"Monuments in Immovable Stone:" Collective Memory and Mourning in the Ramjanmabhumi Movement
by Aaron Rester

Introduction

In early December 1992, at least 150,000 Hindus[1] converged on the pilgrimage town of Ayodhya, in the north Indian province of Uttar Pradesh, about 300 miles east of New Delhi. The goal of these "pilgrims" was the destruction of a 16th-century mosque (known as the Babri Masjid) that, the Hindus claimed, had been constructed upon the ruins of a temple built to mark the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama (known as the Ramjanmabhumi). Following the Masjid's destruction, so the plan went, a new temple would be built on the site, returning the sacred ground to its proper custodians. On December 6, the gathered Hindus, unobstructed by a meager police presence, began to demolish the mosque with picks, shovels, and their bare hands. They also attacked foreign journalists who happened to be on the scene.[2] In the shockwave of communal[3] rioting that swept through the subcontinent following these events, over a thousand people were killed in India, and almost 250 Hindu temples were set on fire in Pakistan

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[1] "150,000 Hindus in Ayodhya to Build Temple on Disputed Site," Vijay Joshi, Associated Press, 12/3/92.
[2] "A Religious Zeal Turns Into Abuse," Edward A. Gargan, *New York Times,* section A, p. 10, column 4. 12/7/92

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and Bangladesh as retaliation.[4] The failure of the ruling National Front coalition to deal adequately with the crisis wound up causing its government to collapse, and more than a decade later, the incident and its fallout continue to be political flashpoints. Though work has begun in Rajasthan on a massive temple that would be transported to Ayodhya if and when its erection is approved,[5] various lawsuits, pending charges against the instigators of the destruction of the mosque, and archeological attempts to establish the existence or absence of an ancient temple at the site have -- for the time being -- resulted in a stalemate.

Those unfamiliar with the situation might wonder, as Philip Lutgendorf puts it, "how an obscure, abandoned mosque in a provincial backwater… could so rapidly become the focus of nationwide emotion, controversy, and turmoil."[6] In this paper, I will discuss the Ramjanmabhumi movement in relation to the concepts of collective memory and mourning, and argue that the movement is the performance of a particular vision of what India's collective memory should be, a vision which is centered on the mourning for a vanished past.

Collective Memory and Mourning

Before delving more deeply into the incidents in Ayodhya, we must first examine what is meant by the terms "mourning" and "collective memory." Mourning, according to Freud, is "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction

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[3] "Communalism" in the Indian context generally refers to tensions between the Hindu majority, who in 1992 made up about 82 percent of India's 850 million people, and the Muslim minority, who were about 12 percent of the population ("150,000 Hindus in Ayodhya to Build Temple on Disputed Site").
[4] "Jailed leader says his party does not seek setting up of Hindu state," UPI, 12/27/92.
[5] "Master Builder," http://www.ayodhya.com/ayotemplet.jsp?sno=38&E38=1
[6] Philip Lutgendorf, "Imagining Ayodhya: Utopia and its shadows in a Hindu landscape" *International Journal of Hindu Studies* Vol 1, No. 1 (April 1997) p. 21.

which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on"[7] that

manifests itself in a severe difficulty in removing the libidinal attachments to the missing

object. The severing of these attachments is

> carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the
> meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single
> one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is
> brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in
> respect of it… when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and
> uninhibited again.[8]

Mourning, then, is a *memory practice* that involves both the remembering of the lost

object and the gradual, often only partial, forgetting of the libidinal ties that bound the

mourner to that object. All memory, one can argue, necessarily involves a certain amount

of forgetting, as it is impossible for a human mind to retain every bit of information that

has been processed by our senses about the remembered object. Memory is an inherently

Procrustean process, as we are constrained by the finiteness of our media of memory[9] to

edit out those bits of information which seem inessential to the object being remembered.

As Marita Sturken writes, "to dismember is to fragment a body and its memory. To

remember is to make a body complete;"[10] yet the reassembly of a body in memory

provides only the illusion of completeness. Where mourning differs from other memory,

then, may be that its ultimate goal is the partial forgetting of libidinal attachments to the

lost object.

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[7] Sigmund Freud, "On Mourning and Melancholia" in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological
Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XIV. Translated and edited by James Strachey. (London: Hogarth Press,
1957). p. 244.
[8] Freud, p. 245.
[9] See James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2002) pp. 2-18 for a discussion of memory as mediated action.
[10] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of
Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) p. 72.

As Maurice Halbwachs,[11] Paul Connerton,[12] James Wertsch[13] and others have argued, memory (and, presumably, the associated practice of mourning) need not be confined to individuals, but may also be collective. Collective memory, according to Wertsch, results from a productive tension between the media of memory -- school textbooks,[14] monuments,[15] and films,[16] to name a few -- and the human agents that create and use those media.[17] This collective memory is thus constantly shaped, negotiated, and reshaped by the interactions of its "rememberers" -- both the human agents and the media -- with each other. It is these processes which we will examine in relation to the Ramjanmabhumi movement and the dispute in Ayodhya.

Historical Background of the Ayodhya Dispute

The origins of the dispute in Ayodhya are hazy. Tradition holds that the mosque was built in 1528 by the Mughal emperor Babur, though it appears that Babur may never have even visited Ayodhya, let alone built a mosque on the site of a desecrated Hindu temple.[18] There are no textual references to a Hindu temple at the site of the mosque or to a dispute over the site until 1838, in the writings of a British officer, who mentioned that Hindus held the Mughals responsible for the destruction of numerous temples, including

[11] See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory.*, edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[12] See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[13] See Wertsch.
[14] See Wertsch, pp 67-86.
[15] See Sturken, pp. 44-84; and Levi Smith, "Window or Mirror: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Ambiguity of Remembrance" and James Young, "Against Redemption: The Arts of Countermemory in Germany Today" in *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End*, edited by Peter Homans. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000) pp. 105-125 and 126-144.
[16] See Sturken, pp. 85-121, and David MacDougall, "Films of Memory" in *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R, 1990-94,* edited by Lucien Taylor (New York: Routledge: 1994) pp. 260-270.
[17] Wertsch, p. 11.
[18] Sushil Srivastava, *The Disputed Mosque: A Historical Inquiry* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1991) pp. 67-96.

ones in Ayodhya.[19] In 1853, the first of what would be several violent clashes over the mosque occurred, as devotees of Hanuman (Rama's monkey henchman) occupied the mosque, claiming that it had been built on the site of Ramjanmabhumi; in 1855 Muslims recaptured the building.

This flaring of communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims served British imperial ends; it provided them with justification for the annexation of the kingdom of Awadh (where Ayodhya was located) in 1856. This political action was cast by the British not as the advancement of their own economic and martial interests, but rather as the freeing of an oppressed Hindu populace from the rule of lazy and ineffectual Muslim monarchs.[20] After the so-called "Sepoy Mutiny" in 1857, the Hanuman devotees in Ayodhya, who had aided the British in putting down the rebellion, were allowed to build a platform in front of the mosque to mark the birthplace of Rama. In 1859 a fence was constructed between the Hindus' platform and the mosque, with the intention that Hindus and Muslims would worship separately at the site.

The two groups coexisted uneasily but relatively peacefully, though in 1934 the mosque was again stormed, following the Muslim sacrifice of a cow for the festival of Id. The domes of the mosque were partially destroyed before the police intervened. Finally, on the night of December 22, 1949, statues of Rama and his family mysteriously appeared inside the mosque. Citing impending unrest, the District Magistrate declared the area "disturbed," ordered the Imam to leave the premises, and had the gates of the

[19] Srivastava, p. 26.
[20] Srivastava, p. 21.

mosque locked. Hindus were allowed to take *darshan* (ritual viewing) of the statues through the locked gate.[21]

This situation continued as lawsuits stalled in the courts, until 1986, when a district court ordered the gate unlocked to allow Hindus access to the building, resulting in extensive protests by Muslims who sought to have the mosque returned to them. From 1987-1989, a wildly popular televised serial version of the story of Rama was broadcast on national state-run television.[22] The Vishwa Hindu Parishad ("World Hindu Organization," known as the VHP for short), capitalizing on increasing public interest in Rama, organized the laying of a foundation stone for what they claimed would soon be a rebuilt Ramjanmabhumi temple on a small plot of Hindu-owned land adjacent to the mosque.[23] The result was violent rioting. In 1990, Hindu activists broke into the mosque and wrapped saffron cloth around its spires, leading to more riots and arrests. With each incident, momentum amongst the Hindu public for the construction of the temple continued to build, culminating in the 1992 destruction of the mosque.

Hindutva and Mourning for the Past

Why then has the question of whether or not a temple (which may or may not have existed) was destroyed nearly five hundred years ago generated such heated emotions among Hindus today? A hint is provided by the ideology of the organizations that have been primarily responsible for mobilizing the Hindu public around the

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[21] Srivastava, p. 16.

[22] See Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001) and [22] Philip Lutgendorf, "All in the (Raghu) Family: A Video Epic in Cultural Context" in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia,* ed. by Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) pp. 217-253.

[23] "Moslems Protest, Hindus Rejoice over Disputed Shrine Site," Earleen Fisher, Associated Press 11/10/89.

Ramjanmabhumi issue, namely the VHP and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party that managed to ride the wave of popular support for the Ramjanmabhumi movement to increased power in the coalition governments that have replaced the Congress Party since 1990. The ideology subscribed to by the VHP, BJP, and their associated organizations is known as Hindutva ("Hinduness"). Hindutva is intensely concerned with the creation (or, its proponents would say, the "awakening") of a very specific form of collective memory. Hindutva was first articulated by V.D. Sarvarkar in a 1922 book of the same name. According to Christophe Jaffrelot,

> Sarvarkar's main argument in *Hindutva* is that the Aryans who settled in India at the dawn of history already formed a nation now embodied in the Hindus. Their *Hindutva*, according to him, rests on three pillars: geographical unity, racial features, and a common culture. Sarvarkar minimizes the importance of religious criteria in the definition of a Hindu by claiming that Hinduism was only one of the attributes of 'Hinduness'… The notion of territory was at the heart of Sarvarkar's ideological construct… for Sarvarkar, the territory of India cannot be dissociated from Hindu culture and the Hindu people.[24]

Sarvarkar's ideology thus conflated religion, geography, and culture, so that being Indian is equated with being Hindu. It views Jews, Christians, and Muslims whose families have lived in India for centuries as simultaneously still Hindu at their core and also alien, because their primary loyalties presumably lie outside the borders of India. At the same time, Hindutva whitewashes over the significant differences of caste, language, region, and sect that have divided Hindus in the past. Hindutva "dismembers" India as a historically and culturally diverse and fragmented society, and "remembers" India as unified Hindu nation whose origins lie in the misty reaches of prehistory.

Yet this Hindu nation, so the Hindutva line runs, has been crippled by centuries of foreign rule, particularly that of the Muslim Mughals who conquered much of India in

medieval times. According to this narrative, Hindus have been abused and humiliated by foreign occupiers, whose yoke must now be thrown off as Hindus "awaken" to their true identity. Neeladri Bhattacharya quotes a 1988 pamphlet written in the voice of an "Angry Hindu:"

> My temples have been desecrated, destroyed. Their sacred stones are being trampled under the aggressor's feet. My gods are crying. They are demanding…reinstatement in all their original glory… For so long -- for too long -- I was lost in a deep coma. I saw nothing, I heard nothing, felt nothing -- even when my motherland was cut off. But all such incessant blows have at last awakened me. Now I have begun to see, I have begun to hear, I have begun to understand, and I have begun to feel -- what tragedies have overtaken me.[25]

Or as Ram Madhav writes in an online article, "The movement for the Ram Janambhoomi is basically a movement for the self-assertion of a civilisation. It is a wounded civilisation trying to re-invent its roots."[26]

Despite the fact that Hindus make up over 80 percent of an Indian population that has had a democratic government for over 50 years, Hindutva's proponents believe that the Congress Party governments were controlled by "pseudo-secularists" whose primary objective was the harvesting of votes of the Muslim minority. Hindus were thus alienated from the government of "their" land, still victimized by the foreign invaders of five hundred years ago who, the story goes, are responsible for the destruction of a glorious Hindu past. The destruction of the Babri Masjid, that "symbol of national shame"[27] (as Balraj Madhok, a well-known Hindutva proponent called it), a reminder of the indignities suffered by the Hindus under the brutal rule of the Muslims, would appear to be the first

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[24] Christophe Jaffrelot,*The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 26-7.
[25] Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Myth, History, and the Politics of Ramjanmabhumi" in *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi Issue,* edited byS. Gopal (New Delhi, Penguin, 1993), p. 127.
[26] Ram Madhav, "Symbol of an awakened civilisation," http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/feb/10guest.htm

step towards forgetting those indignities. As James Young asks in regard to commemoration of the Holocaust: "How else would totalitarian regimes commemorate themselves except through totalitarian art like the monument? Conversely, how better to celebrate the fall of totalitarian regimes than by celebrating the fall of their monuments?"[28]

Yet the goal of Hindutva is not simply to forget the suffering which Hindus are said to have undergone; it is also to bring back the glories of India's pre-Muslim past. The story of Rama, and the mythic Golden Age known as *Ramraj* (in which Rama's just and righteous rule established a peaceful and harmonious paradise on earth, centered on his capitol in Ayodhya) is often portrayed as the ultimate manifestation of the brilliance of this Hindu past. We might consider the story of Rama to be a "schematic narrative template"[29] that provides a structure for thinking about the world that is widely prevalent in northern India, where both Hindutva and devotion to Rama have their strongest base.[30] This template seems to be frequently mapped on to the Babri Masjid dispute in the manner depicted in the following chart, with Muslims taking over the role of Ravana, Rama's demon-king antagonist:

Ravana conquers world ->	Vishnu incarnates as Rama, defeats Ravana ->	Ramraj established
Muslims invade India ->	awakening of Hindus, destruction of Babri Masjid ->	rebuilding of Ramjanmabhumi

[27] "The Rediff Interview/Balraj Madhok," http://www.rediff.com/news/2002/mar/18inter.htm
[28] Young, p. 129.
[29] Wertsch, p. 62.
[30] See Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), for more information on the importance of Rama to north Indian cultural life.

Rather than gradually forgetting libidinal ties to its lost object (*Ramraj*) -- to complete the mourning process -- Hindutva seeks to resurrect it, to "psychically prolong its existence" through the rebuilding of the Ram Janmabhumi temple.

The Hindutva insistence on bodily action -- the destruction of the mosque, the building of a new temple -- reminds us that, according to Connerton, "images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past… are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances."[31] Hindutva proponents have been particularly adept at creating public performances that emphasize the version of collective memory that they wish to propagate. According to Bhattacharya,

> The formation of a new identity and new collectivity also requires the invention of new rituals and practices. In India, rituals and practices are usually specific to sects and castes. Their collective performance binds the members of a sect or caste together, and separates sects or castes from each other. To transcend these differences and build a larger 'Hindu' unity, the VHP and BJP have invented new rituals. They are desacralized, in the sense that their objective is solely political.[32]

Aside from the ritual-like destruction of the mosque (it was presided over by saffron-robed holy men) and the ritual laying of the new temple's foundation-stone, the VHP and BJP have performed publicity stunts such as the brick campaign of 1984, in which the VHP arranged for Hindus all over India to send to Ayodhya bricks inscribed with Rama's name, to be consecrated and eventually used in the construction of the temple.[33] Along the same lines was BJP head L.K. Advani's 1990 "Rath Yatra," during which Advani drove across India toward Ayodhya in a Toyota pick-up done up to look like Rama's

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[31] Connerton, pp. 3-4.
[32] Bhattacharya, p. 130.
[33] Richard H. Davis, "The Iconography of Rama's Chariot" in *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India,* edited by David Ludden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) pp. 26-57.

chariot. Both of these events served to create the impression that the Hindu public was united in its support for the Hindutva cause.

Even the watching of the *Ramayan* television serial (which was of course itself a performance) became imbued with ritual overtones that invoked a united Hindu India: a religious serial, the product of a state apparatus, was viewed simultaneously by millions of people throughout India, and even worshipped by some with the same rituals as one would use in a temple or household shrine. The sense of loss that characterizes the Hindutva version of Indian collective memory was present in the serial as well:

> The theme of loss, alluded to but never directly addressed, underlay the entire serial. In interviews [with viewers], it was explained that the cultures and values of olden times had been lost, that people required reminding of them. Viewed in the privacy of the home, the notion of a great Hindu culture as a libidinal collective came to exist in the intimate spaces of peoples' lives… This was arguably a key symbolic backdrop against which the Ram Janmabhumi movement can be seen to have 'taken off.'[34]

Hindutva versions of collective memory have thus been enacted in multiple ways, of which the actual destruction of the mosque (and the construction of the temple, if it is ever permitted) was just one.

Conclusion: The Invasion of Modernization

As the quote above regarding the *Ramayan* serial indicates, Hindutva's mourning for the past may have far less to do with the invasion of Muslims in the 16th century than with the invasion of modernity in the 20th, which has caused "the cultures and values of olden days" to be lost. Additionally, the decline of the Nehruvian developmentalist socialism which had directed the Indian economy since Independence has been largely

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[34] Rajagopal, p. 139.

jettisoned in favor of Western-style economic liberalization. According to Shashi

Tharoor,

> The social ferment engendered by economic change is… a key factor in the communal violence following the Hindutva resurgence in the 1990s. The youths who smashed the Babri Masjid wore the shirts and trousers of lower-middle-class urban youth, men whose opportunities have not matched their expectations, and who are taking out their resentment on the visible Other. Various sections of Hindu society are seeing their status and privileges threatened by bewildering processes of change: affirmative-action programs for Dalits [Untouchables] and "backward classes," trade liberalization, economic reforms that have brought foreign employers into the country, remittances from Gulf labor that have made nouveaux riches out of their Muslim neighbors.[35]

Mahesh Narayan Singh, who was at the time the secretary of the VHP's Ramjanmabhumi

Committee, articulated the dilemma of modernization slightly differently in a 1990

interview with journalist Jonah Blank:

> I asked the VHP man whether the Hindutva movement might stem from a different fear entirely [than that of Muslims]: a fear of modernity.
> The secretary leaned forward on the bed to take a biscuit from the tea tray, and nibbled on it as he spoke.
> 'Yes, indeed, we have much to worry about quite apart from the Muslims,' he said. 'Hindus, more and more, are forsaking their own traditions freely, without anybody forcing them. More and more, all the time, they would rather go to the movies, wear Western clothing, study abroad and move to the United States. They forget to worship the gods -- how can you call yourself a Hindu if you don't worship the gods? For them the great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are merely television programs.'
> 'Those television programs have made the VHP successful.'
> 'Yes, they have helped stir up interest in the grand epics. But the Indian nation must be reminded that its days of glory are not all in the past. That is why we will build a new temple. We must be reminded not merely with pretty words, but with monuments in immovable stone.'[36]

For Singh, the performance of Hindutva collective memory -- especially the building of

the temple in Ayodhya -- will provide a means for staving off the onslaught of modernity.

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[35] Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to the Millenium* (New York: HarperPerennial: 1997), p. 325.
[36] Jonah Blank, *Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), p. 15.

But Paul Connerton has argued that such performances are ultimately futile in the face of the capitalist juggernaut:

> "[In modernity] the celebration of recurrence is a compensatory device. Capitalism, in Marx's famous phrase, tears down all social immobility, every ancestral confinement and feudal restriction; and invented rites, however implicated they often are in that very process of modernisation which capitalism drives remorselessly on, are palliative measures, facades erected to screen off the full implications of this vast worldwide clearing operation."[37]

If Connerton is right, the Ramjanmabhumi movement is basically a comforting illusion for those whose worldviews are threatened by the changes of modernity. But it is an illusion with extraordinary symbolic power, being wielded in a battle over how Indians -- and the world -- will remember not just one patch of ground in Ayodhya, but how they will remember what "India" itself is.

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[37] Connerton, p. 64.

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