

## DARK FOREBODINGS

S. GUHAN

I welcome this opportunity to speak at the series of meetings which the Centre is organising on Ayodhya and the Future India. The first reason why I very readily agreed to speak is that I think this is one of the most important issues that the country has faced in its history. And therefore each of us – to whatever inclinations and persuasions we might belong – should take every opportunity to come together and interact with each other and share our perceptions. We may not always agree with each other, but all thinking people should give an opportunity for others to convince them, and to be convinced. And even if we are not convinced, we should at least try to understand why somebody is arguing what he is arguing, and what is behind it. I think such interactions are always useful.

Secondly, I was told that my good friend, Arun Shourie, had spoken here earlier. And my views are diametrically opposite to his views. I know his views both from personal conversations with him and his public writings. And, I can say with certainty that my views are 180 degrees away from Sri Shourie's. So I thought you might have an opportunity to evaluate these diametrically opposite views, and come to your own conclusions.

Thirdly, it is the timing of these meetings which seemed very appropriate to me. I think it is very good that we are talking about Ayodhya almost nine weeks after the event. During this time we have had some time to reflect on the issue. Passions are a little less strong. And in the meanwhile, a lot of literature has come out on the subject. People of different persuasions and colours have written about it. And, most importantly, we have also witnessed and heard a number of actions and utterances of the leaders of the *sangha parivar*.

*The sangha parivar*

The 'sangha parivar' is a term I shall keep using throughout my talk. The parivar I define as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajarang Dal and a number of front organisations going under different names. The parivar also includes various people who are, in some sense or the other, of the same persuasion or under the same control, openly or secretly.

There is no necessary continuity in the utterances and writings of the leaders of these groups. They say one thing today, something else two weeks later. One organisation strikes a moderate pose, another strikes a militant pose. And, like an adept musician playing a piano, they've been orchestrating these views, very strategically, very cleverly. This is what makes them a parivar, an entourage, an assemblage, or as you say in Tamil, *parivaram*.

I would not like to say "A" said this or "B" said this, because I am not an expert on who said what on which day, and who denied himself on any other day. Or, on who contradicted each other, and who corroborated each other. So instead of referring to specific individuals and their statements, I shall refer to the parivar. That is why I am taking a little trouble to explain my use of the term 'sangha parivar', or simply the 'parivar'.

In the last 9 weeks we have had various utterances from the parivar. Sri Vamadeva Maharaj has spoken, Swami Muktananda has spoken and, most important, Bal Thackeray, who is one of the allies of the parivar, though at one remove from it, has had his say. Then, what is more important from my point of view as an academic, we have had two very cogent – cogent in the sense of being carefully structured – articles from two outstanding theoreticians of the parivar. One is Jaswant Singh, who is a very articulate, very learned Oxford graduate, and has written on the subject at length in a recent special issue of the Seminar on Ayodhya (Number 402, February 1993). And in the same special issue of the Seminar, we also have Arun Shourie. Here are two theoreticians of the parivar who, after the Ayodhya event, have spelled out their views on how it happened, what it means to the country, and what lessons are to be learnt. So, we have the raw material before us for a comprehensive analysis.

*The issues*

On my own part, I would like to cover four main topics this evening. First, the demolition of the mosque itself: What it represents? What led to it? And how it happened? This analysis, it seems to me, is very important. Because, I do not think we can look at the future of India, forgetting what happened at Ayodhya on December 6, 1992. We cannot say, "Whatever happened has happened, let's look at what is going to happen." We cannot strike that stance. Because, if we sow the whirlwind, we shall reap the whirlwind. We cannot sow the whirlwind and then hope that we shall reap a lush green crop.

Second, I shall speak on secularism: What is understood by secularism? What has been the practice of secularism in this country? What does secularism mean in theory? And what has it meant in practice?

Third, I shall speak on an issue which is really a side issue, but a very important one: Federalism. It is an issue in which I am very interested. What effects the events of the recent past have on federalism?

And fourth, of course, I shall conclude with saying something about what the Ayodhya events, in my mind, augur for the future of India, because that is the subject of these discussions.

*Arguments of the parivar*

To start with the first issue, that of analysing what happened at Ayodhya: We can, I think, straightaway dismiss that Ayodhya was an aberration, or a small accident. It is not as if some cat jumped over a table and upset a glass of water, though even a person like Jayendra Saraswati, Sankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, has said that 'by chance' the mosque was demolished. There was nothing 'by chance' about it. There is evidence that it was carefully planned, that people were trained, that they were equipped with implements to demolish the mosque. You cannot demolish an old, strong structure, covering an area of 6000 square feet, in 6 hours without planning and without being equipped to do so. We have all seen demolitions of buildings in our neighbourhoods. It cannot happen without careful planning.

But let us for a moment leave aside the physical planning that went before the demolition of the mosque. Let us look at what really led to it in a longer span. And, the best way to do it is to look at the analysis offered by the leaders of the parivar. They have given an account of why it happened. In fact, some of them had justified the demolition even before it happened. They had been appealing for the demolition on the basis of spurious and dubious facts. They had been spreading misinformation about many things. And now, many others, like Arun Shourie and Jaswant Singh, have rationalised the demolition after the event.

The parivar utilises three types of arguments. One type is for the gullible people. For them the parivar uses factual arguments: “This was the Janmasthana of Srirama, this precise spot. On that precise spot there was a temple. That particular temple was demolished. On that a mosque was built.” This story has been broadcast. It has been propagated to a certain kind of audience, who will believe that kind of argument, to the kind of people, who would not go into history or archaeology, and be taken in by this kind of wrong facts, wrong archaeology, wrong history and wrong logic.

But the parivar has a different argument for persons like me. For example, when Arun Shourie talks to me, he would not use these arguments. He knows the argument is hollow—I would laugh at him. Therefore, with persons like me he uses another argument. And, that is also the argument Jaswant Singh has used in the Ayodhya issue of the Seminar. This argument makes the Janmabhoomi a matter of faith: “Just as Christians have believed for 2000 years that Bethlehem—that stable in Bethlehem—was the birthplace of Christ, just as Muslims believe that Karbala in Mecca is the birth-place of Prophet Mohammed, so the Hindus believe that that precise spot in Ayodhya is the birthplace of Srirama. It is a matter of faith. Any number of trivial factual arguments is meaningless. And, since people hold this faith, since millions of people for hundreds of years have held this faith, let us not go into the facts. The facts do not matter.”

I am willing to take this argument at its face value. I would accept it if indeed it were the case. I do not discount faith. Faith does not always rest on facts, but faith itself is a fact. If the faith has been strong, if it has been continuous, if it has been held by a very large number of people, we have to respect it, even if we do

not share it. But is that faith itself a matter of fact? That is the issue we have to face. And we shall come to it.

The third level of arguments advanced by the sangha parivar is built around the concept of 'reaction'. That is the level at which Arun Shourie argues in the Seminar issue. The argument goes like this: "Hindus in this country have been provoked so much by appeasement of the minorities by pseudo-secularists that they have reacted sharply by demolishing the mosque. It is merely a reaction to the events of the last few decades, and in the face of this reaction facts and faith about the birthplace do not matter." That, of course, is a post-facto argument, but we will evaluate that too.

*Neither the birth nor the birthplace are established*

Let us begin with the argument about the facts first. But before beginning, I should make it clear that I do not believe the temple should be reconstructed even if there were factual evidence to prove that there was a temple there under the mosque. I do not believe the temple should be reconstructed. One could, of course, say that if in any case we are not going to rebuild the temple, why go into the facts at all? If there was a temple that we are not going to rebuild, why should we go into the fact of whether there was a temple or not? One can logically take that stand.

But we shall look at whether there was a temple, because on this rest some of the beliefs and the faith that are being so talked about. I shall, therefore, look into the argument regarding the facts, without however yielding to the argument that if there was a temple it should be rebuilt.

What does this factual argument imply? First, that Srirama was a historical person, because only historical persons can actually be born in this world. Second, he was born at a place which can be identified as the present day Ayodhya in Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh. Third, in Ayodhya he was born at the precise spot where the idols are placed: that precise spot is the Janmasthan. Fourth, there was a temple at that spot. Fifth, the temple was demolished and the Babri Masjid was built on it around 1528. These are the five propositions required to establish the factual argument. The factual argument will follow, if and only if all five of these propositions are proved to be true.

But, none of the propositions stands to reason. First, there is absolutely no evidence that Srirama was a historical person. Although the epic and the myth might have grown around a historical king, of some dim past, but certainly there is no evidence that Srirama of the epic was a historical person. Internal evidence of the Ramayana itself is against the possibility of the hero being an historical character. The various exploits of Srirama described in the epic – the various miracles he performed and the way he fought with an army of monkeys and squirrels and so on – are not facts that might pertain to a real historical being.

Second, there has always been considerable doubt about the exact location of Ayodhya. Vikramaditya Skandagupta, the historians tell us, went around trying to locate Ayodhya. And then Saketa of the old days, on the banks of Sarayu, was renamed as Ayodhya. That is the historical fact. That is why our grandmothers used to say, “Don’t ask where is Ayodhya. Wherever there is Srirama, there is Ayodhya.” The sangha parivar has put the wisdom of our grandmothers up-side down. They say, “Where Ayodhya is, there Srirama was!” It is because traditionally the physical location of Ayodhya, the precise geographical spot, was in doubt, that we had this saying among our grandmothers. Even I have heard it from my grandmother, “Where Srirama resides, there is Ayodhya.” Then what is the controversy about?

Archaeological evidence suggests that prior to 5th century B.C. there was no habitation at the site of the present day town of Ayodhya, while Srirama is dated to the Tretayuga, in the year 3010 B.C., or something like that.<sup>1</sup> So if this be so, we can not be sure that the Ayodhya of Srirama is the Ayodhya of Faizabad district.

The third proposition in need of evidence is that the exact spot where the Babri Masjid stood is the birthplace of Srirama, that exact spot is the Janmasthana. Where is the Janmasthana first mentioned?

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[<sup>1</sup>In the Indian reckoning of time, *Tretayuga*, the second of the basic *Chaturyuga* cycle of creation and decline, begins 21,60,000 years before the beginning of *Kaliyuga*, the last *yuga* of the cycle, and ends 12,96,000 years later. We are now in the 5095th year of the current *Kaliyuga*, which according to the calculations of Indian astronomical texts began on the midnight of February 17/18 or with the sunrise of February 18 of 3102 B.C. Srirama is born towards the end of the *Tretayuga*. Professor Guhan seems to have missed a whole *yuga*, the *Dwapara*, while estimating the time of Srirama’s birth.– ed.]

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, during its discussions with the Babri Masjid Action Committee (BMAC) held in 1990-91 at the initiative of the then prime minister Chandra Sekhar, gave a memorandum arguing the facts. In the memorandum the only evidence the VHP adduced in favour of the spot being the Janmasthan is a reference to a text called "Ayodhyamahatmya", which is attached to Skandapurana. And the Skandapurana is dated to somewhere between the 14th and the 16th century.

Experts have looked into this document, and they have arrived at the exact compass readings for the Janmasthan as described in this text. Janmasthan, according to this reckoning, is nowhere near the Babri Masjid, it is much closer to the river Sarayu. So the one document produced by the VHP does not prove their claim about the Janmasthan; and in any case this document is of as late a date as the 16th century. Srirama was born in the Tretayuga, around 3000 B.C., and the first document mentioning the place of his birth, the Janmasthan, that the VHP can produce is of 14th to 16th century. And the precise compass readings deduced from that document do not place the Janmasthan anywhere near the mosque.

*There is no evidence for the temple either*

The next proposition that we need to establish is regarding the existence of a temple at the site before the Babri Masjid was put up there. What is the evidence for this? Absolutely none. None that would stand the test of any kind of history or archaeology. Mir Baki, who is said to have built the mosque, would have been the first person to claim that he demolished a temple and built a mosque, because by doing so he would be praising Babar for his Islamic piety. As a mujahid, as a person engaged in waging war against Hinduism for the greater glory of Islam and Allah, he would have been the first to say, "I destroyed this Temple." But he does not say so in his inscription of 1528.

No mention of the demolition is available in Babarnama, the memoirs of Babar. The pages corresponding to the period of his visit to Ayodhya are missing from the memoirs. Nothing at all is said about the destruction of this temple in Ain-e-Akbari, which was written a little later, in the 17th century. Most importantly, there is no mention of the temple and its destruction in the Ramacharitamans

of Goswami Tulasidas. Swami Tulasidas wrote the *Manas* around 1575/76, less than 50 years after the Babri Masjid was built. Is it conceivable that Swami Tulasidas would not have mentioned the demolition of the temple at Ayodhya, if any such demolition had indeed taken place?

*The story begins with the British*

The first mention that there was a temple at all in Ayodhya begins to appear in the works of western historians, like Carnegy, Neville, Beveridge and Hans Bakker, around 1850, near the time of the first Indian war of independence.<sup>2</sup> And all of them attribute the existence of the temple to local belief. Beveridge attributes it to speculation. She only says, "There would have been a temple." Bakker says that there is a belief that there was a Janmasthan temple, but that it was outside the mosque, not inside.

Most pertinent in the series of historical evidence about the existence of a temple at the alleged Janmasthan is the well recorded incident of an armed conflict between Sunni Muslims and Vaishnava Bairagis around 1855. The conflict took place over Hanumangarhi, and not the Janmasthan. Hanumangarhi is an old temple in Ayodhya, dedicated to Hanuman. And this temple has been the principal site of pilgrimage in Ayodhya. If you look at *Divyaprabandham*, where all the 108 divyasthanams of India are listed, you will find an entry corresponding to 'Thiru Ayodhya', and Thiru Ayodhya is there described as the Hanumangarhi Kovil.

But let us return to the incident of the armed conflict of 1855. The story is that there was a Hindu Mahant in Hanumangarhi, who was chased out. He converted to Islam. Then he went and told the Maulavi, that there was a mosque on Hanumangarhi, which was demolished, and on that site the Hanumangarhi temple was built. Thereupon the Sunni Muslims, about 500-600 of them, gathered and they tried to invade Hanumangarhi and demolish the temple. In response, the Hindus mobilised in large numbers, about 5 to 6

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<sup>2</sup>[The reference is to P. Carnegy, *A Historical Sketch of Tahsil Fyzabad Zillah Fyzabad*, Lucknow 1870; H. R. Neville, *Fyzabad - A Gazetteer*, Allahabad, 1905; A. S. Beveridge (tr.) *Baburnama*, London, 1922; and Hans Bakker, *Ayodhya*, Groningen, 1986.-ed.]

thousand gathered there, leading to an armed conflict. The Muslims were chased back to the Babri Masjid. Nearly a hundred Muslims were killed in the encounter and in fact the ground where they were buried is still remembered.

Even after this encounter the Hindus involved in the incident, the Vaishnava Bairagis of the Ramanandi sect of Hanumangarhi, did not claim that the Babri Masjid was the Janmasthan. Is it conceivable that if the site of the Babri Masjid had been believed to be the Janmasthan of Srirama, the Hindus would have kept quiet and not claimed the mosque, even after a bloody riot in which many people had been killed? And, especially when the Muslims were laying claim to their own temple, the Hanumangarhi, as the site of a mosque! The Hindus, however, did not put up any claim to the site of the Babri Masjid then, not even as a counter to the Muslim claims.

It is only in 1857, the time of the first war of independence or a little later, that the Mahant of Hanumangarhi built the Chabutara, a 17 feet by 21 feet raised platform, outside the Babri Masjid. That was clearly a counter response to the Muslim claims on Hanumangarhi, because by that time the British had set up a committee to go into the Hanumangarhi incidents and to determine whether there had been a mosque at the site of the temple. It is only at this stage that the Hanumangarhi Mahant claimed the Janmasthan, and the claimed spot was still not inside the Babri Masjid, but on the Chabutara outside, which was built in or around 1857.

The British allowed the Chabutara to be built for their own reasons. During the war of independence, the Muslims of that region had fought the British, while the Hindu landlords and the Mahants had extended them their support. Therefore the British turned a Nelson's eye on what the Hindus did, and thus the Chabutara was constructed. But the British insisted on putting up a fence between the mosque and the Chabutara, and decreed that no Hindu would enter the mosque, and no Muslim would enter the Chabutara.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>[The story of the Hanumangarhi conflict and the evolution of the British perspective on the Ayodhya issue is told in greater detail, and in the same vein, in the articles by K. N. Panikkar and Sushil Srivastava in S. Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, Viking, 1991, Reprint, Penguin India, 1993.–ed.]

*Beginnings of the current litigation*

This position was contested only in 1885. It was then that Mahant Raghubardas made a plea before the sub-judge of Faizabad for permission to build a temple on the Chabutara outside the Babri Masjid. Notice that the Mahant was not pressing any claim over the site of the mosque, but only over the Chabutara outside. The sub-judge was one Pandit Harkishan Prasad, a Hindu. He gave an excellent judgment, which remains relevant even today. Delivering the judgement on 24th December, 1885 he said that if “permission is given to Hindus for constructing a temple on the Chabutara, then one day or the other a criminal case will be started and thousands of people will be killed.” Therefore, in the interest of expediency, the sub-judge refused to permit a temple on the Chabutara. The order was upheld by the district judge, and the judicial commission.<sup>4</sup>

Incidentally, all this litigation took less than one year. Mahant Raghubardas had moved the sub-judge of Faizabad in late 1885 and by November 1886 he had exhausted all appeals. He had nowhere else to go. This is in stark contrast to what is happening in the Allahabad high court and in the Supreme Court today. Three appeals were disposed off by the British in one single year, and they took a sensible pragmatic position that if a temple came up there it would lead to violence and bloodshed.

*Appearance of the idols*

This happened in 1885. Once again there is a tremendous lull of 64 years between 1885 and 1949, when the idols were installed on the night between December 22 and 23. It was claimed that the idols had miraculously appeared inside the mosque. Before the event there was a 9 day non-stop recitation of Ramacharitamanas organised by the Akhil Bharatiya Ramayana Mahasabha. The descriptions of the scene at Ayodhya at that time remind us of what the sangha parivar has been doing in the recent past. Like now, so in 1949, people were

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<sup>4</sup>[This and later stages of litigation on the Ayodhya issue are described in greater detail in the article by A. G. Noorani in S. Gopal, cited earlier. Akshay Brahmachari’s account referred to a little later in the text is recounted by Sri Noorani on pp. 68-69 of the same book.–ed.]

going about mobilising and collecting great multitudes, recitations were being held, loudspeakers were blaring. There is an eye-witness account of the events of 1949 by a local congressman, Akshay Brahmachari.

It should be remembered that in 1949 only two years had passed since partition. Also, the RSS was banned in 1948 and the ban was lifted in 1949. So, they had to assert themselves and show their strength. The installation of idols in the Babri Masjid in 1949 was thus purely a show of strength by the RSS in the relatively tense atmosphere of post-partition north India. The gullible were of course told that those idols had appeared miraculously on the site. And, this happened fully 64 years after 1885, when the Hindus had last raked up the issue.

#### *Recent history*

The events following 1949 are recent history, and many of you must be familiar with these. So, I shall just rush with this part. But I shall take time to mention every milestone in this snowballing movement, because each of the milestones is important in itself.

The installation of the idols was protested by the Muslims. The judiciary ordered the doors of the mosque to be locked, the Hindus were restricted to performing puja of the idols from the outside, and at the same time the Muslims were also restrained from entering the mosque and offering prayers there. So the Muslims could not pray in the mosque, and the Hindus also could not perform puja inside, but they could offer worship from the outside.

This position was confirmed by the Allahabad high court in 1955. Thereafter another 25 years passed and nothing happened in Ayodhya. These intervals are very important. The VHP was formed in August 1964, but even the VHP did not take up the Ayodhya issue for almost 20 years. It was only in 1984, 35 years after the appearance of the idols in Ayodhya and 20 years after the VHP itself was formed, that a call for the “liberation” of the Janmabhoomi was given in the VHP sponsored gathering of sadhus and Hindu religious leaders, in the so-called Dharma Samsad, that met at the Vijnana Bhavan in Delhi in April 1984. It was then that Mathura and Varanasi were also mentioned along with Ayodhya. And then the first rathayatra started from Sitamarhi in Bihar, which took

place in September 1984, when Srimati Gandhi was still alive. This then is the exact time when this whirlwind was formally sown by the VHP.

In 1986 a tacit understanding was reached between the then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and the VHP. The judiciary was certainly influenced. And on an application by an unknown lawyer, Umesh Chandra Pande, the sub-judge of Faizabad ordered the locks to be opened and the Hindus to be allowed to perform puja there. The sub-judge did not even allow an opportunity to the Sunni Wakf Board to be heard. He disposed of the application in 40 minutes and summarily passed orders directing unlocking of the gate and allowing Hindu puja there. Appeals on that are still pending.

The next major event took place in 1989. The then home minister in the union government, Buta Singh, reached an accord with the VHP permitting a limited performance of silanyasa, the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone, on November 10, 1989.

At that time Ashok Singhal, secretary of the VHP, had clearly said that the proposed temple would subsume the mosque, the temple would extend into the mosque. He said it openly. Also the VHP had given its plan for the temple, and that incorporated the place where the idols were kept inside the mosque as the garbhagriha, the sanctum sanctorum, of the proposed temple. Knowing all this the government of Rajiv Gandhi allowed limited silanyasa in November 1989.

The events following the silanyasa are too recent to need recounting: The rathayatra of Lalkrishna Advani in 1990, the fall of the government headed by V. P. Singh, discussions between the VHP and the BMAC at the initiative of Chandra Sekhar, and later at the initiative of the present prime minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao, and finally the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya.<sup>5</sup>

*Both the facts and the faith are nebulous*

What I would like to bring out from this somewhat long recounting of the history of Ayodhya events is the hollowness of the claims

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<sup>5</sup>[For another, and exhaustive, version of the current history of Ayodhya, see, BJP's White Paper on Ayodhya and the Rama Temple Movement, Bharatiya Janata Party, April 1993.–ed.]

of the protagonists of the temple. Their claims are hollow on the factual basis. There is no evidence to prove that there was Srirama; that he was born in Ayodhya; that he was born at the precise spot occupied by the Babri Masjid; that there was a temple at that site; that the temple was demolished and the mosque was built upon its ruins. There is no evidence to prove any one of these propositions. The whole set of arguments blared out to the gullible people by trained propagandists is factually wrong. But today if you ask an ordinary person in India, he would say, "What do you mean? Can we not even build a temple to Srirama in India? Don't we have the right to do this?" That is what has been put in the minds of the people. The minds have been vitiated.

Not only is there no evidence to prove the existence of a temple at the site, there is also no evidence to show that there has been any widespread belief in the existence of the temple there. Jaswant Singh refers to the belief that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem which has moved Christendom for twenty centuries, and he compares that belief with the belief of the people of India in the birthplace of Srirama. He is asking us to believe that the Hindu belief in the Janmasthan at Ayodhya is of the same validity as the Christian belief in Bethlehem! Just as that belief has moved Christendom, the whole of Christendom for 20 centuries, similarly this belief has moved all Hindus!

I think this is utter rubbish. If there was such a belief, what happened to that belief between the Tretayuga and 1855, when the first claim on the Janmasthan was made and the Chabutara was built? What happened to that belief between 1885 and 1949? What happened to it between 1949 and 1984? This is mere rubbish. I cannot give up my common sense. If there was such a strong belief held by millions of Hindus, just as the Christians have held the belief in Bethlehem for 20 centuries, then does it stand to reason that this off-on, off-on approach to reclaiming the supposed Janmasthan would have gone on in this desultory fashion?

I have not yet come to the arguments advanced by Arun Shourie, which are a little more sophisticated. The parivar has gradations of sophistications within it. Jaswant Singh is a little more sophisticated than Ashok Singhal, and Arun Shourie is more sophisticated

than Jaswant Singh. Sri Shourie does not touch the argument about Hindus having faith in the Janmasthan. He only puts forward the argument about the Hindu reaction to the alleged Muslim appeasement. He says, "Forget about faith. This is only a Hindu reaction against appeasement of the Muslims over many decades." But what is this appeasement? Muslims, according to all available statistical evidence, are far behind the majority in terms of their economic standing, their representation in the bureaucracy and the armed forces, their levels of education, and so on. Then where is the appeasement? And what are the Hindus reacting to?

The claims of the sangha parivar have no validity. There is no evidence to establish anyone of the arguments advanced by them. Nothing can be proved, neither the argument about the facts, nor about the faith, and nor the one about appeasement and the consequent reaction.

*It is merely incremental politics of the Parivar*

If you look at the sequence of the Ayodhya events, you find nothing more than the incremental political strategy of the parivar. They are adopting a strategy of building up incremental pressure to gain political power. For this strategy to work they have to mobilise crowds around a physical issue or a target that is extremely vivid to the people. They know that if they talk about issues, about policies, about programmes, or about constitutional changes, then people will not understand all this. The people must be mobilised around a physical object. So they say, "That mosque there, that is our enemy. Demolish it!" It is easy to whip up crowds around a physical object. This is exactly what they have done.

The other part of this incremental strategy is that you should gain some ground, and then withdraw, only to move up again to gain further ground. This is very important in politics. You demonstrate to the people that you have gained ground, that you have made some advance. Then you withdraw, in order to keep the issue alive. You take up an impossible task, a task that cannot be completed. If you complete the task, the game is over, the balloon is punctured. So you must make an advance to show your strength to your enemies and your friends, and then you withdraw a bit to threaten the enemies again, and keep the game going, keep the issue alive.

This is exactly what the members of the sangha parivar have done from time to time. They have done it at the time of every election. They did it in 1984. They did it at the mid-point of a government in 1986. They prepared for it till 1989 and activated it again on the eve of the elections. And then in 1990, utilising the issue of reservations in government jobs for the backward castes according to the Mandal commission report, an issue that was given to them on a platter by V. P. Singh, they raised the pressure again. They thought it was an excellent time for action, so that they could whip up sentiments against the reservations and also utilise the resulting atmosphere for building support for the Ayodhya movement.

If you are a student of politics – as I have been, sometimes even a close student of politics, having moved very freely with politicians – this is a very good strategy so far as it goes. But it cannot go on forever. I hope it does not. But so far as it goes, this strategy of advance and retreat, off and on, hot and cold, pays well. It has paid rich dividends to the parivar, as is clear from the results of successive elections. The BJP won two seats and 7 percent of the popular vote in the 1984 elections to the Lok Sabha, their share went up to 85 seats and 11 percent of the popular vote in 1989, and in 1991 their representation in the Lok Sabha went up to 119 seats. They were obviously onto a good political strategy, but it was no more than a political strategy. It had absolutely nothing to do with faith or fact.

## DISCUSSION

RADHA RAJAN: Sir, academicians in India seem to have a rather derogatory attitude towards most things. In the same vein you too are crying down everything. You are dismissing all arguments that do not suit you. You are belittling all opinions that do not happen to be in consonance with yours. You do not give any weight to the feelings of others. You have very clever arguments, you have very learned arguments. But, do you ever give consideration to what other people feel? They might not be as learned as you are. But their views and opinions are about as valid as yours.

GUHAN: Do you have consideration for my feelings? Do you have any idea how I feel about this stupid movement that has been unleashed upon this country? In spite of my strong feelings about it, I have not used a single un-parliamentary word. Please challenge me if I have done that.

RADHA RAJAN: You don't have to use un-parliamentary words in order to hurt the feelings of others. I am very perturbed by your way of arguing, of belittling and dismissing everyone, and of sarcastically laughing at the faith and feelings of the people.

But, sir, let me turn to a more specific question. You came down rather heavily on Arun Shourie and Jaswant Singh. You have interpreted them according to your reasons and your convictions. In the same way I take the liberty of interpreting what you and the "secular club" have been saying. The club asks, "Why is the sangha parivar worried about issues like Shah Bano and Salman Rushdie? Is the sangha parivar shedding tears for Shah Bano or for Salman Rushdie?"

Of course, there are always intellectuals who are clever at raising arguments and diverting attention. But the questions you and the "secular club" raise are irrelevant. One need not shed tears for Salman Rushdie, but can still question the ban. One does not have to be a sympathiser of Mr. Rushdie in order to ask, "Why are we being denied the right to read a book? Why this ban on religious grounds? Why this eagerness to spare the sentiments of one particular religious community, while a vast body of literature inimical to and abusive of the Hindu religion is not only tolerated, but also is often positively encouraged? Why doesn't anyone think of banning that?" One can ask all these questions, without at the same time having to shed tears for Salman Rushdie.

Similarly, shedding or not shedding tears for Shah Bano is also not the issue. Without being sentimental about that courageous lady, one can still ask, "Why is it that when a person comes to our courts of justice, and when religious fundamentalist protest against the relief provided by the courts, we make it into a major political issue and bring in legislation to overrule the supreme court?" This weakkneed response to the fundamentalist pressures is the issue. The matter of shedding tears or not shedding tears for Shah Bano or anyone else does not come into the picture.

GUHAN: Let me first respond to your question about the banning of

that book by Salman Rushdie. You say that you have been denied the opportunity to read the book, just because the Muslims said that it contains heretical reflections on the Prophet. You say that this is not fair. I on the other hand would defend the banning of that book for this simple reason: Just as the parivar says, and Jaswant Singh has said it very clearly, that there has been a monumental faith among the Hindus about the Janmasthan of Srirama, similarly, whether you like it or not, the 80 million Muslims of India have a certain feeling for their Prophet. And if the introduction of this book was going to lead to large scale riots and a breakdown of law and order, then it was perfectly legitimate to ban the book. You know what happened in Iran over this book.

I have been in the government for 35 years. And I know that any civil servant or politician or anyone else entrusted the task of running this country, would have to weigh the availability of this book for some people to read, on one pan of the scale, and the fact that there may be extensive rioting, wide-spread breakdown of law and order, and tension between the communities, on the other. What judgement a sensible person will come to? I shall leave it to you to form your own judgement. I don't want to say anything more.

RADHA RAJAN: But, sir, when there is so much of literature condemning Hinduism, how is it that only this book gets banned?

GUHAN: By all means let people protest against the books that condemn Hinduism. Is there any example involving a text which brought Hindu religion or gods into disrepute, and the people protested against it, and the government refused to ban it? Periyar was banned. If you find a book that hurts the Hindu sensibilities, make a demand for banning it!

AMBADI: Sir, the suggestion you are making has very serious implications. What you are saying is that if a certain group is capable of concerted militancy on an issue concerning freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom to criticise religion – if the group is capable of unleashing national and international violence on such an issue – then you will concede to its demands. You will concede to national and international violence. You will ban a book here if somebody issues a fatwa in Iran to kill somebody in England. You will ban the book here because there is a possibility of organised, mindless violence by some groups. I know I am using strong words. But your argument calls for strong words. If violence is the bench-

mark, if this is the criterion for allowing or not allowing something, then how can we blame anyone for the demolition at Ayodhya? Sir, your argument shall please Bal Thackeray the most. What you are suggesting is: Demand what you want, demand vociferously, threaten violence, indulge in violence, and what you demand shall be conceded.

GUHAN: He seems to have a point, but he does not have a point. I did not say that the state must concede to the threat of violence. What I said was that on an issue like this we have to take the possibility of violence into account and come to a practical decision. You and I might differ. There are many who have looked upon the ban as another instance of appeasement, some have even characterised the ban as communal. The parivar can add this to its long list of examples of minority appeasement. I have no problems with that.

And I agree that in the matter of Shah Bano, the government failed totally. I make no bones about it. Even S. Gopal says that this was an instance of the government buckling under communal pressure and deviating from the path of secularism.

RAVI: Sir, in your presentation you mentioned that Swami Tulasidas does not mention the demolition of the temple at Ayodhya in the Ramacharitamanas, and this you said is one of the most important proofs that there was no temple there. But, all of us in Tamilnadu know that Malik Kafur entered and desecrated the Madurai Meenakshi Temple and the Srirangam Temple. But I have not heard of any Tamil saints, savants or poets having written songs about those events. We also know that Belur and Halebeedu were ravaged around the same time. To my knowledge there are no songs in Kannada about that. Have you, sir, heard of any songs or of any great poetry in Tamil or Kannada literature describing the desecrations and ravages of that period?

Guhan: All I am saying is that if somebody claims that something was there, he has to produce evidence. Logically it is impossible to prove the negative. If somebody says that there was a temple in Ayodhya, he has to produce the evidence for its existence. He cannot say, "I cannot produce any evidence, but you produce evidence to show that there was no temple." I refuse to take the onus of proving the non-existence of the temple. Logically it is impossible to prove the negative. One cannot function according to such demands and rules.

GOVINDACHARYA: Sir, much reasoning, intellectualising, and championing for the cause of secularism has gone on in this country for decades. How is it that in spite of it the sangha parivar is able to get away with all that you are accusing it of? And what do you think of the future of our “secular” forces? Do you think that the secular forces and secular minds will be able to come together? Will they be able to put up a good fight for what they believe in and tilt the scales in favour of their ideas? And what is the way that our country is going to take? What is your assessment of the future in the light of our experiences of the past 40 years? Viewing dispassionately the political forces active in the country, what do you feel about the future polity of India?

GUHAN: I am extremely touched that Govindacharya wants to know the way out! I have heard a lot about you, and I speak with respect. I do not say that I have a definite and clear answer. But as a dispassionate analyst my suspicion is that the sangha parivar is not ‘super-life size’. It is not 10 feet tall. It talks and acts and bluffs as if it has done a great and wonderful thing. It believes that it has launched this country in this tremendous crisis, and now it is for others to tackle it. To me all this is less than convincing. I think that the parivar has in a sense exhausted itself. Let us take the claims of the parivar with a pinch of salt.

If the members of the parivar themselves realise their limitations, which I hope a very good, a very enlightened person like our questioner will realise some day, then they should not have their sessions with ‘academics’ like me. They should do some introspection amongst themselves.

I shall request them to kindly withdraw from this, to kindly sit down and talk brass-tacks. Talk about the Shah Bano affair, by all means. I shall welcome it. Talk about article 356, talk about article 370, talk about any other relevant articles of the constitution. Talk about all these and about a hundred other things which in your opinion are important for this country. By all means talk about them. But do not talk about mosques and temples.

Do not talk about one more silanyasa, about one more Ayodhya. Because, if you do this you would be beaten up, somewhere or the other. I am not going to beat you up. But there are enough Hindus who will do the beating. This is in fact a debate between Hindus. What is going on is not a fight between Hindus and Muslims. It is

between the Hindus themselves. This is a fundamental thing I want to say. Please do not pretend that you have aggregated the Hindus behind Srirama. Not even ten percent of them are worried about this. So, do not make a balloon out of yourself and get pricked.

JHUNJHUNWALA: Sir, when the Ayodhya movement began I was very happy that we have begun to take Maryada Purushottama Srirama as our ideal, and probably I was hoping that something great would come out of this. But I believe that the name of Maryada Purushottama Srirama has nothing to do with the talk of anti-Islam, and if we keep mixing the two we are taking the name of Srirama in vain.

I am very worried about the way ordinary Hindus have begun to hate ordinary Muslims. I wouldn't be bothered if they were to hate some leaders of the Muslims. But, I am very worried when the ordinary man in the street is filled with hate for his fellow Muslim. And I wonder why and how it has happened?

Guhan: I endorse every word of what you say.

Chamundeswari: I think you are wrong. I do not believe that Hindus have started hating Muslims. Many Hindus still go to the dargahs of Muslim Pirs and the churches of mother Velankanni and others, as they, with their expansive understanding of the divine, have always been doing.

I think the point the Ayodhya movement has emphasised is that the faith of a majority of the people cannot be denied or ignored. The movement has shown that the faith of the people can supercede the designs of the state, that the nation is in any case bigger than the state. And Maryada Purushottama Srirama is the symbol of that assertive faith of the Indians in themselves and in their nation.

VAIDYANATHAN: Sir, if we are serious about discussing the future of India, there are two issues we need to pay attention to. The first is: Are we going to create a situation where we justify all manner of aggression and violence on innocent people on the ground that their leadership or parts of their clergy happens to mouth some kind of extremist nonsense? After all, that extremist nonsense is not confined to any one community. There are fringes in every community, which pursue one kind of extremism or the other.

The other issue, which is a much more serious cause for worry and reflection, is this tendency to imagine that somehow we can create a new, resurgent, dynamic India under the banner of Hindutva. We should recognise that the reality of Indian society is caste. This

society is rife with caste-based fragmentation, regional fragmentation and linguistic fragmentation. Hindu society is seething with these tensions.

By talking about Hindutva we are skirting the issue of confronting modernity. We are living at a time when the world is being flooded with technologies. We are being flooded with things which we all use shamelessly. We are not like the East Asians; they have tried to meet this technological invasion on their own terms; they have recognised the inevitability of technology, and have gone about wresting control over it, and using it to good purpose. Instead, we are creating this myth of Hindutva, of the great Hindu ethos which has answers for everything, the great Hindu society which will arise again as a homogenous entity and make India into a great nation. And, we are creating these myths in ways that are going to tear apart the fabric of this society.

NEELAKANTHAN: I endorse what Prof. Vaidyanathan has said. We must all look into the future with all seriousness.

GUHAN: Allow me to conclude this discussion. My grandfather and my mother were both great scholars of Ramayana. I have read Kambaramayana in my early days. I know Maryada Purushottama Srirama and his Ramayana limb by limb, word by word, verse by verse. It is because of my acquaintance with Srirama that I feel total revulsion for what has happened at Ayodhya. I feel this revulsion not merely as a citizen, not as a non-Hindu, not also as a practising Hindu, but as someone who knows about the ideal of Srirama. I am not a practising Hindu, but I know my Ramayana very well. I have read it in Sanskrit. I have had it told to me in Hindi. I have read it in Tamil. I have a right to talk about Maryada Purushottama.

Recently my friend Girish Karnad gave me this verse, and I would like to end the evening by reading this beautiful verse of Basavanna. He says: <sup>6</sup>

The rich will make temples for Siva,  
What shall I, a poor man, do?

My legs are pillars, the body the shrine,  
the head a cupola of gold.

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<sup>6</sup>[Reproduced from A. K. Ramanujan's translation of the verses of Virasaiva saints, *Speaking of Siva*, Penguin, 1973, Reprint 1985, pp. 88.-ed.]

Listen O Lord of the meeting rivers,  
things standing shall fall,  
but the moving ever shall stay.