

than other people, though not so much as successful businessmen. What I want to remind you of is something I was told when I began to teach in a university. "The people for whom you are there" said my own teacher, "are not the brilliant students like yourself. They are the average students with boring minds who get uninteresting degrees in the lower range of the second class, whose examination scripts all read the same. The first class people will look after themselves, though you will enjoy teaching them. The others are the ones who need you."

That applies not only to the university but to the world. Governments, the economy, schools, everything in society, are not for the benefit of the privileged minorities.

We can look after ourselves. It is for the benefit of the ordinary run of people, who are not particularly clever or interesting (unless, of course, we fall in love with one of them), not highly educated, not successful or destined for success, in fact, nothing very special. It is for the people who, throughout history, have entered history outside their neighborhoods as individuals only in the records of their births, marriages, and deaths. Any society worth living in is one designed for them, not for the rich, the clever, the exceptional, although any society worth living in must provide room and scope for such minorities. But the world is not made for our personal benefit, nor are we in the world that claims that this is its purpose is not a good world, and ought not to be a lasting one.

We publish below an article written a few weeks after the communal violence that erupted in India following the destruction of the Babri Masjid. It raises some questions, valid for us too, about the role of religion and the concept of secularism in India.

A NATION AT WAR WITH ITSELF

Gyanendra Pandey

This is not an attempt to pose the problem raised by Ayodhya. It is but one among a growing number of statements by concerned citizens of this country expressing anguish and anger at all that is happening around us— at our political leaders' refusal to take even those minimal steps that are necessary to stop the killings that have gone on for five weeks now, and our own inability to do anything to force these so called 'servants of the people' to do their duty or get out.

In Surat, bands of 'Hindu' hoodlums indulge in the worst kind of torture of woman and gang rape and find the time to set up lights and videotape their brutalities. In Bombay, the rioters search out individual Muslims by name— well known artists, journalists, film makers, or just the shopkeeper in the neighborhood— and immediately declare that they have 'fled to Pakistan' when the houses of the terrorised individuals and families are found abandoned and locked.

In Assam, they surround Muslim habitations and set fire to their huts, triumphantly ensuring that not a single man, woman or child escapes alive. At sundry railway stations across the country, they pull out passengers who happened to have been born in the wrong community, lynch some, burn some and brand the genitals of others. The photographers who spoke up after the Ayodhya events of 6 December 1992 was right: 'If this is Hindu *raj* (rule), we want none of it.'

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Events like this have come to pass not only because land sharks have got into the act, because large sections of the urban poor are desperate and angry, because 'criminal' elements run riot whenever law and order collapses. They have come about because we have acquiesced in the steady erosion of democratic values and all sense of public spirit in our public life, because too many of us have been silent for too long. In a more immediate sense, this war against ourselves has come upon us because people at the helm of Indian affairs, those in power and those who would be, have shown scant respect for the law, for the Constitution they swear by, for the rights of minorities, and for human life.

New 'National Culture'

At the first threat of public agitation, the Government of India allows Hindu worshippers the right of *darshan* (blessing) at the disputed 'Ram Janmabhoomi' site, unmindful of both the illegality and the all round condemnation of the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December: for the Congress cannot afford to lose the 'Hindu' vote. Within days of the Ayodhya 'tragedy' (as it was described by all shades of political opinion, including the BJP), the Prime Minister deems it necessary to go - for atonement? - not to Ayodhya, but to Tirupati. Visiting the riot-ravaged suburb of Seelampur in Delhi is not possible for there is much more important business to perform, such as offering flowers at the *samadhi* (memorial) of Sanjay Gandhi on his death anniversary. Bombay reels under the most savage and prolonged violence that



it has witnessed since Independence, but the Prime Minister cannot make time to visit the city, it seems, until after the 14 day cycle of *Makar Sankranti* (religious Hindu festival). These are signs of the times of the new 'national culture' some of our compatriots are hoping to build— another sign of which is the video-filmed gang rape.

We have indeed plumbed the depths of the unscrupulous and the self serving, as our leading political figures outdo one another in seeking electoral glory and national shame, as one cynical move follows another bestiality, and the list of those killed, maimed and damaged for life grows in such a way that ultimately nothing but numbers remain: 'Bombay toll now 560', '40 more killed in Ahmedabad, 'over two dozen lynched at wayside station....'

Call for Celebration

Ashok Singhal announces, on his release from a comfortable detention in a Lalitpur guest house, that what happened on 6 December and after, calls not for compunction or regret, but celebration, and that Mathura and Kashi are next on the VHP's list: more rounds of medieval bloodlust, more disruption of daily lives, more poison, hatred and fear (where will it end - with the Taj Mahal?). A day later, L.K. Advani addresses a crowded press conference and speaks, not of the mayhem and murder and the need to stop these, but of his party's electoral platform: The BJP did not take up the Ayodhya agitation when it began 10 years ago, but only in 1989; Kashi and Mathura are not on its agenda at present, but can be taken up when and if the party needs them. (And sections of the press describe this as 'a conciliatory move'). Seeing which way the wind is blowing, Narashimha Rao declares that he had to announce a decision to rebuild the Babri Masjid: for, if he had not done it, someone else— or, even, some other country— would!

Is it any wonder, in this context, that eight years after the event, the authorities have failed to arrest and convict even one person involved in the 1984 massacre of innocent Sikh men, women and children (riots in Delhi after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi)? Is it any wonder that, after 6 December 1992 the government's police force arrests all of half a dozen prominent leaders said to be responsible for spreading the communal poison and a score or so of *kar sevaks* (a Sikh term for voluntary workers, involved in building construction work for the

community) injured during their work of demolishing the Masjid, and then proceeds with prosecution in so inept a manner that the courts quickly release the lot— including the leaders of recently 'banned' organisations?

Is it surprising that not even the formality of the ban is imposed on the Shiv Sena, in spite of its obvious implication in the Ayodhya events of 6 December and in everything that has happened in Bombay since then? Or that an increasingly partisan police force has stood idly by, if it has not actually joined the rioters or even taken the lead in organising the killings— in Surat and in Bombay, in Kanpur and in Delhi, on the days following 6 December, as in so many other places on different occasions over the last decades or so?

Privilege of Silence

If the political and religious leaders, the government and the administration, have much to answer for, the rest of us who have used our privileges only to remain silent are scarcely above blame. We have allowed political

thugs to get away, literally, with murder. We have accepted the erosion of democratic procedures and autonomous institutions in one place after another without a word of protest— so long as our own careers, our lives and our properties, have been safeguarded. We have failed even to address the question of national identity, believing somehow that economic advance— in the form of a super computer, a massive infusion of foreign capital, or an improved version of the mixed economy— would provide the answer to all our national problems.

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To pursue that last point a little further, we have handed over to the BJP-RSS-VHP and their ilk, who never tire of mouthing slogans on these issues, practically the entire platform of Indian history and culture. And, by offering no alternative, we have enabled them to lay down the meaning of this history and this culture. We have watched as they have reduced Indian history to religion, religions to Hinduism, Hinduism to *Rambhakti* (worship of Rama), *Rambhakti* to the building of a temple, and the building of a temple at precisely the site and in precisely the way that a gang of Hindu extremists dictates.

As with so much else that has been allowed to happen in recent days, this monumental reduction of Indian history and the Indian heritage needs to be openly contested - and contested at every step. The vandalism that was exhibited at Ayodhya on 6 December, and the call for Muslim blood that has gone out across the country since,



has nothing to do with Rambhakti. Rambhakti is not all there is to Hinduism. Hinduism is not Hindustan (not even if we write that as Hindusthan). And neither 'Hindus' (who are, in any case, not a homogeneous, undifferentiated group programmed to think identically) nor some pretended 'pure Hindu tradition' accounts for all of India and Indian culture. To claim otherwise, as Hindu propaganda goes today, is to empty the history of one of the oldest and most dynamic civilisations in the world of all its variety, its struggles and its richness.

'Foreignness'

Related to this is the question of 'secularism', which we are asked to reject as an alien concept, unsuited to Indian conditions. Interestingly, the charge of 'foreignness' is never brought against the concept of 'nationalism', let alone 'capitalism'. The much sighted 'foreign hand' is never noticed when it comes to hand-outs from the International Monetary Fund, whatever the demands (regarding acceptable economic and political arrangements) that accompany them.

It is reserved for use when working people and their organisations challenge the economic and political privileges of the ruling classes, or when minority groups express their anger at the destruction of places of worship, ill treatment by the police, or simply the conditions of their ghettoized existence.

Question and the Struggle

Today, the debate on whether 'secularism' is an Indian or a Western concept seems not merely academic, but also misplaced. For the choices are clear: a pluralist perspective, based on respect for our wonderfully mixed culture and all its diverse and changing components, on the one hand; narrowness intolerance and murder, on the other. These are not choices that we can, or should leave to a handful of self appointed leaders of the nation and guardians of its culture. As I have noted, too many of us have been silent for too long. The time has come for us to speak up, to ask questions even if we have no answers, to ponder deeply on the question: what kind of society do we wish to live in? The struggle will have to be joined in every home and every class room, in every speech and act of ours: and it will be far from easy. For the rot has gone very deep.

The rot has gone so deep that a group of students in Delhi, discussing the post Ayodhya situation, can actually say: 'Why talk about killings? "Killings" are an abstraction.' The clever student is right. 'Killings' are an abstraction. For they abstract away from the deep and unique sense of loss that every death involves. Every killing is differ-

ent. Every killing has a different meaning for parent, child, husband, wife, relatives, loved ones and a very different meaning for others. Every killing is a termination, an end of life, love, family, home, relationship, sense of belonging: and after such endings, it is rarely possible to return to life 'just as it was'. 'Killings' are an abstraction - when they are reduced to mere number, and (of course) as long as it is not one of our near and dear ones who is killed.

There are other things to be said about this exhibition of insensitivity and ignorance. If 'killings' are an abstraction, are they more so than the concept of 'Hindu rights' and 'Hindu pride' that are bandied about so effortlessly today - without a thought for the questions: which Hindus do we speak for? What is the history of the so called neglect of their rights? And what are the grounds upon which this sense of pride is sought to be drummed up?

There are other abstractions that are worth fighting for: and these include the abstraction of democracy, secularism and respect for human life. For the sake of our common humanity, and the very possibility of living with self respect and pride, not to mention our dreams of a more humane and just future, we must return to these ideals today and struggle to realise them as far as possible.

A group of 25-30 Muslims, whom three journalist friends and I met in a deserted *mohalla* (neighborhood) of Ayodhya on the evening of 5 December 1992, asked us a simple question. Two of the older men among them told us of how they had chosen to stay on in Ayodhya through the difficult times brought by Partition (division of India). For this was their home, their land; and they knew and desired no other. On 5 December 1992, they still wished to stay - for the same reason; and today, after the torching of their homes and mosques and murderous assaults on their kith and kin even in Ayodhya, a few of them are returning, to try pick up the threads and rediscover some meaning in existence in their native land.

What they asked us on 5 December was what they had done to deserve this isolation and this terror 45 years after Indian Independence? "Who are the real patriots?" they asked. "We, who have stayed on through all these troubles; or those who are massing around the Babri Masjid, terrorising anyone who is different from them, shouting obscenities in every public meeting, and threatening to defy the orders of the highest courts in the land?"

These questions needed an answer then. They are, perhaps, even more urgent now. For they are questions we will have to live with.

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