalities revealed that they are quite aware of the cyclical character of communalist tension concerning the Ayodhya issue, and that the sparking off of violence in Gujarat is perceived as just another peak of activism. This, together with the lack of charismatic leadership, is the reason for the undermining of all attempts of the mentioned bodies by opposing groups within the Muslim community, and even today when joint action is at highest demand, there are enough indications for the fact that the Ayodhya issue is used by different Muslim factions only to serve their own interests, and to consolidate their own position within the Muslim community, as the example of the recent hearing of Maulana Kalb-i Jawwad, noted Shi'a cleric from Lucknow, proves: he claimed the land where the mosque once stood to be sacred; this rather exceptional concept is very much reminiscent of the VHP rhetoric. Not the least because of such internal discord, a solution for the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi dispute seems still to be far away.

#### Notes

1. Cf. Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave. Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (New Delhi, 1999), 148–50.
2. For an overview cf.: Ali Asghar Engineer (ed.), *The Shah Bano Controversy* (Hyderabad, 1987).
3. For an overview, see: Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation. The Babri Masjid – Ramjanmabhumi Issue* (New Delhi, 1991).
4. Abu I-Hasan 'Ali Nadwi, *Karwan-i zindagi*, vol. 3 (Lakhna'u, 1997), 81.
5. Cf. *Ibid.*, 138f.

Jan-Peter Hartung is a Ph.D. candidate at the Max Weber Centre of Erfurt University, Germany. His research is on contemporary Muslim scholarship in India.  
E-mail: janpeter.hartung@uni-erfurt.de