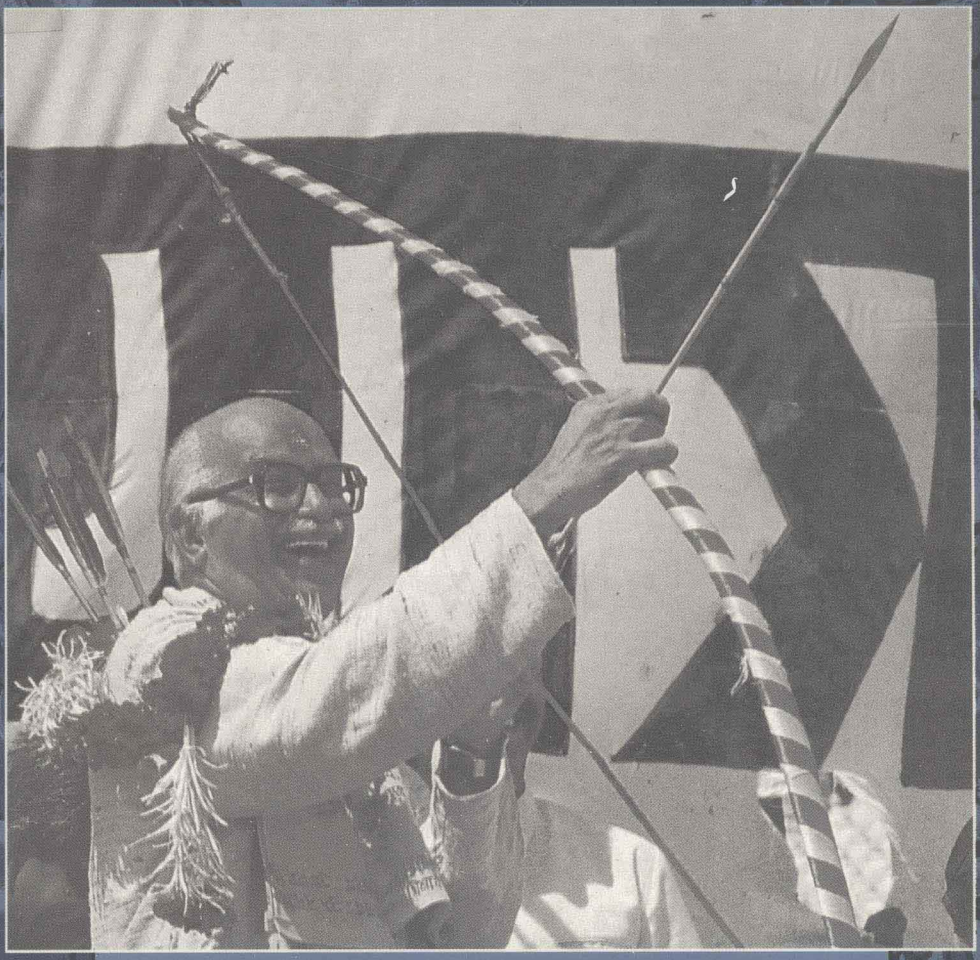

Religious Nationalism

Hindus and Muslims in India

Peter van der Veer

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Hindus and Muslims in India

PETER VAN DER VEER

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Veer, Peter van der.
Religious nationalism / Peter van der Veer.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-520-08220-6 (alk. paper) ; 0-520-08256-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Nationalism—Religious aspects. 2. Nationalism—Religious aspects—Hinduism. 3. Nationalism—Religious aspects—Islam. 4. Religion and politics—India. 5. Hinduism—Social aspects—India. 6. Islam—Social aspects—India. I. Title.
BL2015.N26V44 1994
320.5'5'0954—dc20 93-28079

Printed in the United States of America
9 8 7 6 5 4 3

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984. ♾

Preface

Current events in India reveal the continuing importance of religious nationalism. While much has been written on both Indian religions and Indian nationalism, the religious aspects of Indian nationalisms have yet to receive adequate attention. To study these aspects—movements, discourses, practices—we need a shift in emphasis from the political scientist's study of political parties and voting behavior to the anthropologist's study of religious movements and ritual action as part of historical practice. My aim in this book is modest. I am not able to describe and explain religious nationalism as it occurs in India in its full historical and social complexity. I will thus limit myself to some religious movements, discourses, and practices whose links to nationalism have not, in my opinion, been sufficiently taken into account. My discussion will not provide a straightforward narrative of the development of religious nationalisms but will instead address a set of related issues from a variety of angles. The argument clarifies the transformation of what Eric Hobsbawm calls "protonational feelings of collective belonging" into religious nationalism.[1]

I submit that we should take religious discourse and practice as constitutive of changing social identities, rather than treating them as ideological smoke screens that hide the real clash of material interests and social classes. The study I want to engage here concerns the historical construction of Hindu and Muslim identities in India and, specifically, the transformation of these identities in the colonial and postcolonial periods in the context of the rise of nationalism. My argument is: (1) that religious identity is constructed

in ritual discourse and practice; (2) that these identities are not "primordial attachments," inculcated by unchanging traditions, but specific products of changing forms of religious organization and communication; (3) that religious nationalism articulates discourse on the religious community and discourse on the nation; and (4) that Hindu and Muslim nationalisms develop along similar lines and that the one needs the other. An important caveat is that in discussing the contemporary situation I will in general limit myself to India. Scant attention will thus be given to Pakistan and Bangladesh or to post-Independence Muslim nationalism in India.

The claim that something like religious nationalism exists will be rejected by many students of nationalism for the simple reason that both nationalism and its theory depend on a Western discourse of modernity. This discourse constitutes the "traditional" as its antithesis and interprets difference as backwardness. A crucial element of the discourse of modernity is the opposition of the "religious" to the "secular." One point I want to make in this book is that leading theories of nationalism tend to ignore the importance of colonialism and orientalism in the spread of nationalism. To understand religious nationalism in India we need both an analysis of "tradition" that is not prejudiced by the discourse of modernity and a theory of the impact of colonialism and orientalism that does not deny agency to colonial subjects.

My interest in the subject of religious nationalism started with experiences I had in 1984 while I was doing fieldwork in Ayodhya, a Hindu pilgrimage center in Uttar Pradesh, a province in North India.[2] My research focused on the social organization, religious orientations, and ritual performances of the two most important groups of specialists in Ayodhya, the Ramanandi monks and the Brahman priests. In focusing on these two groups, I was concerned to assess the values and identities of the religious specialists in this center who receive pilgrims, and how these have changed over time. While my work explicitly tried to take a historical perspective by looking at large-scale political and economic processes, it did not seem necessary at the time to take the rise of religious nationalism during this century into account. I saw Ayodhya as an important religious center, but, at least in the twentieth century, as a political backwater, far removed from the main arenas of political activity, such as Delhi, Lucknow, and Kanpur.

Whatever the value of these considerations—and the argument

of this book places them very much in doubt—at the end of my research period in 1984 I was jolted out of my complacency. Of course, I was aware that Ayodhya had a site that had been long under dispute between Hindus and Muslims. It was an old mosque, built on the very spot that, Hindus claimed, was the birthplace of Lord Rama, the premier god of Ayodhya. One could not fail to see the mosque in Ramkot, the center of Ayodhya, where the most important temples are located. Entering the compound of the mosque one encountered a police picket, intended to ensure that no one tried to enter the mosque, which was itself closed off by a gate with an impressive lock. On a platform in front of the mosque a group of Hindu monks would sit and chant. Pamphlets saying that this was the birthplace of Lord Rama and should be returned to the Hindus were handed out, and donations solicited. Despite this form of "agitation" and the presence of the police, though, the site had always struck me as rather serene during the period that I regularly visited Ayodhya, from 1977 to 1984. The disputes seemed to have more to do with who among the monks would receive which part of the donations than with any attempt to launch an attack on the mosque.

In 1984, however, the relative peace of the place was suddenly disrupted when a campaign "to liberate the birthplace of Lord Rama" was launched.[3] The initiative was taken not by local monks but by a Hindu nationalist movement with branches all over the country. Since then, the site has developed into one of the hottest issues in Indian politics today. Hundreds of people have died in riots between Hindus and Muslims. The issue precipitated the fall of the Indian government in 1990, and a major opposition party subsequently embraced the issue very successfully in its electoral campaign. The issue continued to be contested after the elections, and on 6 December 1992 a Hindu mob marched on the mosque and succeeded in demolishing it. This event was again followed by rioting, with heavy loss of life and property, especially among Muslims, in many parts of the country. Hindu temples in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Great Britain were attacked in retaliation. Indeed, the Ayodhya case reflects all the elements of religious nationalism in which I have come to be interested. While this book is not principally about Ayodhya, the Ayodhya case is taken here as the main illustration of my argument.[4]

Ayodhya is a site (*tirtha*) for pilgrimage (*yatra*) and the campaign

related to it consists of religious processions (also called *yatra*). As I will try to show, movement and the definition of space and territory are central elements in religious nationalism. This also pertains to the transnational migration resulting from the demands of the labor market, which plays a significant role in the construction of nationalism "at home." Theories of nationalism often assume a sharp opposition between the traditional, parochial community and the modern, larger framework of the nation. What I want to show is the extent to which larger frameworks than that of the locality were already available in India before the colonial era, and the extent to which religious nationalism builds on these earlier frameworks and transforms them. My argument is that conceptions of a larger world emerge both in religious travel, primarily pilgrimage, and in migration. Although these two types of movement may seem very different, they reinforce each other in important ways. Given that pilgrimage is, by definition, a ritual of the larger community, it is easily incorporated into religious nationalism.

The relation between nationalism and transnational migration is also relevant here since, in the campaign for "rebuilding" the temple in Ayodhya, the involvement of Hindus who live outside of India has proved crucial. Migrants who leave India but continue to have ties with their homeland are confronted with challenges to their identity that are often met by nationalist activism. Instead of encouraging a sense of world citizenship, the transnational experience seems to reinforce nationalist as well as religious identity. It is the ambiguities of the dialectic between nationalism and transnationalism that constantly draw one's attention in contemporary politics.

The mosque-temple issue did not arise "naturally." Rather, it has depended on conscious, planned action by religious and political movements and is, as such, related to a changing political context that I will try to sketch. The arguments of the participants in the dispute focus on two problems: the relation between Hindus and Muslims, and the nature of the Indian nation-state. Most important, they concern conflicting interpretations of history. Religious discourse tends either to deny historical change or else to prove its ultimate irrelevance. It is my argument that religious nationalism combines this antihistorical feature of religious discourse with an empiricist search for "facts" that has been highly influenced by orientalism. Nationalism has a very urgent and contradictory need

to show, in a historical account, that the nation has always existed, a need that emerges clearly in the attempt to "rebuild" the temple in Ayodhya.

My earlier work was largely devoted to the study of the development of one Hindu monastic order, the Ramanandis, whereas in this book I look, from a comparative perspective, at the development of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim religious communities. My goal is to demonstrate that religious nationalism builds on a previous construction of religious community. This is not a version of the two-nation theory, which says that the Hindu and Muslim (or Sikh) nations are primordial entities, long predating the nationalist era. Rather, I will argue that religious nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries builds on forms of religious identity and modes of religious communication that are themselves in a constant process of transformation during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. The spread of religious orientations in India has always been largely dependent on holy men and their networks of sacred centers, while the expansion of religious groups through conversion is clearly a process of long duration, continuing down to the present day.

Much of the literature on the emergence of nationalism in nineteenth-century India focuses on the dual role of the colonial state and the "colonized" middle class. We should not reserve agency only for the "bourgeois project," however, but also pay attention to movements and discourses that do not seem to have a narrow bourgeois support. The main issue here is the connection between the reformist religion of the bourgeoisie and the religion of the "other half." There is a kind of Protestant reformation in Indian religion that entails a "laicization" of organization and leadership, as Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere have observed in their study of Sri Lankan Buddhism, where they demonstrate the importance of the emergence of "Protestant Buddhism" for Sinhalese nationalism.[5] A similar development can be found in Indian Hinduism and Islam. One instance of this is the saintly behavior of the politician, as in the case of Mahatma Gandhi. Other instances include the marginalization of Sufi saints in Islam and the "ethicization" of conduct among the Muslim laity.

Very important also is the historical formation of Hindi as a Hindu language and Urdu as a Muslim language, as well as the relation of these languages of everyday life to the sacred languages of Hinduism

and Islam, Sanskrit and Arabic. As I will seek to show, the sacredness of the languages of the scriptures is, in the context of religious nationalism, attributed to national languages—a form of "laicization" of sacred communication. A similar process is at work in the use of religious imagery in films shown in movie theaters and on television.

Not only are the sacred scriptures adapted for cinema and literature in the age of nationalism but ritual communication itself is transformed. In religious communities ritual communication plays a crucial role in forging an identity among people with very different class backgrounds. This sociological observation entails an understanding of ritual as a political process in which identity is discursively constructed and contested. With this in mind, I will examine the ways in which the ritual construction of gender is taken up in the nationalist construction of the nation as "brotherhood." The question I want to ask is whether the Hindu veneration of mother cow and the Muslim elaboration of gender separation become operative in similar ways in the new discursive space of nationalism.

One of the great problems in writing about culture and nationalism is the strong tendency to reify one's object of discussion. There is clearly much truth in Richard Handler's argument that "boundedness, continuity, and homogeneity encompassing diversity" dominate both nationalist and social-scientific discourse equally.[6] No doubt, studies of "aspects of culture," and especially of "traditional culture," do much to freeze and objectify culture as heritage, as a tangible sign of a common identity. This problem is even more overwhelming in the case of a work, such as the present one, that generalizes about a huge society over a large time period. It is hard to escape from speaking about "the Hindus" or "the Muslims" if one does not intend to provide a detailed, contextualized case study. Therefore I am certain that parts of this book will have fallen prey to the very essentializations my argument attempts to problematize.

Another important problem is that, writing about another culture, one tends to claim an objective outsider's viewpoint on matters for which other people die. I am, by definition, an outsider to Indian affairs because of my Dutch citizenship, and having recently gone through the intricate machinery of obtaining permanent residency in the United States, I would be the last to claim that borders and nation-states do not exist. However, India and Holland belong to a world system of nation-states, and within that context I have

been privileged to study India for the last two decades. "India" has thereby become part of my personal identity, an area of emotional involvement. In that sense I do not think that I am totally "outside" the phenomenon I discuss in this book, although I would not claim to be writing "within."[7] In fact, I would argue that the decision about what is "within" and what is "outside" is the very subject of nationalist debate. Those who have read my earlier book, *Gods on Earth*, will hardly have come to the conclusion that I romanticized Ayodhya. Still, I had a romantic attachment to its peaceful way of life and now feel pained when I see that the troops of monkeys on the roofs of Ayodhya's temples have been replaced by policemen with semiautomatic guns. Confronted with the anguish and fear of my Muslim friends during recent visits to Surat I feel even more the tragedy of what is happening in India. Nevertheless, it is hard for me to take sides and exchange the position of outsider for that of partisan. Obviously, this has to do with my relative distance from events and my personal safety in respect to them. But I also find it genuinely difficult to adopt the "liberal" position of condemning religious nationalists. In fact, I want to escape from that position in order to be able to understand religious nationalism. Of course, I am in favor of "nonviolence," but my analysis in this book has led me to understand the ambiguities of Hindu "tolerance" and Gandhian "nonviolence."

On the intellectual side, I do recognize the power of the discursive formation in which we think and argue about ourselves and the world. I have been influenced by a more general critique of the narrative of modernity that became influential in the 1980s—but much of this critique is completely Eurocentric. This book thus attempts to redirect attention to discursive traditions that are affected by the European ones but not derived from them. It is my hope that what I have to say will problematize some of the main issues in contemporary politics not only in India but on a world scale.

This is a book of synthesis. My intellectual debts are therefore innumerable and recorded in the footnotes. The subject is huge, and the present book is only one among many. Particularly pertinent to its subject matter, however, are three recent books: Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative*

Discourse? (1986); Sandria Freitag's *Collective Action and Community* (1989); and Gyanendra Pandey's *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1990). More generally, I feel very much indebted to the perspective on religion and politics developed in the numerous writings of Talal Asad.

An early impetus to this work was given by a series of discussions carried out under the auspices of Wilder House at the University if Chicago. I am grateful to David Laitin, its director, for his encouragement. Barney Cohn was present on one of these occasions, and his sharp questions prodded me to do some further thinking. At the University of Pennsylvania Arjun Appadurai commented on the early drafts of the first two chapters. To work with him, Carol Breckenridge, and David Ludden was a true pleasure. Finally, at the University of California Press I owe special thanks to Lynne Withey for her early encouragement and to Pamela MacFarland Holway for her careful attention to the manuscript. I am also indebted to the anonymous readers of the manuscript for their many incisive comments. In general, however, I have taken little advice and am myself to blame for inaccuracies and inconsistencies.

Contents

Chapter One

Religious Nationalism

Babar's Mosque or Rama's Temple?

The cover of the 15 May 1991 issue of *India Today*, India's leading newsmagazine, shows Lal Kishan Advani, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), with bow and arrow in hand, vermilion on his forehead. His posture, immediately recognizable to all Hindus, imitates that of the icon of *kodanda* Rama, the god Rama with bow and arrows. In the national elections of May and June 1991, in which 511 seats were contested, Advani's party won 119 seats and 20 percent of the vote. This meant that the BJP had nearly doubled its share of the national vote and had emerged as India's largest opposition party by far.[1] Perhaps even more significant, it won the state elections and formed a government in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state of some 100 million people.

The political success of the BJP depends squarely on its alliance with two Hindu nationalist movements, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization of religious leaders, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a militant youth organization. This alliance allows it to use religious discourse and mass-scale ritual action in the political arena. The party's program stresses *Hindutva*, Hinduness, a term explored by the Hindu nationalist leader V. D. Savarkar in the 1920s: "A Hindu means a person who regards this land of Bharat Varsha, from the Indus to the Seas, as his Father-Land as well as his Holy-Land that is the cradle of his religion."[2] The term *Hindutva* equates religious and national identity: an Indian is a Hindu—an equation that puts important Indian religious communities, such as Christians and Muslims, outside the nation.

The argument for the term stresses that Hindus form the majority community in the country and that, accordingly, India should be ruled by them as a Hindu state (*rashtra*).

All this is not new. From its very beginning in the nineteenth century nationalism in India has fed upon religious identifications. This is true not only for the two most important religious communities in India, Hindus and Muslims, but also for groups like the Sikhs and, in Sri Lanka, the Buddhists. In all these cases nation building is directly dependent on religious antagonism, between Hindus and Muslims, between Sikhs and Hindus, between Buddhists and Hindus. At Independence this antagonism led to the most important political event of twentieth-century South Asian history, the formation of Pakistan as a homeland for Indian Muslims. This history also provides the background to the issue that was responsible for the recent success of the BJP: a dispute between Hindus and Muslims over a building in the city of Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh.

In the North Indian pilgrimage center of Ayodhya is an old mosque, known as the Babari Masjid, which was built in 1528 by a general of Babar, founder of the Mughal dynasty. The dispute centers on a local (hi)story, according to which the mosque was built to replace an even more ancient Hindu temple to the god Rama, which had occupied the spot from the eleventh century A.D. The temple commemorated the place where Rama, the god-hero of the great epic poem the *Ramayana*, had been born. After destroying the temple, the general built his mosque, using carved pillars that had been taken, the story goes, from the temple ruins. I heard this story when I visited Ayodhya for the first time in 1977. The British also recorded it when they took control over the city. After the annexation of the regional realm—to which Ayodhya gave its name (Awadh)—in 1856, the British decided to put a railing around the mosque and to raise a platform outside on which Hindus could worship, while Muslims were allowed to continue their prayers inside.

This situation seems to have continued until Independence. Following the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Indian government placed a guard outside the mosque, which was now declared out of bounds for both communities. However, during the night of 22 to 23 December 1949 an image of Rama was placed in

the mosque by a group of young Hindus, who have never been caught and tried. The next day a rumor spread quickly that Lord Rama had appeared in the form of an image to claim the mosque as his temple. Riots ensued, which were quelled by the army, but the image was never removed. Leaders of both Hindu and Muslim groups subsequently filed suits to claim the place as theirs.

In 1984 the Vishva Hindu Parishad, a Hindu nationalist movement, began to demand that the lock on Rama's birthplace be opened. *Tala kholo!* ("Open the lock!") was their battle cry. A procession started out from Sitamarhi (the birthplace of Sita, Rama's wife), reaching Ayodhya on Saturday, 6 October 1984. The procession consisted of little more than a few monks in private cars and a truck bearing large statues of Rama and Sita under a banner inscribed with the slogan *Bharat mata ki jay* ("Hail to Mother India"). The next day, VHP leaders and local abbots made speeches in Ayodhya. But none of this was very impressive. When the procession arrived at the state capital, Lucknow, however, it attracted considerably more attention. From Lucknow the procession moved on to Delhi, where the VHP intended to stage a huge rally, but it was caught in the aftermath of the murder of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, which turned national attention away from the Ayodhya issue. Nevertheless, in the following years the VHP continued to put pressure on politicians, which resulted in a decision by the district and session judge of Faizabad on 14 February 1986 that the disputed site should be opened immediately to the public. This decision triggered off communal violence all over North India, and on 30 March 1987 Muslims staged in New Delhi their biggest protest since Independence.

After the decision by the Faizabad judge the temple-mosque issue came to occupy an increasingly central position in the platforms of various political parties, ultimately playing an important role in the elections of 1989. Even the leader of the Congress party, the late Rajiv Gandhi, who was then leader of the opposition, insisted in a rally in Faizabad-Ayodhya that he supported the VHP case. But the issue was made absolutely central by the Bharatiya Janata party. At least from this point onward—and probably already in 1986—the political agenda of the BJP cannot be separated from that of the VHP. There is a direct coordination of rituals, agitation, and political maneuvering by the high command of the BJP, the

RSS, and the VHP—who in fact overlap to a significant degree. Vijaye Raje Scindia is a vice president of the BJP and a leader of the VHP; Lal Kishan Advani and Atal Behari Vajpayee are leaders of the BJP but have a background in the RSS; an important leader of the RSS, Manohar Pingle, has the VHP in his portfolio. Significantly, the VHP leadership also draws extensively on the experience of retired members in the higher echelons of the Indian bureaucracy, such as former director-generals of police, former chief judges, and former ministers: it is not simply an "extremist" organization, far removed from the mainstream of Indian society. Obviously, the support of persons with strong links to the bureaucracy is critical in the planning and execution of mass-scale demonstrations.

Beginning in September 1989 the VHP engaged in the worship of the "bricks of Lord Rama" (*ramshila*) in villages across North India, organizing processions to bring these sacred bricks to Ayodhya, where they would be used to build a temple on the site of Rama's birthplace, in place of the mosque of Babar. It is estimated that some three hundred lives have been lost in connection with these "building processions." The heaviest casualties occurred in Bihar, where the Muslim population of the town of Bhagalpur was almost wiped out. Ultimately, the VHP was allowed to lay its foundation stones in a pit outside the mosque on so-called undisputed lands. Remarkably, some of the stones most prominently exhibited come from the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and South Africa, as if to emphasize the transnational character of this nationalist enterprise.

In 1990 there were two major political developments that affected the course of action regarding Ayodhya. In the first place, the Kashmir issue flared up again, bringing with it such unprecedented violence against the Hindu population that large groups of people were forced to leave that part of the country. The BJP took a strong anti-Pakistan stance on the situation in Kashmir—and, in India, this is always related to an anti-Muslim stance. Second, in September, V. P. Singh's government decided to implement an earlier report of the Mandal Commission that suggested a considerable increase in the number of places reserved for the so-called backward castes in educational institutions and government service. These reservation policies are among the most important political instru-

ments in the modern Indian state. In South India these policies have led to the result that the great majority of the population is now listed as "backward." In northern and western India the policies have resulted in large-scale violence, which in a number of cases (Ahmedabad in 1985, for example) escalated into Hindu-Muslim riots.

Following the Mandal decision, widespread antireservation riots took place, during which a large number of students immolated themselves in what was for India a new form of protest. Since the agitation around the reservation issue imperiled the Hindu agenda of the VHP/BJP/RSS, Lal Kishan Advani, the leader of the BJP, decided to start a ritual procession that would pass through ten states—from Somanatha, in Gujarat, to Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh—with the goal of constructing the new temple to Rama on 30 October. Advani's posturing as Rama, with which this chapter opened, took place in the context of this campaign. His initiative met with great enthusiasm all over the country. Members of a recently established youth branch of the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, offered a cup of their blood to their leader to show their determination. All this ignited a kind of time bomb, which ticked louder with every mile taken in the direction of Ayodhya. Mulayam Singh Yadav, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, took a vow that he would not allow Advani to enter Ayodhya, and indeed, before 30 October, Advani was arrested in the neighboring state of Bihar by Chief Minister Laloo Yadav's government. This did not prevent Advani's followers from marching to the mosque, but they were stopped when the police opened fire. To appreciate the firm stance of the two chief ministers, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Yadav, who were backed by V. P. Singh's central government, one has to take into account that they are low-caste leaders of an upwardly mobile backward caste—*yadav* is a synonym of *ahir*, "shepherd"—that would benefit considerably from the implementation of the Mandal report. Moreover, V. P. Singh and his colleagues allied themselves with the prevailing tradition of institutional secularism. The government of India could not allow the radical alienation of its Muslim population by an attack on the Ayodhya mosque. Notwithstanding all the political strategy involved, then, the secularism of the state was at stake. It is highly doubtful that a Congress government would have acted in a different