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**"The New Hindu History"**

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## The New Hindu History

Gyanendra Pandey

'Ayodhya', which may serve as a shorthand for the right-wing Hindu movement of recent years, has thrown up anew the question of the meaning of the Indian past. It has also threatened to establish as a new orthodoxy among large sections of the Indian middle classes a new chronology of Hindu-Muslim military contests in India, and, underlying this, a renewed belief in the inevitability of such contest given the character of the people on the two sides.

What is it that accounts for the considerable influence of this new Hindu history? The obvious answers – that a powerful political movement, with massive financial and organisational resources, has led to the widespread dissemination of this historical propaganda, or that economic difficulties and the availability of a ready explanation (and scapegoat) for these have made for the acceptance of this kind of history – are not wrong: but they are plainly inadequate. They do not begin to tell us why other powerful political movements, say, of the left, and other available explanations have not had the same kind of impact. They seem not to recognise, either, that the widespread acceptance of the Hindu version of the history of Ayodhya, for example, has contributed greatly to the rise of the new Hindutva movement: not just the other way about.

To re-open the question of the appeal of Hindu history, let us first underline what may be said to be its central claims to truth. Hindu history poses as a history of the <sup>indigenous</sup> ~~local~~ community, <sup>of local</sup> the ~~local~~ society – *samaj* or, more accurately, Hindu *samaj* – as against the state: in other words, it claims to be a history that speaks in the language and voice of the people about their most deeply-rooted beliefs and desires, which have (in this view) been too long suppressed. Further, and obviously related to the above claim, it asserts its position as an 'authentic' Indian history, as distinct from the slavish imitation of Western histories produced by deraciné scholars ensconced in privileged positions in the universities and research institutions of the sub-continent.

It is my belief that these assertions require close examination, not only because we have so far generally neglected them (to our cost), but also because they may throw up

important questions regarding our own – fairly unreflective – practice of history and politics.

## II

An investigation of the question of the appeal, or persuasiveness, of different kinds of history may profitably be begun with the question of language – in the sense both of the medium of speech and writing, and of the mode of constructing and framing historical, political, social-scientific, arguments and statements. The critical importance of language in the production of knowledge, particular kinds of history and particular kinds of politics, is now very widely recognised. Yet, in India perhaps more obviously than elsewhere, this recognition seems to have had little effect on practice. The notion of ‘two Indias’ – ‘India’ and ‘Bharat’ – that populist politicians have promoted especially since the days of Rajiv Gandhi, retains considerable force in the country today. It is not that secular historians never write in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil and so on. It is rather that they write predominantly in English, and almost always for a small, English-knowing, ‘modern’, ‘secular’, internationalist audience – whether living in India or abroad. Secular contributions to the debate in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, as it is conducted, say, in Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay, are more often that not translations. The regional language press seems to have been handed over, as it were, to those who are not quite so ‘secular’, ‘modern’, or ‘cosmopolitan’.

This ‘secular’ inattention to language (and, therefore, to history, particularity, culture) is evident in other ways as well. The English-language press and social-scientific discourse in India has readily accepted the Hindu Right-wing’s chosen terms of self-description. For a long time now, we have spoken of ‘Ramjanmabhumi’ – referring to a precise spot, occupied <sup>until 6 December 1992</sup> by a small medieval monument, rather than to the general area of Ayodhya which is, in Hindu belief, the *bhumi* (land, zone, region) of Ram’s birth. Worse, we write of ‘*sadhus*’ and ‘*sants*’ (even translated as ‘saints’, in the English press), of the ‘Sangh Parivar’ (the ‘family’ sprouted by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), and the ‘Dharma Sansad’ (‘religious parliament’? ‘parliament of religions’? ‘parliament of religious figures’?). Notice that there is not even a trace of irony in the secularists’ use of these as descriptive terms. Consider, on the other hand, the terms used by journals like

*Organizer* and *Paanch-janya* to describe the political opponents of the Hindu Right: "secular *giroh*" (or 'gang of secularists'), "pseudo-secularists" (and now the word 'secularism', having been associated so long with terms like 'pseudo-' and 'minorityism', is often by itself enough of a condemnation), "slaves of the West" or of "Westernism".

The Hindu Right's use of Hindi, Marathi, Malayalam and so on for their political propaganda is of course important. But that use of local languages reflects – or perhaps produces – a sensitivity to language (and to linguistic/cultural sensibilities) that secular academics and journalists in India could certainly learn from. Let me illustrate this by reference to the great importance attached by the so-called 'Sangh Parivar' to the word used to describe the Babari Masjid. In India today, it is a declaration of political position – or I suppose of position as a member of a 'minority', Muslim community – to speak of the Babari Masjid. For the rest, for those who would reserve their political choices as well as for the Hindu Right, it is not, it never was a *masjid*. It was the 'so-called *masjid*'. It was a *mandir* that had, nevertheless, to be destroyed. It was a 'victory monument' – '*gulami ki nishani*'; '*haram ki nishani*'. It was, and, astonishingly, given our ineptitude, may against all odds continue to be a 'disputed structure'. Certainly, the latter term has now passed into the vocabulary of elite political (and historical) discourse in India. A Prime Minister, hailed by the Hindu Right as the best in India since Lal Bahadur Shastri, is condemned for ever from the moment he refers to the Babari Masjid as the Babari Masjid.

In the same way, the Hindu Right has 'played', and played to a large extent successfully, with notions of 'religion', 'culture', 'politics'. 'Hinduism' is not a religion. It is the way of life, the manner of being, of people living in this part of the world. Everyone who lives in Hindustan is a Hindu: so that Bhai Parmanand could be asked in the USA whether every Hindu was a Muslim, and Imam Bukhari (the Shahi Imam of the Jama Masjid of Delhi) on a visit to Mecca whether he was a Hindu? Ram is not a 'religious', but a 'national' hero. The Ramjanmabhumi 'liberation' movement is not a political, but a religious movement – or the other way around.

Hindu history, like Hindu politics, has thrived on this 'play'. It has moved unapologetically ~~between the divine and the mundane~~ between the divine and the mundane. The opening paragraph of Ramgopal Pandey Sharad's *Shri Ram Janmabhumi ka Romanchkarit Itihasa* <sup>[Horripilchit]</sup> ('*The Thrilling History of Shri Ram Janmabhumi*') illustrates the point very well indeed:

Wing H. Kes Ltr.  
p. 5.

900,000 years ago, the supreme ideal of manhood, Lord Shri Ramchandraji, took on his earthly incarnation in precisely this hallowed land/area. He rolled in the pure dust of this sacred spot . . . and, along with Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughanji, thus enacted his rare and divine childhood. The Hindu rulers who graced the throne of India [Bharat] many centuries before Christ defended it all along. [Note, this unheralded first reference to the site of Ram's birth, the Ramjanmabhumi, as a monument.] They repaired it from time to time, but at the time of the Kiratas and the Huna invasions, they turned their attention away from the site. As a result, the ancient temple [the first mention of this] was destroyed and no trace of it remained. In the end, a century or so before Christ, the shining light of the Hindu family, Emperor Vikramaditya, rediscovered the site after great effort and constructed a grand temple at the sacred spot. (pp.3-4)

There is much to be said about the ease with which this paragraph moves from the alleged birth of Ram, 900,000 years ago in the Treta Yuga, to the Hindu kings who graced 'the throne of India' in the centuries (millennia?) before Christ, to the destruction of what could have been an 'eternal', not just 'ancient' temple (for its 'construction' is nowhere mentioned), to the rediscovery of the site and the construction of another grand temple by 'Vikramaditya' – a king who has still to be satisfactorily identified. But before entering into a more detailed discussion of these moves, it may be well to spell out some of the more obvious features of this Hindu history as it is reflected in the recent writings on Ayodhya.

### III

Perhaps the first thing that would strike the elite observer about the histories of Ayodhya, produced in plenty in recent years by Hindu enthusiasts, is their pulp quality. Sold (or distributed) along with audio-cassettes, badges, posters, images of gods and goddesses and other memorabilia, moral tales and books of common prayer or devotional songs by Hindu Right-wing sympathisers, in Ayodhya and elsewhere, these pamphlets – produced in very cheap and short-lived editions, crudely written and poorly printed on rough paper – seem scarcely worthy of our attention: it is only the power of the political

movement with which they are associated, and which they reflect and reinforce, that has made us turn to them.

The next observation that one might make, if one bothers to collect and examine a number of these histories over the years, is that they are entirely repetitive: so repetitive that they are hard to read with the best will in the world, and that having looked at one or two, one is persuaded (perhaps rightly) that there is no need to look at any more. The repetitiveness is marked between publications, which often seem no more than quick copies of earlier productions with minor variations, as well as within individual 'histories'. The uniformity and the repetitiveness start with the very titles of these productions. Here are five of them:

1. *Shri Ram Janmabhumi: Sachitra, Pramanik Itihasa* ('An Illustrated and Authoritative History of Shri Ram Janmabhumi'; the booklet itself provides the translation as 'An Illustrated and Authentic History', and the 'authenticity' is underlined by the announcement that the author has an M.A. and Ph.D. in Archaeology and History), Ayodhya 1986;
2. *Shri Ram Janmabhumi ka Pramanik Itihasa* (The Authoritative/Authentic History of Shri Ram Janmabhumi'), date and place of publication not given;
3. *Shri Ram Janmabhumi ka tala kaise khula. Shri Ram Janmabhumi ka Romanchkari Itihasa* ('How the locks [placed on the gates of the Babari Masjid/Ram Janmabhumi complex in 1949] were opened. The Horripilating History of Shri Ram Janmabhumi'), Ayodhya, n.d.;
4. *Shri Ram Janmabhumi ka Rakt Ranjit Itihasa. Tala kaise khula?* ('The blood-stained history of Shri Ram Janmabhumi. How the gates were unlocked), Ayodhya, n.d.;
5. *Mukti Yagya. Shri Ram Janmabhumi ka Sampurna Itihasa* ('Sacrifice for Liberation. The Entire History of Shri Ram Janmabhumi'), Ayodhya, 1991.

cf. P. D. Datta,  
The Janmabhumi  
in H. P. P. P. P.  
(1976)

The sequence of events (or 'chronology') that provides the core of these works is also noteworthy for its marked repetitiveness. This chronology appears as follows, with only slight variations of dates and numbers as between different accounts:

1. 900,000 years ago – Birth of Ram: hence of Ramjanmabhumi (RJB)
2. 150 years BC (Greek & Kushana Times) – Battle to liberate RJB
3. 100 years BC – Vikramaditya's rediscovery of RJB, & construction of grand RJB temple
4. Salar Mas'ud's time – 2 battles to liberate RJB
5. Babar's reign – Destruction of temple, construction of mosque;  
4 battles to liberate RJB
6. Humayun's reign 10 battles to liberate RJB
7. Akbar's reign 20 battles to liberate RJB
8. Aurangzeb's reign 30 battles to liberate RJB
9. Sa'adat Ali of Avadh's reign 5 battles to liberate RJB
10. Nasiruddin Haidar's reign 3 battles to liberate RJB
11. Wajid Ali Shah's reign 2 battles to liberate RJB
12. British rule (1912 & 1934) 2 battles to liberate RJB
13. 1857 Attempted compromise between Hindus and Muslims over RJB (thwarted by British machinations)
14. December 1949 Appearance of Ram (in the form of the infant, Ramlala), and installation of images of Ramlala, inside the mosque. Building locked by administrative order to maintain the peace.
15. 1986 Opening of locks on Babari Masjid/RJB temple.

[Source: Pratap Narayan Mishra: *Kya Kahti Saryu Dhara? Shri Ram Janmabhumi ki Kahani* (1st published 1987; 2nd edition, Lucknow 1990), Appendix, p.144.

To the battles listed in this appendix, I have added Events 1 & 3, and numbers 13-15, which appear regularly in these histories of Ayodhya. The date of event 3 varies, being given as late as the 5th century AD in Radhey Shyam Shukul's *Sachitra, Pramanik Itihasa*, which identifies 'Vikramaditya' with the Gupta king, Skandagupta, who ruled at Pataliputra (modern Patna) from 455 to 467 AD]



Note that this chronology, based on one of the earliest in the new series of Hindu histories of Ayodhya, which is explicitly acknowledged as the source of some of the later accounts, gives a total of 79 battles fought by 'the Hindus' for the 'liberation' of the Ram Janmabhumi. The magic number was, however, subsequently fixed at "76", which is the number of battles supposedly fought since the time of the Mughals, with whom the history of Muslims in India is readily equated. The battle for the 'liberation' of the RJB that was launched in the mid-1980s was, therefore, always referred to as the 77th, and I have listed it as such.

The point of this history is to enumerate the many occasions when 'The Hindus' have risen in defence of the Janmabhumi, and to catalogue their enormous sacrifices. The opening pages of another early publication in this series, *Ham Mandir Vahin Banayenge* (Suruchi Prakeshan, New Delhi, 1989), illustrate the argument very well indeed. The first chapter begins with the title: '*Lakhon shish chadhe jis thaon. Shri Ram Janmabhumi ka inihasa – Amar balidan-gatha*'. ('Where lakhs of lives were offered up. The history of Shri Ram Janmabhumi – a saga of eternal sacrifice'). Above the title on the title-page appears a note to say that 77 battles have been waged and 300,000 lives sacrificed by the Hindus for the protection and liberation of the Ram Janmabhumi *mandir*.

The first paragraphs of the history set the tone of the narrative that follows. After a statement on the antiquity of Ayodhya town, the text says:

Foreign aggressions on Ayodhya also have a very ancient history. The first aggressor was the . . . notorious King of Lanka, Ravana, who destroyed Ayodhya during the time of the ancestors of Shri Ram. Ravana's death, along with his entire family, at the hands of Shri Ram is a story known all over the world

In history, the second external attack upon Ayodhya was by the Greek king Milind or Mihirgupta (Menander), who was the first aggressor to have destroyed the Shri Ram Janmabhumi temple. But Indian pride arose to punish this irreligious foreigner for his evil deed [*dus-sahasa*, literally 'misguided (or foolish) bravery'], and within 3 months Raja Dyumatsena of the Sunga dynasty had killed Milind in a fierce war and again liberated Ayodhya . . .

The third aggressor to attack Ayodhya was Salar Masud, a nephew of the notorious Muslim plunderer, Mahmud Ghaznavi. Destroying temples as he went

along, Masud reached [the environs of] Ayodhya and destroyed temples in the vicinity. But the united strength of the Rajas of Ayodhya and the surrounding areas, and the attacks of the *sadhus* of the Digambari *akhada*, prevented his conquering army from entering Ayodhya. He then moved to the north, but in 1033 AD, 17 local Rajas led by Raja Suhail Dev surrounded that beastly irreligious tyrannical plunderer . . . in Bahraich, and sent the entire invading army to their graves. After this, all of Mahmud and Masud's successors were also beaten and driven from the country . . . .

The next plunderer who attacked Ayodhya with the object of destroying the Shri Ram Janmabhumi temple was Babar . . . This ungrateful plunderer [who had been given refuge, food and shelter by people in different parts of India] responded to India's native tolerance and hospitality by ordering his Commander-in-Chief, Mir Baqi, to destroy the huge, palatial Shri Ram Janmabhumi temple that had stood in Ayodhya since Vikramaditya's time, in order simply to please two evil Muslim *faqirs*. But . . . the people [the country] rose in fierce opposition to this vile attack on their national honour. The historian Cunningham writes [the reference is to *Lucknow Gazetteer*, pt.36,p.3]: "At the time of the destruction of the Janmabhumi temple the Hindus sacrificed everything and it was only after 1 lakh, 74 thousand Hindu lives had been lost that Mir Baqi succeeded in bringing down the temple with his cannons . . . ."

Through the many recensions of the Hindu history of Ayodhya, it is this story of 'foreign' aggression and native valour, of eternal Hindu activism and sacrifice, that is endlessly repeated. Context – the very heart of the historian's discipline, as we might say – counts for nothing. I shall return to this point. For the moment, let me draw attention to two other fairly obvious features of Hindu history.

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\* *Mandir vahin banayenge*, pp.10-11. It is noteworthy that while the attacks by Ravana and Milind (Menander) appear in these opening paras., not even the latter forms part of the "77" battles listed by the author as having taken place for the protection/liberation of RJB. The reference to Cunningham is still to be checked, and the footnote will need to say something about the fraudulent use of sources.

The first is the importance of numbers. Numbers appear to be important here not only for their suggestion of statistical accuracy and historical precision: "76" (or "77" or "79" as the case may be) battles fought for the 'liberation' of the RJB; the 700 soldiers of Babar's army that Devi Din Pandey accounted for, with his sword alone and in the face of a constant rain of bullets, in just three hours (which, according to the Hindu account, Babar himself testifies); and, further, of Devi Din's inevitable offering of his own life in this process: "On 9 June, 1528 AD, at 2pm, Pandit Devi Din Pandey breathed his last". They represent the 'excess' that characterise all nationalist narratives. Hence Devi Din Pandey's "700" victims in a span of "3 hours"; or the 174,000 Hindu lives sacrificed before Mir Baqi was able to bring down the temple; or the "hundreds" of monkeys who attacked the Mughal camp one day during the same period, engaged the soldiers in battle for several hours, and silenced their guns and cannons; or the 10,000 tong-wielding (*chintadhar*) *sadhus*, who worsted Aurangzeb's army "with their tongs alone"; or, to take a non-numerical example, the "indescribably beautiful" Rani Jairaj Kumari, who formed a band of several hundred (or several thousand) women guerillas to attack the Ram Janmabhumi on numerous occasions through the reigns of Babar, Humayun and Akbar.

Numbers are important, too, in fixing the boundaries of the (unchanging) 'community' (or 'nation') – 'Us' and 'Them'. A pamphlet entitled '*Angry Hindu? Yes, Why Not?*' puts it as follows: "I (the 'Hindus') form 85% of this land": why should I be denied my rights? The 'Hindu' has now awakened. The 'Hindu' is these hundreds of millions of people – of one opinion and one vision. As *Ham Mandir Vahin Banayenge* has it, in a note that appears above the title on its title page, that (title) is the *vision*, determination, ~~pledge~~ (*sankalp*) of "the 700 million Hindus of the entire world".

A final feature of these histories of Ayodhya that clearly deserves notice is their straddling of the worlds of religious and historical discourse. As I have mentioned, these histories are sold (or distributed) at pilgrim-sites, along with images of deities, religious calendars, prayer-books and the like – and bought, perhaps, as often for the decoration of a house-hold shrine, or prayer-room, as for reading individually or in groups. They are prefaced or headed frequently by an 'Om', a *mantra*, or a longer prayer to Shri Ram. They begin in the age of Ram, 900,000 and more years ago, and they are marked by an easy (and, in a sense, unceasing) intervention of the divine – or, to put it in other terms, a realisation of the ineffable that lies behind the illusions of this fleeting world.

Source: p. 67  
(see: 4 p. -)

ibid, 68.

ibid, 83

(1988), p. 5

Thus, to take the most recent examples first, Hindu history tells us of the miraculous appearance of the infant Ramlala inside the Babari Masjid on a cold December night in 1949, attested to (in the Hindu account) by the Muslim policeman who was there on guard duty. We also have Ram, "unable to bear the suffering of his *bhaktas* (devotees) any longer", intervening through a local lawyer and a local magistrate in Faizabad to have the locks on the mosque/temple opened in 1986. There is evidence of divine intervention again in November 1990, when a number of *kar sevaks* "miraculously" scaled the Babari Masjid and attained the heights of the domes in a matter of moments (a feat, we are told, that took the trained commandos at the site, with all their equipment, over half an hour to accomplish), and when a large monkey appeared and sat for a long time on top of the central dome, with the *bhagwa dhvaj* (saffron flag, emblem of the Hindu movement) in 'his' hands: veritably, we are told, this was the monkey-god, the greatest Rambhakta of all, Hanuman himself.

The sequence of divine intervention began, of course, a long, long time ago. In historical times, its first startling manifestation occurs at the time of the Emperor Vikramaditya who "re-discovered" the Ram Janmabhumi. As the Hindu account has it, a tired Vikramaditya, accidentally separated from his companions, was resting by the river Saryu to regain his breath when he saw a handsome black prince, dressed from top to toe in black and mounted on a black horse, enter the river. When the horse and rider came out again a few moments later, an amazing transformation had taken place: the prince's mount, his clothes, his face, were now all shining white.

Overwhelmed, Vikramaditya went up to the strange prince and asked him to explain the meaning of this 'vision'. The prince explained: "I am Tirtharaj Prayag [the pilgrimage centre, Prayag or Allahabad, personified]. Every year [at a certain time] I come with the countless sins I have taken onto myself from the millions of pilgrims who come to cleanse their sins at Prayag, and these are washed away by the Saryu" (which, therefore, becomes even more efficacious than Prayag as a site of pilgrimage and a step to salvation). Asked for further advice and guidance, Tirthraj Prayag tells Vikramaditya to re-establish the Ram Janmabhumi. Aided by signs and measurements <sup>given</sup> to him by Tirthraj, Vikramaditya rediscovers Ayodhya, establishes the exact site of the Janmabhumi by setting free a cow newly delivered of a calf (milk begins to flow automatically from

Saryu-Mandir  
gives vision in  
no one can see  
or diff. details for  
re-establishing - 3/1/19  
C&A 11/1/19 (p.342)

her udders as soon as she reaches the sacred spot), and builds there a grand temple on the 84 pillars of black touch-stone.

The subsequent history of the Ram Janmabhumi is in line with this half-human half-divine, 'neither this nor that', scenario – as indeed at 'Ram Janmabhumi' it ought to be. The point is illustrated dramatically by the difficulties experienced by Babar in converting the temple into a mosque. After Babar had overcome 'the Hindus' in a battle that lasted long and furiously, and in which the Mughal forces were beaten back time and again, he left Ayodhya instructing his lieutenant, Mir Baqi Khan of Tashkent, to build a mosque on the site of the temple using the very material of the latter. But this proved to be no easy task. "The walls that were built during the day came down [as if by miracle] at night"; and this is what continued to happen day after day, until Mir Baqi in despair urged Babar to return and see things for himself.

Babar returned, and seeing what each day brought, consulted local *sadhus* and arranged a compromise which gave him a way out. The *sadhus* said that Hanuman was against the construction of the mosque, and no building could occur until he was persuaded. In the end, as (according to our Hindu historians) Babar himself has written in his memoirs, the Hindus laid down 5 conditions: "The *masjid* was to be called 'Sita Pak' [i.e. Sita's *rasoi* or kitchen]. The space for circumambulation around the central structure [*parikrama*] had to be preserved. A wooden door was to be erected at the main entrance. The turrets/spires were to be brought down. And Hindu *mahatmas* were to be allowed to conduct prayers and recitations." Every one of these conditions negated the concept of a *masjid*, according to this Hindu account. Thus, it was not the Hindus but Babar who had ultimately to surrender. Even in the form of a mosque, the RJB remained a temple. Even in defeat the Hindus were (as, implicitly, they always will be) victorious.

#### IV

I have suggested that a sense of eternal (and united) Hindu activism and sacrifice, of numbers (which testify again to Hindu strength), and of a divine 'play' or 'order' (once again revealing of the power of 'the Hindu'), actuates the Hindu history of Ayodhya. It is easy to mock this history for its obvious inconsistencies of time, place and circumstance, its fallacious logic, its fraudulent use of sources, and its fabrication of many 'historical'

events". It may be more interesting, and effective, however, to seek to unravel the organising principles of such a history, its objects of analysis, the subject positions it affirms, the notions of time that it works with. Through this exercise, it may be possible, too, to arrive at a somewhat better appreciation of the distance, or closeness, of this history from the modern, statist histories that it so vociferously condemns.

The Hindu history of Ayodhya, as found in all its recent versions, is not about the region, much less the people, of Ayodhya; it is not even about a spot now <sup>red</sup> call<sub>y</sub> the Ramjanmabhumi; it is about a building on that spot. This entire history is focused on a monument, which we can, for the moment, designate the 'grand temple' built (and rebuilt) on the site of Shri Ram's "birth". Everything revolves around this monument. The narrative begins with the destruction of the monument, and returns to this point again and again. Two paragraphs that appear as a 'preface' in one edition of *Shri Ram Janmabhumi ka Romanchkari Itihasa*, and as 'postscript' in another, illustrate the proposition very well indeed.

I quote the first line of the first paragraph, which is headed 'The Hindu Signs at the Janmabhumi': "Several Hindu features remained when the temple was demolished and given the form of a mosque: these are features that Babar was forced to retain because the walls [of the proposed mosque] kept falling down on their own . . ."

The second paragraph, headed 'The Pillars of Black Touch-stone', reads as follows:

The ancient Shri Ram temple was built on 84 black touch-stone pillars. These had been constructed by King Aranya of the . . . Surya dynasty. Ravana defeated Aranya in battle and carried the pillars away [to Lanka], from where they were brought back to Ayodhya by Shri Ram after his victory over Ravana . . . The [Babari] *masjid* was built upon these very pillars, upon which the aforesaid images [of Hindu gods and goddesses] can still be seen, along with inscriptions of Maharaja Aranya, Ravana and Lord Shri Ram on some pillars. Of the 84 black touch-stone pillars, 11 are in the Babari Masjid, 2 at the entrance to the *mandir* [i.e., the same *masjid*] and [another 2?] at the [nearby] grave of Kajal Abbas [one of the Muslim *faqirs* said to have incited Babar to demolish the Ram Janmabhumi

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\*\*Long footnote to illustrate, including twisting of 1912 and 1934 events.

temple], and some are adding to the glories of the museums in Lucknow, Faizabad and London.

What follows, in every account published in the last few years, is a longer or shorter description of battle after battle fought by the Hindus to 'liberate' the site, remove the mosque, and rebuild the grand temple: "76" battles before the current one which is the 77th. The monument, one could say, is the history.

This marks a significant change from earlier histories of the Ram Janmabhumi, the Krsna Janmabhumi and so on, examples of which may still be found in Mathura. Here, at the site of the claimed Krsna Janmabhumi, the pulp histories that are sold concentrate on the life of Shri Krsna; and stories associated with his exploits as a child and an adult are presented alongside a fairly bland account of the several temples built at various nearby sites, the destruction by Aurangzeb of the last 'grand' temple, and the establishment of organisations to promote the worship of Krsna in Mathura and improve facilities for pilgrims, Indian and foreign.

Traces of a somewhat more 'open' and 'tentative' history of Ayodhya may also be found in some of the earlier publications associated with the latest round of Hindu agitation for the 'liberation' of the Ram Janmabhumi from the mid-1980s. These begin with attempts to describe the grandeur of the 'ancient city', as presented in the Valmiki *Ramayana* for example, and acknowledge the gaps in our knowledge of this history – the difficulty of establishing who the 'Vikramaditya' of tradition was and how he 'rediscovered' Ayodhya; the fact that Ayodhya was built many times and many times fell into ruin; the long periods when the city had little habitation or activity (down even to the so-called 'Muslim' period).

No such tentativeness or uncertainty is to be found in the 'mature' Hindu history contained in works like the *Romanchkari*, *Rakt-ranjit* or *Sampurna Itihasa*. The 84 black stone pillars, straddling the world from the age of Ram (and even earlier) to the age of colonial and post-colonial museums, capture the spirit of this history as it is evoked by the most recent Hindu historians of Ayodhya: its antiquity, its beauty and solidity, its destruction, and its continued existence.

It goes without saying that the 84 pillars stand for much more than a town called Ayodhya: they stand for the Ram Janmabhumi, for Hinduism, for the Hindu spirit and

Scrymgeour &  
R. Uday Shyam  
Shukla, also  
Srinivasan  
allowing for diff.  
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culture, the Hindu people, the nation. Ayodhya, or should we say the black stone pillars, are a symbol (*pratik*) of the 'eternal', 'undefeated' ('Ayodhya' - that which cannot be defeated) Hindu nation. This is why this history refers constantly to the religious and national spirit of the native Hindu ever engaged in battle against the 'irreligious, foreign invader'; the 'Hindu kings who graced the throne of India [Bharat] in the centuries [even millennia] before Christ'; the united struggle of kings, *sadhus* and the common people (Hindus) against any insult to the national honour - referring almost always, in this case to the Ram Janmabhumi.

Interestingly, however, the recent Hindu history of Ayodhya - which may also be described as the Hindu history of India - is not about the construction of the Ram Janmabhumi temple. It is about its destruction. To that extent, it is a history, not of the temple, but of the mosque built upon its ruins - not of the greatness of 'the Hindu' but of the evilness of 'the Muslim'.

It is notable that the 'construction' of the ancient temple is not mentioned, it is simply assumed; and that of Vikramaditya's 'grand' temple never detailed (though his re-discovery of the site is). What is detailed is the 'destruction': how long it took, at whose hands it occurred, with what subterfuges and difficulties it was accomplished, and what features were left standing.

Even more significantly, the number of battles fought for the 'liberation' of the Janmabhumi is fixed at "76", which by the Hindu historians' own account is the number of battles fought for the liberation of the site since the time of Babar. The battles fought before Babar's time and listed by some early Hindu historians, including the two battles supposedly waged to fend off the invasion of Salar Mas'ud Ghazi, do not count in the end, for this is in fact a history of the mosque and attempts to obliterate it. It is no accident, then, that so many of these histories should begin their account of the history of Ayodhya with a statement of the 'Hindu' signs still to be found in the mosque (that is, until its destruction on 6 December 1992), or that the volume entitled *Shri Ram Janmabhumi ka Sampurna Itihasa* ('The Entire History of the Shri Ram Janmabhumi') should add on its inside cover 'from 1528 AD to today'.

If the monument constitutes the history of Ayodhya/India, and the monument is in fact a mosque (by whatever name it may now be called), it follows that the Hindu account is very close indeed to the colonial account of the Indian past. As in the colonial account,

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'Hindu' and 'Muslim' here too are fully constituted from the start, and all of Indian history for centuries prior to the coming of the British becomes a history of perennial Hindu-Muslim conflict. The differences are minor, but noteworthy. What are 'riots', 'convulsions', symptoms of a disease for colonialist writers, are 'wars' for the Hindu historian (though it must be noted that many colonialists were happy enough to describe Hindu-Muslim conflict as 'religious' or 'national' wars). Wars have their heroes and villains, and Hindu history quickly runs up a long list of Hindu heroes and Muslim villains (joined just occasionally by Hindu villains); whereas for colonialist historiography Hindus and Muslims were villains (or at least beasts) uniformly – with rare exceptions.

Another difference follows from the pre-constituted character of 'the Muslim' as congenitally evil, and 'the Hindu' as tolerant, hospitable, liberal and – in an extension of colonial stereotypes that would surely have been unacceptable to the colonialist – part of the divine. Curiously, given the all-embracing character of Hindu philosophy, this modest status of being a small part of infinity is not accorded to the Muslim. Rather, the Muslim, 'foreigner', 'invader' and 'irreligious being', who may be seen to be scheming, greedy, lustful and bigoted, is fully to be blamed for 'his' actions (women figure, on both Hindu and Muslim sides, merely as property: extraordinary cases, like that of Rani Jai Raj Kumari, are after all extra-ordinary). The Hindus, on the other hand – *rajās*, *talūqdars*, *sadhūs* and even ordinary villagers – all being part of the divine, in fact only serve a divine purpose and are, in that sense, not responsible for their actions. It is in that sense, too, I suggest, that they can never be defeated, according to the canons of Hindu history.

The remarkably different subject-positions occupied by 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' point to the vexatious interpenetration of different orders of time, indeed different domains of history, that takes place in the Hindu account. The 'construction' of the original Ram Janmabhumi temple, and its 'destruction', represent the quintessence of these different orders, different histories, the divine and the mundane.

From the time of Shri Ram (and even earlier), which can scarcely be described, which is beyond human time, to the ossified exhibits of colonial and post-colonial museums, divine time runs into historical (and archaeological) time. Hindu history is quite untroubled by this colossal chronological span, or by the huge gaps in it: say, between (1) and (2) in the chronological table given in section III above; or on an altered, 'modern'

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historical time-scale, between (3) and (4); or in the greatly accelerated chronological arrangements of contemporary history, between (13) and (14).

There is a timeless, epic quality to this history, in its proposition of beginnings that are not beginnings, destruction that is not destruction; in the circular character of the narrative, which returns to the same point again and again and again, and in which nothing changes; and in its suggestion that those participating in the 'liberation' war against Babar (or against pseudo-secularists today) are one with those who joined the war against Ravana. What the account does is to atemporalize events. Even the enumeration of battles fails to change this aspect of the narration. While enumeration usually implies linearity, the enumeration here has no such logic attached to it. It might be either random or entirely self-contained; and it does not necessarily "grow". The "76" battles do not move to different ends, not even somewhat different ends, but are in the end all the same.

The curious mixture of cyclical time and instrumentality found in these accounts has the structure of a rudimentary fable, where all events ultimately point one way. However, the collision of times is striking. Remote, golden, happy; overturned by a mythic cycle of bloodletting; savagery and valour; disrupted into linearity once again by the possibility of an 'end' – today. Mythic time schemes leak into positive, historical, realist time. Marked by what Koseleck has called "the self-accelerating temporality of the 'modern'", epic time turns back upon itself and devours itself in the demand for a final resolution now.

The 'Muslim invasion' (equated frequently in Hindu as in colonialist historiography, with the rule of the Great Mughals, and dated to 1528 – for Babar's attack on the RJB is the central motif) and 'Indian Independence' (the appearance of Ramlala in 1949 being the sign of this) are the two precisely dated historical events around which the discourse of Hindu history and politics turns. At one pole is Babar, the foreigner and invader, and with him all Indian Muslims – the progeny of that invader (*Babar ki aulad*), a blot on India's history (not unlike the Babari Masjid). At the other end, this history is animated by the 'continued slavery' of India (and especially of India's westernised ruling class) even 40 years after formal independence, which does not allow 'us' (the Hindus: that is, the nation) to build a temple at this, 'our' most sacred site, in 'our' own country – the only Hindu country in the world.

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Eternal, epic conflict – between the gods and the demons – there was, at the Ram Janmabhumi. But final victory, it appears, is now at hand. 700 million Hindus have awakened, and they will build the temple – at precisely that spot, by their own hands, today.

In the end, then, this account belies its pretensions to epic status. If the epic tradition is distinguished by the absence of beginnings, middles and ends, and of unidirectionality, by the refusal to privilege a single point of view, by the problematising of the good and the bad, Hindu history departs radically from it. Indeed it is, in many senses, closer to the worst kind of ~~realist~~ melodrama – where Good is Good, and Evil is Evil, a thief is a thief, and that's all there is to that.

Hindu history seems to be a long way, too, from being the anti-statist history that it claims to be, giving voice to society and 'community'. It is worlds apart, for instance, from the local 19th-century history of a weavers' *qasba* in northern India, in which the community is the subject of history, community honour its object of analysis. In the latter the idea of the community is valorised, but at the same time it has no fixed boundaries, it attaches itself to different collectivities, and has multiple meanings – depending upon context. In Hindu history, by contrast, the community (<sup>the</sup> 'Hindu' even more than the 'Muslim') is a clearly enumerated community, with boundaries that are fixed from the beginnings of time. In that sense, it has no history. What is more, this Hindu community can realise itself only through the capture of state-power – which is, of course, the stuff of Hindu politics and Hindu history today.

## V

In conclusion, two points may be made about the relationship between Hindu history and secular, academic history, Secular historians – and I use the term broadly to include political figures, journalists and others writing historical accounts – have worked consistently over the last hundred years and more to construct a unified, uniform, centralised and (by extension) undifferentiated 'Indian history'. As many have argued, this is the very ground, the condition, of a unified, uniform, centralised, and undifferentiated 'Hindu history'.

A second point, related to the first, is that the secular historian, in common with all other 'modern' social scientists in India, has insisted on a single language, a uniform vocabulary, a particular way of seeing, as the language, vocabulary, approach, of modern science and, therefore, of all scientific, historical, political, even philosophical, truth. One consequence has been a serious loss in the ability to acknowledge and manage difference.

There is little room in the formal intellectual life of social scientists for a recognition of dissonant voices – as distinct from their personal lives (in India, as elsewhere) in which difference, the diverse viewpoints of rationality and instinct, and the realm of the superstitions, are easily (if often unconsciously) accommodated. There is no room in the approved academic history for an investigation of the historical individuality of individuals, for questions about the direction of human progress, for self-doubt or a sympathetic understanding of a religious sensibility.

I wish to suggest that this inflexible (and somewhat dated) scientism, based on an arrogant belief in the infinite power of 19th and 20th century 'man', has not only closed off many possibilities of reflection and debate, but also opened up space for other arrogant believers to stake their claim to 'authenticity' on the grounds of attention to particularity: a concern with indigenous (or, as it is quickly dubbed, 'national') culture, religious sensibilities and the rights of society as against the state.

Even after we have condemned Hindu history as myth, or more carefully as a fraud that slides all too easily between 'myth' and 'history'; after we have pointed out its inconsistencies, ambiguity, duplicity, and its refusal to account for so much of what it says; the question remains why this fraud persuades so many people of different classes and regions and sexes, why such large numbers of our countrymen and women fail to notice what we see as its ambiguity and duplicity – or, at any rate, are untroubled by it.

The answers may lie not only in the kind of 'authoritative' history – of 'Muslim' conquest and Hindu-Muslim strife – that has been continuously and widely broadcast in India, from early colonial times until today, or in the political manipulation and economic difficulties of recent decades. They may also lie in the persistence of world views which do not search for consistency in the way <sup>social</sup> scientists do; which do not see the sharp distinctions that 'modernists' make between religion and culture, or religion and politics (or, indeed, religion and history); which do not always expect human activity and history to be neatly compartmentalised, recognise instead that ambiguity is central to the business of existence and survival, and work with the knowledge that context determines meaning.

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