

Violence sweeps India: Will the nation survive?

by Ramtanu Maitra

A long-unresolved dispute between Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, erupted into a full-fledged national crisis on Dec. 6. An unruly mob of over 100,000, assembled by the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the pretext of carrying out a symbolic construction of a temple to Lord Ram, and armed with pickaxes and shovels, descended on the Babri Masjid mosque and, unchallenged by state authorities, razed it to the ground within a period of five hours.

The consequences of such a dastardly act, ostensibly unexpected by both the national leaders in New Delhi and local leaders in Ayodhya, have been familiar ones. At the time of this writing, Muslims, justifiably enraged by the charade that official protection was being provided to the mosque, have joined in violent protests, resulting in the deaths of more than 700 people, mostly from police shootings.

The demolition of the mosque, carried out by a mob belonging to the organizations Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, Hindu Mahasabha, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad—all fronts of the Hindu religious group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS)—has left the nation in a state of shock. Unless the government can move quickly to restore confidence within the Muslim population, India will again be pushed to the brink, and communal tensions could ruin any prospects for national unity.

In his address to the nation on the evening of the Ayodhya events, Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao called the demolition of the mosque “a matter of great shame and concern for all Indians.” In an unprecedented action, Indian President Shankar Dayal Sharma issued a press release requesting the prime minister “to initiate appropriate expeditious steps to uphold the rule of law, the maintenance of public order, and protection of all law-abiding citizens.”

In the first 24 hours after the destruction of the mosque, the government took the following moves to try to prevent a catastrophe:

- The BJP government in Uttar Pradesh was dismissed, and the entire national leadership of the party arrested. This includes BJP Chairman L.K. Advani; President M.M. Joshi; Uma Bharati, the Member of Parliament from Madhya Pradesh; and Sadhvi Rithambara, a Hindu fundamentalist provocateur from Punjab.

- Prime Minister Rao indicated that a number of communal groups who ran the demolition will be banned, including the Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, Hindu Mahasabha, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad. There is also pressure within the Congress Party to ban the BJP itself, as well as its mother organization, the RSS.

- The Uttar Pradesh chief minister, Kaliyan Singh (who is a member of the BJP), will be prosecuted, and UP government officials and bureaucrats will be charged with criminal dereliction of duty.

- The government announced that both the mosque and a temple to Hindu Rama will be built, by the government, with government funds, at the Ayodhya site, in a firm statement of national unity.

- On the Muslim side, the Islamic Sevak Sangha (ISS) has been banned or is about to be. All Muslim-dominated areas of Delhi are under curfew.

Muslim leaders, along with V.P. Singh's Janata Dal party, are attacking the ruling Congress Party the most loudly, and are demanding the banning of the BJP. If the BJP is banned, it will bring down with it the four state governments it now controls. This in turn will force New Delhi to hold elections in these states. In 1989, when the Muslims left the Congress Party and revolted against Rajiv Gandhi, V.P.

Singh became their choice. It is this coalition which ousted Gandhi and took the elections in 1989, resulting in two years of chaos and destabilization. It is now feared that this combination will come to the fore again.

What preceded the act

Prior to the monumental failure of the national government machinery and the political groups that were handling the issue, the Babri Masjid—completed in 1528 by Mir Baqi, an army general of Babur, the first Mogul emperor of India—had been the center stage of a violent episode in 1990, which eventually helped to bring down the shady V.P. Singh government. At that time, the BJP, with whose support the government had maintained a majority in the Parliament, had decided to withdraw its support from the V.P. Singh government because of New Delhi's determination not to allow the mosque to be demolished. At that time, too, the mosque took something of a beating, but there was no significant damage.

When the Congress Party came to power in New Delhi in June 1991 under the leadership of P.V. Narasimha Rao, following Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in May, it was expected that the past experience would guide the new rulers to seek a path of negotiation and not confrontation.

The crux of the dispute lies in the claim by the Hindus, represented by the BJP, its front organizations, and innumerable freelancing *sadhus*, that Lord Ram, a Hindu hero whose past existence is a matter of faith and not of archaeological evidence, was born in the very spot where the mosque was erected in the 16th century, and hence, the mosque must be demolished and replaced by the Ram Janambhoomi Temple. The Muslims rejected this demand, with a qualification. They pointed out that if it were proven archaeologically that the mosque was indeed built upon a temple, the Hindu demands would be met. What most people considered a reasonable outcome of the debate, the BJP did not, and it kept up the pressure, assembling hundreds of thousands of semi-literate and illiterate militants ready to sacrifice their lives for the temple.

The confrontation, which has taken an ugly form in the last two years, has a long history. In 1855, Hindus and Muslims had clashed over the issue, but the dispute was resolved amicably. In 1883, the deputy commissioner of the Faizabad district, where Ayodhya is located, refused permission to the Hindus to construct a temple, due to objections from some Muslim leaders. In 1949, some local Hindus surreptitiously, in the dead of night, installed an idol of Ram inside the mosque. The main gate was locked the next day, on instructions from the district magistrate. Since then, the mosque has been left unused, although the issue was not quite dead.

In 1986, allegedly under pressure from the ruling Congress Party, the district magistrate of Faizabad unlocked the masjid doors. The Congress Party, under Rajiv Gandhi at that time, had opened up the issue to appease the Hindu voters, who had been becoming increasingly disillusioned about New Delhi's pro-Muslim postures. Since the 1986

opening of the lock, the issue has been a volatile one, and the BJP has seized upon it to gain political mileage. There is no question that the conflict has been the BJP's bread-and-butter issue, and has allowed the party to rise from the near-oblivion into which it had descended in 1984. Cashing in on the issue, the BJP raised its number of seats in Parliament from 2 in 1984 to 90-plus in 1989 and 120-plus in 1991. The issue allowed the BJP to gain a single-party majority in the Uttar Pradesh State Assembly in the 1991 elections, and control over this most populous state in India.

The recent developments

Since the Rao government took over power in New Delhi in June 1991, securing a razor-thin majority, the issue has continued to haunt the Congress Party. Prime Minister Rao had promised the nation that the issue would be resolved peacefully, which meant to all that the mosque would be kept intact and a temple would be built in the adjacent area. Meanwhile, the BJP was putting on pressure, and in July 1992, it carried out a symbolic foundation-laying, with the threat that if the government could not come up with a solution by Dec. 6, the actual construction of the temple would begin.

It has been well documented by now that the Rao government was not sitting idle in face of this threat, and the prime minister conducted hundreds of meetings with various groups and individuals with the purpose of finding a peaceful formula. The Uttar Pradesh state government, run by the BJP, had acquired the 2.77 acres surrounding the Babri Masjid in October 1991. The issue of the legality of the acquisition was referred to the state high court, and the court announced at a much later date that a verdict would be issued on Dec. 11, five days after the deadline for construction set by the BJP and its front organizations. As the countdown to the proposed construction began, it became apparent that no formula had yet been found, and the Supreme Court demanded assurance from the Uttar Pradesh government that no construction would take place. The Supreme Court also appointed an observer to monitor activities in Ayodhya.

However, by the end of November, it became evident that the BJP leadership was not going to openly buck the demand from its base that the construction work on Dec. 6 be undertaken in earnest. Harsh statements violating earlier promises were issued by the BJP leaders, such as L.K. Advani, the leader of the opposition in the Parliament, and BJP chief Murli Manohar Joshi. Although on Nov. 27, New Delhi sent a total of 160 companies of paramilitary forces to Uttar Pradesh to ensure law and order, an impression was given to the public that the Dec. 6 event would be an anti-climax and would consist mostly of chanting of hymns and devotional songs.

But the die was cast in the first week of December, when thousands of trident-wielding individuals and pickaxe and shovel brigades began to converge on Ayodhya. By the time the deadline arrived, there were more than 120,000 impoverished Hindus assembled at the disputed site, ready to strike. It

The British gameplan

British black propaganda specialist Conor Cruise O'Brien, writing in the *Times* of London on Dec. 8, lays out the British oligarchy's version of how the current crisis in India will develop. The nation is "inevitably" moving toward becoming a fundamentalist Hindu state, he writes, under the headline, "Will India Fall to the Zealots?"

"India's history as a secular state appears to be coming to a close," he claims. "The mosque at Ayodhya had been a symbol of that state. . . . That symbol has been destroyed, and that authority shaken to its foundation. . . . It may not be long before the BJP becomes the government of India. India will then cease to be a secular state and 'our nation' will be the Hindu nation."

was surprising to hear reassuring statements issued by the government at such a crucial hour, when the average person, watching from Delhi, had become convinced that confrontation could not be avoided. It soon became apparent that the crowd assembled at Ayodhya had successfully blocked off the roads leading to the disputed area, thus making it impossible for paramilitary or military forces to arrive there on short notice in case of an emergency. What measures New Delhi may have taken to respond to any emergency still remain a mystery.

The fallout

The most important fallout from the incident is the alienation of the Muslim community. As the *Economic Times* pointed out in its editorial on Dec. 8, the prime minister faces a Muslim public that, by and large, and not without justification, "believes that he was in cahoots with the BJP to demolish the Babri Masjid." The violent reaction of the Muslims around the country indicates a great loss of faith and a greater sense of indignation within the community. This in turn provides the Muslim fanatics yet another opportunity to create chaos.

In addition, the prime minister is under tremendous pressure from within his own Congress Party. Many senior cabinet members, such as Arjun Singh, Madhavrao Scindia, and Sharad Pawar, have made it clear that it was the inaction of the government that brought about the calamity. However, it is also evident that none of the Congress leaders have any ready solution at hand, and they openly admit that the only other way out would have been to meet the BJP rabble head-on with force, which would also have meant a great danger.

On the other hand, the events, if handled judiciously from now on, could lead to the political death of the BJP. Within

the BJP, leaders like Advani and Vajpayee, although they have shown little spine so far to oppose the rag-tag Hindu fanatics, are trying to distance themselves from what happened at Ayodhya. Advani resigned from his post of parliamentary opposition leader, in the face of a massive onslaught from the left parties and the Congress. Even the militant RSS, the crusader for the state to adopt a "Hindu soul," called the incident "deplorable." It is also clear that the thousands who came with their tridents and pickaxes have no political organization other than the BJP, and without the BJP, they could be classified as common criminals and hoodlums.

The international fallout of the incident will be significant, but not irreparable. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, where anti-India campaigns are the sole unifying force, the fallout will be mostly in the form of damage to Hindu properties and temples. This has already happened. However, neither Bangladesh nor Pakistan has ever practiced secular policies, and hence, their statements are of little value. The Organization of the Islamic Conference, which called the incident "shameful," is a mixed bag, and its statements have all along been more politically motivated than based on reality.

The onus for repairing the situation now lies with the Rao government. Thousands of volunteers are still busy constructing the temple at Ayodhya, at the time of this writing, and the BJP and the RSS are cooperating with New Delhi to disperse them. Once this is achieved, New Delhi must move quickly and openly, and from a position of strength, to discuss the temple-mosque issue. According to the list prepared by the BJP, there exist 50 shrines where mosques have allegedly been built over demolished temples.

New Delhi will have to make sure that this list does not see the light of day. An agreement to this effect must involve both the BJP-RSS combine and the Muslim leadership. And then, those who were involved in dismantling the masjid and putting the country through a grave crisis, must be brought to trial.

As noted above, the government has promised that the Babri Masjid will be rebuilt and a number of Hindu fanatical organizations will be banned. While banning non-political organizations involved in spreading hatred and malice can be effective, there is no question that the BJP-RSS combine must be exposed to the full and fought politically. The same goes for the Muslim fanatical groupings such as Islamic Sevaka Sangha, which spreads untold hatred in the state of Kerala.

If the Congress Party remains unified and redoubles its efforts to resolve these issues, there is no doubt that it can succeed. But this requires complete honesty and transparency. At the same time, it is evident that the blowup of the Babri Masjid issue, at a time when the world is going through a massive change, will pull India back politically from the international arena. It is expected that the Rao government, now in a deep mire of economic crisis and communal disharmony, will be spending most of its time trying to set its own house in order. It is a big task, but there is no alternative.