RIOTS

> The language of the mob was only the language of public opinion cleansed of hypocrisy and restraint.
>
> HANNAH ARENDT

I

IN OCTOBER 1952 THE chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) wrote a rare signed article in the English-language press. 'Cut from its moorings, regeneration of a nation is not possible', insisted M. S. Golwalkar. It was, therefore,

> necessary to revive the fundamental values and ideas, and to wipe out all signs that reminded us of our past slavery and humiliation. It is our first necessity to see ourselves in pristine purity. Our present and future has to be well united with our glorious past. The broken chain has got to be relinked. That alone will fire the youth of free India with a new spirit of service and devotion to our people. There cannot be a higher call of national unity than to be readily prepared to sacrifice our all for the honour and glory of the motherland. That is the highest form of patriotism.

How could one give shape and meaning to this very general ideal? What specific issue would charge the youth to sacrifice their all? 'Such a point of honour in our national life', believed the RSS chief,

> is none else but MOTHER COW, the living symbol of the Mother Earth – that deserves to be the sole object of devotion and worship. To stop forthwith any onslaught on this particular point of our national honour, and to foster the spirit of devotion to the motherland, [a] ban on cow-slaughter should find topmost priority in our programme of national renaissance in Swaraj.[1]

In the opinion of Guru Golwalkar and his Sangh, India was a 'Hindu' nation. But the Hindus themselves were divided – by caste, sect, language and region. From the time it was founded in 1925, the mission of the RSS had been to make the Hindus a strong and cohesive fighting force. For its members, as for the organization as a whole, religious sentiment went hand-in-hand with political ambition. We may not doubt Golwalkar's own personal devotion to the cow. Yet his call to make cow-slaughter a national priority stemmed from a much greater goal, that of uniting the Hindus.

The cow was found all over India. Hindus too were found all over India. And Hindus worshipped the cow, whereas Muslims and Christians preferred to butcher and eat it. That was the logic on which the RSS sought to build a nationwide campaign. Fourteen years after Golwalkar's article, a large crowd marched on Parliament to demand a countrywide ban on cow-slaughter. That was the campaign's high point, and its appeal steadily declined thereafter. Even at its zenith its main attractions were to Hindu holy men and RSS workers – it never quite achieved the popular support its promoters had hoped for.

In the 1980s, however, a single holy spot in a single small town was able to accomplish what a ubiquitous holy animal could not. The campaign to build a temple where a mosque stood in Ayodhya generated a widespread appeal. Many Hindus across India, and of different castes, were beginning to see this as a 'point of honour in our national life'. To these people, the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was indeed are minder of 'our past slavery and humiliation'. To put a temple to Ram in its place had become the 'sole object of devotion and worship' for thousands of Hindu youths. This was energy expended in a cause which Golwalkar himself had not anticipated. Were he alive, he might have been surprised, and certainly also pleased.

II

In 1984 the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), successor to the old Jana Sangh, won a mere two seats in the eighth general election. Five years later its tally was eighty-six. A major reason for this rise was its involvement in the Ayodhya campaign.

Anxious to keep the Congress out of power, the BJP now supported V. P. Singh's National Front without joining the government. However, the decision to implement the Mandal Commission's report, announced in August 1990, threw the party into a tizzy. Some leaders thought this a diabolical plan

to break up Hindu society. Others argued that the extension of affirmative action was a necessary bow to the aspirations of the backward castes. Within the party, and within RSS *shakhas*, *the* debate raged furiously – should, or should not, the Mandal recommendations be endorsed?

Rather than take a position, the BJP chose to shift the terms of political debate, away from Mandal and caste and back towards religion and the mandir/mosque question. The party announced a *yatra, or* march, from the ancient temple of Somnath in Gujarat to the town of Ayodhya. The march would be led by L. K. Advani, an austere, unsmiling man reckoned to be more 'hard line' than his colleague Atal Behari Vajpayee. He would travel in a Toyota van fitted up to look like a *rath* (chariot), stopping to hold public meetings on the way.

Commencing on 25 September 1990, Mr Advani's *rath yatra* planned to reach Ayodhya five weeks later, after travelling more than 6,000 miles through eight states. Militants of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) flanked the van, flagging it off from one town and welcoming it at the next. At public meetings they were complemented by saffron-robed *sadhus*, whose 'necklaces of prayer beads, long beards and ash-marked foreheads provided a strong visual counterpoint' to these armed young men. The march's imagery was religious, allusive, militant, masculine, and anti-Muslim'. This was reinforced by the speeches made by Advani, which accused the government of 'appeasing' the Muslim minority and of practising a 'pseudo-secularism' which denied the legitimate interests and aspirations of the Hindu majority. The building of a Ram temple in Ayodhya was presented as the symbolic fulfilment of these interests and aspirations.[2]

Advani's march through north-western India was a major headache to V. P. Singh's government. For the procession 'posed a provocation that could not be ignored. Growing disorder, riots, and a final destruction of the mosque loomed ahead. Yet there would be serious consequences to stopping it. Not only would Singh have to act against [the revered god] Rama, but he would also bring down his own ruling coalition and risk serious disorder.'[3] The *yatra* reached Delhi, where Advani camped for several days, daring the government to arrest him. The challenge was ducked, and the procession started up again. However, a week before it was to reach its final destination, the van was stopped and Advani placed under preventive detention. The arrest had been ordered by the Bihar chief minister Lalu Prasad Yadav, through whose state the march was then passing.

While L. K. Advani cooled his heels in a Bihar government guest house, his followers were making their way to Ayodhya. Thousands of *kar sevaks*

(volunteers) were converging from all parts of the country. The Uttar Pradesh chief minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, was, like his Bihari namesake, a bitter political opponent of the BJP. He ordered the mass arrest of the visitors from out of state. Apparently as many as 150,000 *kar sevaks* were detained, but almost half as many still found their way to Ayodhya. Twenty thousand security personnel were already in the temple town, some regular police, others from the paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF).

On the morning of 30 October a large crowd of *kar sevaks* was intercepted at abridge on the river Sarayu, which divided Ayodhya's old town from the new. The volunteers pushed their way past the police and surged towards the Babri Masjid. There they were met by BSF contingents. Some *kar sevaks* managed to dodge them, too, and reach the mosque. One planted a saffron flag on the structure; others attacked it with axes and hammers. To stop a mass invasion the BSF *jawans* used tear gas and, later, live bullets. The *kar sevaks* were chased through narrow streets and into temple courtyards. Some of them resisted, with sticks and stones – they were supported by angry residents, who rained down improvised missiles on the police.[4]

The battle between the security forces and the volunteers raged for three whole days. At least twenty *kar sevaks* died in the fighting. Their bodies were later picked up by VHP activists, cremated, and the ashes stored in urns. These were then taken around the towns of northern India, inflaming passions wherever they went. Hindus were urged to take revenge for the blood of these 'martyrs'. The state of Uttar Pradesh was rocked by a series of religious riots. Hindu mobs attacked Muslim localities, and – in a manner reminiscent of the grisly Partition massacres – stopped trains to pull out and kill those who were recognizably Muslim. In some places the victims retaliated, whereupon they were set upon by the Provincial Armed Constabulary, long notorious for its hostility towards the minority community.[5]

As one commentator put it, L. K. Advani's *rath yatra* had, in effect, become a *raktyatra*, a journey of blood.[6]

III

Among the casualties of the *rath yatra* was Prime Minister V. P. Singh. In November 1990 he resigned, unable to sustain his minority government in the absence of BJP support. As in 1979 – when Morarji Desai demitted office – the Congress allowed a lame-duck prime minister (in this case Chandra

Shekhar) to hold charge while they prepared for midterm elections to be held in the summer of 1991. In the middle of the campaign Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated while speaking in a town in Tamil Nadu. The assassin, who was also blown up by the bomb she was carrying, was later revealed to be a representative of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The killing was an act of vengeance, for the LTTE had not forgiven Rajiv Gandhi for sending troops against them in 1987.

Notwithstanding the murder of Rajiv Gandhi, the elections went ahead on schedule. Pollsters had predicted a hung Parliament, with no party anywhere near a majority. However, the sympathy generated by the killing allowed the Congress to win 244 seats. With support from independents they were in a position to form a government. P. V. Narasimha Rao, a veteran of the Congress Party from Andhra Pradesh who had held important positions in Rajiv Gandhi's Cabinet, was sworn in as prime minister.

In these Parliamentary elections of 1991 the BJP won 120 seats, up thirty-five from the last time. It also won the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh. It was now in power in four states in northern India (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh being the others). Clearly, the Ram campaign was paying political dividends. Riots were being effectively translated into votes. At the same time, these successes at the polls had led to a crisis of identity. Was the BJP a political party, or was it a social movement? Some leaders thought the party should now put the mosque-versus-temple controversy on the back burner. It should instead raise broader questions of economic and foreign policy and work to expand its influence in south India. On the other side, the VHP and the RSS were determined to keep the spotlight on that disputed territory in Ayodhya. In October 1991 they acquired the land around the mosque and began levelling the ground, preparing for temple construction.

In July 1992 a team from the central government was sent to study the situation. They found that there had been 'large-scale demolition' on the disputed site, and the building of a 'large concrete platform', both developments in clear contravention of court orders demanding that the status quo be maintained. To their dismay, the Uttar Pradesh government, headed by the old RSS hand Kalyan Singh, had turned a blind eye to these activities. There had been, in sum, 'flagrant violation of the law in Ayodhya'.

Worried that the trouble would escalate, the Home Ministry in New Delhi had prepared a contingency plan, allowing for the imposition of President's Rule in Uttar Pradesh and a central takeover of the mosque/ temple complex. However, Prime Minister Rao still hoped for the matter to be resolved by dia-

logue. He had several meetings with VHP leaders and also consulted with the opposing Babri Masjid Action Committee. The possibility of having the matter referred to the Supreme Court was also discussed.[7]

Meanwhile, the VHP announced that 6 December had been chosen as the 'auspicious' day on which work on the temple would commence. From the middle of November volunteers began streaming into Ayodhya, encouraged by the fact that the state government was now in the hands of the BJP. The chief minister, Kalyan Singh, was summoned to New Delhi. Narasimha Rao urged him to allow the Supreme Court to decide on the case. Singh told the PM that 'the only comprehensive solution to the Ayodhya dispute was to hand over the disputed structure to the Hindus'.[8]

Kalyan Singh had instructed his government to house and feed the thousands of volunteers coming in from out of the state. Reports of this large-scale influx alarmed the Home Ministry. They prepared a fresh contingency plan, under which paramilitary forces would be sent to Ayodhya. By the end of the month some 20,000 troops had been stationed at locations within an hour's march of the town, ready to move in when required. This, claimed the home secretary at the time, 'was the largest mobilisation of such forces for such an operation since Independence'.[9]

On the other side, more than 100,000 *kar sevaks* had reached the temple town, 'complete with *trishuls* [tridents] and bows and arrows'. On the last day of November, at a press conference in Delhi at which he announced his own departure for Ayodhya, L. K. Advani said that 'I cannot give any guarantee at the moment on what will happen on 6 December. All I know is that we are going to perform *kar seva*.'[10]

On the morning of the 6th, a journalist at the site found that 'straddling the security wall [around the mosque] were PAC constables armed with batons and RSS volunteers with armbands'. The central forces stationed around Ayodhya had not been asked to move into the town. The job was left to the UP police and its constabulary. The VHP had planned to begin the prayers at 11.30, on the raised platform constructed beforehand. However, by this time some *kar sevaks* had begun making menacing moves towards the mosque. RSS workers and police constables tried to stop them, but were met instead by a hail of stones thrown by the crowd, which was becoming more restive by the minute. '*Mandir yahin banayenge*', they shouted, pointing at the Babri Masjid – We will build our temple at that very spot. An intrepid youngster scaled the railing ringing the mosque and climbed on top of one of its domes. This was the signal for a mass surge towards the monument. The police fled, allowing hundreds of *kar sevaks* to charge the mosque, waving axes and iron bars.

By noon, volunteers were crawling all over the Masjid, holding saffron flags and shouting slogans of victory. Grappling hooks were anchored to the domes, while the base was battered with hammers and axes. At 2 p.m. one dome collapsed, bringing a dozen men down with it. '*Ek dhakka aur do, Babri Masjid tor do!'* screamed the radical preacher Sadhvi Ritambara (Shove some more, and the whole thing will collapse!). At 3.30 a second dome gave way. An hour later the third and final one was demolished. A building that had seen so many rulers and dynasties come and go, that had withstood the furies of 400 and more monsoons, had in a single afternoon been reduced to rubble.[11]

Was the demolition of the Babri Masjid planned beforehand? Or was it simply the result of a spontaneous display of popular emotion and anger? To be sure, some BJP leaders were taken aback by the turn of events. Despite his threatening talk the week before, when he saw volunteers rushing the monument, L. K. Advani asked them to return. As the domes came crashing down, he got into an argument with the senior RSS functionaries H. V. Seshadri and K. S. Sudarshan. They thought that now the deed was done, the RSS and the BJP should claim credit for it. 'The course of history is not pre-determined', said Sudarshan to Advani. 'Accept what has happened.' Advani answered that he would instead 'publicly express regret for it'.[12]

In press conferences after the event, the term most often used by BJP spokesmen to describe the happenings at Ayodhya was 'unfortunate'. They knew that in a democracy ostensibly bound by the rule of law, an act of vandalism by the main opposition party could scarcely be condoned. When he met the press at the party's Delhi headquarters on the evening of the 6th, the ideologue K. R. Malkani 'made it clear that we did want the old structure to go, but that we wanted it gone through due process of law. The regret was that it had been demolished in an irregular manner.' Seeking to distance the BJP from the act, he claimed that the *kar sevaks* who attacked the mosque were most likely from the Shiv Sena, since they had been heard speaking in Marathi.[13]

The radicals within the movement were less coy. One VHP leader boasted that, in September itself, engineers had been asked to identify the structure's weak spots and volunteers trained on how best to bring it down. 'Without this planning how do you think we razed the masjid in six hours?' he asked a reporter. 'Do you think a group of frenzied *kar sevaks* could have gone about it so systematically?'[14] And in a speech in Madras soon after the demolition, the polemicist Arun Shourie noted that, 'while the BJP leaders tried to disown and distance themselves from what had happened, the Hindus of India appropriated the destruction; they owned it up' . The Ayodhya events, said

Shourie, demonstrated 'that the Hindus have now realised that they are in very large numbers, that their sentiment is shared by those who man the apparatus of the state, and that they can bend the state to their will'. His own hope was that 'the Ayodhya movement has to be seen as the starting point of a cultural awareness and understanding that would ultimately result in a complete re-structuring of the Indian public life in ways that would be in consonance with Indian civilisational heritage' – a somewhat roundabout way of saying that the demolition of the Babri Masjid should, and perhaps would, be a prelude to the reshaping of India as a Hindu nation.[15]

One cannot be certain that all Hindus shared these sentiments – as Shourie presumed they did. But those Hindus who brought down the mosque on 6 December had certainly bent the Indian state to their will. The forces to stop them were at hand, yet the order telling them to act never came. Worried that it would be charged with being anti-Hindu, the government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao 'came to perceive the lesser evil in the demolition of the mosque'. Only after the deed was done was action taken – in the shape of the dismissal of the Uttar Pradesh government and the imposition of President's Rule.[16]

IV

When the domes of the Babri Masjid fell, they brought those atop them down too. More than fifty *kar sevaks* were injured, some very seriously. At least six deaths were reported. The aftermath of the event was, however, more deadly still. The main leaders of the BJP, such as L. K. Advani, were taken into protective custody, yet riots broke out in town after town, in an orgy of violence that lasted two months and claimed more than 2,000 lives.

The troubles began in the vicinity itself. An influential local priest had expressed the desire that Ayodhya should become the 'Vatican of the Hindus'. To cleanse the town of the minorities was one step towards that larger goal. *Kar sevaks* celebrated the felling of the mosque by setting fire to Muslim homes and localities. In other towns, riots were a consequence of processions organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Elsewhere it was Muslims who came out into the streets to protest the demolition, by attacking police posts and attempting to burn government buildings.

Sometimes sparked by triumphant Hindus, at other times by defiant Muslims, the riots covered large parts of northern and western India: 246 died

in Gujarat, 120 in Madhya Pradesh, 100 in Assam, 201 in Uttar Pradesh, 60 in Karnataka. The weapons used by the mobs ranged from acid and sling-shots to swords and guns. Children were burnt alive, women shot dead by the police. In this epidemic of violence, 'every possible refinement in human unkindness [was] on display'.[17]

The city worst hit was India's commercial capital, Bombay. On the morning of 7 December the Muslim locality of Muhammad Ali Road witnessed an outpouring of collective anger in which Hindu shops were raided and effigies of BJP leaders set aflame. A temple was also razed to the ground. When a posse of constables arrived on the scene, the crowd were undaunted. 'Police in Ayodhya just stood by and let the mosque be demolished,' they shouted. 'We're going to get you now.' Through that day and the next mobs battled police in the area. At least sixty people died in the violence.

Meanwhile, to the north of the city, the shanty town of Dharavi was suffering from an excess of Hindu triumphalism. A 'victory rally' organized by the BJP and Shiv Sena ended in attacks on Muslim homes and shops. In retaliation, Muslims stabbed a priest and set his temple on fire. In other places anger was vented not on the rival community but on the state. Dozens of government buses were trashed or burnt, as were at least 130 bus shelters.[18]

On 9 December the Shiv Sena and the BJP announced a city wide strike to protest against the arrest of their leaders in Ayodhya. This, recalled a Bombay journalist, 'was a signal for their followers to go on the rampage. They attacked mosques and Muslim establishments. In one locality, the Shiv Sena put up a notice announcing an award of Rs50,000 to anyone pointing out a Muslim house.'[19]

The Shiv Sainiks were encouraged by their leader and mentor, Balasaheb Thackeray. In an editorial in the party newspaper, *Saamna*, published on 10 December, Thackeray insisted that the violence of the past few days was merely

> the beginning of an era of retaliatory war. In this era, the history and geography of not only this country but the entire world is going to change. The dream of the Akhand Hindu Rashtra [United Hindu State] is going to come true. Even the shadow of fanatical sinners [i.e. Muslims] will disappear from our soil. We will now live happily and die happily . . . No revolution is possible by shedding tears. Revolution needs only one offering, and that is the blood of devotees![20]

Curfew was imposed, and the army called in. It still took ten days for the city to get back to normal, for the commuter trains to be up and running, for offices and factories to be working as before. For three weeks the peace held, but then in the beginning of January afresh riot broke out. On the morning of the 5th two Hindu dock workers were stabbed to death in a Muslim locality. The cause was not clear – it might have been a product of union rivalry – but the story that Hindus were killed in a Muslim area spread through the city, catalysing more violence. In Dharavi, angry Hindus looted shops and warehouses owned by Muslims. In another slum area, Jogeshwari, a Hindu family was burnt to death. For a week the fires raged, till Bal Thackeray announced in a *Saamna* editorial that the attacks could stop 'since the fanatics had been taught a lesson' It was, indeed, the minorities who had borne the brunt of the violence. Of the nearly 800 people who died in the riots, at least two-thirds were Muslim, though they constituted a mere 15 per cent of the city's population.

Once more Bombay limped back to normal. This time the peace held for two whole months. On 12 March 1993 a series of bombs went off in south Bombay, one outside the Stock Exchange, others in front of or inside luxury hotels and corporate offices. The intention was to inflict the maximum casualties, for the explosions occurred in the early afternoon, the busiest time in the richest part of the city. More than 300 people died in the blasts. The material used to blow them up was the powerful explosive RDX. The operations had been directed by two Dubai-based mafia dons, in apparent revenge for the killings of their co-religionists earlier in the season.

The rise of the Shiv Sena had, over the years, somewhat dented Bombay's reputation as the most cosmopolitan and multicultural of India's cities.That image was dealt a body blow by the riots and bomb blasts of 1992-3. This was now a 'permanently altered city', a 'deeply divided city' , even a 'city at war with itself'.[21]

The Babri Masjid demolition was depressing enough, but, as the columnist Behram Contractor wrote, 'the bigger tragedy, perhaps, is not that India is no longer a secular country, but that Bombay is no longer a cosmopolitan city. Whatever happens henceforth, whether the Ram Janmabhoomi issue is resolved, whether Hindus and Muslims relearn to live together, Bombay's reputation as a free-living and high-swinging city, absorbing people from all communities and all parts of India, is gone for ever'.[22]

V

In 1994 the VHP leader Ashok Singhal remarked that the destruction of the Babri Masjid was ‘a catalyst for the ideological polarization which is nearly complete’.[23] Two years later the Bharatiya Janata Party reaped the rewards in the eleventh general election. It won 161 seats, emerging as the largest single party in Parliament. The Congress was relegated to second place, twenty-one seats behind. The veteran BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee was invited to form the government, but after two weeks he resigned, failing to cobble a majority. For the next two years the BJP sat in the opposition, while the country was governed by a motley coalition of regional parties calling itself the National Front. When a mid-term poll was held in 1998, the BJP improved its position further, winning 182 seats. This time, the support of smaller parties and independents gave it the numbers to govern. However, within a year it called a fresh election, hoping to do better still. As it happened, it won the same number of seats (182), but the Congress hit an all-time low of 114. A strong performance by its allies allowed the BJP to govern for a further five years. Thus, the BJP’s Atal Behari Vajpayee became the country’s longest-serving non-Congress prime minister, occupying that office for six years altogether.

In the first years of Independence the wounds of Partition had provided the excuse for a vigorous assertion by the Hindu right. The RSS was particularly active. But when the Jana Sangh won a mere three seats in the 1952 elections, commentators were ready to write an epitaph for a party that, in a modern, secular, democratic state, dared to base its politics on religion. The socialist politician Asoka Mehta wrote that Hindu communalism ‘has proved to be weak twice, once in [the elections of] 1946 and again in 1951–2’. He was confident that ‘its ghost is now laid for good’.[24] ‘The Hindu is too tolerant’, remarked the writer-couple Taya and Maurice Zinkin, themselves long resident in India. The election results had shown that ‘Hindu communalism has been utterly defeated’, indeed, that ‘communalism has thus failed, probably finally’.[25]

Other observers, the Kashmiri leader Sheikh Abdullah among them, thought that it was mostly Jawaharlal Nehru who kept the Indian state and Indian politics on the secular path. They worried about what would happen after he was gone. After Nehru’s death the Jana Sangh slowly gained in influence. It won twenty-five seats to the Lok Sabha in 1967 and twenty-two in 1971, more or less holding its own despite the ‘Indira wave’ of that year. Later, its participation in the JP movement, its leaders’ incarceration during the emer-

gency and its role in the Janata government substantially increased the party's profile and presence. Then it fell away again. As the freshly named Bharatiya Janata Party it won two seats in the elections of 1984. Even Atal Behari Vajpayee, who had been a member of parliament since 1957, failed to win re-election. Once more obituaries were written for a politics based on religion. Once more it was claimed that the Hindu would not tolerate bigotry among his kind. 'The most striking feature of Indian politics is its persistent centrism', wrote two American political scientists. Apart from the natural Indian tendency towards moderation, the BJP had also to contend with the fragmentation of the electorate on lines of caste and region. Hence the conclusion that 'the support base for a national confessional party, [representing] the Hindu majority, is illusionary'.[26]

The events of the 1990s confounded these predictions. For the big story of this decade was in fact the rise of Hindu communalism, as manifested most significantly in the number of seats won by the BJP in successive general elections. Beyond the formal theatre of party politics, there was also a transformation occurring on the ground. In towns and villages across northern India, relations between Hindus and Muslims were being redefined. Once, members of the two communities had lived next to one another, traded with one another, even befriended and played with one another. True, there was also competition and conflict. Each community thought itself theologically superior, each had memories – real or imagined – of being scorned or victimized by the other. However, the compulsions of living together meant that these divisions were deflected or subsumed by activities conducted in common. But with the riots sparked by the Ayodhya movement, the ambivalences had been replaced by an unambiguous animosity. Hostility and suspicion were now the governing – some would say only – idioms of Hindu-Muslim relations.[27]

Fewer in numbers, and generally poorer in economic terms, the Muslims had more to lose from the souring of relations. In most riots more Muslims died than Hindus, more Muslim homes were burnt than Hindu ones. The whole community had become prey to a deep insecurity. The taunts of Hindu chauvinists that they should move to Pakistan made them feel vulnerable and victimized. The sentiments of the ordinary Indian Muslim, circa 1995, were movingly expressed by the Telugu poet Khadar Mohiuddin. On the one hand, he wrote, the Muslim is told by the Hindus to think that

> My religion is a conspiracy
> My prayer meetings are a conspiracy

My lying quiet is a conspiracy
My attempt to wake up is a conspiracy
My desire to have friends is a conspiracy
My ignorance, my backwardness, a conspiracy.

On the other hand, said Khadar,

It's no conspiracy
[for the Hindu] to make me a refugee
in the very country of my birth

It's no conspiracy
to poison the air I breathe
and the space I live in

It's certainly no conspiracy
to cut me to pieces
and then imagine an uncut Bharat.

The Muslim was being continually asked to prove his loyalty to India. As Khadar Mohiuddin found, 'cricket matches weigh and measure my patriotism' When India played Pakistan, it was demanded of Muslims that they display the national flag outside their homes, and that they loudly and publicly cheer for the national side. In the poet's words: 'Never mind my love for my motherland/ What's important is how much I hate the other land'.[28]

The polarization of the two communities was a victory for the Sangh Parivar, the collective name by which the family of organizations built around the RSS and the BJP is known. Through the first five decades of Indian independence, the *ideology* of the Sangh Parivar had remained pretty much constant. To my knowledge, the best summation of this ideology appears in D. R. Goyal's authoritative history of the RSS. In Goyal's rendition, the core beliefs of what the Sangh Parivar calls 'Hindutva' are as follows:

> Hindus have lived in India since times immemorial; Hindus are the nation because all culture, civilisation and life is contributed by them alone; non-Hindus are invaders or guests and cannot be treated as equal unless they adopt Hindu traditions, culture etc.; the non-Hindus, particularly Muslims and Christians, have been enemies of everything Hindu

> and are, therefore, to be treated as threats; the freedom and progress of this country is the freedom and progress of Hindus; the history of India is the history of the struggle of the Hindus for protection and preservation of their religion and culture against the onslaught of these aliens; the threat continues because the power is in the hands of those who do not believe in this nation as a Hindu Nation; those who talk of national unity as the unity of all those who live in this country are motivated by the selfish desire of cornering minority votes and are therefore traitors; the unity and consolidation of the Hindus is the dire need of the hour because the Hindu people are surrounded on all sides by enemies; the Hindus must develop the capacity for massive retaliation and offence is the best defence; lack of unity is the root cause of all the troubles of the Hindus and the Sangh is born with the divine mission to bring about that unity.[29]

Goyal adds that 'without fear of contradiction it can be stated that nothing more than this has been said in the RSS shakhas during the past 74 years of its existence'.

While its ideology was unchanged, in time the *organization* of the RSS grew enormously in strength and influence. Once an all-male body, it opened a separate women's wing which both schoolgirls and housewives were encouraged to join. Once limited to northern India, it setup active branches in states where it previously had no presence at all. Everywhere the core ideology of the Sangh was adapted to the local context. Thus, in Gujarat, the rebuilding of the ancient Somnath temple was celebrated as a manifestation of a united and assertive Hinduism. In Orissa the focus was on the great Jagannatha temple, used by the RSS to build bridges between the local and pan-Indian Hindu identities. There was a particular emphasis on work in tribal areas, on 'reclaiming' the adivasis and 'returning' them to the Hindu fold. Schools were opened where tribal youths were taught Sanskrit and acquainted with Hindu myths and legends. The RSS worked hard in times of natural calamity, bringing grain when the rains failed and rebuilding homes after an earthquake.[30]

As its organization grew, the RSS's ideology found even fuller expression through a new *campaign strategy* .M.S. Golwalkar had thought that cow-slaughter was the issue on which the Sangh Parivar would launch a country-wide struggle. That failed, but then the egregious mistakes of the Congress delivered an even more emotive issue into their lap. When Rajiv Gandhi's

government appeased Muslim fanatics and overturned the Supreme Court verdict in the Shah Bano case, the Hindu radicals could claim, more convincingly than ever, that (*pace* D. R. Goyal's words above) the present rulers were 'motivated by the selfish desire of cornering minority votes', that to counter this, 'the unity and consolidation of the Hindus is the dire need of the hour'. That 'non-Hindus are invaders or guests' was further proven by the stubborn reluctance of Muslims to hand over the Babri Masjid. The monument itself was a standing insult to Hindu pride, a nasty reminder of the slavery of past times that had not yet been fully overcome. That they were not allowed to construct a shrine to their beloved Lord Ram was only because 'the Hindu people are surrounded on all sides by enemies'; enemies within, as in the politicians who appeased Muslims, and enemies without, as in the malevolent Muslim nation (Pakistan) which had fought three wars against them. To build the Ram temple, but also to protect themselves more generally, the Hindus had to 'develop the capacity for massive retaliation' , to realize that 'offence is the best defence'.

To the phrases already quoted from D. R. Goyal's summation, let us now add the critical last line: 'lack of unity is the root cause of all the troubles of the Hindus and the Sangh is born with the divine mission to bring about that unity'.

In the Ram movement, the RSS's mission was furthered by its sister organizations, in particular the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which had taken up the issue in the first place. Then there was the Bajrang Dal, named after Ram's great monkey devotee Hanuman (who was also called Bajrang Bali). This was composed of angry youths, equipped not so much to 'protect' their idol (as Hanuman is supposed to have done) but to beat up anyone who stood in their way. Finally, there was the Shiv Sena, actually another party altogether, and whose ideas and methods were even more extreme than the VHP and the Bajrang Dal. They were prone to calling Muslims 'poisonous snakes' and 'traitors', and advising them to move to Pakistan.[31]

By the 1980s the RSS could no longer be called a male or north-Indian body; it had reached out to women and to other parts of the country. However, it was only through the Ram movement that it successfully overthrew the tag of being a 'Brahmin-Bania' organization, led and dominated by the elite, traditionally literate Hindu castes. For the first sixty years of its existence it had been guided by a Maharashtrian Brahmin – first K. B. Hedgewar, then M. S. Golwalkar, finally Balasaheb Deoras. Then in March 1994 a non-Brahmin from Uttar Pradesh, Rajendra Singh, was appointed head of the organization. This was a bow not only to the Mandal debate, but also an acknowledgement

of the major role played by the backward castes in the Ayodhya movement. The cadres of the Shiv Sena and the VHP were mostly drawn from the middle castes, and there were a fair number of Dalits as well.

Through this broadening of the base – in terms of region, gender and, above all, caste – was created what might justly be called the 'mother of all vote banks'. In the early days of the Ayodhya controversy, circa 1985-6, VHP leaders were liable to refer to the issue as one which affected the 'sentiments of sixty crore [600 million] Hindus'. As time went on, and the issue remained unresolved, demographic change caused a natural inflation in numbers: 'sixty crore' became 'seventy crore', even 'eighty crore'. This was, of course, a conceit. The VHP and the RSS did not speak for the majority of Hindus. But apparently they spoke for enough Hindus to allow their political front, the Bharatiya Janata Party, to emerge as the largest single party in the Indian Parliament.

In the 1990s the BJP came to define the political agenda in a way the Congress once did in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, a property dispute in a small north-Indian town came to enjoy an overwhelming importance in the life of the nation. Thus, the political discourse in general came to be obsessed with questions of religious identity rather than matters of economic development or social reform. Losing its hold on the government, winning ever fewer seats in Parliament, the Congress was now merely reacting to debates initiated by the BJP. In desperation, it called upon Rajiv Gandhi's widow Sonia, then living a reclusive life with her family in Delhi, to head the party. After she took charge as Congress president in 1998, Sonia Gandhi worked overtime to dispel the image of her party as 'anti-Hindu'. She regularly visited temples, and even went so far as to participate in the great Kumbh Mela, a congregation held every twelve years in which tens of millions of Hindus take a dip in the Ganga at Allahabad.[32]

While the Ayodhya dispute remained its focus, the Sangh Parivar also took up other campaigns in the 1990s. More sites were identified where, it was alleged, Muslims had usurped a Hindu shrine – in Mathura, in Banaras, in the Madhya Pradesh town of Dhar, in the Baba Budan hills of Karnataka's Chikmaglur district. Movements were launched, with varying success, to 'reclaim' these places from the 'intruders'. Simultaneously a series of attacks were launched on Christian missionaries, particularly those working in tribal areas. Churches were burnt and priests beaten up in both Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. An Australian missionary was burnt alive in Orissa, along with his two sons, the arsonist later identified as a member of the Bajrang Dal named Dara Singh.[33] Hindus were a comfortable majority in India, yet the RSS insis-

ted that their pre-eminence was threatened on the one hand by Christian proselytization and on the other by the larger family size of Muslims, this in turn attributed to the practice of polygamy.[34]

Occurring in different parts of India, sometimes led by the RSS, at other times initiated by the VHP or the Shiv Sena, there was nonetheless an underlying pattern to these campaigns. In every case, a religious minority – Muslim or Christian – was targeted and accused of having offended Hindu sentiment, or of being in the pay of a foreign power. The demonizing of the other was a necessary prelude to mobilizing one's own forces, thus to foster a collective spirit of solidarity in along-divided Hindu community. Usually, there was much malice aforethought. Sometimes, however, the issue taken up was farcical rather than diabolical. In the summer of 2000, for example, the RSS journal *Panchjanya* complained that the three leading male actors in the Hindi film industry were all Muslim (Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan, and Salman Khan). The journal saw in this coincidence a dark conspiracy, whose agents apparently were mafia dons who funded these actors' films and multinational corporations whose products the actors endorsed. To thwart the conspiracy, *Panchjanya* called upon its readers to promote an up-and-coming actor named Hrithik Roshan, the lone 'Hindu' challenger to the monopoly of the Khans.[35]

VI

As a rule, the Muslims in India were poorer than the Hindus, as well as less educated. There were a few Muslim entrepreneurs, but no real Muslim middle class. They continued to be under-represented in the professions, and in government service. Forty per cent of Muslims in cities lived below the poverty line; the situation in the countryside was not much better. The literacy rate for Muslims was well below the national average, and the gap between them and the other communities was growing. Few Muslim girls were sent to school, while the boys were often placed in *madrasas* (religious schools) whose archaic curricula did not equip them for jobs in the modern economy. Meanwhile, the taunts of the Sangh Parivar had inculcated a defensive, almost siege mentality among the Muslim intelligentsia. The young men, especially, sought succour in religion, seeing in a renewed commitment to Islam an alternative to poverty and persecution in the world outside. Nor was this turn to faith always quietist. A Students Islamic Movement of India had arisen, whose leaders ar-

gued that threats from the rival religion could be met only through force of arms.[36]

The rise of Hindu fundamentalism in the 1990s put an already vulnerable minority further on the defensive. In the border state of Jammu and Kashmir, however, the roles were reversed. Here, the Muslim majority was increasingly expressing its aspirations in religious terms, with the Hindu minority suffering as a consequence.

The popular revolt that broke out in the Valley in 1989 was at first led by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. Within a year, however, the JKLF had ceded ground to the Hizb-ul Mujahideen, whose own commitment to a multireligious Kashmir was much less certain. The cry of *azaadi* (freedom) was being replaced by the call of *jihad* (holy war). As a popular slogan of the Hizb-ul cadres went: 'Na *guerrilla jang, na qaumi jang: al jihad, al jihad*'. (This is neither a guerrilla war nor a national liberation struggle; this is jihad, jihad.)[37]

One consequence of this turn to religion was that the community of Kashmiri Pandits became suspect in the eyes of the militants. They were Hindus, but in other respects akin to their Muslim brethren, speaking the same language, eating the same kind of food, partaking of the same syncretic culture of the Valley. In the past there had been economic rivalry between Hindus and Muslims. Sheikh Abdullah, for example, had resented and then brought to an end Pandit control of cultivable land and of the state administration. But the social harmony was more or less complete. Even in the Partition riots of 1947 Kashmir was untouched, an oasis of peace lauded by Mahatma Gandhi himself.

In the winter of 1989/90, as the Hizb-ul supplanted the JKLF, the Pandits became a target of attack. Because they were Hindus, and for no other reason, they were seen as agents of a state that had for so long oppressed the Kashmiris. Several hundred Pandits were killed in 1989-90, and killed in ways that made the ones who survived deeply insecure. As a reporter who documented these murders later wrote:

> These women and men were not killed in the cross-fire, accidentally, but were systematically and brutally targeted. Many of the women were gang-raped before they were killed. One woman was bisected by a mill saw. The bodies of the men bore marks of torture. Death by strangulation, hanging, amputations, the gouging out of eyes, were not uncom-

mon. Often their bodies were dumped with notes forbidding anyone – on pain of death – to touch them.[38]

In panic, Pandit families began leaving the Valley for the Hindu-majority Jammu region. Others fled further a field, to Delhi and even to Bombay.

There were an estimated 200,000 Pandits living in the Kashmir Valley. By the summer of 1990, at least half had left. They lived in refugee camps, some run by the government, others by the RSS. At first the state's hope, and their own, was that the migration was temporary, and that once peace returned to the Valley then so would they. In the event, they stayed on, and on.[39]

Throughout the 1990s there were further attacks on Pandits who had chosen to remain. Sometimes entire hamlets were set on fire. By the end of the decade, fewer than 4,000 Pandits were left in the Valley, a melancholy reminder of the centuries in which they had lived cheek-by-jowl with their compatriots.[40]

The growing militancy in Kashmir was actively aided by Pakistan. That country's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) ran camps where terrorists were trained in the use of arms and provided maps of the region. With the ISI's help, Kashmiri activists moved freely across the border, into India to kill or bomb, then back to Pakistan for rest and replenishment. By now, indigenous militants had been joined by foreign mercenaries – Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks – who had cut their teeth in the war against the Soviet puppet regime in Afghanistan. When that war ended, and Russian troops had returned, defeated, to their homeland, these fighters found another holy cause in the liberation of Kashmir.

By the mid 1990s the Hizb-ul had been joined by many hundreds of *mehmani mujahideen* (guest freedom-fighters).These owed allegiance to different groups, all of which were headquartered in Pakistan, and all of which practised the austere, fundamentalist version of Islam taught in that country's many religious schools. Through the 1980s, the Islamicization of Pakistani society had proceeded apace. At the nation's birth in 1947 it had a mere 136 *madrasas*; by 2000 it had as many as 30,000. These madrasas, writes Tariq Ali, were 'indoctrination nurseries designed to produce fanatics'. Pakistan now boasted fifty-eight Islamic political parties and twenty-four armed religious militias, peopled in the main by the products of the *madrasa* system.[41]

The intensification of religious sentiment in Pakistan deepened its commitment to the 'liberation' of Kashmir. Preachers in mosques and *madrasas* spoke repeatedly of Indian *zulm* (terror) in the Kashmir Valley, urging their

followers to join the *jihad* there. Youths so swayed entered groups such as the Lashkar-i-Toiba, which was rapidly assuming a leading role in the armed struggle. The proximate aim was the uniting of Kashmir with the Pakistani nation, this 'a religious duty binding not only on the people of Pakistan, but, in fact, on the entire Muslim *ummat* [brotherhood]'. A wider ambition was to catalyse a civil war in India. As the chief of the Lashkar, Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, boasted, they were aiming to 'set up a *mujahideen* network across India', which, when it was up and running, would spell 'the start of the disintegration of India'[42] 'Revenge is our religious duty', said Saeed to an American journalist. 'We beat the Russian superpower in Afghanistan; we can beat the Indian forces too. We fight with the help of Allah, and once we start jehad, no force can withstand us.' Speaking to a Pakistani reporter, the Lashkar chief claimed that 'our struggle will continue even if Kashmir is liberated. We still have to take revenge [against India] for [the loss of] East Pakistan.'[43]

This animosity and hatred was perhaps not unexpected. For the *jihadis*, India was the land of the *kafirs*, or unbelievers. But as it happened their wrath was being visited on some co-religionists as well. There were killings of activists from the National Conference, which wanted autonomy within India, of the JKLF, which wanted independence rather than merger with Pakistan, and of the People's Conference, which advocated non-violence.[44] The fundamentalists also came down hard on the pleasures of the people. Cinema halls and video parlours were closed, and drinking and smoking banned. Militant groups distributed leaflets ordering women to cover themselves from head to toe by wearing the long black veil, or *burqa*. The *burqa* was contrary to Kashmiri custom – here many women did not even wear headscarves. Besides, they cost Rs2,000 a piece. Cynics suggested that tailors and cloth merchants were behind the move. There were, withal, savage attempts to enforce the ban, with acid being thrown on women who disregarded it.[45]

The main target of fundamentalist ire, however, was the Indian state and its symbols. Scarcely a week passed without a suicide attack on an army post or police camp, to stop or stem which even more troops were moved into the Valley. There were now bunkers on every street corner in Srinagar. The Indian army had become 'an imposing and ubiquitous presence' in Kashmir, a 'parallel government' even. It was charged not merely with the maintenance of law and order, but also with running hospitals, airports, bus stations and tourist centres. The state government had abdicated most of its duties. By 1995 or thereabouts, there were only two functioning institutions in Kashmir – the Indian army on the one side and the network of *jihadi* groups on the other.[46]

As the Valley came to resemble a zone of occupation, popular sentiment rallied to the *jihadi* cause. Terrorists mingled easily with the locals, and were given refuge before or after their actions. When their men were killed in bomb attacks, the reprisals of the Indian security forces could be murderous. Soldiers dropped in unannounced in remote villages, searching for terrorists – when they did not find them, they beat up the peasants instead. A large number of custodial deaths were also reported.

The costs of this apparently unending war were colossal. According to government figures, between January 1990 and August 2001 some 12,000 civilians died unnatural deaths – three-quarters at the hands of militants, the rest in the cross-fire. Security forces claimed to have killed 13,400 militants, while losing 3,100 of their own. Given the low population densities, so many deaths in Kashmir was the equivalent of 4million Indians being killed in the country as a whole.[47] The casualties were spread all across this lovely if increasingly desolate Valley. However, they were mostly of young men, of Kashmiris who came of age in this cursed decade. The journalist Muzamil Jaleel, who almost became a militant himself, later visited a graveyard near his native village, where he found twenty-one tombstones recording the deaths of his friends and classmates.[48]

As James Buchan has written, in the years since 1990,

> the Kashmiri Muslims and the Indian government conspired to abolish the complexities of Kashmiri civilization. The world [it] inhabited has vanished: the state government and the political class, the rule of law, almost all the . . . Hindu inhabitants of the valley, alcohol, cinemas, cricket matches, picnics by moonlight in the saffron fields, schools, universities, an independent press, tourists and . . .banks. In this reduction of civilian reality, the sights of Kashmir . . . are redefined: not the . . .lakes and Mogul gardens . . . or the storied triumphs of Kashmiri agriculture, handicrafts and cookery, but two entities that confront each other without intermediary: the mosque and the army camp.[49]

Throughout the 1990s, as Hindu fundamentalism gathered strength in the rest of India, Islamic fundamentalism was on the ascendant in Kashmir. The two processes began independently, yet each legitimized and furthered the other. With every communal riot sparked by the Ayodhya movement, radicals in the Valley could more easily portray India as a state run for and by Hindus. With every killing of innocent civilians or Indian soldiers in the Valley, the RSS

could point to the hand of Pakistan in fomenting trouble within India. There were two critical events that, as it were, defined this epoch of competitive fundamentalisms: the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits. Would one trust a state that could not honour its commitment to protect an ancient place of worship? Would one trust a community that so brutally expelled those of a different faith? Such questions resonated across the subcontinent, asked by countless Indians not previously known to think along lines of religion and faith.

VII

After the Babri Masjid came down, Hindu radicals hoped to build a grand temple in its place. Architects were commissioned to design an edifice in marble, and craftsmen engaged to cut the stone and polish it. However, the site itself remained in the custody of the state. Cases were being heard in the Allahabad High Court and the Supreme Court, to decide whether a Ram temple had ever existed here, and whether the VHP had (as it claimed) the legal rights to the land surrounding the old mosque. Attempts were also made to find a solution outside the courts. The influential Shankaracharya of Kanchi met with the Babri Masjid Action Committee, and urged them to hand over this one site, in exchange for which no further demands would be made on the Muslims.

The BJP remained committed to the construction of a temple in Ayodhya. When it came to power in 1998, it said it would forge a national consensus on the issue, failing which it would enact enabling legislation. The prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, said that 'Rama occupies an exalted place in Indian culture', and claimed that 'the entire country wants a Rama temple at Ayodhya' , the issue being 'how to make it and where'.[50]

However, at the site itself the status quo prevailed. The courts took their time disposing of the matter, and no compromise could be reached outside them either. Meanwhile the Vishwa Hindu Parishad organized tours of Ayodhya by *kar sevaks* from all over the country. They also held religious ceremonies in anticipation of the building of the temple. One such *yagna*, held in the last week of February 2002, was attended by hundreds of volunteers from the state of Gujarat. On their way back home by train, these *kar sevaks* got into a fight with Muslim vendors at the Godhra railway station. The vendors were asked to chant slogans in homage to Lord Ram; when they re-

fused, their beards were pulled. Word of the altercation spread; young men from the Muslim neighbourhood outside the station joined in. The *kar sevaks* clambered back into the train, which started moving even as stones were being thrown. However, the train stopped on the outskirts of the station, when a fire broke out in one of its coaches. Fifty-eight people perished in the conflagration.

Godhra was a town with along history of communal violence; it had experienced serious riots in 1949, and again in 1981. That Hindus and Muslims had not always been on the best of terms, and that the Ayodhya problem had strained relations further, is clear. It is also beyond dispute that the incident at the station was sparked by *kar sevaks* taunting Muslim vendors. What remains unclear is the cause of the fire afterwards. The VHP claimed that it was the handiwork of a Muslim mob. On the other hand, forensic evidence suggests that it originated *inside* the carriage, and was probably the result of a gas cylinder or paraffin stove accidentally catching fire.[51]

Word that a group of *kar sevaks* had been burnt to death at Godhra quickly spread through Gujarat. A wave of retributory violence followed. This was at its most intense, and horrific, in the cities of Ahmedabad and Baroda. Once known for their philanthropic industrialists and progressive intellectuals, once centres of technical innovation and artistic excellence, both places had experienced a prolonged period of economic decline. With this came a deterioration in inter-community relations. Hindus and Muslims now rarely worked or played together, a separation that had in the recent past expressed itself in bouts of communal violence.[52]

These latest riots in Baroda and Ahmedabad were unprecedented in their savagery. Muslim shops and offices were attacked, mosques torched and cars vandalized. Muslim women were raped, Muslim men killed and bonfires made of their bodies. The mobs were often led by activists of the VHP, with the local administration in collusion. Their weapons ranged from swords and guns to petrol bombs and gas cylinders. The vandals had voter lists, which allowed them to identify which homes were Muslim and which were not. Ministers of the state government were camped in police control rooms, directing operations. The police had been instructed to give ‘free run of the roads to VHP and Bajrang Dal mobs’.[53]

Beyond Baroda and Ahmedabad, the violence also reached out into smaller towns and rural settlements. In the district of Sabarkantha, mobs roamed the countryside in tractors and jeeps, targeting properties owned by Muslims. The numerical record of their activities is available: ‘altogether, 2161 houses, 1461 shops, 304 smaller enterprises . . . 71 factories, 38 hotels, 45 religious

places and 240 vehicles were completely or partially destroyed'.[54] What was true of Sabarkantha was broadly true of the state as a whole. The VHP had made it clear that it wanted to render the Muslims hopeless as well as homeless. Thus in Ahmedabad, weeks after the riots had subsided Muslims still found it difficult to get loans from banks, gas and phone connections and enrolment in school for their children. Muslims who had fled their villages were told they would have to drop charges against the rioters if they wished to return. Sometimes their safety was made conditional on their conversion to Hinduism.[55]

The chief minister of Gujarat at the time of the 2002 riots was Narendra Modi, a hard-line Hindutva ideologue who had grown up in the unforgiving school of the RSS. Now, he justified the violence on Muslims by pointing to the burning of the railway coach in Godhra, which, he said, had set in motion a 'chain of action and reaction'. In truth, the reaction was many times that of the original action. More than 2,000 Muslims were killed, and at least fifty times that number rendered homeless, living in refugee camps whose pitiable condition was noticed by the prime minister and president themselves.[56]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'pogrom' as 'an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group'. By this definition, while there have been hundreds of inter-religious riots in the history of independent India, there have been only two pogroms: that directed at the Sikhs in Delhi in 1984 and that directed at the Muslims of south Gujarat in 2002. There are some striking similarities between the two. Both began as a response to a single, stray act of violence committed by members of the minority community. Both proceeded to take a generalized revenge on the minorities as a whole. The Sikhs who were butchered were in no way connected to the Sikhs who killed Mrs Gandhi. The Muslims who were killed by Hindu mobs were completely innocent of the Godhra crime (which may anyway have been an accident).

In both cases the pogroms were made possible by the willed breakdown of the rule of law. The prime minister in Delhi in 1984, and the chief minister in Gujarat in 2002, issued graceless statements that in effect justified the killings. And serving ministers in their government went so far as to aid and direct the rioters.

The final similarity is the most telling, as well as perhaps the most depressing. Both parties, and leaders, reaped electoral rewards from the violence they had legitimized and overseen. Rajiv Gandhi's party won the 1984 general election by a very large margin, and in December 2002 Narendra Modi was re-elected as chief minister of Gujarat after his party won a two-thirds majority in the assembly polls.

VIII

The rise of the Hindu right in general, and the events at Ayodhya in particular, prompted afresh wave of gloomy forebodings about the future of India. ‘The secular fabric of the country has been seriously damaged’, wrote the Madras fortnightly *Frontline*, adding: ‘India will never be the same again’. For the ‘events of December 6 and 7 gave India a taste of what things would be [like]if and when the Hindutva combine’s Hindu Rashtra [Hindu State] comes into existence. It became clear . . . [that] the minority communities would have no right to live, not to speak of social interaction; that freedom of expression would be non-existent; and that truth would be only what the rulers perceive. ‘In the week that followed [6th December 1992], India changed, perhaps forever’, commented the Calcutta weekly Sunday. With the breakdown of authority and the rule of law, ‘in the eyes of the world, India moved one step closer to being perceived as a tinpot African “republic”’. The ‘forces let loose by the vandalism at Ayodhya’ , lamented the New Delhi magazine *India Today*, ‘have begun not just to take a ghastly toll of human lives, but also to reduce to rubble the edifice of our hopes and aspirations as a people and as a nation.[57]

These worries were shared by the Western press. ‘Like the three domes that crowned the 464-year-old Babri mosque’, wrote *Time* magazine, ‘the three pillars of the Indian state – democracy, secularism and the rule of law – are now at risk from the fury of religious nationalism’.[58] The day after the mosque came down, *The Times* of London carried a story with the headline ‘Militants Bury Hope of Harmony in Rubble of Indian Mosque’. The next day’s paper quoted the views of the Labour politician Jack Straw, then on a visit to Bombay. Straw thought that there was a real danger that India would slide ‘into the abyss of sectarianism’. The same issue carried a leading article by the Irish intellectual Conor Cruise O’Brien, which confidently proclaimed that ‘India’s history as a secular state appears to be coming to an end’. O’Brien anticipated a mass flight of Muslims into Pakistan, and the emigration of educated Hindus into Europe and North America.[59]

These were the immediate, so to say knee-jerk, responses of excitable journalists and professional cynics (O’Brien had previously predicted that the fall of the Berlin Wall would lead to the revival of a cult of Hitler and of a party based on Nazi ideals). But writers trained to take the long view also echoed these fears. A British author who had written many affectionate books about the subcontinent remarked that ‘all who care about that country must

tremble for the future of its secular democracy'.[60] And an American scholar who had spent a lifetime studying India went so far as to compare the Sangh Parivar to the Nazis: 'It is past time to note', wrote Paul Brass, 'that Indian politics and society display many of the symptoms of a murderous pre-fascist stage which has already produced a multiplicity of localized *Kristall-nachts* in numerous urban sites.' The 'spread of violence, lawlessness and disorder at the local level, thought Brass, might prompt the central government (then controlled by the Congress) into 'another venture into authoritarian practices' . And so the 'Indian state may yet disintegrate in this clash between secular opportunists and chauvinist nationalists equally tied to the pursuit of illusions and chimeras, "symbols and shadows" of national unity and greatness pursued by all the tyrannical regimes of the twentieth century .[61]

At the time of writing (2008), these dire predictions have not come to pass. In theory, if less assuredly in practice, India remains a secular state. The rule of law is not what it might be, but the writ of the central government still runs over most of India. India has not (yet) become either a tinpot dictatorship of the African kind or a fascist one modelled on European examples.