

India's Dream State

In the wake of the riots and violence that followed the storming of a mosque in Ayodhya, ancient religious hatreds are being touted as the cause. Yet, India's history is characterized more by religious toleration than conflict. These hatreds are often invented by Hindu nationalists who are revising history to support their plans for a Hindu state.

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By Tom MacFarlane

The Art of History

As curious as it may sound, perhaps the best history of India I have ever come across is a piece of fiction. I am referring to Salman Rushdie's 1981 novel, *Midnight's Children*. In it, the narrator, Saleem Sinai, relates the fantastic story of his life. He is born at midnight on the fifteenth of August, 1947, the very moment that the Indian state achieved her official independence. From that instant, his story and India's history are yoked mythically and metaphorically.

I know as I make such a claim that there are plenty of accomplished historians who would laugh off my impertinence. After all, what use is fiction to the purposes of history, much less a stream of consciousness narration which misdates the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi? Still, Saleem's fabulous history (he calls it a "chutnification [or pickling] of history")—self-consciously trying to "encapsulate the whole of reality" while at the same time giving it shape and meaning—introduces, explains, and represents contemporary India, with all its magical (and explosive) energy, in a way that a more conventional historical text cannot.

For a country in which the majority of the population uses the same term for 'yesterday' as 'tomorrow' and understands all earthly existence as the dream of a god, the idea of history is a complicated one. There exist few other countries in the world whose facts are so tangled in fiction and whose past is so intricately knotted to its present. It is a country of invention in which languages, customs, cuisines, histories, and religious practices vary from region to region and person to person.

When recounting to a friend recently the latest rash of disturbing news out of India—the January Hindu-Muslim riots sparked by the

storming of a mosque, the fatal explosions in Bombay and Calcutta in March, reports that Pakistan and India were on the verge of nuclear war for Kashmir in 1990—I remembered Saleem Sinai and the "fear of absurdity" which prompted him to find connections in everything. Were there any connections in the frenzy of these events?, I wondered.

Still puzzling about India, I pulled *Midnight's Children* off the shelf and was startled upon re-reading the book's final passage in which Saleem shares an apocalyptic vision of the future. "I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode," he announces. Then later, "they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust." The first allusion—bombs in Bombay—caught my eye immediately. As for the second, the six hundred million people of India (now, in fact, closer to nine and counting) obliterate their collective history as it is made, marching restlessly through, and over, it to find themselves in familiar yet new places, tracing the inner logic of a dream.

Ancient Hatreds, Modern Inventions

I will concentrate here on the most disagreeable of contemporary developments: the rising tension between Hindus and Muslims, as exposed by the destruction of a sixteenth century mosque at Ayodhya (a city in the northern province of Uttar Pradesh) and



Mohandes K. Gandhi, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and Jawaharlal Nehru.

by the subsequent wave of mob violence that crippled much of north and west India in early January.

On the surface, perhaps, the reports of these incidents correspond more rigidly to a pattern of history than the other events—bombings and proposed bombings—brought lately to our attention. Certainly our news media manages hastily to package the unrest in language which has become conventional. We see a ten second highlight package on television and are made to believe we understand that the people on our screen are acting this way out of “ancient hatreds” and “religious fanaticism.”

But, these simplifications—true only to a point—so often only make us co-conspirators, sharers of the myths and fantasies at the root of the violence. More often than not they conceal the particularity of the upheaval—the complex and decidedly modern set of circumstances that combine to make it possible—and, in India’s case certainly, the haphazardness of it. The impetus behind the Hindu extremist movement has, some would say, as much to do with political and economic power as it does with religion or deep felt hatreds. Nevertheless, Hindu nationalist leaders struggle at every turn to reinvent India’s past by exploiting religious sentiment and merging history with legend and fiction.

As politically radical as the Indian nationalist movement was (led by Gandhi and India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru), its emphasis on pluralism, secularism, and tolerance—ideals reflected in the evolution of India’s legal and political structure since independence—was nothing new. In fact, throughout the subcontinent’s long and turbulent history, there is surprisingly little record of religious intolerance. Early Hindu Kings are known to have respected the various practices of their immigrant populations. Subsequently, as the power of these kings began to decline in the eleventh century, the conquering Muslims, who maintained control until the collapse of the Mughal empire in the eighteenth century, were, with few exceptions, every bit as lenient.

Incidents of conflict between Hindus and Muslims took on new, more serious, characteristics following British colonization. The division of the subcontinent into administrative units often fell along religious lines—for example the 1905 division of Bengal into what is today easternmost India and Bangladesh. With the traditional multi-religious principalities gone, indigenous leaders found mono-religious administrative pockets in which to build support. Politicians exploited Hindu and Muslim fears to their advantage.

Moreover, events with non-religious origins often resulted in communal conflict. In 1920, thousands of Muslims returning early from a failed pilgrimage to Mecca found their lands appropriated by their Hindu neighbors. The violence that ensued pitted Hindu against Muslim but had equally as much to do with economic necessity as sectarian hatred. The violence of 1924-26 had similar economic roots as the poorer Muslim peasants and landless laborers lashed out against Hindu landowners.

Hinduism and Hindu “Unity”

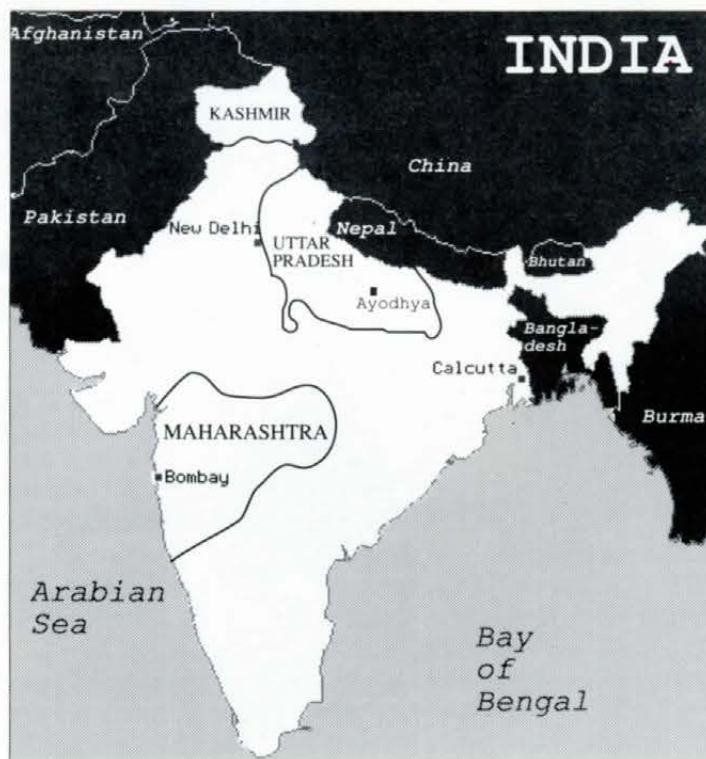
Hinduism has always had a dynamism and flexibility that belied any attempt to discriminate on grounds of faith. Anciently derived from a mixture of imported Aryan beliefs and indigenous customs, Hinduism’s earliest doctrines all acknowledge diverse theories and standards. The rigid caste divisions between followers of the religion—which still exist despite the fact that

Gandhi insured their constitutional abolishment—are severely discriminatory. However, they also emphasize the fundamental plurality within Hinduism, giving a place to all—rich and poor, low and high. Moreover, among Hindus, no central structure of authority or hierarchy of clergy exists. Nor do Hindus subscribe to one central set of scriptures. Rather, there are only regionally based groups. Virtually no formal coordination has evolved between regional leaders and differing schools of thought.

In fact, Hinduism has only relatively recently come to be understood as a religious designation at all. The travelers who first coined the term used it as a tag for the peoples of, and around, the Indus river valley—a large and various assemblage grouped together as a result of geographical orientation only. It was common even in the early British period to refer to “Hindoo Muslims” and “Hindoo Christians.” One might well still argue that Hindus, with their loose confederation of legends and philosophies, comprise more a societal body than a religious one. Mocking the past, today’s Hindu nationalists and opportunistic militants do their best to obscure the history of Hindu diversity.

Ayodhya and Rama

Ironically, the fuss over the Ayodhya mosque (commonly known as the Babri Masjid, or ‘Babur’s Mosque’—mosque is the name given to Muslim houses of worship) serves to highlight both the traditional diversity within the Hindu faith, and the uniquely modern sources for recent declarations of Hindu unity. The site on which the mosque stood is reputed to be the birthplace of Rama, the hero of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Hindu nationalists argue that an original temple to Rama had been destroyed by Babur (the first Muslim Mughal emperor) and the mosque erected in its place. They hold, thus, that the December 6 razing of the Babri Masjid was not an act of vandalism so much as one of restoration, and that destroying such an enduring symbol of



[Electromap, Inc.]

repression hails a reclamation of their historical and religious roots. They are now impatient for a new temple to Rama to be built, no doubt to function as a centrepiece for the struggle towards the recognition of a Hindu nation.

Whether or not one were to dispute the justifications for the raid on the mosque—all based on historical speculation—the very figure (Rama) in whose name the raid was carried out, is marked by an ambiguity that has also been ignored. While in the northwest Rama may be worshiped as the preeminent god, most Hindus would probably question granting him such a high status. Moreover, many in the south might dispute that he is a god at all. The idea, then, of uniting Hindus through the reparation of this “insult to Rama” seems incongruous.

Enter Rama, Contemporary Television Star

What emboldened the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to seize on the issue of the Ayodhya mosque, though, was the power of television combined with that of a good story. In January 1987, the state-run television network (Doordarshan) began to air an eighteen month long megaserie of the *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* (“Rama’s Way”) is one of the two great epics in South Asian history. As William Buck, scholar of Hinduism, describes, it “tells a story of courtly intrigue, heroic renunciation, fierce battles, and the triumph of good over evil” and depicts the noble god-king Rama’s twelve-year exile and battle with the demon Ravana. An estimated audience of 100 million watched the series. Hinduism became standardized in such a way that gave self-serving militant political factions, formerly quite obscure, a collective enthusiasm to harness, and a cause to exploit.

Not long after the concluding episode was televised, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) was calling on Hindus across the country to make bricks with inscriptions of Rama’s name for a temple at Ayodhya where Babur’s mosque was. Then, appropriating this concept for its campaign, the BJP began its abrupt climb to prominence in the 1989 national elections. This is an ascent that has now made it the second largest party in India, currently holding 119 parliament seats (up from two in 1984!). Polls suggest that the party would win 170 were elections held today—not the 273 needed for a majority, but a momentous, and still growing number. During these last few

years it has also won four state elections, including that in Uttar Pradesh.

As clear as it is that the *Ramayana* series contributed to the recent rise of Hindu nationalism, this would have certainly been difficult to predict. Doordarshan, which produced the epic, has always been a secularizing vehicle that attempted to forge “national” or “Indian” consciousness. It was the voice of modernity and international culture, uniting caste and creed behind its national cricket team. Furthermore, the *Ramayana* itself is generally treated as a piece of shared folklore, and was watched as eagerly by Muslims as Hindus. The story is, in fact, popular throughout Southeast Asia, and integral to the dramatic traditions in Buddhist Thailand and Muslim Indonesia. What’s more, the Rama we find in it, while idealized, is more an exemplary worldly ruler than a deity. However, an all-too easy target, he has been co-opted and re-invented for the political purposes of Hindu radicals and their reconstructive tendencies.

Reshaping Reality: India’s Muslim Era

The BJP platform rests almost entirely on similar creative self-fashioning. Ironically enough, they have adopted the “two nation” theory that Mohammed Ali Jinnah, former head of the Muslim League, initially proposed in his campaign for the creation of Pakistan in the 1940s. This theory rests on the inaccuracy that the Indian Muslim community descends from immigrant populations, and thus is not native. Most of the Muslims in India have, rather, an indigenous ancestry, their families having simply converted to Islam at some point since (and quite possibly for nothing more than political expediency).

Moreover, many Hindus voice suspicions that Indian Muslims are more loyal to the hated enemy—Pakistan—than to their own country. Others, however, cast these questions of allegiance aside. During the partition period in 1947—that separated British Colonial India into India, West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh)—Muslim Indians made specific decisions to stay in India when given the choice to leave. However, it must be said that the partition was a time of near anarchy in which approximately ten million people changed lands and more than one million died. Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs butchered each other as the migratory stream became a flood.

The primary theme of Hindu nationalist revisionism is that of Muslim religious repression. There is a grain of truth to the accusation but Hindu nationalists have cultivated it into a general principle. The early Muslim invaders, first arriving in the eleventh century, did leave a path of devastation over much of the territory they conquered. They destroyed lavish temples and ravaged great cities. However, this pattern became less and less frequent as the Afghans and Turks began to settle on the subcontinent. The Mughal empire, founded under Babur in the early sixteenth century, had, as I mentioned above, a remarkable record of religious openness.

Akbar (1556-1605), who, more than Babur and Homayun before him, established the lasting structure of the empire, did so by allying himself with the Hindu Rajput warriors in Rajasthan and giving Hindus positions in his government. Akbar tried to find a common ground between the peoples. He devised a composite religious cult which, while it centred on himself—consolidating the emperor’s status as something akin to a divine right—also detached Mughal rule from any strict Muslim orientation. Such moves were to insure that the Mughal empire, with



Durga Puja—Hindu Festival, Calcutta
[Government of India Tourist Office]

its Persian cultural mantle, would cease to be thought of as a 'foreign' rule. As Percival Spear points out in his *History of India* (Vol. 2): "[the Mughal empire] has remained a legend in India because it lasted long enough to be part of the accepted order of things and because, though not Hindu, it was generally felt to be Indian."

Hindu obscurantists tend to neglect Akbar, though, in favor of Aurengzeb, who ruled during the late seventeenth century. An orthodox Sunni Muslim, he won the throne from his elder brother Dara (whom his father Shah Jahan (builder of the Taj Mahal) had endorsed). He ruthlessly held on to power, after imprisoning Shah Jahan and beheading Dara, for over forty years. He did not treat Hindus as well as Akbar, and he tore at least one temple down in Varanasi to build a mosque. But he was in all likelihood not the cruel zealot portrayed by some. Besides, outside observers believe that Aurengzeb's religious intolerance was a minority in the duration of the Mughal empire. Notwithstanding the probability that his record of misdeeds has been exaggerated, to hold him up as a typical Mughal leader is an overstatement.

Indian Culture: A Muslim-Hindu Blend

In an attempt to legitimize their reinterpretations of the past, the BJP and the neo-fascist, Bombay-based Shiv Sena (Shiva's Army) are pushing to revise school textbooks to minimize the positive contributions and inflate the transgressions of Muslims in India. They deny the contemporary evidence that Indian culture is a thorough blend of Islamic and Hindu influences. Mod-

ern literature, painting, music and architecture draws from both traditions, as does popular culture. It is not unconventional that the scriptwriter and lead actor of the *Mahabharata*, the second Hindu epic made into a television series (capitalizing on the success of the *Ramayana*), are Muslim. The enormous Indian film industry, so central to the collective subconscious of Indian society, has virtually since its inception drawn on an integrated community of collaborators.

Even the actual contemporary religious beliefs and customs of Hindus and Muslims in India show a tremendous cross-pollination. Some would argue that Islam is as much an Indian religion as Hinduism is. The conventions of India's Muslims have evolved quite distinctly and discretely from those of the rest of the Islamic world and are closely allied to Hindu practices. In fact, the over 100 million Indian Muslims effectively comprise the second largest collection of Muslims in the world. Furthermore, it is an Indian version of Islam that spread to what is now the largest Muslim country, Indonesia.

The BJP: Whose Movement?

When analyzed closely, the idea of making India a Hindu state seems unfeasible. Perhaps not even the BJP can ultimately believe in it. While the Muslim population amounts to only around eleven per cent of the population relatively speaking, the real numbers of Muslims are formidable. It would be impossible to suppress such an enormous community or be rid of them. Further, because out of all the states only Kashmir (a different case



Fiddling while Ayodhya burned.
[Government of India Tourist Office]

entirely) has a Muslim majority, another partition of the country appears out of the question.

The BJP have, indeed, mixed religion and politics in theory only. L. K. Ardvani, BJP's top man, and the rest of the party leadership (all from the high Brahmin caste) admit no holy men to their inner circle. Even if a Hindu theocracy were conceivable (and it is unlikely for a splintered faith like Hinduism), it would run contrary to the self-interest of the BJP's power-hungry elite. In fact, what the BJP has always espoused is a more moderate, even a secular line, stressing cultural over religious unity.

The grievances voiced by the BJP have had to do primarily with certain legal concessions to Muslims guaranteed in the constitution. In radically overhauling Hindu personal law to conform with his western liberal concept of the rights of the individual, Nehru not only abolished caste restrictions but managed to pass less popular bills certifying the rights of women. These laws, however, are not binding on Muslims. Thus, a Hindu can be taken to court for polygamy while a Muslim cannot. Equally, the liberal terms for divorce apply only to Hindu marriages. Not so much sanctioning a bias against Hindu men as against Muslim women, these differences are nonetheless brought up constantly as unfair to the majority. A call for their correction has been the BJP's central plank.



Selling dreams on the street.
[Tom MacFarlane]

It would not be fair to blame the BJP alone for the riots and communal atrocities of January. One might well argue that a violent hatred of Muslims is the true expression of the party and that the moderate goals it professes are only a thin veil. However, if it set out to exploit the ignorance and disaffection of the masses with its latest rhetorical stances, it clearly lost control of them in the end. The frustrations that fed the anarchy were certainly more deep-seated than the BJP could have imagined, and came to be directed by more extreme elements—*sadhus* (holy men) with megaphones, organized crime bosses, and the Bombay-based Shiv Sena.

Bal Thackeray, the Shiv Sena leader contorts the idea of a privileged minority (Muslims are, on average, poorer and less literate than Hindus) into a frightening hysteria. In a *Time* magazine interview (January 25, 1993), he takes credit for controlling the Bombay mobs and, rather shockingly, adds that because Muslims "behave...like Jews in Nazi Germany," he sees "nothing wrong if they are treated as Jews were in Germany." Such extremism has never been associated with the BJP; but the fact that it made no attempts to detach itself from the likes of Thackeray raises the suspicion that the party is radicalizing as it expands.

Popular Dissatisfaction: Congress Struggles to Hold the Middle

What is it that appeals to so many Hindus about the BJP, the Shiv Sena, and other more marginal extremist organizations similarly bent on revoking the civic status of their Muslim neighbors? Why have the lies suddenly become so dangerously seductive? These are not simple questions to answer. But the issue, no doubt, has something to do with the fact that the Congress party, which has so dominated Indian government since Independence, seems to have lost its vision of secular, pluralist democracy. They are unsure which political winds to follow—those to defend the secular state or those to color the state structure Hindu. The public's trust of politicians and patience with the system have been diminishing steadily over the last decade, with increasing reports of endemic corruption, societal ills, a stalled economy and failed projects.

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's reactions to the storming of the Babri Masjid did nothing to help avert the ensuing chaos. At first he expressed rage and vowed to rebuild the mosque. Then, he gave in to the 'soft Hindu' line favored by many in his cabinet of establishing funds for both a Muslim mosque and a Hindu temple. He was attracted by the support he might win for moving quickly on plans for the temple, and of the ease with which he might delay the building of the mosque until a more politically opportune time.

On the other hand, he has, indeed, taken strong action against the rival BJP, dismissing its four Hindi-belt state governments (an act now being challenged in the Indian courts) and efficiently imposing a ban on their rally in New Delhi. But his party made relatively little attempt to either control or condemn the Shiv Sena in Bombay. The Bombay police force, over which the Congress-ruled Maharashtran state government presides, is actually under Indian court investigation for being complicitous with the Hindu rioters. All of this points to a confusion in Congress party strategy, with some advisors nudging the Prime Minister towards open confrontation with the BJP, and others asking him to be more indulgent towards its followers. Rao has

since tried to deflect attention towards the economy which, with a wave of foreign investment and a decreasing inflationary burden, has showed recent signs of renewal.

An economic recovery would go a long way towards answering the suspicions about the advantages of secular democracy. It would also give the government the confidence to challenge the ideology of Hindu nationalism head-on, and expose its historical revisionism. Most of the severe problems arose in regions with high rates of poverty and illiteracy. A liberalized and growing economy could very well provide the upward mobility that would keep Hindi-belt communities from becoming such easy prey for politically motivated obscurantists.

By no means are all of the trouble-makers poor and illiterate, however. The most ardent and dangerous of the Hindu nationalist camp could be characterized as quite the opposite. They are the educated middle class whose hopes and ambitions have, more and more, been exceeding their opportunities. Born into privilege, they have grown disenchanted with Indian society. They are resentful of those upstarts from minority groups or lower castes who have benefitted from the modern economy's expansion and threaten to overturn the formerly rigid Hindu social hierarchy. They feel much the same bitterness as Nathuram Godse, the Hindu who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi for championing 'outcaste' and Muslim rights. Self-immolations are carried out every year by frustrated middle class youths as a demonstration against government affirmative action hiring quotas for lower castes.

It is Hindus from this group to whom Bal Thackeray appeals when he refers, odiously, to Nazi Germany, and the very same who burn Muslim shops and enter wealthy Muslim neighborhoods in Bombay to harass, vandalize, and murder. In a way that so typifies the enigmas of India, the two groups—illiterate poor and middle class—that apparently rallied together in a movement to unite all Hindus are, themselves, at cross-purposes. The lower caste believe that they are not receiving their fair share in the new India and cry for more. The middle class also feel they are deserving of a greater piece of the pie and would do so by entrenching the lower caste where they are now.

A Cautionary Tale

It is exceedingly difficult to anticipate anything when speaking



Gateway to Bombay in quieter times.
[Government of India Tourist Office]

of India—except, that is, its constant surprise. I am tempted to say that the historical, religious and cultural fictions which cloak the contemporary political and economic negotiations of the Hindu nationalist movement will dissolve once those negotiations begin to show progress. Yet, despite government efforts, the prevalence of deeply ingrained legend (understood as fact) continues unbowed. Myth, legend, history and fiction remain intertwined. It is not an easy task to separate them.

The news out of the country since the suppression of the BJP's rally in New Delhi has served further notice of the country's ever-shifting sources of self-revelation (and self-annihilation). To begin with, only weeks after the January sectarian violence in Bombay that followed the storming of Ayodhya, 45,000 people cheered the Indian cricket team to a test match victory that marked their first-ever series sweep of England. The triumphant captain, Mohammed Azharuddin, is a Muslim; the president of their host Bombay Cricket Association, Manohar Joshi, a deputy of Shiv Sena.

Then, in mid-March of this year, came the bombs throughout that very same city, dozens of them exploding simultaneously according to some latest hideous master plan, killing 317 people without an apparent reason. The conclusion being drawn—and the sophistication of the terrorism demands that we decipher its message—is that a Muslim underground family, in the pay of Pakistan's secret service, coordinated the bombings (with the help, evidently, of several hirelings each of whom they paid the equivalent of 167 US dollars). No doubt, if there is any truth to this theory of outside authorship, the motive would involve some conjured history.

Less is known about the crude bombs which killed 90 people in Calcutta less than a week later—four in a train station when a bag that a vagabond was carrying exploded, and 86 when explosives stored in two old tenement buildings were set off. Surely, in such sad coincidences, lies yet further fictions, more private ones maybe, which impose their tragic structures on a nation all too susceptible to the charms of fantasies.

Finally, Seymour Hersh (in the *New Yorker*, March 29) gave us news of the most destructive fantasy there is, when he reported that, in the Spring of 1990, India and Pakistan were on the verge of a nuclear confrontation over the quintessential vale of dreams: Kashmir—literally the "K" in "Pakistan"—and the backdrop for probably every romantic Indian movie ever made. Hersh reminds us that, when thinking of India, one should not underestimate the powers of invention.

Suggestions for Further Reading

- The Ramayana and Mahabharata*, trans. by Romesh Dutt (Everyman, 1969)
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