

‘God must be Liberated!’ *A Hindu Liberation Movement in Ayodhya*

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THERE seem to be at least two elusive concepts in the sociology of India: caste and communalism. On caste Eric Wolf makes the point eloquently: ‘The literature on the topic is labyrinthine, and the reader is not always sure there is light at the end of the tunnel’ (1982: 397). The sociological perspective on caste seems to be obscured by a great deal of confusion about the place of religious values and sentiments in Hindu society. According to Louis Dumont (1970: 6, 7), the primary object of the sociology of India should be a system of ideas and the approach that of a sociology of values. Since the religious ideology, on which the caste system is based in his view, seems to have been fixed already in the classical period of Indian civilization, caste becomes a static, a-historical phenomenon in Dumont’s writing and in much of the debate originating from it (cf. Van der Veer 1985). The same may easily happen with that other most elusive concept of the sociology of India, communalism. Again Dumont can be our misleading guide here. He argues that ‘communalism is the affirmation of the religious community as a political group’ (1970: 90). In terms of their religious values and norms there is a lasting social heterogeneity of the Hindu and Muslim communities (95–8). This argument amounts to a ‘two-nation’ theory, based upon an a-historical sociology of values. Dumont is not alone in this kind of argument. In fact, there is a strong tendency in symbolic or semiotic studies of religion to construct static systems of symbols shared by all members of a group or society. The most important example of this tendency is the work of the leading American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In Geertz’s view religion is a cultural system of symbols, while he takes culture as ‘a system of inherited conceptions expressed in

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symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life' (1973: 89). He seems not to be interested in the historical conditions necessary for the existence of particular religious practices and discourses (cf. Asad 1983). In discussing integration in the New States, Geertz derives phenomena like communalism in India from 'primordial attachments', 'the assumed "givens" of social existence' (1973: 259).

It is not my intention to deny that religious values and sentiments are of importance in understanding political actions of Hindu, Muslim or other religious groups in India. My point is, rather, that it seems unfruitful to divorce these values and sentiments from the political arenas in which they are shaped. Religious experience cannot be seen apart from religious organization and group-formation; and since the latter changes over time, the former changes with it. The notion of a Hindu identity—being a Hindu and acting as such—is an option open to the social actor who may articulate, underplay or stress this identity, depending on the situation, in which he finds himself. He is of course not 'free' to choose, since identity-formation can be seen as the result of forces operating on the individual and the group from within, and those impinging on them from without (Epstein 1978: 102). Being a Ramanandi, a Vishnuite, a Hindu or an Indian is therefore not a 'primordial attachment', but the result of political processes.¹ Just as we are accustomed to describe nation-building and state-formation in political terms, we should do the same while describing communalism and the development of religious organization (cf. Van der Veer and Van der Burg 1986).

In this paper I want to present an analytical description of a Hindu movement, which made an attempt in 1984 to remove the so-called Babar Mosque in Ayodhya from the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, on which it had been built in the sixteenth century. First I want to give a short historical account of the changing relations between Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya to show that it is misleading to take the antagonism between them as an unchanging factor which is culturally given. The main focus of the paper is, however, on the movement of 1984 and on the political actors on the local level: their aims and actions. I want to show that the sentiments aroused by the movement are not 'primordial', but that they are fragmented and depend on developments in the political arena. The interest of the case, presented here, lies partly in the fact that the actors are sadhus who dominate part of the religious scene of North

¹ My position seems somewhat similar to that of Bayly (1985: 202, 203), though I fail to see the advantage of using the term 'mentalité' instead of 'identity'.

India. Moreover, the principal arena of their political activities is one of India's most important places of pilgrimage, a focus of Hindu beliefs and actions.

Hindus against Muslims in Ayodhya: Changing Configurations

Ayodhya is the birthplace of Lord Ram, one of North India's most important Hindu gods. It is situated on the bank of the holy river Sarayu, some 120 kilometres distant from Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh. In a literal as well as a metaphorical sense it is a *tirtha*. This Sanskrit word for place of pilgrimage means literally 'ford', a place to cross the river, but it has wider metaphorical ramifications. The river descends from heaven and therefore the pilgrim can come into contact with heaven at the *tirtha*. In the ritual context of ancestor-rituals the sacrificer crosses over to heaven to make contact with the world of the ancestors, while in the spiritual context of the devotion to Ram the worshipper leaves the world of illusion and comes into Ram's presence. The religious specialist of the ritual context is the Brahman *panda* who performs the rituals on the bank of the Sarayu. The spiritual context is dominated by Ramanandi sadhus who occupy most of Ayodhya's temples (Van der Veer 1984). The Ramanandis have come to dominate the religious and political scene of Ayodhya in the course of this century as the result of a long-term process in which they increasingly abandoned their peripatetic lifestyle for 'sedentary' life in places of pilgrimage.

In Ayodhya is the exact place of birth of Ram, of course, the foremost object of pilgrimage. The difficulty, however, is that on this spot a mosque was built in the sixteenth century after the destruction of a Hindu temple. Some of the old pillars of the temple are still visible today and date to the eleventh century AD (Bakker 1984: 44). Local tradition has it that the temple, like many other temples, had been built by the legendary king Vikramaditya. According to the theory of Ayodhya's religious specialists, Ram lived in the *Treta* period, the second of the four 'world-periods' (*yugas*) of Hindu cosmology. At the end of the *Treta* period Ayodhya disappeared only to be 'rediscovered' in the present *Kali* period by king Vikramaditya. Helped by his meditation he succeeded in finding the places associated with Ram's life and he started to build temples on them. This typical Hindu story of the 'rediscovery' of lost sacred places is partly confirmed by historical research. Bakker (*op. cit.*) argues that the fictional Ayodhya of the sacred saga *Ramayana* came

to be identified with the important North-Indian town of Saketa during the reign of the Guptas in the fifth century AD. The Guptas removed their capital from Pataliputra to Saketa, which they decided to name Ayodhya. The Gupta kings Kumaragupta and Skandagupta styled themselves devotees of Visnu, and Skandagupta took the title of Vikramaditya. He liked to compare himself with Ram and it was a dominant theme in the Gupta court that the Guptas continued the glory of Ram's dynasty and had restored the capital of Ram to its ancient glory. After the reign of the Guptas, the town fell into insignificance, but not into oblivion, thanks to its recognition as Ram's place. On the eve of Muslim expansion in North India, Ayodhya contained several temples, amongst which the important temple on Ram's birthplace.

This temple then was destroyed by the Moghul ruler Babar and replaced by the mosque which is still on the spot. An inscription in the mosque reads as follows:

By the command of the Emperor Babur, whose justice is an edifice reaching up to the very height of the heavens, the good-hearted Mir Baqi built this alighting-place of angels. *Bavad khair baqi!* (May this goodness last forever). The year of building it was made clear likewise when I said *bavad khair baqi* (= 935 AH, i.e. AD 1528). (Beveridge 1922 II, App. U, p. LXXVII f.)

According to local tradition the temple was at the time of destruction under the supervision of the sadhu Syamanand. Two Muslim *pirs* came to Syamanand to learn from his devotional methods. Impressed by the great power (*mahima*) of Ram's place, they wanted to transform it into an Islamic place. Their chance came when Babar visited Ayodhya. They promised Babar to make him and his descendants emperors of India if he would destroy the temple and build a mosque instead. Babar ordered his general Mir Baqi to fulfil this wish, and he succeeded in doing so after several difficulties. Tradition is corroborated by the fact that there is a Muslim grave nearby of the pir Fazl Abbas Musa Ashikhan which shows two pillars, belonging to the ancient Hindu temple. The demolition of the temple did, however, not imply that Hindus stopped frequenting the place. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the pilgrims continued to worship there unhindered, throwing flowers in a pit, which was said to be the actual spot of Ram's birth (Sitaram 1930: 36).²

The exact configuration therefore seems to be rather complex and can easily be misinterpreted. In the first place there is clear evidence that an

² The situation resembles that of Benares, where a 'well of wisdom' (*Jnana Vapi*) is situated before the mosque, which was built on the demolished Visvanath Temple (cf. Eck 1982).

important Hindu temple has been destroyed by an officer of the Mughal Babar at the instigation of local Muslim saints. This seems to be a pattern quite common in Indian history, in which a Muslim ruler is enjoined by religious leaders to spread Islam and to suppress Hinduism. On the other hand, there is the local story that the Muslim saints had come to learn from a Hindu sadhu. This also testifies to a common pattern in Indian history of Hindu and Islamic syncretism. This makes it hardly possible to speak of incompatible and mutually exclusive belief systems. Moreover, there is no evidence for a total suppression of Hinduism in Ayodhya. Hindu worship remained possible in the compound of the mosque and the activities of the Brahman pandas of Ayodhya are recorded by the first European visitor of the place, William Finch between 1608 and 1611 (Forster 1921: 176). In fact there seems to be nothing definite to say about the attitude of Muslim rulers and officials in the Mughal period towards Hindu institutions. They could gravitate towards the demolition of temples as well as towards the active patronage of temples. For both extremes examples can be found. At least in the case of Ayodhya the call for the spread of Islam by religious leaders seems to have been successful. To neglect such a call completely has always been a sheer impossibility for Muslim rulers, since the legitimation of their power and the extent of the support given by several groups to their regimes depended for an important part on their use of Islamic symbols and rhetoric.

Squarely on the for Hinduism positive pole of the continuum between demolition and support of Hindu institutions stood the regime of the Nawabs of Awadh (Oudh) who succeeded the Mughals as the dominant regime of Northern India in the eighteenth century. Awadh is, of course, another writing of Ayodhya and the Hindu sacred place was during the rule of the first Nawab, Saadat Khan (1722–39), the centre of this expanding regional realm. His successor, Safdar Jang (1739–54), however, removed the administration from Ayodhya to the newly built Faizabad, and later in the eighteenth century Lucknow was made the capital of Awadh. In the modern literature on Ayodhya Hindu writers tend to interpret the removal of the Nawabi administration from Ayodhya as the liberation of a Hindu sacred place from Muslim oppression (see e.g. Sinha 1957). The idea is that only after this removal could Ayodhya develop as an important pilgrimage centre and this theory is substantiated by pointing out that most of the older temples in Ayodhya were built in the eighteenth century. There can be no doubt about the fact that Ayodhya became an important pilgrimage centre only in the eighteenth century, but this seems not to have been the result

of the removal of Nawabi interference, but, on the contrary, the effect of patronage of the Nawabi court. In his recent study (1980) Richard Barnett makes it very clear that the rule of the Nawabs depended to a great extent on the successful collaboration of Hindus and Muslims. The administration was largely in the hands of *kayasths*, a caste of Hindu scribes, while the military force was dominated by Shivaite *nagas*. The growing significance and prosperity of Ayodhya in this period seems rather to be the result of the upward mobility of Hindu groups in the expanding realm of Nawabi Awadh than the result of the removal of Muslim rule from the place. This view is enforced by documentary evidence found amongst the Brahman *pandas* and Ramanandi *sadhus*. The *diwan* of Nawab Safdar Jang, the saksena *kayasth* Nawal Ray, built and repaired several temples in Ayodhya, while Safdar Jang himself gave land to Abhayramdas, abbot of the Nirwani akhara, for building a temple on what is known as Hanuman's hill. Asaf-ud-Daulah's *diwan*, the *srivastava kayasth* Tikayat Ray, supported later the building of the important temple-fortress Hanumangarhi on this land. Moreover, in the documents kept by the *pandas* we find evidence of several gifts given by Muslim officials of the Nawabi court for rituals performed by these Hindu priests.

The mutual understanding between Muslim rulers and Hindus seems therefore to have been great in the eighteenth century, but it had its limits. There was no sign of removing the mosque from Ram's birthplace, although as before Muslims and Hindus continued to worship in the same compound. When the power of the Nawabs gradually eroded due to the growing influence of the British in Awadh's politics the peaceful coexistence of Hindus and Muslims in what had become one of the most important Hindu pilgrimage centres in North India came to be threatened. During the reign of the last king of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah (1847–56), who had become almost a puppet in the hands of the British, the Sunni leaders began to assert themselves against the authority of the Shia Nawabs. In 1855 Muslims of Ayodhya, led by a Sunni leader Ghulam Husain, claimed that there had been a mosque within the precincts of Hanumangarhi. This mosque should again be opened for Muslim worship. The Muslims gathered in the Babar mosque and started to threaten the Ramanandi *nagas* with an attack on Hanumangarhi. This led to a violent battle, which was won by the *nagas* who killed some 70 Muslims. The events caused considerable agitation amongst Muslims in the whole of Awadh, which the British tried to quell by appointing a commission of both Hindu and Muslim noblemen to investigate the Muslim claim. Although the commission came to the

conclusion that the claim was unjustified, the Sunni preachers continued to rouse their followers to start a holy war against the nagas of Hanumangarhi. An army was formed under the leadership of Maulvi Amir-ud-din *alias* Amir 'Ali against the explicit orders of the king of Awadh. Before it could reach Ayodhya, it was, however, stopped by British troops.³ When the British annexed Awadh in February 1856, they decided to put up a railing around the Babar mosque, so that the Muslims could continue to worship within the mosque, while the Hindus were forced to make their offerings on a platform, which they raised outside the fence (Carnegy 1870: 21).

The configuration in the eighteenth century, in which the cooperation of Hindu groups was essential to the expansion of the realm of the Shia Nawabs, had been important to the rise of Ayodhya as a pilgrimage centre. The British rule did not have a negative influence on this rise, but it changed its character. Patronage of Muslim rulers and officials was not anymore needed. Petty rajas and zamindars of the region started to invest money in Ayodhya's temples on an enormous scale, probably because of the greater security of property which they enjoyed in the British period (cf. Metcalf 1979: 352). The removal of Nawabi rule seems, however, not directly to have acerbated the relations between Hindu and Muslim commoners after the events of 1855. Ayodhya is not different from other places in North India in that it was affected by the so-called Cow-Protection Movement and there is evidence of riots on a great scale during the Muslim festival of Bakr-Id in 1912 and 1934. In both cases the Hindus launched an attack on the Babar mosque. In 1934 hundreds of Muslims seem to have been massacred and the army to have intervened. After this explosion of violence the British imposed a punitive tax of a few hundred thousand rupees on the Hindu citizens of Ayodhya. Nevertheless Ayodhya seems not to have been a centre of Hindu-Muslim communal strife; rather it seems to have followed the general pattern of deteriorating Hindu-Muslim relations in the national polity in the first half of the twentieth century.

However, a fundamental change in the status quo concerning the Babar mosque on Ram's birthplace took place in the years following the Partition of 1947. In the night of 22 to 23 December 1949 an idol of Ram suddenly appeared in the mosque, which was guarded by an armed guard to prevent any breach of the peace. The news spread very quickly the following morning. For the Hindus Ram had appeared, while the Muslims interpreted the events as an attempt to defile their mosque. The ensuing riots were quelled only with great difficulty by police and army,

³ See for these events the extensive description in Bhatnagar (1968: 117-41).

while both religious groups were prevented from entering the mosque. Leaders of both parties started litigation to obtain their right of entrance, but the case is still pending, illustrating the capacity of the Indian judiciary not to decide 'unsolvable' cases. In the meantime, the Commissioner of Faizabad, Syam Sundarlal Dar, ordered the District Magistrate K. K. K. Nair to remove the idol from the mosque, but this official refused, with the argument that such an action would mean the rekindling of communal violence. Nair was a supporter of the Hindu communalist movement Rastriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and was forced to retire from his post together with his assistant Gurudat Singh because of his role in the Hindu-Muslim conflict. Gurudat Singh continued to play a prominent role in communalist politics in Faizabad (cf. Gould 1966). Ram's idol remained in the mosque and, since an idol has to be worshipped, a committee was formed for this purpose. From 1950 the members of the Ram Janmabhumi Seva Committee obtained permission to worship Ram's idol once a year in the night of 22 to 23 December. Besides that, the committee organized a so-called uninterrupted devotional singing (*akhand kirtan*) in front of the mosque, as long as the birthplace was not liberated. The execution of this activity was given into the hands of a sadhu Ram Lakhan Saran, who was succeeded by Ram Dayal Saran in the sixties. The latter we shall meet in our description of the events in 1984.

The new situation had therefore become one in which Muslims and Hindus were refused the entrance to the mosque, while Hindus had organized an activist devotional practice in front of it. Both parties were engaged in legal procedures, which gave the government the opportunity to remain neutral pending the decision of the court. The persons who had contrived to put the idol in the mosque had tried to use the changed configuration in North India after the Partition to the advantage of the Hindus, but they had not really succeeded. Until 1984 the mosque remained guarded by the police, but nothing much happened.

A Sacrifice to Liberate the Spot on which Ram was Born

On the evening of Saturday 6 October 1984, several groups of Ramanandi sadhus stood on the bridge over the river Sarayu waiting for a procession coming from Sitamarhi in Bihar and expected in Ayodhya that evening. The name of the procession was somewhat strange: *Ram Janmabhumi Mukti Yajna*, which means literally 'A sacrifice to liberate the spot on which Ram was born'. It was thus clearly a religious

procession with a rather activist aspect. In the attitude of the waiting sadhus, however, nothing could be seen of a grim determination to sacrifice their lives or anything in a violent attack on the mosque. When the procession arrived on the bridge, it, too, did not turn out to be of a violent nature: only a few trucks with shouting people and some private cars crammed with sadhus. The pièce de résistance of the procession was indeed of a more or less religious character: a truck with the large statues of Ram and his wife Sita under a banner with the slogan: *Bharat Mata ki Jay*, Hail to Mother India. It was clearly not the intention to take the mosque by storm. It remained a religious procession with Hindu-Nationalist slogans. After the arrival of the procession, the people were invited to come on the following day to the bank of the Sarayu, where a programme would be held with speeches and sacrifices.

On the next day, a platform had been erected on a stretch of wasteland near the river. On the side of the platform facing the audience, a large painting was fixed representing a fight between Muslims with swords and sadhus without weapons. On the platform, a rather large group of sadhus took their places, while between the platform and the audience some room was left for the press. As far as I could see only some five to seven thousand people had come to listen to the speeches. This seemed a disappointing number, since Ayodhya is a pilgrimage centre which attracts regularly thousands of pilgrims; and, on festivals, even hundreds of thousands. The Hindu press was not taken aback by this number, however, and inflated it to fifty thousand and in some papers even to a hundred thousand, numbers which were taken over by the national press. Although the number of spectators was in fact relatively small, it was not possible to identify the faces in the crowd and to trace their origin, which is often recommended if we want to come to grips with crowd behaviour. As far as I can see, this is only possible when something goes wrong, when the crowd starts rioting and the police are forced to make arrests, so that documentary evidence on the rioters becomes available (cf. Yang 1980). Nothing of the kind happened, however, in Ayodhya, so that we are forced to restrict ourselves to the faces on the platform.

First of all, two office-bearers of the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) addressed the audience. This organization had taken the initiative to organize the procession to liberate Lord Ram from his Muslim jail, as it was expressed during the meeting. It is often said in India, as well as abroad, that the VHP is a cover of the former political party Jan Sangh, which has recently become the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), and the RSS. The latter organizations are the best known examples of what is

called Hindu communalism in Indian politics and therefore the VHP, too, is called a communalist movement.⁴ The VHP is, however, to some extent different from the other two organizations. It was founded in 1964 by Swami Chinmayanand as an attempt to unite the religious organizations of Hindus for common purposes. At the first congress of the VHP there were representatives of many religious communities, including Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs (Master Tara Singh), who obviously did not object to incorporation in a movement for Hindu unity. The organization has two levels: an 'assembly of religion' (*dharmsansad*) with 500 representative members, chosen by the several local branches, and an 'advisory committee' (*margdarshak-mandal*), having as its members leaders of the various participating religious communities. As distinct from the BJP and RSS, the VHP seems to be dominated by religious leaders, while laymen, including politicians from all parties, can be members. Amongst these laymen Hindu conservatives of the Congress (I) seem to be as prominent as members of the BJP.

The VHP's attempts to unite the Hindus have never been very successful until the *Ekatmatayajna*, i.e. 'Sacrifice for Unanimity' of 1983. From all directions processions traversed the country. Prominent in the processions were trucks with enormous bronze pots (*kalashas*), containing water from India's most sacred river, the Ganges. Water from the pots was distributed in the villages on the way, while the pots were refilled with water from local or regional reservoirs of sacred water, like temple-tanks or sacred rivers. This mixture of sacred, purifying water symbolized in an immensely direct way for Hindus the unity of Hindu India. The success of these processions was enormous and enabled the VHP to strengthen its network of local branches throughout the country. In a way, the processions aimed only at Hindu unity, but it cannot be denied that the notion of a Hindu nation excludes non-Hindu groups and primarily the Muslims from the nation. The so-called 'Hindu unity' implies, therefore, a clearer demarcation between 'We Hindus' and 'They Muslims'. This implication is even clearer in the liberation movement started by the VHP in 1984. The demand to remove the mosques from Hindu sacred places including, besides Ram's birthplace, also Krishna's in Mathura and the important Viswanath temple of Shiva in Benares, does not so much stimulate Hindu unity as it stresses the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. The mosques were built several centuries ago, so that Muslims have also a historical claim that these places are important in their religion.

⁴ See for a description of the political history of the Jan Sangh and the RSS: Baxter (1966).

The office-bearers of the VHP who spoke at the meeting were an abbot of the Gorakhnath Jogis from Gorakhpur, Mahant Avaidyanath, and a former Congress (I) minister of Uttar Pradesh, D. Khanna. They spoke about the disgrace that although India had become independent in 1947, Hindus were still second-rate citizens, who did not even have access to their most sacred places. After them a few sadhus from Ayodhya came forward. The most powerful speech was delivered by Paramahams Ramchandradas, the active abbot of the Digambar Akhara of the Ramanandi order. He asked loudly: 'Where are the Ramanandis of Ayodhya? Does it not interest them that their god is in a Muslim jail?'. To understand this challenge we shall have to ask ourselves who had not come to speak on the platform. To this and to Ramchandradas's role in the events later that year we will return in the next two paragraphs. The sadhus of Ayodhya were succeeded by a seemingly unending row of religious leaders, belonging to various religious orders, and coming from regions as far apart as Panjab and Kerala. Their speeches all amounted to the same message, but one recurring theme has to be mentioned here. The audience was asked repeatedly to give their vote only to those parties which explicitly promised to give the Hindus their sacred places back. We have to realize that all this happened before the murder of Mrs Gandhi, who had announced that general elections were to be held in the beginning of 1985. The liberation movement was, therefore, perfectly timed for putting pressure on the politicians. This is not the same, of course, as a call for the support of the BJP or other Hindu parties. It can also be seen as an attempt to influence the secular policies of the Congress (I), to which several important VHP-members belong. The first aim of the movement seemed to be the creation of a broad platform for Hindu religious aims without identification with any particular political party.

One of the most striking aspects of the meeting in Ayodhya seems to be that leaders of various independent orders of sadhus spoke to an audience without even mentioning their differences. Vishnuites, Shivaïtes and Tantrists who have a long history of violent competition were peacefully gathered under the banner of a goddess not worshipped by any of them: Bharat Mata, Mother India. Moreover, regional differences were underplayed, since sadhus from all parts of the country had come to take part in the liberation movement. The VHP offers therefore a platform for several sadhu leaders from different orders and regions (excluding other leaders) to participate in actions of broad Hindu interest. In this way the actions of the VHP bear some similarity with the 'Cow Protection Movement' which emerged in North India at the end

of the nineteenth century. There is the same emphasis on symbolic action in the protection of the cow, the nurturing mother, featuring in almost all important Hindu rituals, as in the mixing of sacred water from all parts of the country or the liberation of Hindu gods from their Muslim jails. Moreover, just as in the actions of the VHP, the spread of the Cow Protection Movement seems to have been for the greater part in the hands of peripatetic sadhus who were here for the first time, as it seems, collaborating in a movement which lay outside their immediate interests, but within the interests of a newly defined 'Hindu community' (cf. Yang *op. cit.*; Freitag 1980). Times have changed, however. While the Cow Protection Movement had distinct anti-British overtones (Yang *op. cit.*: 583), the VHP cannot anymore agitate against British rule, but must address itself to a secular national state, almost continuously governed by Congress governments, which are supported by considerable groups of Hindus as well as Muslims. It has chosen not to ally itself with any Hindu political party, because this kind of party has not been tremendously successful since Independence. In fact, there is no Hinduism or Hindu community existent which can be represented by a political party. There are two words in Hindi for communalism: *sampradayavad* and *jativad*. The latter is often translated with 'casteism', while the former pertains to religious communities. The differences between the interests of castes and between the interests of religious orders makes an easy identification with a Hindu community impossible. There are, however, specifically Hindu issues, which can be the basis of broadly supported actions with various implications in the political arena.

The liberation movement of the VHP is such an action which has the potentiality to attract a broad support from various Hindu groups which may have different and even antagonistic interests in other fields of political and economic action. The success or failure and in general the implications of the movement depend on political processes at various levels. Some of these processes on the local level of Ayodhya and on the national level will be examined in the next two paragraphs.

The Defenders of the Status Quo

There are Ramanandi sadhus in Ayodhya who believe, of course, in Ram's liberating power, but do not desire to liberate the god himself. Those were the Ramanandi sadhus to whom Ramchandradas alluded, when he asked where the Ramanandis of Ayodhya were and why it did

not seem to interest them that their god was in a Muslim jail. We have therefore not only to examine who did speak on the platform, but also who did not. First of all, the sadhus of Ayodhya's most important temple, Hanumangarhi, were not represented. Secondly, Ram Dayal Saran, the leader of the uninterrupted devotional singing in front of the mosque, was conspicuously absent. And, finally, Ramcaritradas, the President of the Ramjanmabhumi Seva Committee, did also not show up at the meeting.

The sadhus of Hanumangarhi are nagas, so-called 'fighting ascetics', who do not shy away from the use of naked violence to defend their interests, as we have seen in our summary of the history of the conflict about the birthplace. Moreover, the modern legitimation for the military training of nagas in wrestling and the use of weapons is that they have the historical duty to defend Hindu religion. Therefore it is surprising that they did not take part in the liberation movement, organized by the VHP. The most important reason for it seems to be that they feared the success of the movement. This would disturb the status quo in Ayodhya considerably. At the moment there are two important temples in Ramkot, the centre of Ayodhya, and these are visited by almost all pilgrims. The first is Hanumangarhi, the temple-fortress of the monkey-god Hanuman, and the second is Kanakbhavan, the palace of Ram and his wife Sita. The latter is not in the hands of Ramanandi sadhus, but of a trust, presided over by the heir of the builder of the temple, the raja of Orccha. These two temples obtain the larger part of the offerings presented to the gods by millions of pilgrims, visiting Ayodhya every year. Near them is the mosque and almost all pilgrims also go there to give some offerings to the sadhus who are sitting in front of the mosque, singing their devotional songs. However, as long as there is a mosque on the spot and not a temple, the attraction of the place is minimal in comparison with nearby Hanumangarhi and Kanakbhavan. The removal of the mosque and the building of a temple, which would probably be in the hands of the government, would mean a considerable loss of income for Hanumangarhi and Kanakbhavan. They would still be visited, but would obtain less offerings. For the trustees of Kanakbhavan, who only derive status, not income from their wealthy temple, this would not be a very threatening prospect. But for the 500 to 600 nagas living in Hanumangarhi, who depend largely on the temple's income, such a future can hardly be welcomed.

There is another, less important reason why the nagas of Hanumangarhi stayed away. They seem to have a long tradition of easy accommodations with 'the powers that be'. They obtained their temple

and their land from the Muslim Nawabs, as we have seen. After that, they seem to have supported the British during the mutiny of 1857 (Bayly 1983: 362) and, according to my information, during the nationalist agitation of the twenties and thirties of this century. Since Independence they have the reputation of being staunch supporters of the Congress Party. Good contacts with the rulers and their bureaucracy have always been considered to be of great value by the nagas of Hanumangarhi, who are comfortably settled in their wealthy temple. It was primarily the absence of these nagas that led Paramahams Ramchandradas to call out defiantly: 'Where are the Ramanandis of Ayodhya?'. He is also a naga, but of a different branch and his temple is considerably less important than Hanumangarhi, which clearly irritates him. That is why he relished the awkward situation in which the nagas of Hanumangarhi were brought by the liberation movement.

Even more conspicuous than the absence of the nagas of Hanumangarhi was that of Ram Dayal Saran, the leader of the devotional singing. The singing will continue as long as the place is not liberated and therefore it would seem that Saran's intentions and those of the liberation movement ought to coincide. This is, however, not the case. Officially, the singing is an activity of the Ram Janmabhumi Seva Committee and Saran is only the man to perform it. Since the sixties he has, however, not presented to the committee any financial account of the offerings given by the pilgrims to sustain the singing. Gradually he has become a free entrepreneur, who puts the whole income, which is estimated to be at least one hundred thousand rupees a year, in his own pocket. The committee has not taken any action against Saran, since he is known to be a tough, a *goonda*, who commands a small group of armed retainers. Saran is, of course, not at all interested in the real liberation of Ram's birthplace, since in that event the singing would lose its *raison d'être*. His role in a new temple would be negligible, since the government would take the management into its own hands.

The last sadhu to be absent at the meeting of the liberation movement was Ramcaritradas, president of the Ram Janmabhumi Seva Committee. In daily life he is the abbot of a Ramanandi temple near the river Sarayu, but he is better known as an important moneylender and entrepreneur. He looks like a fearsome wrestler and in fact he has a violent reputation, derived from his moneylending and other commercial activities. He is a sadhu, whom we would expect to lead a celibate life, but this is not the case. He is rather the kind of Ramanandi sadhu, already described by Nesfield (1885: 86), who shows himself to the outside world as an ascetic, but who has in fact adopted the life of a layman. He leads a kind of double life, having a wife, two sons, who call

themselves his disciples (*chelas*), and a daughter. Ramcaritradas is a religious entrepreneur who has many interests in the economic and political life of Ayodhya and who had himself chosen as president of the committee in 1983. To win the yearly elections is not difficult, since every person who has paid a contribution has the right to vote. By making a certain number of his friends paying members Ramcaritradas could easily win, but the question is rather, why should he have wanted to win. What interests Ramcaritradas is money; but the only money-producing activity is the devotional singing, which is in the hands of Saran. One of the few sadhus in Ayodhya to be able to tame the wild Saran is, however, the not less wild Ramcaritradas, who just like Saran has a small group of armed retainers at his disposal. In fact, Ayodhya was already waiting for a violent encounter of the two sadhus, when the news of the liberation movement reached the town. The attention given to Ram's birthplace in the press and by the authorities prevented any of Ramcaritradas's plans to avail himself of part of the income of the devotional singing. This is not to say that he lost the money he invested in becoming president. He told me that he did not want to support the movement, since he had good contacts with the Congress (I) which had promised him to do 'something' to solve the problem of Ram's birthplace, if he would not give his support to the movement. Persistent rumours in Ayodhya, however, have it that the 'something' promised by the Congress (I) had nothing to do with Ram's birthplace, but everything to do with the coming elections for the municipal council of Ayodhya, in which Ramcaritradas would be put on the Congress (I) ticket for chairmanship of the council. These rumours seem to have more truth in them than Ramcaritradas's statement, since there were no indications at that time that the Congress (I) would even consider losing the Muslim vote by conceding to the Hindu demand.

The status quo in Ayodhya has thus its defenders, although it is a status quo which seems contrary to Hindu feelings and wishes. There is no reason to think that the sadhus mentioned here do not have 'belief in Ram' while those sadhus who support the liberation movement do have that belief. The point is that the aims of the liberation movement are quite contrary to the real interests of these sadhus and that is why they prefer not to support it.

Further Events: The Ramayan-Mela

What happened in Ayodhya after the meeting of the liberation movement near the river? The procession started on the next day for

Lucknow to present a petition to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Rumours were spread in Ayodhya that the procession was attacked on the way by Muslims, but these were almost at the same time contradicted by other rumours. Some of Ayodhya's sadhus had accompanied the procession to Lucknow and told, after their return, that it had had a far greater success in Lucknow and in the places on the way than in Ayodhya itself. The procession would go on to Delhi, where it would arrive in December. In Delhi a petition would be handed to the national government. Ramchandradas informed me that he expected much of the outcome of the liberation movement, because leaders of Hindu parties as the BJP as well as leaders of conservative factions in the Congress (I) welcomed the movement as a support for their position in the elections. During the Hindu month Kartik, which is one of the great months for pilgrimage, Ramchandradas and other sadhus of Ayodhya would have to stay in Ayodhya to receive their lay disciples, but in December they would also go to Delhi.

However, the whole situation changed dramatically with the murder of Mrs Gandhi by Sikh extremists. Congress (I), led by the son of the murdered Mother of the Country, became at once the symbol of a unified India for Hindus as well as Muslims. The 'Us' and 'Them' identifications changed overnight from Hindus against Muslims to Indians against Sikhs. The liberation movement became an anachronism, since—at least in this period—the political situation could not anymore be represented in terms of Hindu-Muslim antagonism. The change was not only reflected in the ugly riots in Faizabad, in which Muslims and Hindus attacked Sikh property together, but also in rather more subtle events in November 1984 in Ayodhya.

In the last week of November there were three Ramayan-Melas, i.e. meetings for the recitation of the Ramayana, organized in Ayodhya: one by the government of Uttar Pradesh, one by the national government, and one by Ramchandradas. For the first Mela a few well-known regional experts in recitation were invited as well as some of the most important sadhus of Ayodhya, who were known to support Congress (I). The second Mela had an international character. Besides two participants from the Soviet Union, there were expatriate Indians from all parts of the world: the Caribbean, Canada, United States, Great Britain, Netherlands and so on. This Mela was broadcast on television. The third Mela was organized by Ramchandradas as a protest against this 'show' of piety by the government, in which Ram's saga was recited, while the god himself was not liberated from his Muslim jail. In this meeting several sadhus of Ayodhya participated. While the two Melas

organized by the Congress (I) governments were reasonably well attended, Ramchandradas's Mela was an abject failure. The sadhus on the platform recited for each other, not for an audience. People who had formerly supported the liberation movement avoided this Mela and told me with subdued voice that it was not correct to organize anything against the government in these difficult days. With great enthusiasm the audience in the two Melas, organized by the government, reacted to suggestions that Lord Ram was a bridge between his subjects and that the late Mrs Gandhi was a great lover of the Ramayana. At the end of his Mela, Ramchandradas left for Delhi to join the procession. A few days later he returned disappointed. No one in Delhi had been interested in the liberation movement. It had become a failure due to unforeseen circumstances. Ramchandradas drew his conclusions and supported without any hesitation the election campaign of the Congress (I), which indeed turned out to be an unprecedented success for Rajiv Gandhi.

Conclusion

Ayodhya is an important Hindu centre of pilgrimage. Ram is one of the most important Hindu gods of North India and Ayodhya is his place. It is therefore a focus of Hindu beliefs and actions. It seems reasonable to suggest that the very location of a mosque on Ram's birth-site has always been a humiliating affront of Hindu feelings. The argument would then be that the liberation movement of the VHP is the simple expression of these feelings in the political arena. This line of thought, which is quite common in sociological thinking on religion and communalism, hinders, in my opinion, the correct interpretation of the events described in this article. First of all there is no 'simple expression of Hindu feelings'. Those who believe in Ram may support the liberation movement or may not support it, depending on their interests and interpretation of the situation. Moreover, there is no constant and static existence of Hindu feelings and values. They are not 'cultural givens'; rather they are the products of a political process. There are, of course, ancient notions of a 'Muslim community' and a 'Hindu India', but these notions change constantly in content and can only become dominant sentiments and guiding ideas as the result of specific political processes. It is certainly incorrect to say that there has always been an unchanging antagonism between Hindus and Muslims which is culturally given. As has been seen, it is better to speak of changing configurations, in which Muslim rulers might destroy a temple, but also may support it. The rise

of Ayodhya in the eighteenth century seems to depend on the success of Nawabi rule in Awadh, while communal strife between Muslims and Hindus coincides with the decline of that regional realm.

It is difficult to attempt an interpretation here of the rather sudden success of the VHP's Ekatmata Yajna processions of 1983. Its symbolism of the mixing of sacred water from all parts of India was no doubt a 'direct hit', but this does not explain why it was done only in 1983, while the VHP was already founded in 1964. An explanation would imply an analysis of changes in the national political arena, in which attention would be given to the fear of the international 'revival' of Islam as well as to the success of regional movements in Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Panjab. Such an explanation is not attempted here. We have to limit ourselves to the observation that the success of the Ekatmata Yajna inspired the VHP to organize a movement to liberate Hindu sacred places the next year. Although the movement was not particularly successful at the local level of Ayodhya, it was met with greater enthusiasm in other parts of Uttar Pradesh. It is impossible to predict what would have been its political implications at the national level, had the murder of Mrs Gandhi not spoiled everything. It is, however, clear enough that the movement aroused sentiments which had been virtually dormant since 1950. Between 1950 and 1984 there had been no action, no movement to demand Hindu occupation of the place of Ram's birth except for legal actions, destined to remain endlessly unfruitful.⁵ These new sentiments, whatever their exact social origin, were, however, counterbalanced at a later stage by the upsurge of national feelings following Mrs Gandhi's assassination. Therefore it may be concluded that religious feelings and values do matter, but that they cannot be divorced from the political processes in which they are produced and managed.

⁵ Although several cases are already more than thirty years pending in the High Court, the District and Session Judge of Faizabad decided on 14 February 1986, that the gates of the shrine should be opened immediately. It would not be difficult to say that this decision was politically motivated, as indeed Muslim leaders have already done. It seems, however, that the judge decided upon a petition of a local Hindu lawyer 'seeking the unlocking of the gates of the disputed shrine on the grounds that it was only an earlier district administration and not a court which had ordered its closure' (*India Today*, 28 February 1986). These developments triggered off great communal disturbances in many North Indian cities. *India Today* also reports that violent quarrels over the control of the shrine have already broken out between several Hindu groups. It is impossible to say what will be the future of the shrine, since it is still not decided by any court whether it is a mosque or a temple.

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