The History of History
Politics and Scholarship in Modern India

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On 6 December 1992, the Babri Masjid, a mosque in the city of Ayodhya in the Gangetic Plains, was brought down by a large crowd numbering in the thousands. While a police force of nearly 20,000 looked on, the crowd set to work on demolishing this (in the words of the Indian state) ‘disputed structure’ with axes, shovels, picks, and their bare hands. In the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the mosque, violence broke out across the length and breadth of India, in which the casualties were overwhelmingly of the Muslim faith. The Babri Masjid, which takes its name from the Mughal Emperor Babur, at whose command the mosque was most likely constructed in 1528–9, is said by the ‘fundamentalist’ or militant Hindus to have been built at the very spot at which supposedly stood a temple dedicated to the Hindu deity, Lord Rama. On the ‘fundamentalist’ view, which finds, as adumbrated earlier, its cultural voice embodied in the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), its political expression in the activities and pronouncements of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Shiv Sena, and its brute strength in the armed support rendered to it by the paramilitary organizations known as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Bajrang Dal (BD)—not that these divisions of duty are at this juncture entirely meaningful—the temple also marked the exact place at which took place the birth of Lord Rama. Thus reparation to the Hindus, for the offence caused to their religion, could only be achieved by the destruction of the mosque, so that the way might be paved for the construction of a temple dedicated to Rama, which would then stand as a monument to Hindu pride.
The destruction of the Babri Masjid has, it is likely, occasioned more comment in Indian newspapers and magazines than any other ‘communal’ event since the nation achieved its independence in 1947 amidst the bloodshed and carnage of the partition. Only the recent killings in Gujarat, which have an obvious relation to the events of 6 December 1992, have perhaps been the subject of more intense scrutiny—and this ten years later, in the age of the Internet and satellite television. A great deal of the discussion on the debacle at Ayodhya hovered around several sets of questions. In the first instance, what was the role of the state in perpetuating this crisis, and to what extent did the demolition of the mosque represent the abnegation by the state of its duties? More pointedly, how could the single-minded demolition of the mosque have been wrought when the state had furnished guarantees about the safety of the mosque, and provided an armed force of several thousand policemen as an assurance of its commitment to live by those guarantees? To political scientists, these questions resolve themselves into more precise queries about the respective roles of the central and state governments and their relationship to each other. Was the relationship inimical or, on the contrary, conducive to the resolution of the crisis?

A second set of considerations that loomed large in the press and media pertained to what is habitually referred to as the ‘law and order’ aspects of the crisis. When the Supreme Court itself had forbidden any party from encroaching upon the mosque, with what impunity could militant advocates of the Hindu faith, acting with the blessing of a parliamentary party sworn to uphold the constitution and the law of the land, have arrogated to themselves the right to take the law into their own hands? Did the destruction of the mosque signal the complete erosion of the ‘rule of law’, and if so, would the imperative to retain ‘law and order’ necessitate more advanced techniques of repression? Is India moving, editorialists on 1 January 1993 were wont to query, towards chaos and lawlessness, towards the anomy that signifies a structural failure in the economy, the breakdown of civil society, and the inefficaciousness of the political arrangements by which a nation was sought to be governed? Thirdly, and here again the political scientists with their penchant for positivism and party politics talk found the situation ripe for the display of their ‘expertise’, there was much speculation about what the future portended for the Congress, whether the Bharatiya Janata Party would be able to steal victory and return India to the fold of an authentic Hinduism, and how the country would divide at the time of the next general election. What would be the coalitions by which India would be governed?

Finally, and most poignantly, there was a great deal of soul-searching about the future of secularism in India and the nature of its purported opposite, ‘communalism’ or (though this word was then much less in vogue) ‘fundamentalism’. This element of the commentary, far more ponderous in tone, continues down to the present day, except that in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid it was etched in the language of mourning. It is as a lament that we must read the movingly eloquent piece by Gyanendra Pandey, one of India’s most well-known historians, in the Times of India on 10 December 1992 mourning the demise of Indian secularism and the betrayal of the ideals which informed his childhood and in which the grand experiment of nationhood was sought to be nourished; and likewise is the reflection on the struggle for India’s soul that the Indian novelist and international civil servant, Shashi Tharoor, penned for the 11 December edition of the New York Times. The India in which Tharoor and Pandey grew up could not be spoken of in the singular: it was emphatically not ‘Hindu’ India, and as Tharoor put it poignantly, ‘the singular thing about India is that you can speak of it only in the plural’. Tharoor went on to say, by way of illustration, that ‘Our National leaders and heroes were Muslim, Parsi, Christian, Sikh, as well as Hindu. When my Brahmin mother-in-law visited us in Europe, she was most anxious to light a candle at Lourdes.’ And yet in the India that his sons stand to inherit, the fear of symbols, ‘the mark on a forehead or the absence of a foreskin’, appears to rule the lives of its inhabitants. If this is not the India that Tharoor would like his children to claim as their own, it is most decisively not the India of Tabish Khair, who found that the destruction of the Babri Masjid had stripped him of his Indian identity, an identity that had perforce already been problematic. Growing up as an Indian, Khair had been relegated to that special sub-species that went by the name of ‘Secular Indian Muslim’; as the years went by, that designation had all but been evacuated of the term ‘Indian’, and on 6 December the remainder of his ‘historical, social and legal identity was systematically demolished’. The ‘average Hindu’ had suddenly discovered a Muslim in people like Khair; to the ‘average Muslim’, the non-religious, liberal Muslim could, after Ayodhya, scarcely flaunt his secular credentials. ‘Most Muslims look at me and see red. Most Hindus look at me and see green.’ Would anyone paint him as an Indian?

All these considerations are undoubtedly significant, and it would
be churlish to pretend that the crisis generated in and around Ayodhya does not continue to pose critical questions about the future of secularism in India and the notion of ‘Indianness’, questions to whose explication if not resolution a good deal of the debate is and will continue to be directed. It is not only the future of the nation-state that has been called into question, and indeed if that were so, there might—besides the lament—be considerable cause for celebration as well, for India as a nation-state remains but a pale shadow of the richer entity it has been in history; moreover, as the pieces by Pandey, Tharoor, Khair, and innumerable others suggest, there are many other larger moral, existential, and epistemological questions, located around the issues of identity, cultural difference, hybridity, otherness, and moral conduct, that must necessarily impinge upon our consciousness. Nonetheless, there is at least one other critical question suggested by much of the commentary to which we must direct our attention if we are to emerge from the debacle at Ayodhya not with an incapacitating sense of defeat and loss, but with the hope that from the wreck of Ayodhya and its aftermath we might still be able to salvage not only some sense of good, but a real possibility of emancipation from the forces that have made a blasphemous mockery of a civilizational ethos that has always recognized and paid homage to the plurality of cultural and religious traditions. This ‘critical question’ that I refer to is, of course, none other than the appeal to history, the resort to the historical mode of inquiry and persuasion, by all the parties to the debate in an attempted justification of their respective positions. Ayodhya marks, for the first time in the history of post-independent India, the ascent of the historian to the proscenium of the nation-state; it signifies the indubitable importance of the historian to the nation-state, and the presumed indispensability of historical thinking and an historical consciousness to a nation-state that seeks recognition as a member of a world community bound together by a commitment to modernity and norms of rationality.

Where dharma and law once constituted the court of justice, today history appears as the tribunal before which proponents of conflicting representations must wage their struggle. As I shall suggest towards the end of this chapter, after having established the unrepentant attraction to history that the shakers and movers of Indian society have displayed, perhaps the most salutary insight we can imbibe from the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the deplorable loss of life in its wake is that historical consciousness and the awareness of historical thinking, far from being the mode in which India shall be delivered from the throes of communal violence, arguably represent the nemesis of any reasonable attempt to find solutions that would enable Indians to live in comparative harmony.

II

The Babri Masjid was, as an inscription on the now-destroyed mosque stated, built in 1528–9 by the Muslim nobleman Mir Baqi on the order of the Emperor Babur, whose victory at arms over Sultan Ibrahim Lodri in 1526 at Panipat paved the way for the creation of the Mughal empire in India. Only the date of the erection of the mosque appears to be beyond dispute; everything else, as the voluminous writings in Indian newspapers, magazines, journals, and other polemical and scholarly literature amply suggest, is contested. As the most well-known scholarly compilation on the Babri Masjid—Rama Janmabhoomi Issue’ demonstrates, certain historians and others posing as practitioners of the historical craft began to put forth ‘evidence’ from the mid-1980s onwards that purportedly would prove, beyond any reasonable doubt, that a temple dedicated to Lord Rama, marking the very site where the Hindu king and deity was born, was demolished and the mosque built in its place. Pratap Nair’s Kya Khati Hai Sarayu Dhara? Sri Ramjanmabhumi ki Kahani [What Says the River Sarayu? The Story of Ramjanmabhumi], which appeared in 1985, was perhaps the first work of its kind with its appeal to historical evidence as the supreme arbiter; it was followed in quick succession by a number of other works, largely penned in Hindi and emanating from Lucknow, Allahabad, Ayodhya, and other principal Hindi literature-producing centres of the so-called cow belt. These works and other sundry pieces, many of them published in the Organiser, the organ of the RSS, sought to establish, as an incontrovertible fact, the existence of a temple at the very spot where stood the Babri Masjid: as the author of one article put it, ‘There is no room for any doubt that the Babri Masjid was constructed after demolishing [the] Shri Ramjanmabhumi temple and on the very spot. This fact has been clearly recorded in many authentic history books.’ In a similar vein, with just as much of an emphasis on the supposed historical irrefutability of certain alleged ‘facts’, Deeki Nandan in his historical and legal review of the controversy surrounding Ayodhya gave it as his opinion that ‘it is an undisputed historical fact that at Ramjanmabhumi there was an ancient mandir since the time of Maharaja Vikramaditya.’
Once purportedly historical evidence had been invoked in support of the view that a Rama temple—and no ordinary Rama temple at that, for the claim was that the temple marked the place where Rama was born—was destroyed to make way for a mosque that heralded the triumph of the Muslim faith over Hinduism, historians who could not share in this view were compelled to enter the fray. As S. Gopal and over twenty other scholars associated with the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University were to argue, the historian, when faced by beliefs camouflaging under the ‘legitimacy of history’, must attempt a ‘demarcation between the limits of belief and historical evidence. When communal forces make claims to “historical evidence” for the purposes of communal politics, then the historian has to intervene. Accordingly, they issued the first rejoinder in the form of a pamphlet entitled ‘The Political Abuse of History: Babri Masjid–Rama Janamabhumi Dispute’, and shortly thereafter a smaller group of four scholars, of whom three are historians, entered the dispute by way of another pamphlet entitled ‘Ramjanmabhumi Baburi Masjid—A Historians’ Report to the Nation’. In like fashion, the authors of the latter report lamented the fact that the Government of India, by initiating negotiations with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Babri Masjid Action Committee (BMAC), should have allowed disputes over ‘facts of history’ to be decided by clearly partisan ‘litigants’ instead of turning the matter over to an ‘independent forum of historians’. This seemed to us, as professional historians, the authors further noted, ‘a very unhappy procedure.’ There will be time enough to ruminate over the peculiar circumstance whereby historians, much like public policy or scientific ‘experts’, are called to furnish a ‘report to the nation’, or in any case do so at their own behest; and similarly we need only note, for the time being, the manner in which ‘professional historians’ are presumed to represent transcendence, an ethical force of ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’.

The authors of the two pamphlets, which complement each other neatly, gave it as their considered opinion that the debate over the ‘disputed structure’ could be framed around several sets of considerations which are amenable to serious historical investigation. First, is it the case that Hindus have ‘always, and certainly over a long period before the construction of the Babri Masjid’, believed that Ayodhya is a sacred place, sacred by virtue of its association as the janmabhumi (birth-ground) of Lord Rama? In a detailed assessment, Sharma and his fellow authors noted that no ancient Sanskrit text could be cited in support of the claim that ‘there has been an ancient Hindu belief in Rama Janmasthan at Ayodhya’. One might ask just how ancient is ‘ancient’, but the writings of the Hindutvavadis leave no doubt that they have in mind a period dating back to remote antiquity, to many centuries before the supposed destruction of the Rama temple in 1528 or thereabouts. The only Sanskrit text that the VHP has put forth in substantiation of its claim, the Skanda Purana, appears to be rather unreliable, for the ‘Ayodhya-mahatmya’, or that portion of the Purana which recites the merits of visiting Ayodhya [mahatmya=eulogy], was most probably an eighteenth-century interpolation; moreover, the core of the Purana itself was evidently not compiled before the second half of the fourteenth century, and indeed may even bear a much later date, for there is a reference in it to the fourteenth-century Bengali poet, Vidyapati. The inference is clear: Ayodhya did not occupy a central place in the religious imagination of Hindus, and was endowed with a rare importance sometime after the establishment of Muslim hegemony in North India in the sixteenth century. Just as pointedly, the janmasthan does not appear in the itinerary of pilgrimage spots mentioned in the ‘Ayodhya-mahatmya’; to the contrary, the relative insignificance of the janmasthan is suggested by the fact that the Skanda Purana devotes a mere eight verses to the description of the janmasthan, while lavishing a hundred verses on the Svargadara, or the site from where Rama is supposed to have ascended to heaven. Neither of the two Svargadara sites, moreover, bears any relation to the ‘disputed structure’.

Sharma further argues that the location of Rama’s birth enumerated in the ‘Ayodhya-mahatmya’ and other texts does not tally with the geographical location of where the Babri Masjid stood until December 1992; indeed, if we are to follow Gopal and his colleagues, that discrepancy should scarcely surprise us, for it is more than probable that the present-day Ayodhya is not the capital of the Ikshvaku dynasty described in Valmiki’s Ramayana, or even the Ayodhya identified in many later texts. The Ayodhya of today is on the banks of the river Sarayu; the Ayodhya that was a city in Koshala, and which is claimed to be the ancestor of the present-day Ayodhya, was located on the banks of the Ganga and was known to early writers as Saketa. There is also a controversial argument, advanced by Hans Bakker among others, that the Gupta rulers who in the fifth century AD sought to link their rule to the traditions associated with the name of Rama renamed the site known in Buddhist and Jain texts as Saketa to Ayodhya; indeed, to follow Bakker further, the Ayodhya of epic
literature has no reference to any real city, but rather to an idealized city constructed from cities of a later period. Historicity, as Bakker evidently suggests, is not the most productive way of understanding the scared geography of the Ramayana.

But it is more than in this confusion of names that the local tradition recognizes the ambiguous history of the origins of Ayodhya; as Gopal’s brief recounting of the mythic origins of the present-day Ayodhya suggests, an attempt has been made to confer the city with a ‘sacred lineage’ that it never possessed or was endowed with only most ambiguously. Ayodhya was, so the story goes, lost after the Treta Yuga; while in search of Ayodhya, the Emperor Vikramaditya met Prayag, ‘the king of tirthas’ or pilgrimage sites, who guided the king to Ayodhya. Vikramaditya marked the spot, but could not find it later: an act of forgetting, wilful or otherwise, that would unleash its own consequences. A yogi whom Vikramaditya then encountered ‘told him that he should let a cow and a calf roam. When the calf came across the janmabhumi milk would flow from its udder. The king followed the yogi’s advice. When at a certain point the calf’s udders began to flow the king decided that this was the site of the ancient Ayodhya.’ Gopal concludes, ‘even in the myths the process of identification of the sites appears uncertain and arbitrary.’

What, then, of the more specific claim that the spot where the Babri Masjid stood until recently was the very spot where a temple existed in commemoration of the birth of Lord Rama, and that this temple was demolished to make room for the mosque? It is with respect to this question that scholars, commentators, journalists, and others on either side of the divide have most fully and self-consciously resorted to the idiom of history in substantiation of their respective positions. Consider, for example, the debate as it appeared in the pages of the Indian Express, a national newspaper then openly sympathetic to the VHP/RSS position. Pursuant to a response by Professor A. R. Khan to the pamphlet by Gopal and his associates in the pages of the Indian Express on 25 February 1990, Abbas Kumar Chatterjee on 26 March offered ‘more evidence’ to ‘further remove’, as he confidently put it, ‘the unwarranted doubts harboured in some quarters’ about the historicity of Ayodhya and the destruction of a Rama temple. Chatterjee noted that Joseph Tiffenthaler, a Jesuit priest who travelled extensively in the Oudh region between 1766 and 1771, wrote a detailed account of his impression of Ayodhya. On Tiffenthaler’s account, ‘The emperor Aurengzeb destroyed the fortress called Ramkot, and built at the same place a Mohammedan temple with three domes. Others say that it has been built by Babar.’ Tiffenthaler went on to describe certain pillars, fourteen in number, twelve of which supported the inner arcades of the mosque, that bore non-Islamic designs and were reputed to have been brought from Lanka by Hanuman. The complex also bore signs of destruction, for a hollow space marked the place where stood the house in which Rama was born.

Either Babar or Aurangzeb, Tiffenthaler surmised, had ‘destroyed the place in order to prevent the heathens from practising their superstition’. But the faith of a people is not so easily arrested; indeed, the destruction of the temple may have spurred Hindus in the ardent profession of their belief, for ‘they continued to practise their religious ceremonies in both places [i.e., the mosque and the courtyard in front of it] knowing this to have been the birthplace of Rama.’

To Chatterjee this account appears as decisive a piece of evidence as one could summon of the association of the site with a Rama temple, and if the only point of uncertainty in Tiffenthaler’s narrative is whether the act of villainy should be attributed to Aurangzeb or Babar, for Chatterjee this doubt is easily resolved by the inscription that was in the mosque. The position, then, as it appears to Chatterjee is that the holy Janmabhoomi temple, which once stood in Ramkot disappears. Pillars of a destroyed Hindu temple are used to construct a mosque under Babar’s orders in Ramkot at a spot surrounded by scores of other shrines associated with Ram. Hindus claim all along that this was the site of the temple. In spite of the efforts of Mughal rulers to keep them out, they reoccupy the site and continue to offer worship there. Great gatherings of people continue to be held here to celebrate Ram Navami. They defend the shrine against Muslim attacks in violent clashes as in 1853, when 70 Muslims making a bid to recapture the temple, are killed and are buried in the nearby ‘ganja shaheead’. If this is not ‘evidence’, asks Chatterjee, then what would avail to satisfy the detractors of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement, unless it be the tarnished ‘evidence’ of ‘their other exercises of history’?

It has been pointed out that the inscription, over which a great deal of ink and blood has been spilled, says nothing whatsoever about a mosque having been constructed at the site of a temple; moreover, according to the historian Sunil Srivastava, the line Bajarumada-i-Shah Babur, which was rendered by the English translator of Babur’s memoirs as ‘By the order of the Emperor Babur’, means equally ‘By the desire of the Emperor Babur’. The claim that Hindus had all along considered the complex the site of the original Rama temple has been,
as we have seen, contested; likewise, no undue significance can be attached to the fact that the complex is surrounded by 'scores of other shrines associated with Ram', for many of these shrines are of recent vintage, built to enshrine the importance of Ayodhya when it became politically expedient to do so. If there are many shrines in the area, there are not a few mosques as well.

But let us suppose that the inscription offers irrefutable testimony to the construction in 1528–9 of a mosque at the disputed site; and let us also concede that the presence of innumerable shrines offers evidence of the Hindus' devotion to Ayodhya as the birthplace of Rama. Is that evidence enough that, in order to pave the way for a mosque, a temple was desecrated and demolished? If the Muslim is enjoined, as Hindus are asked to believe, to celebrate the defeat of the infidel and the destruction of idolatry, why did not Mir Baqi, whom the inscription states as having built the mosque, mention the destruction of the temple, a deed for which he would have acquired merit? Why is it that the great bhakta of Rama, Tulsidas (1532–1623), who was a contemporary of Akbar (1556–1605) and an inhabitant of the Awadh region, said nothing about the destruction of a temple devoted to his venerable God? Would not the destruction of a temple marking the jamnasthan of Rama have evoked the anger of Rama's greatest devotee? Or could it be that, since Tulsidas had no firm attachment to the Ayodhya of history, an Ayodhya of stone embedded firmly in the ground—as he says in the Ramacaritmanas (2.74.3), 'Awadh tahan jahan Rama Nivasai' ('Wherever Rama resides, there is Awadh')—he refused to concern himself with the destruction of Rama's temple? But does that not make the position of Rama's self-professed devotees, who seek to be militant guardians of his memory, even more fraught with difficulties? Do they think that their devotion is superior to that of Tulsidas? If it is the sign of a bhakta that he or she is not moved to anger, must we not conclude then that those masquerading as the protectors of Hinduism today are least filled with the nectar of devotion to Rama? Or is there nothing, in their perspective, to be learned from Tulsidas?

These questions do not, however, square well with the enterprise of invoking historical evidence, and so we return to the question: was a temple demolished to make way for a mosque? Apart from the aforementioned inscription, the archaeological data has provided the grounds for much of the contestation, and indeed an entire work in a relatively recent series of political tracts has been devoted to this question. The 'archaeological evidence' may not have assumed such importance were it not the case that it is now, in the words of Romila Thapar, 'the single most significant new source for the writing of early Indian history', and thus the ramifications of how the archaeological data is employed in the interpretation of the Rama Janmabhoomi dispute may well extend to the study of the entire Indian past. According to proponents of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement, archaeological research has provided 'conclusive evidence' of the existence of an eleventh-century Vaishnava temple at the site of the Babri Masjid—just as much positivist certainty, scholars critical of the movement appear convinced that their work 'totally demolishes the theory of the mosque having been erected on the ruins of a large temple.

No one has denied that the Babri Masjid had fourteen pillars bearing non-Islamic motifs, but to understand the possible relationship of these pillars to the mosque, the extent of other excavations in and around the site, and finally the politics of these findings, we have to traverse briefly some historical ground. Excavations in Ayodhya go back to 1969–70, when an archaeological team from the Benares Hindu University began digging in three separate localities. Their results were first announced in the pages of Indian Archaeology—A Review, the principal organ of the Archaeological Survey of India. The history of Ayodhya was described as going back to the NBP (Northern Black Polished Ware) Period, 'which is generally accepted as covering the sixth to perhaps the first centuries BC'. This is of more than incidental significance, for Rama is described in the Valmiki Ramayana as having been born in the Treta Yuga, or thousands of years before the present-day Kali Yuga, which itself began in 3102 BC. Yet there is no archaeological evidence to support the view that Ayodhya was inhabited at that time; and it is much less likely then that the Ayodhya of today could have been the large urban settlement, replete with palaces and buildings on a grand scale, that the Ayodhya of the Valmiki Ramayana purports to be. As Gopal and others would have it, and as I have previously stated, the Ayodhya of the epic poem is 'fictional', and what is later taken to be Ayodhya is none other than Saketa, which—as noted before—the king Skanda Gupta (also known as Vikramaditya) renamed Ayodhya, no doubt because 'he was trying to gain prestige for himself by drawing on the tradition of the Suryavansmi kings, a line to which Rama is said to have belonged'. It is agreed that habitation in Ayodhya continued after the NBP period into the end of the Gupta period; between the sixth and the
eleventh centuries, Ayodhya appears to have been abandoned. Following the first round of excavations, in 1975 B. B. Lal, who had just retired as Director-General of the Archaeological Survey, initiated a project on the archaeology of the ‘Ramayana sites’. In the reports that he submitted to the Archaeological Survey in 1976–7 and 1979–80, he acknowledged this ‘break in occupation’, and the rehabilitation of the disputed site ‘around the eleventh century AD’. Lal not only made no mention of any pillar-bases, he went so far as to say that though ‘several later-medieval brick-and-kankar lime floors [had] been met with’, ‘the entire late period was devoid of any special interest’. Is not the ‘late period’ the very time when the temple is supposed to have been demolished? Notwithstanding these reports, B. B. Lal was much later, towards the end of 1990, to submit that certain brick bases he had excavated in the 1970s were meant to support pillars and thus suggested ‘the existence of a temple-like structure in the south of the Baburi Masjid’.

B. B. Lal’s extraordinary delay in making known his ‘findings’, particularly when they contradict the earlier published results, has of course been questioned, but that is the least of the objections that have been raised by historians and archaeologists opposed to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Turning first to the carvings on the pillars, it has been argued that they are far from offering any irrefutable association with Vaishnavism: they lack the emblems through which Vishnu is known, such as the shankha (conch shell), chakra (wheel), gada (mace), and padma (lotus). The motifs on the pillars suggest varying dates between the ninth and the eleventh centuries; to be more precise, ‘eight of them are dissimilar, the pattern of carvings or decorative sculptures being quite different from each other’, while the remaining four, though carrying similar motifs, ‘do not necessarily occur in a particular grouping’. The predominant motifs are floral, conventionalized or stylized lotuses, and the female figure. All these motifs, while common to much ‘Hindu’ art, are also found in early Buddhist art originating from places like Sanchi and Bharhat, as well as in Jain and Shaivite architecture. As one scholar has argued, ‘the only pillar (doorjam) which has anything that may be called a religious motif is the one found in the Sita-ki-Rasoi [literally, “Sita’s Kitchen”], a structure that stood apart from the Babri Masjid though in the same complex. “On its lower part it has a figure with a trishula in its left hand”, but the trishula most emphatically suggests a Shaivite association, “for no Vaishnava dvarpala [door-keeper] can be and has ever been shown with the trishula as an attribute”.

The pillars themselves, Lal and his supporters have claimed, were sustained by pillar bases that he is said to have excavated. Sharma and his colleagues observe that the site notebook that Lal as a professional archaeologist would have had to keep, as well as the register of antiquities connected with the Ayodhya excavations, have not been made available to other archaeologists. Nor has a full report of Lal’s supposed findings, which should have followed the preliminary report, been published. As Sharma puts it bluntly, the ‘failure to make available the relevant material raises not only questions of ethics in using archaeological material, but also makes it doubtful whether Professor Lal’s new interpretation is really borne out by the actual record and material of his excavations’. But let us, once again, suppose that Lal did excavate some pillar bases, and let us hear the voice of his supporters first. Is there agreement that the black pillars and the bases said to support them are structurally akin, and that both can be dated to the eleventh century? This is certainly not the considered opinion of many professional archaeologists. Thus D. Mandal, in his monograph Ayodhya: Archaeology after Demolition, argues in considerable detail that it is ‘highly probable that the so-called pillar bases are actually the remnant portions of walls of different structural phases’. He concurs with Sharma et al. that the so-called pillar bases would have been unable to sustain the ‘vertical load of large-sized stone pillars’, which must be construed as being decorative rather than load-bearing pillars. In short, in Mandal’s view, ‘the contention that a “pillared building” was raised in the eleventh century AD is absolutely baseless’.

Similarly, Mandal makes short shrift of alleged ‘new archaeological discoveries’ at the Babri Masjid site of a ‘hoard’ of sculptures and other stone fragments bearing figures of Vishnu’s incarnations, on the basis of which a team of eight archaeologists and historians were able to claim that their finds ‘prove that there did exist at this very site a magnificent temple, from at least the 11th century, which was destroyed to build a mosque-like structure over the debris of the temple in the 16th century’. A panel depicting incarnations of Vishnu did not, as Mandal notes, appear in the ‘dig photo’; other objects, such as an image of Shiva-Parvati, ‘were found some distance away’, and in general the ‘stratigraphic position and locus of discovery’ of various ‘finds’ have not been specified. From the point of view of an archaeologist with professional training, ‘archaeological finds acquire the status of evidence when situated in their context’, and ‘context in archaeology is the concerned stratigraphy, the sequence
of soil deposits and the cultural material that is found in the various deposits. Mandal made then the pointed observation that 'not a single photograph showing the sequential stages of the unearthing of the pieces of the “hoard” has so far been published', and this neglect of stratigraphy marred the entire digging operation. The haphazard manner in which the digging was conducted did not merely ignore the stratigraphy of the site, in relation to which both the structural remains and the objects found there must be assessed, but in fact destroyed the stratigraphic evidence. Romila Thapar describes the recent operations in Ayodhya as 'wilful destruction'; those who have pilloried sixteenth-century Muslims as pillagers are shown to be accused of the crime themselves.

The so-called archaeological evidence proffered in support of the hypothesis about the existence of a temple at the site of the Babri Masjid has thus been put forth on the problematic supposition that the stratigraphically unassociated structural pieces—the pillar-bases, pillars at the Babri Masjid and in trenches at some remove from the mosque, and a door jamb built of the same blackstone found at a mound—are 'an integral part of one and the same structure, namely, a “Hindu Temple”'. As one might expect, proponents of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement have also been described as being selective in their use of 'evidence', a charge that is the most transparent reason for debates in the historical profession anywhere in the world. In the case of Ayodhya, it has been noted by more than one archaeologist and historian that excavations at Ayodhya have yielded Islamic glazed ware pottery pieces; all these pieces 'are securely dated', in the words of the protagonists of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement, to a period between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, and on stylistic and comparative grounds, that is in relation to West Asian pieces, they are determined to be Islamic in origin. The archaeological evidence, in other words, indicates not a temple but rather the distinct possibility 'of a Muslim settlement' at or in the proximity of the mosque 'from the 13th century onwards'.

It is the contention, then, of credentialed critics of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement that the entire archaeological enterprise to demonstrate the existence of a temple, more particularly an eleventh-century Vaishnava shrine dedicated to Rama, at the Babri Masjid site has been marred by scholarly incompetence and ignorance, exceedingly questionable motives, violation of professional ethical codes, and even—it would not be too far-fetched to say—downright dishonesty. Such work, argue some professional archaeologists, cannot withstand professional scrutiny; and indeed the temple theory stands, on their view, completely contradicted. The available information is quite adequate to support the categorical statement, states Mandal, 'that there was no temple, either of stone or of brick or of both materials, lying below the mosque at the site during the three centuries (the thirteenth to the fifteenth) which preceded the construction of the mosque.' Archaeological evidence in itself may not have furnished sufficient grounds for establishing the prior existence of a Hindu temple, but given that the historicity of the temple was sought to be proven by the use of archaeological data, archaeology had perforce to become a contested terrain. As Romila Thapar puts it simply, 'Whereas anyone has a right to his or her beliefs, the same cannot be held for a claim to historicity'.

The great transgression, one might say, consists in having shifted the dispute from the domain of 'belief' to the realm of 'history', and it is to an interrogation of this transgression, and the collusion of both the proponents and antagonists of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement in propelling history as the idiom in which the dispute is likely to be understood and resolved, that we shall now turn.

III

Insofar as one accepts that historical and archaeological evidence can establish or effectively contradict the theory that a Hindu temple was demolished to make way for a mosque in 1528–9, and further that the awareness of the 'truth' provided the grounds for a resolution of the problem, and does so perhaps even today when the Babri Masjid no longer exists, it is quite certain that the proponents of the temple theory have fared poorly in the debate. Again, if one were to accept, as indeed one must, that there are certain standards for historical knowledge and scholarship, then it is just as clear that the standards by which the antagonists of the temple theory abide are far more stringent and in congruence with standards that are accepted within the historical profession worldwide. Of course one might well ask, and with perfectly good reason, why we should allow the notion of what constitutes acceptable historical scholarship to come down to us from the West, or why 'history' should be none other than what 'history' has been in the West. But given that both the proponents and critics of the temple theory have given their implicit, and often explicit, consent to the notion of historical knowledge, craft, and understanding inherited from the West, the question within these parameters
is one of assessing how far either party has adhered to the canons of historical scholarship.

The promoters of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement have, as a whole, not merely displayed poor scholarship and an impoverished understanding of the nature of the historical enterprise; they have not been above fabricating 'evidence' or other material that would support their position. Thus, for example, the public was one day in December 1990, not long after the kar sevaks ['workers in the cause of Hinduism'] breached the defences placed around the Babri Masjid and placed a saffron flag atop one of its domes, informed through the newspapers that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had urged the Prime Minister to accept 'Mahatma Gandhi's formula' in an attempt to achieve a resolution to the Rama Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. Writing to the Prime Minister, the general secretary of the BJP apprised him of an article purportedly written by Gandhi and published in the Haryana Sevak on 27 July 1937, wherein Gandhi had said:

*It is a very heinous sin to forcibly take over any place of religious worship. During Mughal times many places of worship, which were sacred to Hindus, were looted and destroyed. Many of them were converted into Masjids. Although both temples and masjids are places of worship of God and there is no difference between the two, yet the way of prayers and traditions of both Hindus and Muslims worship are quite different.*

From the religious point of view, a Muslim will never tolerate a Hindu placing an idol in a Masjid where he had been praying for long. Similarly, a Hindu will never be able to bear where he has been worshipping Rama, Krishna, Shankar and Devi, is converted into a masjid. As a matter of fact such events, wherever they occur, are a symbol of religious slavery. Both Hindus and Muslims should try to settle such disputes among themselves. Places of Muslim worship which are under the control of the Hindus should be returned to the Muslims. Similarly, Hindu religious places which have been taken over by the Muslims should be handed over to Hindus voluntarily ...

There is, in this letter, at least something—such as the portions that I have placed in italics—that one can imagine might justifiably be credited to the Mahatma had he written the letter, but one must wonder at the audacity entailed in pushing forth a forgery, and that too in the name of the 'Father of the Nation', in an attempted resolution of the dispute. Queries revealed that the news weekly in which the article supposedly appeared, the Haryana Sevak, was not published on 27 July 1937, and the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, which runs into over ninety hefty volumes, does not carry the letter, certainly not under that date. The BJP could not produce a copy of the letter, and its general secretary, when interrogated about the matter, insisted that 'it is for the Prime Minister to deny its authenticity'.

It is always possible to argue that in questions of faith, the evidence that history can furnish has no place, and to some variant of this position we shall return in due course. It bears reiteration, however, that the proponents of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement have placed themselves entirely within the problematic established by historicism, and thus display all the signs of confusion and anxiety attendant upon those who, while having accepted in principle the standards of interrogation and 'truth' set by an alien culture, then reject those very standards as woefully inadequate and yet simultaneously claim on their own behalf a more rigid and exact adherence to those standards. While critical if not contemptuous of history, the proponents of the temple theory have been the most ardent advocates for the historicity of the temple, and have relentlessly pursued a historical line of inquiry. The contradictions of seeking to set 'faith' apart from 'history', and yet seeking validity by the invocation of historical authorities (or by attempting to demonstrate, as is quite common, the compatibility of 'science' with Vedic religion), are well-exemplified in much of the literature, such as Abbas Chatterjee's article in the Indian Express, a daily newspaper that then unabashedly advocated Hindutva history. 'To take first things first,' writes Chatterjee, 'the question whether Lord Ram was born at this spot, or was born at all, is irrelevant. Items of religious belief are essentially matters of faith and not of history, in Hinduism as much as in other religions of the world.'

Nothing in what Chatterjee says is likely to incite disagreement; indeed, as we have seen, the brunt of the argument from the critics of the temple theory has been that history ought never to have been implicated in an attempt to resolve the dispute. As Gopal and his associates wrote, 'Each individual has a right to his or her belief and faith. But when beliefs claim the legitimacy of history, then the historian has to attempt a demarcation between the limits of belief and historical evidence.' On Chatterjee's view, every faith rests on certain 'myths' which its adherents hold sacred and beyond interrogation, and the Hindu should not be put to tests which we would not think of applying to Christians or Muslims. 'Can any of these,' asks Abbas Chatterjee of Christian beliefs such as Christ being born of a virgin mother, or his rising from the grave after three days, be proved by historical evidence?' Can it be doubted that the interrogation and violation of such beliefs induces, judging from the anger with which
that a Rama temple existed on the spot where the mosque was subsequently built are all—with the exception of the ‘Ayodhya-Mahatmya’, a text that as we have seen can scarcely be invoked in support of the temple thesis—European travellers and scholars. As Chatterjee says, ‘For at least two and a half centuries, all travellers (Tiffenthaler 1766–71), surveyors (Martin 1838, Carnegie 1870, Neville 1905), archaeologists (Cunningham 1862–4, Fuhrer 1891), historians (Beveridge 1922) and scholars (Hans Bakker 1984) find the available evidence to leave no doubt that Babar’s mosque was constructed by demolishing the Jannahbhoomi temple, which stood at the site, and using its debris.’

Had Chatterjee taken care to read these aforementioned texts, instead of relying upon some second-hand accounts, many of them unquestionably in a garbled form, he might have understood the difficulties in appropriating them to his ends. Hans Bakker, for example, has come to the tentative conclusion that Rama as a figure of divinity had no substantial following in India until the eleventh-twelfth centuries, and if that is so, it is hardly possible that the worship of Rama has been a central tenet of Hindu belief since time immemorial as has been claimed, or that a temple stood at the Rama Jannasthan, the existence of which is supposed to be mentioned in the Skanda Purana, ‘composed centuries before’, as Chatterjee maintains, ‘the invasion of Babur’. Perhaps Chatterjee may have had some awareness of the incongruities in his argument, for elsewhere in his piece the ‘conclusive’ evidence is offered in a somewhat tamer fashion. Thus, he insists on the fact that there is ‘conclusive proof that material obtained by destroying a Hindu temple, or palace, had been used in building the mosque’, but the unexplained substitution of a ‘palace’ for the ‘temple’ is achieved in so nonchalant a manner as though to suggest that it made no material difference what sort of structure, if any, existed before the mosque came up in 1528–9. One thought, after all, that what has been in question is whether a particular temple dedicated to Rama, and marking the very spot where he is said to have been born, was demolished to pave way for the mosque.

The attraction to history among the advocates of the temple theory has not gone unnoticed by scholars. One historian who interviewed kar sevaks in Ayodhya drawn from western Uttar Pradesh has noted that they displayed a ‘preoccupation with history’: ‘many of them specifically mentioned historical dates, notably the birth of Ram (nine lakh years ago), Babur’s invasion (1528), the installation of the deity (1949). Yet this invocation of purported historical ‘facts’ has not

Muslims the world over reacted to Salman Rushdie’s mere suggestion that the Koran may not be a work of revelation, extreme feelings of ‘indignation and vengeance’. To the Hindu, Rama is a historical figure as much as a deity, and his life and deeds are as deserving of respect as the lives of Christ or the Prophet Mohammed. ‘Historians should not, therefore,’ warns Chatterjee, ‘step beyond what can be described as their jurisdiction by seeking to test the Hindu’s faith by the yardsticks of historical evidence.’

There is no denying that the faith of Hindus, not to mention Muslims and secularists, has most severely been tested by the particular concatenation of circumstances associated with Ayodhya, but Chatterjee’s strictures against ‘Marxist historians’, as they have been billed by proponents of the temple theory, deliberately obscure the limited design that has guided them in their research and public pronouncements. The suggestion that their endeavours constitute a travesty of the beliefs of Hindus, or that they are determined to deny that Rama was a historical personage (a matter that Chatterjee deems as being quite ‘irrelevant’ in any case), or that they would deny to Hindus what they would allow adherents of other faiths, namely the privilege of indulging them in their beliefs, is scarcely borne out by the writings and pronouncements of these ‘Marxist historians’. If these historians are ‘Marxist’, we can be assured that they have no motivation in elevating one faith over any other, and no particular inclination towards disparaging Islam rather than Hinduism. Their intent, which is by no means unproblematic, as I shall argue shortly, is to unmask the attempt by the proponents of the temple theory to camouflage what are mere ‘myths’ as ‘history’; as is quite clear to them, the instrumental use of history to gain political power and render ‘Muslims’ into ‘others’ for Hindus must be unequivocally deplored.

The proponents of the temple theory, in any case, cannot be accused of irony or self-reflexivity. Having castigated the historian for meddling in matters of faith, Chatterjee proceeds to furnish historical evidence that would establish, beyond any reasonable doubt, ‘that Babar’s mosque was constructed by demolishing the Jannahbhoomi temple, which stood at the site, and using its debris’. Chatterjee belongs to that school of thought which is only too pleased to discount European accounts of India as generally unreliable, a not unreasonable position to adopt if we take into account the Orientalism thesis, but which greedily devours these accounts when it appears to suit their purpose to do so. Thus Chatterjee’s authorities for the view
precluded, among the ideologues of the movement, a disavowal of history when it has appeared to them as an insubstantial mode of defending their position. 'The facts of history', we find stated in one issue of the Organiser, the organ of the RSS, 'appear fiction only to a person suffering from Historologia [sic!] and not to a balanced mind who is not afraid of any unpalatable fact whether it is for or against'; and yet in the same journal it is averred, in another article on the dispute over Ayodhya, that

The belief of millions in such matters is enough to bestow upon them the sanctity more than History can ... The very fact that Ram is worshipped from far east to Arabian sea, from Himalayas to Kanyakumari, and tradition passing from father to son believes him to be a living person of a prehistoric era is proof enough that a person of that name existed and was born in a city called Ayodhya.\(^{53}\)

Neeladri Bhattacharya has put together these and numerous other citations from the writings emanating from the VHP/RSS camp to point to both the appeal that the rhetoric of history has among the advocates of the temple theory and their inability to have a command over this rhetoric. He has characterized the approach of VHP ideologues as the 'mythification of history'. Several narratives of the story of Rama Janmabhoomi are possible; the particular narrative chosen by the proponents of the temple theory includes a certain modicum of verifiable general historical facts, because on the basis of this 'concretization' it is rather easier to induce in people the belief that the entire narrative has a certain credibility. 'Once the reader is made to identify with such familiar facts', which have less to do with Ayodhya or the status of the Rama Janmabhoomi, but more with widely accepted circumstances pertaining to the reigns of Akbar, Aurangzeb, and others, 'he is persuaded to believe in the authenticity of the narrative'. Thus 'invented details' and the grossest distortions of history are, through this mode of familiarization, 'sought to be authenticated'. As Bhattacharya argues, the narrative of the proponents of the temple theory and their supporters transforms, or attempts to transform, various myths—'the myth of ancient Ayodhya, the myth of its loss and recovery, the myth of the destruction of the temple and the construction of the mosque', and so forth—into history. The Rama Janmabhoomi movement derives its very sustenance from this falsified or 'mythic history'.\(^{54}\)

It is the manner in which the VHP's appeal to history has been contested that one begins to find how far the two parties to the dispute converge, rather than (as one had thought) diverge, in their views; more significantly, we can begin to understand why the ideologues of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement can so readily abandon the recourse to history, invoking in its place a whole set of beliefs that are said to belong to the common tradition of the Hindus, while their antagonists must perforce remain committed to history and the indubitable evidence that it claims to furnish; and perhaps we might then perceive why this very commitment to history, and to the 'truth' that we tease out of it, constitutes the precise grounds for the inability of secularists and other antagonists of the temple theory to understand why 'mythic history' has, and certainly ought to have, an attraction for many even in the age of modernity.\(^{55}\) To begin with, and this is a point well worth reiteration, history—that is to say, historical facts, the resort and appeal to historical evidence, the historical sensibility, and historicization—remains the terrain on which the battle is sought to be fought and, it would not be too much to say, brought to a decisive finish. As we have seen, the enterprise on both sides has revolved around a series of questions, to wit: was there or was there not a temple at the site on which the mosque was built in 1528? If so, was the temple brought down at the orders of Babur? What does archaeology have to say in this matter? What, if any, kind of concrete testimony do the pillars in the now-demolished mosque offer to the student of history and archaeology? These questions could, as long as we are confined to questions of 'fact', easily be multiplied.

What is equally arresting is the easy separation between myth and history, and the almost naive invocation of positivism, that we find in the critiques which secular and left historians have offered of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement. Bhattacharya writes as though there could be a 'true' history of Ayodhya, as though this history could, by the mere sifting of evidence at the hands of a skilled, detached, and dedicated historian, be made available to us. He writes as if history and myth, or even history and historiography, could be separated, as though the historian could be like the proverbial swan, the Paramhansa, that can separate the water from the milk in the tumbler. Thus we hear the constant reprimand: stories circulated by VHP ideologues and historians 'have no support in any historical evidence', and 'it is easy to demonstrate that many of the records referred to do not exist': myths and history become indistinguishable.\(^{56}\) As far as the Babri Masjid-Rama Janmabhoomi affair is in question, secular historians have shown themselves to be uneasy with what might be called category confusions and with the ambiguities that arise not merely from discarding conventional disciplinary pieties
but from a supreme indifference to fundamental distinctions that modern historians take for granted. Though no one can doubt that secular historians have by far the better ‘evidence’ than their proponents, they fail to recognize that the writers of the pamphlets and books emanating from the Hindu right conform to a very old tradition which makes no distinction between history and myth. Nor is Bhattacharya alone, let us be certain, in attempting to demarcate myths from history. In the special ‘Black Sunday’ issue of their newsletter Manas, the Sampradayikta Virodhi Andolan [Movement Against Communism], a small organization comprised mainly of left-wing activists, historians, and other scholars, enumerates various myths propagated by the Bharatiya Janata Party, and then goes on to provide a contradiction of each of these myths. To counter the myth that ‘the Muslim majority state of Kashmir has special privileges through Article 370’, the reader is informed that ‘all the provisions which gave it a greater degree of autonomy than other states ceased to operate in 1954’, and thus Kashmir, far from enjoying any special privileges, has been in the unfortunate position of being under the rule of the central government. Again, it is suggested that the myth of a rapid increase in the population of Muslims, owing to the provision in Islamic law whereby a man is permitted to have four wives, is a brazen lie that is ‘easily disproved by census figures’.

Clearly what the authors of ‘Black Sunday’ present is, on the whole, not merely well-intentioned but also a good deal more sensible and accurate than anything that their antagonists may have to say. Yet certain insuperable problems persist in the manner in which they have joined the debate. They are absolutely right to point out that, even if it were established that a temple was torn down to make way for the Babri Masjid, the destruction of the mosque would not thereby be justified. A historical wrong which can be laid at the foot of a conqueror is scarcely corrected by demolishing, some 500 years later, a religious edifice at which prayers were still offered by members of the community. The destruction of places of worship in medieval and ancient times, note the authors of ‘Black Sunday’, was ‘an integral part of political power’; those who wielded temporal power also exercised religious control, and had a temple been destroyed to make way for the mosque (a proposition in itself difficult to substantiate), one is to infer from it nothing more than the fact that in ‘medieval’ times the destruction of religious edifices signified not necessarily the animosity between adherents of different faiths but rather an essential aspect of political authority and the whims of conquerors.

The authors of ‘Black Sunday’ are entirely right in insisting that the actions of warriors, leaders, and invaders in the pre-modern period might be better understood within a framework of the politics of conquest, and that is also the productive path pursued by Romila Thapar in her interpretation of Mahmud of Ghazni’s raid in 1026 on the fabled Hindu temple at Somnath, about which I have written in the previous chapter. We may well wish to commend the authors of ‘Black Sunday’ for their efforts to secure communal harmony and peace through the articulation, in a tone of moderation, of generally acceptable views, but their analysis brings forth fresh problems. If their suggestion that in ‘medieval’ times the separation between religion and politics was inconceivable is to be pursued to its logical conclusion, then naturally Hindu rulers were just as likely to be implicated in that unholy marriage of religion and politics as Babur or any other Muslim ruler. Not surprisingly, then, the reader is informed that destruction of ‘places of worship was not done exclusively by Muslim rulers.’ A number of instances of Hindu kings engaging in the plunder and destruction of religious edifices are then furnished, and at least one example is offered of a temple built at the site of a Buddhist vihara. While it is unquestionably an imperative to establish that the adherents of no one faith have a monopoly on evil and barbarism, the pamphlet gives the inescapable feeling that the argument stems from the logic of quid pro quo: if, that is, it is conceded that the Rama temple was demolished to make way for the Babri Masjid, then let us concede, on the basis of historical evidence, that the Hindus themselves were guilty of similarly heinous acts many times over. The veracity of such an argument apart, its morality, whereby equivalences of evil are established, is exceedingly questionable, and even more uncertain must be the socio-cultural and political effects of this mode of historicization and recall of historical memory. By way of analogy, no one expects that abuse of a person within her or his own family makes abuse by an outsider any more tolerable.

Secondly, one cannot object too strongly to the unqualified valorization of modernity in ‘Black Sunday’ and indeed other like-minded literature. The attack on the mosque, argue the authors of ‘Black Sunday’, ‘is an act which utilises the destruction of religious places for political power. Therefore, it is reminiscent of the barbaric politics of ancient and medieval rulers that defies all modern, democratic, and civilised institutions of our society.’ Likewise, to Neeladri Bhattacharya’s way of thinking, it is a ‘medieval logic’ that is ‘at work
behind the struggle for the Ramajanmabhumi', while Amartya Sen is of the view that the Hindu communalists are guided partly by 'militant obscurantism', which he describes as the 'political use of people's credulity in unreasonable and archaic beliefs in order to generate fierce extremism' (italics added). One could begin with asking how, considering India's recent admission to the community of 'modern' nations, the Babri Masjid was able to stand for nearly five hundred years, and why it had to be knocked down at the very moment when India has been eager to demonstrate to the world its renunciation of tradition, archaic customs, and other vestiges of 'backwardness'.

One could also point to the most peculiar and embarrassing circumstance that not only has the twentieth century been particularly violent, but that it has enlisted the aid of science and technology to refine and perfect barbaric methods of inflicting pain and suffering on victims and exterminating entire populations chosen for no other reason than they constituted, or appeared to constitute, distinct identities that were deemed to be undesirable. If anything, it is the modern world which has had an acute difficulty in living with multiple identities, and its mode of dealing with this difficulty has been to freeze, demarcate, and isolate identities. It is the 'modern' rather than 'medieval' Hinduism of the proponents of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement that has insisted on stripping the Hindu faith of the numerous, often contradictory, strands of belief, devotion, and practice with which it has been fed for three millennia. It was the so-called non-modern world that lived comfortably with multiple and often conflicting traditions of the Ramayana story; and it is unmistakably the modern movement associated with the agitation over the alleged Rama Janmabhoomi temple at Ayodhya that has sought to narrow our interpretations of the Ramayana and elevate the Ramacaritmanas of Tulsidas over other Ramayanas as the authoritative version of the story of Rama. Is the homogenization of Hinduism, a project that the 'liberators' of the Rama Janmabhoomi temple are sworn to uphold, characteristic of the 'medieval' period, over a long duration of which India was swept by the bhakti movement and renditions of the Ramayana appeared in the 'vernacular' Indian languages, or is it not rather a sign of the modern?

IV

In my representation of secular historians and their communalist opponents, I may have, it is possible to argue, inadvisably eschewed

the larger and social and political context, and may not have been sufficiently attentive to the respective strengths of the two camps, or to facts of political patronage. But I make no pretense of offering a comprehensive account of the events leading to the destruction of the Babri Masjid, its extraordinary aftermath as violence engulfed many urban centres, or the role of the principal political actors; and I have, in keeping with my interests in this book, remained resolutely fixed on how, and in what manner, history came to be so ascendant in the affair of the Babri Masjid. Some readers may object that even within the limited scope of my enterprise, it should have been incumbent on me to recognize that the secularist and communalist interpreters were not evenly matched, and that the very terrain of history was scarcely a level playing field. The proponents of the temple theory belong to an intricate web of networks—the VHP and RSS among them—and though the BJP and its allies did not form the government at that juncture in Indian history, communalist scholars must have been emboldened by the political patronage extended to them. Senior members of the present Vajpayee government, including Vajpayee himself and the Home Minister, L. K. Advani, have been long-time members of the RSS, and the construction of a Hindu temple at Ayodhya remains very much on the agenda of the RSS. The VHP has grown immensely since its inception in the 1960s, and had already, by the late 1980s, become not merely a worldwide organization but a conduit for funneling money from the affluent Indian diaspora in the industrialized democracies in the West, and especially the US and the UK, to organizations committed to the rejuvenation of political Hinduism. Though the paper trail from VHP-America to Ayodhya—and in the twenty-first century to Gujarat—is not always easily deciphered, it is widely known that both institutional and personal contributions from diasporic Indians and their organizations have come into the hands of the VHP and related organizations in India.

As one anonymous reader of this manuscript put it, 'a handful of professional historians' was matched against a wide network of organizations. However, the supposition that the antagonists of Hinduutva should be viewed as 'a handful of professional historians' struggling against immense odds and powerful political interests needs to be treated with considerable scepticism. There were twenty signatories alone to a single document produced by S. Gopal and fellow historians at a single university; but perhaps this is reading 'handful' too literally. Consider, then, that almost no historian could be found either at Jawaharlal Nehru University or Delhi University, both of
which have large and easily the most renowned history faculties in the country, to support the temple theory; nor is it inconsequential that the historians at these two Universities, and a handful of others at various other institutions, are the ones who have gained the most recognition among colleagues overseas. To speak of these historians and other secular intellectuals who had immersed themselves in the debate as a very small group that found itself besieged by much larger communalist organizations is to overlook the institutional associations of the country’s leading secular historians, their leadership of institutions such as the Indian Council for Historical Research and the Nehru Memorial Library, their access to privileges and sinecures, and the patronage they themselves received under more hospitable regimes. It is also to ignore the fact that though these secular historians were at a great ideological remove from the Jamaat-i Islami, the Jamiat al-ulama, the Muslim Personal Law Board, and even the Babri Masjid Action Committee, they were nonetheless in agreement with these organizations that the Babri Masjid deserved the protection of the state. So to represent the secular historian as some kind of lone ranger is to obscure the complex if provisional alliances that the crisis of the Babri Masjid produced in the Indian polity.66

If, as seems indubitably to be the case, the proponents of the temple theory are among the same people who in the last couple of years have succeeded in placing astrology in the national curriculum, then one might well be inclined to marvel at the access to power which communalist scholars and the organizations on whose behalf they speak evidently have. But, conversely, the commentary in English-language newspapers on the attempt to introduce astrology into educational curricula has so unequivocally signalled opposition to the proposed changes that no one can possibly mistake the secular consensus on this question for a mere aberration or think that secular intellectuals and their supporters constitute, to appropriate Lord Dufferin’s characterization of the Congress in its early years, a ‘minuscule minority’. The sheer scorn with which ‘Vedic astrology’ and other ancient and medieval ‘superstitions’ have been received point, I would submit, to the fundamental issues at stake in the dispute between secular and communalist scholars. In the characterization of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement as a relic of barbarism, as an example of ‘medieval’ logic and unrepentant primitivism, we arrive at the crux of the matter.

The antagonists (and proponents too) of the temple theory have a great deal invested in modernity, but as I have previously suggested, it is not a commitment to modernity—and thus to ‘correct’ history, backed by the force of evidence, not disgraced or disfigured by ‘myth’—that will render India less susceptible to communal configurations and hatred in the future, but rather the very abandonment of the discourse of history. I have furnished an argument about the perils of the historical enterprise in Chapter I, but a number of points can bear reiteration in order to bring my perspective into sharper focus. Hindu India became known to Europeans for the absence of historical records and, more significantly, the lack of an historical sensibility. Hegel, in his 1830–1 lectures on the philosophy of history, was to pronounce emphatically upon the absence of historical compositions in India. He went so far as to say that in India, ‘History, is not to be looked for; and here the distinction between China and India is most clearly and strongly manifest’ 67 On the one hand, given that the Hindus had acquired, from the time of remote antiquity, a formidable reputation in ‘Geometry, Astronomy and Algebra’, and had displayed ‘great advances in Philosophy’, besides producing the most complex works of Grammar, the neglect of the ‘department of History’ appeared to be all the more anomalous. Yet it was completely understandable that the ‘Hinduists have no History in the form of annals (historia) [and] no History in the form of transactions (res gestae)’. India presented, in Hegel’s view, the most remarkable example of a polity without a State, for the only proper basis of a ‘State, the principle of freedom’, was ‘altogether absent’ in India. In that ancient land of the Hindus, subjective freedom was an impossibility. Hegel had no doubt that the ‘contradictory processes of a dissolution of fixed rational and definite conceptions in their Ideality, and on the other side, a degradation of this ideality to a multiformity of sensuous objects’, made the Hindus ‘incapable of writing History’.68 Here Hegel anticipates the argument, frequently encountered in recent critiques of history, that history has been called too often to service the nation-state, though Hegel obviously did not view the nation-state as an encumbrance upon emancipatory histories.

We scarcely need to pursue Hegel’s argument in all its ramifications; and as for its place within Orientalism, that is all too evident. But indignation and consternation at the preposterousness of the philosophical argument should not obscure the critical detail, namely Hegel’s observation that historical compositions were not to be found in Hindu India. What Hegel could not conceive was that perhaps Hindu India did not care much for such compositions, but this was to be understood nonetheless as a presumed ‘incapacity’. The notion
that Hindus were without much of a sense of the past had been a commonplace since at least the time of the Arab geographer Alberuni, who visited India around AD 1,000. As Alberuni put it, 'Unfortunately the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things, they are very careless in relating the chronological succession of their kings ... ' (36) Hegel and his generation, however, were to render this argument into an episteme, and in the early part of the nineteenth century, as delineated in Chapter I, James Mill, Thomas Macaulay, and numerous other British scholar-administrators of India took up this question in a concerted fashion, subsequently, Indians themselves were to adopt this argument. As for Hegel, so for Mill nothing attested better to the backwardness of Hindus than their lack of histories; lack of historical compositions pointed to the intellectual immaturity of a civilization, and to the low place of such a civilization in an evolutionary and evaluative scale. 'All rude nations', Mill averred, 'neglect history, and are gratified with the productions of the mythologists and poets.' (37) The conclusion, quite inescapably so, was that as Hindus had failed to produce historical works, they were still a medieval and, in the language of the day, 'rude' people.

History had then to be enshrined as the pre-eminent discourse of emancipation, a discourse that would awaken the Hindu consciousness, bring the greatness of the past before the eyes of Hindus, and evoke the collective memory of a people who had fallen from the state of grace into decadent if not evil ways. And so Hindus fell captive to the historical mode, as the writings of educators, philosophers, nationalists, and other civic-minded people so amply testify. The works of Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Vivekananda, to name only two legendary figures for whom Hindu India's acceptance of the historical enterprise marked the beginning of India's engagement with modernity, are well known in this regard, but hundreds of lesser-known figures were all too ready to commence the study of history. In Bengal, the first 'three books of narrative prose' intended for use by 'young officials of the Company learning the local vernacular were books of history', while the immensely popular History of India by Tarincharan Chattopadhyay, which had gone through eighteen editions between 1858 and 1878, unequivocally created a niche for itself with the argument that 'All Sanskrit sources that are now available are full of legends and fabulous tales; apart from the Rajatarangini there is not a single true historical account.' (37) In Indian schools, historical studies were henceforth to occupy a prominent place in the curriculum, and the histories of Mill, James Marshman, and

Mountstuart Elphinstone were to reinforce, 'with remarkable consistency', the argument that 'as long as Indian youth were without a historical consciousness, they would remain shackled to the tyranny of forms.' (38)

The study of history enjoyed the patronage of a much wider circle of admirers in England itself, being the favoured mode of knowledge for the modernizing middle classes. This interest in history can be traced back to the Elizabethan period, and owes something to the expansion of English trade overseas as it does to the creation of a new middle class. As Britain's empire grew, so did the interest in history. Sir Thomas Munro (1761-1827), who was to spend the greater part of his adult life in India, the last eight years as Governor of Madras, was echoing more than his own view when he wrote:

It is distressing that we should persevere in the absurd practice of stifling the young ideas of boys of fourteen or fifteen with logic. A few pages of history give more insight into the human mind, in a more agreeable manner, than all the metaphysical volumes that ever were published. (39)

Eventually historical studies were to have a programmatic place in Utilitarian theories and designs for the 'Improvement' of India, and indeed Indians were overfed with history on the supposition that their proclivity towards superstitions, abstractions, and fanciful exaggerations could not be checked otherwise.

If the study and valorization of history continue to occupy an important place in school curricula across India today, as demonstrated by the bitter disputes over the teaching of history in schools in states under the control of the BJP or its ideological allies, the particular association of history with the middle classes has not diminished either. As I have argued, the controversy over the now-demolished Babri Masjid marked the first occasion in the history of independent India that the historian was brought to the forefront of national politics, and that the discourse of history was seen as having a unique place in settling a dispute of national proportions; and perhaps it would not be too much to aver that blood was shed over competing versions of history. It would be rather trivial (though nonetheless true) to remark that the profession of the historian is eminently within the domain of the middle classes. More pointedly, we must recall that the membership of the BJP and the RSS is drawn largely from the middle classes, and it is precisely these people for whom history appears as the most reliable guide as an indisputable chronicle of Muslim misdeeds. In states where BJP governments have held power, history textbooks have been significantly altered. (39) There is
nothing unexceptionable in this, for history textbooks have always, across cultures,27 been the first casualty in disputes of this sort; what is notable is the attraction that history has for the middle classes on the one hand, and the compelling place of communalism in middle-class ideology on the other hand. It is precisely this connection which has been missed by most of the commentators, who on the contrary assume, as I have discussed at considerable length, that ‘communalism’ is most effectively to be contested by writing histories which are not ‘contaminated by a flood of “theories”, some mythical, some invented, but all masquerading as historical facts’.78

This newly found faith in history among India’s middle classes, which will one day yield a Santoshi Ma of Ithasa, is exemplified in numerous other ways. The eminent Hindi writer, Nirmal Verma, has in a long essay deplored the lack of a historical sensibility among Indians, their indifference to the past. He points out that in Britain, nearly 500,000 monuments have been entrusted to the care of the National Trust for Historic Places, thus ensuring not merely their preservation but their passage into the hands of the coming generations; in India, by comparison, only 30,000 monuments have been designated as ‘historic’ landmarks worthy of the attention of the Archaeological Survey of India, notwithstanding the fact that India is much larger than Britain and can boast of an even longer past.79 This is also the tone of two pieces by the late Arvind Das, one of India’s most respected editorialists, that appeared in a national daily less than a decade ago. The burden of these pieces is that ‘the method Indians appear to have found to deal with their past is to mythologise it. Fact is at a discount … Thus, while myths move millions, the actual and complex historical reality is often ignored’.80 The panacea evidently lies in transforming a ‘passive’ citizenry, submerged under a ‘dark cloud of a-historicity’, into active denizens of the historical faith.81 It is this very mentality that would have entrusted the ‘disputed structure’ of Ayodhya to the Archaeological Survey of India, and that would entrust similarly ‘ambivalent’ structures at Benares, Mathura, and other places for safekeeping to the state.

Under the secularist dispensation, living monuments, where forms of religious practice are critical to the constitution of a community, are to be transformed into dead ones, on the false supposition that the state is a better custodian of monuments, when in fact the state has everywhere been as much responsible for their decimation as any other force. Nor is it the case that monuments classified as ‘protected’ are necessarily beyond dispute or even immune from destruction.82 One might well say, considering what happened to the Babri Masjid, better ‘dead’ than destroyed, but that would be to obfuscate a number of critical questions. If England today is parasitic on tourism, living on the consumerism of millions beset by the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace and other inane thrills, is that what is to become of India also? Must we, like the advanced post-industrial countries of the West, force our culture into museums, giant amusement parks, historic homes, and other bracketed spaces? Or consider another set of questions: if we believe that politics and public life are both contaminated by ‘communalism’, how are we to ensure what we assume, namely the neutrality and ‘objectivity’ of the Archaeological Survey? By turning over ‘disputed structures’ to the Archaeological Survey, do we not commit the much greater error of substituting, for modes of cultural accommodation and lived practices of pluralism, the impersonal authority of purportedly transcendent institutions?

There is no compelling reason why the language of history should be of interest to Indians, and rather than berating them for their indifference to the discourses of history and neglect of the past, the secularists and modernizers would do well to reflect on the shortcomings in their own intellectual practices and their unfortunate surrender to the historical mode. Their respective claims have become possible only with the emergence of the discipline of history and modern forms of historiography. Far more than chiding the Hindu ‘fundamentalists’ for their deployment of an ‘unscientific’ and politicized history, and for contaminating history with myths, which is about the most substantive critique of Hinduva historians that has so far emerged, the secular historians need to make better use of Indian myths. Though, to take one striking instance, the secular historians have been sensitive to the manner in which Rama, and the notion of Ramaraya, have been masculinized, they have made almost nothing of Sita-ki-Rasoi,83 a building which constituted part of the Babri Masjid complex. Sita has disappeared from both Hinduva and secular discourses, and it is not inappropriate to suggest that this congruence has some relation to the privileging of history by both camps. Sita (meaning ‘furrow’) came from the earth, is of the earth, and returns to the earth: thus the preferred ending of the Ramayana among many devotees where Sita charts her own life after the return to Ayodhya and eventually descends into the earth. She is the one who nourishes, and her repudiation by the Hinduvaavadis is a telling fact not only of their narrow reading of the Ramayana but of the
cultural traditions of Hinduism, which stress the fertility principle and the importance of the kitchen as a sacred space.\(^{54}\)

That myth-making, and particularly a judicious use of the vast terrain of Indian myths, should be left to the ‘fundamentalists’ is not merely incomprehensible but indefensible. If the secular intellectuals and modernizers have nothing else to resort to but brute ‘facts’, and the unappetizing language of history, that is only an admission of how far removed they are from Indian civilization, an ‘how far they must travel before they can enter the arena of Indian public life, an arena that at this point must necessarily appear to them as little more than a den of demagoguery, obscurantism, arcaic beliefs, and repository of medieval ills. Ironically, while some of these very historians and intellectuals have celebrated the subaltern, endowed him or her with agency, the language of the subaltern continues to escape them, and the subaltern must appear in the present scenario as little more than an illiterate lumpen proletariat easily duped by masters of deception. Thus, for example, we have it on the authority of no less a person than Amartya Sen, who acquired renown for his writings on economics and philosophy, but lately has taken to pontification on virtually every subject, that the Ayodhya movement owes a great deal to the illiteracy of the Indian masses.\(^{85}\) The ‘low level of elementary education in that part of India [the “cow belt”] surely contributes to this gullibility’ of Indian people, Sen wrote recently, adding for good measure that ‘it was here that the Rama agitation assumed such force, and in fact, most of the Ayodhya agitators came from three states in the Hindi belt.’\(^{86}\) The offensive suggestion that the lower classes are more prone to ‘communalism’ ignores, as I have argued above, the attraction of the ideology of communalism for the middle classes.\(^{87}\) Sen admits that ‘Hindu middle classes in some parts of India have suddenly become more aware of alleged misdeeds of Muslim rulers in the past’, but feels no need to reconcile this statement with the avowed declaration of the communalism of the lower classes; to the contrary, we are merely furnished with the banal explanation that ‘the Hindu political activists have been trying to recreate a mythical past, mixing fact with fantasy’.\(^{88}\)

Perhaps, as the resurrection of historical memories suggests, we always need an ‘Other’. When a people have not had a conception of the ‘Other’, they have paid for their humanity, for their acceptance of pluralism, with their lives. Todorov put it thus: if the defeat of the Aztecs by a few hundred Spaniards cannot be accounted for other than by the circumstance that the Aztecs, having no conception of the Other, no vocabulary by means of which they could speak of the ‘Other’, could only comprehend the Spaniards as ‘Gods’.\(^{89}\) Before ‘Gods’, men must crumble; and when the ‘Gods’ were as rapacious, bloodthirsty, and merciless as the Spaniards, the elimination of the Aztecs was writ large. Yet, if we are to have an ‘Other’ as the condition of our survival, must the ‘Other’ necessarily be conceptualized in human terms? Plato banished the poets from his republic, and though we can scarcely banish historians, we must endeavour to render history itself into the ‘Other’. The ahistoricism of the Indian, and Indian civilization’s profound indifference to history, has been the source of sanity in that ancient civilization. Can it be hoped that from the sorrow of Ayodhya we will learn the folly of indulging in the fond belief that the language of history can ever be a force of emancipation? Perhaps we might then recognize, true to the genius of Indian civilization, that in banishing the discourse of history, we will not be rendering it into an unredemable, absolute ‘Other’, for even from banishment, as the Indian epics have reminded us, there is always the return.

ENDNOTES

1. One way to normalize ‘disturbances’ in India is to speak of them in the abstract, with a certain kind of imprecision that, apropos a ‘developed’ country, would never be tolerated. Whenever a calamity takes place, ‘thousands’ are killed, and ‘tens of thousands’ appear affected, and no doubt that has happened on more than one unfortunate occasion. The killings following Indira Gandhi’s assassination, and the calamitous gas leak at the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal, readily come to mind. In the wake of Ayodhya, such rhetorical flourishes, sad to say, have not been without justification. Between 6 December 1992 and 31 January 1993, if we are to rely on (disputed) official figures alone, 1,801 people were killed, and 226 places were affected by the ‘disturbances’. All over the country, 119 million people were placed under curfew: ‘thousands’ and ‘millions’ take on legitimate meanings in such circumstances. See People’s Union for Democratic Rights, Cry the Beloved Country: Ayodhya, 6 December 1992 (Delhi: PUDR, February 1993).

2. Whatever similarities there may be between the BJP and the Shiv Sena, the differences are no less significant: see Thomas Blan Hansen, Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).


5. Sushil Srivastava, in The Disputed Mosque, has argued with some degree of persuasion that Babur never built a mosque at Ayodhya. According to Srivastava, the closest that Babur came to Ayodhya was a place at the junction of the rivers Sirda and Chagra (Saryu), some 72 miles from Ayodhya. Babur’s whereabouts between 29 March and 18 September 1528 cannot be ascertained, for the pages of his memoirs for those days are missing. With respect to the more difficult question of the tablet with the inscription inside the mosque, Srivastava does not contest that the inscription records the construction of a mosque, or at least the renovation of a mosque that already stood at that spot; what he does doubt is that the mosque was built at the order of Babur, for the Persian quite possibly can be read as suggesting that the mosque was built at the initiative of the nobleman Mir Baqi in the anticipation that it would give Babur considerable pleasure (see Chap. 3, esp. pp. 72–6, 85–9).

6. See Anatomy of a Confrontation ed. Sarvepalli Gopal. Rama Janmabhoomi, which is the spelling that I shall be employing, is literally the ‘ground’ or ‘earth’ on which Rama was born; Janmasthan is the ‘place’ of birth.


9. See Sri Ramjanmabhumi ke Bare me Tahlya, p. 17, quoted in Gopal, p. 139.


11. R. S. Sharma et al., Ramjanmabhumi–Babri Masjid: A Historians’ Report to the Nation. We have encountered some of these scholars in the preceding chapter. Sharma is well-known as a historian of ancient India; Jha, a widely published authority on ancient Indian history, and General Secretary of the Indian History Congress from 1985–8, is a member of the history faculty at Delhi University. M. Athar Ali is one of the principal figures in the study of medieval Indian history, Suraj Bhan, an archaeologist, was then Dean, Faculty of Indic Studies, Kurukshetra University. This work will be cited henceforth as Historians’ Report to the Nation.

12. Ibid., p. 3.

13. For the use of the Skanda Purana and the ‘Ayodhya-mahatmya’ by VHP/RSS sympathizers, see for example Abhas Kumar Chatterjee, ‘Ram Janmabhoomi: More Evidence’, Indian Express (26 March 1990), p. 8: ‘That a Janmasthan temple existed in Ramkot is equally well proved by the ancient Sanskrit text of Ayodhya Mahatmya, which is part of the Skanda Purana composed centuries before the invasion of Babar. It eulogises the glory of the Janmasthan as the holiest of holy spots in Ayodhya and describes the virtues of worshipping at this shrine, specially on Ram Navami day.’ As we shall see, none of this has been ‘proved’. Hans Bakker, in his voluminous study, Ayodhya (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1986), has suggested a time span of the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries for the composition of the ‘Ayodhya-mahatmya’.

14. In his informed and well-known (if somewhat dated) study, Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj makes virtually no mention of Ayodhya. A ‘Grand Pilgrimage of India according to the Mahabharata’ did not include Ayodhya; in the Garuda, Matsya, and Agni Puranas Ayodhya appears as a pilgrimage site (irthi), albeit far less important than Prayag, Gaya, Varanasi, and numerous other places. The most compelling evidence about the status of Ayodhya may come from the Kryakalpatra of Bhata Laksmirasa, a compendious nine-volume digest dated to about AD 1110, a work that Bhardwaj describes as ‘uniquely reliable’ in the religious literature of medieval India’. Bhardwaj notes that at sacred places in South India it is less authoritative, as Laksmirasa was an inhabitant of North India, but if anything that would have made Ayodhya’s inclusion as a great pilgrimage spot more understandable. The eighth part of the work, entitled Tirrhotoqueena Kanadu, celebrates the glories of Varanasi, Prayag, Kurukshetra, Pushkar, Ujjain, Kedarnath, and a few other tirthas, as well as of sacred rivers such as the Ganga and Narmada, but Ayodhya does not figure in that list. Modern sources yield a similar consensus: twenty-eight sites, a list in which Ayodhya does not find a place, are recognized by six or seven scholarly works as the holiest places in India; another twenty-six places, including Ayodhya, are recognized by four to five sources as belonging to the next order of significant pilgrimage spots (see pp. 44, 62, 66, 69, 72–4, and 80–9). This is not inconsistent with the argument that Ayodhya only came to acquire an importance after the sixteenth century, certainly long after a temple is supposed to have been established in Ayodhya to celebrate the glory of Rama and mark his birthplace. One of the very few texts from the pre-modern period asserting the claims of Ayodhya as a great place of Hindu pilgrimage is the Atni-a-Akbar of Abu’l Fazl, who characterized Ayodhya as ‘one of the holiest places of antiquity’, the ‘residence of Ramacandra who in the Treta age combined in his own person both the spiritual supremacy and
the kingly office' (cited by Bakker, Ayodhya, p. 137). One wonders what the advocates of the temple theory would think of using a ‘Muslim source’ to substantiate their claims?

15. Cf. also S. Gopal, Romila Thapar, et al., ‘In the Name of History’, The Indian Express [Sunday Magazine] (1 April 1990), p. 8, where it is argued that Rama Janmabhoomi was not recognized in the ancient and medieval texts as an important pilgrimage spot. Rama Janmabhoomi is not mentioned in an eleventh-century inscription of a Cahadvala ruler who took a pilgrimage to Ayodhya and recorded the sites where he performed worship. ‘As is well known to scholars of early medieval history’, continue the authors in their rejoinder to A. R. Khan’s article in Indian Express on 25 February 1990, ‘there is no mention of the Ramajamabhoomi as a place of pilgrimage in a large number of texts of this period such as those of Lakshmidhara, Mitra, Mishra, Jinarabhulsuri, or the Bhushundi Ramayana and the Puranas, which refer to major places of pilgrimage including Ayodhya.’

16. See the discussion in Bakker, Ayodhya, 14–11, as well as in van der Veer, Religious Nationalism, pp. 157–8.

17. Gopal et al., The Political Abuse of History, p. 77.

18. The importance of Tiffenthaler’s account to proponents of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement can be gauged by the fact that a great deal of the literature in support of the movement cites the relevant fragments from Tiffenthaler’s travel narrative. See, for example, M. B. Chande, ‘Sri Ram Janma Bhoomi (Nagpur: M. B. Chande, 1992), pp. 61–2. This book appeared on 26 December 1992, twenty days after the destruction of the mosque, and is accompanied by an acknowledgement to one Anand Govindrao Puranik, the printer, for ‘processing this book within a fortnight’. The haste with which this work was produced brings to mind a story (howsoever apocryphal) about the famous poet Saadi. Upon being told by Saadi that it took him several days to produce a few good lines of poetry, a fellow poet of his said, ‘Why, I spin out a ghazal every time I take a shit’, whereupon Saadi is reported to have said, ‘No wonder your ghazals smell of shit too.’ As a work of scholarship, Chande’s work is pathetic, and even as a work of propaganda it is shoddy in the extreme; it is typical that the ‘Tiffenthaler [sic] Account’ is reproduced without the slightest indication of where the original and the translation were published. A couple of other ‘original’ accounts by Europeans are offered as evidence, but again one is left without a clue as to the author, title, and publisher of the works in question. The question of Hinduva’s relationship to the social sciences as a whole is deserving of scholarly treatment, marked as this relationship is by a profound ambivalence and sentiments of unease, admiration, contempt, and downright manipulation.

19. All citations from Abhijit Chatterjee, ‘Ram Janmabhoomi: More Evidence’.


21. This point is also made by S. Gopal, Romila Thapar, et al., ‘In the Name of History’. Rajeev Saxena, ‘Tulsidas’ Silence on Ram Mandir at Ayodhya’, Mainstream (9 January 1993), pp. 3–4, notes that Tulsidas wrote about the attack on lower-caste Hindus such as himself by Brahmins, his problems with arthritis, and a number of other issues, but not about the supposed destruction of the Babri mosque. I have some reservations, however, about this line of argumentation. A recent book on Marco Polo, which makes a similar kind of argument, suggests that he never visited China, since Marco Polo’s account makes no mention of the Great Wall or of the custom of foot-binding, and it is inconceivable that an European visitor to China would not have noticed these ‘peculiarities’ of Chinese history and culture. See Frances Wood, Did Marco Polo Go to China? (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995)

22. See Tulsidas, Sri Ramacaritmaanus (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2000 [large print edition, in Hindi], p. 378; the gloss states that ‘wherever Rama resides, there is Ayodhya’.


26. See, for example, the introduction by Shereen Ratnagar to Mandal, Ayodhya: Archaeology after Demolition, p. 3. A more modest appraisal of the ‘evidence’ offered by the VHP is to be found in the comment by Professor R. Champaekalakshmi of the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University: ‘Thus the evidence’, she says, ‘for the existence of a Hindu temple and more particularly a Vaishnava temple dedicated to Rama at the very same site as the present mosque is far from conclusive. Any attempt to use the available evidence as conclusive is questionable’ (italics in original). See Gopal, Anatomy of a Confrontation, p. 232.


30. See Note by Professor R. Champaekalakshmi in Gopal, Anatomy of a Confrontation, pp. 228–32, and Sharma et al., Historians’ Report to the Nation, pp. 8–9.

31. Sharma, Historians’ Report to the Nation, p. 10. This opinion is shared by
the contributors to Gopal, *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, for whom the issue of the acceptability of the evidence ‘also raises a question of archaeological method and procedure which archaeologists feel has been violated in the publicity sought by the claims’ (p. 223).

32. This is the claim of Murlidhar H. Pahola, ‘Archaeological Data on Temple’, *Indian Express* (14 May 1990), p. 8; likewise, see Chande, *Shree Ram Janmabhoomi*, pp. 24–5, although this is barely readable.


34. *Ramayanam Bhumi, Ayodhya: New Archaeological Discoveries* (New Delhi: Historians’ Forum, 1992), p. 16, cited by Mandal, *Ayodhya: Archaeology after Demolition*, p. 17. As one might expect, Chande makes a great deal of these ‘findings’, and a small section of his ‘book’, entitled ‘Archaeological Evidence on Ayodhya’, puts forth the claim that as ‘pillars inscribed with vedic verses or figurines [sic] of Hindu gods’ cannot be found in mosques, churches, ‘or any place of worship other than of Hindus’, ‘the only incontrovertible [sic] conclusion, that can be drawn, is that the Shree Ram temple existed at the present site’ (p. 25).


36. Ibid., pp. 42–3.


38. Comment by Dr. Suraj Bhan, in Gopal, *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, pp. 225–6. Bhan’s critique tallies with the observations of Sharma, Champakalashala, Mandal, and others; for an opposite view, see Dr. S. P. Gupta, ‘Ram Janmabhoomi-Babi Masjid: Archaeological evidence’, whose article seeks to establish that a temple was demolished and its debris utilized in the construction of the Babri Masjid.


42. Ibid., p. xiv, preface by Thapar.


44. This problem, with respect to nationalist thought, has been discussed by Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, especially Chapter 1.

45. Chatterjee, ‘Ram Janmabhoomi’.

46. Gopal et al., *The Political Abuse of History*, p. 76.

47. Chatterjee, ‘Ram Janmabhoomi’, p. 8. To follow Chatterjee’s train of thought, if ‘mere suggestion’ could have incited Muslims to go on a rampage, and that too in a matter where a work of fiction [*The Satanic Verses*] was in question, is it at all surprising that Hindus should have been moved to action confronted by the historical memory of bondage to an alien faith and of a deeply felt injury to their religion and culture to which the Babri Masjid stood witness? In this narrative, the Muslim is always more easily swayed by faith, a creature prone to impulsiveness (as the rapidity with which the worldwide community of Islam was able to stir up a campaign against Rushdie showed), and though the Hindu’s faith is no less ardent a felt, it is a testimony to the Hindu’s restraint that a monument that spoke loudly and clearly of its enslavement should have been allowed to stand so long. It is also worth noting Chatterjee’s attraction for arguments showing the affinity of religion and science: the mathematician Kurt Godel is invoked to the effect that ‘in every axiomatic system, there is always a proposition which can neither be proved nor disproved’. Similarly, certain religious beliefs can neither be proved nor disproved, and we should treat them in the manner in which we accord sanctity to mathematical axioms.


49. Chatterjee, ‘Ram Janmabhoomi’.

50. Hans Bakker, ‘Reflections on the Evolution of Rama Devotion in the Light of Textual and Archaeological Evidence’, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 31 (1986), pp. 21–2; idem, *Ayodhya*, 1:67 ff. Bakker’s argument is dubious, if not unacceptable, for other reasons. If we ask why the Rama cult assumed an importance no earlier than the eleventh–twelfth centuries, on Bakker’s view we have only to think of that time as the period of Muslim invasions of India and the beginnings of Muslim rule. Here was an absolute ‘other’; and in the Ramayana Hindus found a text for demonizing the other. A polemical use had to be found for the Ramayana before the worship of Rama acquired many adherents; and though Bakker suggests that a similar development took place in the time of the later Guptas, the twelfth century assumes heightened importance in his work. It is around this time that Sanskrit manuals which furnished guidelines for the private and public modes of worshipping Rama were first composed.

The effect of Bakker’s argument is to push back the history of communalism into the twelfth century. The argument ignores numerous other considerations, such as the increasing importance of bhakti movements from the ninth–tenth centuries onwards, and besides the evidence on which Bakker rests his argument is so slim as to be scarcely worthy of consideration. But the critical point for us is that this part of Bakker’s argument should, logically speaking, offer no satisfaction to Chatterjee and other advocates of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement, for its effect is to suggest that the Ramayana as a text can be, and has been, mobilized to foment hatred of the Muslim, and secondly that Rama was not a figure of divinity, worthy of veneration as a God (as opposed to a hero), until the eleventh–twelfth centuries, an exceedingly
late time in history given that Rama is supposed to have been born several thousand years ago.


51. Chatterjee, 'Ram Janmabhoomi'.


55. Needless to say, the arguments of the antagonists of Hindu 'fundamentalists' are rather more complex than what I have perhaps suggested. There is, for example, the recognition that VHP ideologues have sought to render Hinduism into a 'masculine' religion; if Rama was before a 'soft', even faintly 'feminine' God, full of warmth and tenderness, now he is an 'aggressive, masculine, warrior God' (ibid., p. 129). But it is not clear what appeal such an argument would have with the Hindu public, and whether this kind of reading is at all relevant to most people. Just as intellectually persuasive (though scarcely unproblematic) has been the argument that the VHP ideologues have, while criticizing other religions for their monolithic unity, themselves aspired to render Hinduism into a monolithic or 'Semitic' religion, but again it is far from being certain that most Hindus see the traditional pluralism of their religion, evident for example in the multiplicity of deities and in the multiplicity of diverging traditions of the Ramayana story, as being incompatible with the attempts to provide Hinduism with, as it were, a centre. These points are, in any case, quite incidental to my thesis that it is really to the question of how history has been deployed by both parties to the dispute, and the consequences of those invocations to history, that we must turn to gain some comprehension of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the possibilities of constructing a future for us that would be less encumbered by historical discourses that seek to arbitrate the destinies and contours of a civilization.

56. Ibid., pp. 124, 133.


58. 'Black Sunday', p. 4; Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation*, p. 351. The myth is 'disproved by census figures', states the authors, and they go on to state: 'The Report on the Status of Women in India (1975) shows that the number of polygamous marriages was greater among Hindus than among Muslims, 5.05% of Hindu marriages were polygamous and 4.31% of Muslim marriages (9 out of 25) were polygamous.' However, there is some amount of evasion, if not prevarication, here: census figures on the Muslim population are not actually cited, which may convey to some readers the impression that claims about the accelerated growth of the Muslim population in India are not without foundation. The first census taken after the partition, in 1951, is not compared with the 1911 census; nor is the possible rejoinder that Hindu men are more likely to take two wives rather than four wives anticipated. The incidence of polygamy is less significant than the quantum of polygamy in each polygamous marriage. My point here is not that the rate of population growth among Muslims necessarily exceeds that of Hindus, but rather that the question is seldom handled with absolute conviction and probity. The 'myth' has two discrete elements: one is a claim about the disproportionate increase of Muslims in the last five decades, the other is a claim about polygamous marriages as the supposed norm among Muslims. Repudiation of the second claim, which is more frequently encountered in the literature, does not settle allegations contained in the first claim. The real rejoinder to the communalists, moreover, must lie in the emphatic declaration that the increased demographic growth of any one community cannot constitute the grounds for their oppression by others.


60. 'Black Sunday', p. 2.

61. Bhattacharya, 'Myth, History and the Politics of Ramjannabhoomi', p. 129; Amartya Sen, 'The Threats to Secular India', *New York Review of Books* (8 April 1993), p. 30. By Sen's standard, Gandhi must stand convicted as well; to a liberal, secular humanist descended from a distinguished line of Bengali modernists, Gandhi has always appeared as someone who held 'unreasoned and archaic beliefs'. Even Tagore, a more much nuanced, sensitive, and ecumenical thinker than Amartya Sen, had perforce, on more than one occasion, to charge Gandhi with holding unreasoned beliefs and superstitions. See the recent collection by Sabysachi Bhattacharya, ed., *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates Between GANDHI and TAGORE 1915–1941* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997).


64. The argument for the ideological modernity of the movement behind the attempt to destroy the Babri Masjid is best made by Ashis Nandy et al., Creating a Nationality.

65. A similar sentiment was conveyed to me by Romila Thapar, personal conversation at Smith College, Northampton, The Kahn Institute Colloquium on Religious Tolerance and Intolerance, 3 October 2001.

66. The experience of SAHMAT, a cultural organization set up to honour the memory of Sajdar Hashmi, a prominent theatre activist with pronounced communist sympathies who was murdered in broad daylight by Congress Party thugs on 2 January 1989, might seem to corroborate the view that secular intellectuals operate, most particularly since the Congress suffered a precipitous decline in the mid-1970s, amidst immense hostility and the far-reaching influence of the Hinduutva advocates. The SAHMAT exhibition, Hum Sab Ayodhya (‘We Are All Ayodhya’), which aimed to present an ecumenical narrative of Ayodhya’s past, and to show the immense divergences in Ramayana traditions around the country, was severely disrupted by activists of the Bajrang Dal in August 1993 and became the subject of parliamentary recriminations. One panel which depicted a Jain version of the Ramayana according to which Rama and Sita were siblings became the pretext for initiating an open assault upon SAHMAT as an organization which had dared to suggest that Rama and Sita were engaged in incestuous behaviour. However, as one critic who is sympathetic to SAHMAT is constrained to admit, the defence of SAHMAT—as indeed there should have been one—almost always overlooks a number of difficulties in SAHMAT’s own outlook and the political economy of the organization. SAHMAT’s interventions on the question of the Babri Masjid have been possible only with state funding, and its music festival, Mukti Naad, was held in war-torn Ayodhya, so to speak, with the evident patronage of the state at the highest level. But commentators who are accustomed to thinking of Hinduutva organizations as the only beneficiaries of the state have nothing to say on this matter. SAHMAT’s own membership and support is derived largely from the elites, and the Mukti Naad festival, for all its posturing as a statement of people’s art and an eloquent testimony to the composite culture of Ayodhya, was apparently staged without any consultation with the people of Ayodhya. The discussion in Rustom Bharucha, In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 52–74, is useful.


68. Ibid., pp. 161–3.


70. The close connection between colonialism and the emergence and teaching of history in India is recognized by Ranajit Guha, An Indian Historiography of India. Guha, however, shows a singular incapacity to step outside the paradigm of history; and, indeed, as his contributions to the numerous volumes of Subaltern Studies suggest, he thinks it is only a matter of substituting—no easy matter, as he concedes—subaltern history for elite history, whether of the colonialist or nationalist variety. See, in particular, the programmatic note by Guha, ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’, in Ranajit Guha, ed., Subaltern Studies I, 1982, pp. 1–8, and ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, in Ranajit Guha, ed., Subaltern Studies II, 1983, pp. 1–42. Both these pieces are also collected together in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds, Selected Subaltern Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), and are discussed below, in Chapter IV.

71. James Mill, History of British India, ed. with notes by Horace Hayman Wilson, 10 vols (5th edn, London: James Madden, 1858), Vol. 2, p. 47; Vol. 1, pp. 114–15; Vol. 2, pp. 46–7. The first edition of this work appeared in 1817. More recently, one scholar has stressed that Mill’s History is the oldest hegemonic account of India within the Anglo-French imperial formation, a work that throughout the nineteenth century was to provide the model for textbook histories of India. See Ronald Inden, Imagining India, p. 45.


73. Gauri Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 125. The examination questions given to students of history are preserved for us in numerous British records. One such question, apparently put to students in the 1840s, was: ‘What are the earliest Historical Records among uncivilized nations? And what are the changes which they usually undergo before we arrive at the period of true History? Illustrate this by instances from the Histories of Greece and Rome, of India, and of Europe.’ See W. H. Sykes, ‘Statistics of the Educational Institutions of the East India Company in India’, Journal of the Statistical Society of London 8 (September 1845), p. 236.


76. Parvarthi Menon and T. K. Rajalakshmi, ‘Hindu Fascists: The Quest for Hate’, and T. K. Rajalakshmi, ‘A Master’s Version’, both in Frontline 15, no. 23 (7–20 November 1998). The report (1993) of the National Steering Committee on Textbook Evaluation noted that BJP governments in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh in the early 1990s had amended textbooks with the intention of furnishing a ‘communal view of Indian history’. In these textbooks, according to one expert reviewer, India was at its most developed in the ancient period, and the struggle for Indian
independence can be said to commence with the opposition over Alexander’s invasion of India in the fourth century BC. See Aditya Sinha, ‘RSS targets history textbooks’, Hindustan Times (17 June 1998). As I write these lines, news is emerging of ferociously communal arguments encountered in Gujarati textbooks, some of which describe all non-Hindus in India as ‘foreigners’, while others suggest that Hitler ‘lent prestige and dignity’ to Germany. See Monibeha Gupta, ‘In Gujarat, Adolf Catches ‘Em in Schools’, Telegraph (29 April 2002), and ‘Gujarat School Text Teaches Hate’, Asian Age (8 May 2002). The South Asia Citizens Wire web site, run by Harsh Kapoor, has a great deal of material on this subject: see <http://www.mnet.fr/niindex>


78. Parvathi Menon, ‘Ayodhya and all that: Communalism and the discipline of history’, Frontline (11–24 May 1991), p. 47. The author of this piece takes the view that we have heard from the vast majority of the proponents of science: history is neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’; it can serve the cause of ‘communalism’ as much as the cause of liberty.


82. I might note parenthetically that the Taj Mahal, India’s most famous monument and largest foreign exchange earner, was closed to visitors in the evening hours for several years, and thus could not be viewed in moonlight. The Government of India pointed in the late 1980s and early 1990s to threats issued by Sikh terrorists to blow up the Taj Mahal; in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid, Hindu ‘communalists’ are said to have threatened the destruction of the Taj, and in 2001 Bajrang Dal activists stormed it and vandalized the monument. But threats to blow up the Taj emanated not only from Sikh terrorists and Hindu extremists. Following orders issued by the Supreme Court to forcibly close a large number of refineries and other industries in the vicinity of the Taj, on the grounds that the smoke belching from these factories was causing permanent damage to the monument, a number of Hindu merchants again spoke of destroying the Taj if these orders were not revoked. These Hindus were undoubtedly unaware that even the Taj Mahal has been claimed as a ‘Hindu’ monument, by no less than a historian. The claims of P. N. Oak were discussed in the previous chapter.

83. It is no surprise that the most sensible interpretation of the conflict around Ayodhya also shows the most imaginative use of Indian myths and the rich stock of stories originating from the great epics and the lives of Indian philosophers and religious leaders. See Ramchandra Gandhi’s Sita’s Kitchen, and my review, entitled ‘Advaita’s Waterloo’, Social Scientist (New Delhi), Vol. 21, nos 5–6 (May–June 1993), pp. 82–9. Gandhi’s book was clearly inspirational for one of the very few scholarly treatments of Sita-ki-Rasoi found in the literature: see Phyllis Herman, Retooling Ramarajya: Perspectives on Sita’s Kitchen in Ayodhya, International Journal of Hindu Studies 2, no. 2 (August 1998), pp. 157–84.

84. No inference can be drawn about Sita herself being in the kitchen; indeed, in Valmiki’s Ramayana, Sita is nowhere near a kitchen, though she is everywhere else.

85. No one, to the best of my knowledge, has ever argued that the holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis upon Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and other ‘undesirables’ owed anything to the illiteracy of the German masses. But such arguments are easily available when it comes to India and obviate the necessity of serious interrogation of all that is taken for granted in any body of knowledge.

86. Sen, ‘The Threats to Secular India’, p. 30. The Bengali intellectual, I think it not unfair to say, is often prone to think of the Hindu from the Hindispeaking heartland, the ‘cow belt’, as a village bumpkin, even perhaps as ‘dirty’ and ‘uncouth’. The historians of the subaltern school have made some sorely needed amends in this regard.

87. A large number of studies have shown that education, far from constituting the solution to ‘communalism’, contributes to it in a great measure. People who are more highly educated are likely to be more communalized: besides the intense competition for lucrative positions and government dispensions, their sense of history is more acute. In a study conducted in the schools of Bombay in the aftermath of the 1992–3 communal confrontation, it was found that children attending private schools, who come mainly from the Hindu middle classes, had more pejorative views of Muslims than children at municipal schools. See ‘The darker side of riots’, Times of India (5 December 1993), Bombay edition.