

The Ayodhya Debate: Focus on the 'No Temple' Evidence

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Two sides to the story

In references to the question whether there really was a Hindu temple at the Ayodhya site later covered by the Babri Masjid, the focus is invariably on the case made by the Hindu side, viz. that there was a temple, and that different types of evidence confirm this. The standard question is: is this evidence for the temple demolition scenario valid? Have they succeeded in proving the existence of the temple? By contrast, the opponents of the temple hypothesis are but very rarely asked to put their evidence on the table.

Let us now look at the anti-temple argumentation (with due attention to the several non-archaeological types of evidence)^[1] and in particular to its offer of positive evidence that the allegedly demolished Hindu temple never existed. Of course, some might argue that it is impossible to prove the non-existence of something, and that it is therefore unreasonable to demand such proof.^[2] But this argument is not valid: if there was no temple and no temple destruction, then there must have been something else at the site, some other history preceding the building of the mosque, which is exactly as capable of leaving some written or archaeological testimony as a demolished temple would. There is no need to prove the temple's non-existence, it will do to prove the existence of something else at the site.

The disputed site is an elevated site near the centre of a city, quite well-known to a whole city population, so it is perfectly reasonable to expect the existence of testimonies of any alternative history of the site. Thus, the site may have been covered with a forest and the city records mention its felling to make way for a mosque; or the owner of some secular building standing at the site sold his real estate to the builder of the projected mosque at a fair price, vide the written sales contract. As much as the temple party is expected to provide evidence for the temple, the non-temple party must provide evidence for the alternative to the temple.

Now, a close scrutiny of the argumentation by the non-temple party, whether by the Babri Masjid Action Committee, by the scholars representing it during the government-sponsored scholars' debate of December-January 1990-91 (at least its last two meetings)^[3], or by independent scholars such as those of Jawaharlal Nehru University)^[4] shows that none of them even formulates an alternative hypothesis. Not one of the numerous scholars who took up arms against the temple party has thought it necessary to explicitate even in the vaguest terms what exactly happened before a mosque was built at the site. Much less does any of them provide any kind of evidence for such an alternative scenario, eventhough positive proof for a non-temple scenario would be the best possible refutation of the temple scenario.

Vanquishing a straw man

The non-temple argumentation is confined to two types of evidence: arguments from silence, and attempts to find fault with pieces of evidence offered by the temple party.

Criticism of the pro-temple argument is usually directed against a straw man, not against the actual argumentation as presented by pro-temple scholars. A number of much-acclaimed anti-temple publications bravely announce in the introduction or on the cover that they will demolish every argument given (or “concocted” and “maliciously propagated”) by the temple party, but then fail to address or even mention the main statements of the pro-temple party. Thus, Asghar Ali Engineer has published two anthologies of articles on this controversy^[5], but carefully leaves out the official as well as the competent non-official formulations of the pro-temple position; instead he includes only a few clumsy ones to create a semblance of even-handedness.

The most powerful non-official books by pro-temple scholars are simply never mentioned, let alone discussed.^[6] Even the official argumentation offered by the scholars mandated by the Vishva Hindu Parishad during the government-sponsored debate is generally ignored.^[7] Gyanendra Pandey manages to leave all this argumentation by professional historians totally unmentioned in three successive publications purporting to deal with the Hindu way of doing history during the Ayodhya controversy, focusing instead on some Hindi pamphlets by local religious personnel totally unacquainted with scholarly historiography.^[8]

The same ignoring of the very argumentation which is purportedly refuted is found in the successive editions of S. Gopal’s *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, for most foreign scholars the only accessible source about the Ayodhya conflict. Even the fact that a government-sponsored debate between historians mandated by both sides took place is obscured in most publications, and when it is at all mentioned, it is mostly to denounce the fact that the government had “collaborated with the communal forces” by giving them a hearing at all.

Case study of a straw man

The single most important book in the whole Ayodhya controversy is Sita Ram Goel’s two-volume book *Hindu Temples, What Happened to Them*. Its first volume contains a number of presentations of specific cases of temple demolitions, a brief presentation of the Islamic theology of iconoclasm, and most of all a list of nearly 2,000 mosques standing on sites of temples demolished by Islamic iconoclasm.^[9] Everybody whispered that within the Ayodhya movement, a list of “3,000” demolished temples was circulating. The normal thing to do for serious historians would have been, to analyze this list inside out, and to try to refute it. After all, far from basing itself on “myth”, Goel’s argument consists of two thousand precise and falsifiable claims, as a scientific theory should. It turns out that none of the anti-temple historians has taken up the challenge of refuting even one of those claims, viz. by proving objectively that one of the mosques in the list had definitely not been built in forcible replacement of a temple. The list has never been discussed and figures in practically no bibliography.^[10]

Even more important is the second volume, *The Islamic Evidence*. It is the key to the whole Ayodhya controversy, no less. Its main parts are a 174-page compilation (emphatically not claiming completeness, merely the discovery of a “tip of the iceberg”) of Muslim literary and epigraphic evidence for the demolition of Hindu temples, and a 138-page presentation of the Islamic theology of iconoclasm. Goel’s comment on the compilation open thus: “Starting with Al-Biladhuri who wrote in Arabic in the second half of the ninth century, and coming down to Bashiruddin Ahmad who wrote in Urdu in the

second decade of the twentieth, we have cited from seventy histories spanning a period of more than a thousand years. Our citations mention fifty kings, six military commanders and three sufis who destroyed Hindu temples in one hundred and seven localities..." [11]

The importance of the book is that it provides the historical and ideological context of the temple demolitions: it demonstrates that the Ayodhya dispute is not a freak case but on the contrary an entirely representative case of a widespread and centuries-long phenomenon, viz. Islamic iconoclasm. It shows that the iconoclastic demolition of Hindu temples was practised in practically all Indian regions which were under Muslim rule at one time. Historians, particularly modern historians with their emphasis on "context", ought to welcome it and study it closely. Instead, it has been completely obscured and kept out of the picture in the whole controversy.

It may have achieved mention in a footnote here or there. The longest discussion of it which I am aware of, is by political scientist Chetan Bhatt (who does not try to hide his ignorance about medieval history), who devotes fifteen lines to it: two separate lines in his text, and a 13-line footnote. He accuses Goel of "a highly selective obsession with archaeology and to some extent anthropology" [12], of marshalling "the most selective archaeological and historical facts" [13], and of this: "Goel's text uses Islamic sources to 'prove' that Mughals were only interested in religious domination of Hindus and nothing more. The historical method used is based almost entirely on highly selective non-contextual quotations from these sources." [14]

It is of course very convenient to allege that embarrassing quotations are "selective" and "pulled out of context", especially when you don't say what that context is, nor how it changes the meaning of the quotation. But here we are dealing with hundreds of quotations, requiring no less than an equal number of contexts to redeem them, to turn a testimony of fanatical vandalism into a testimony of tolerance. Moreover, it is normal for quotations to be selective (those in Bhatt's own book, culled from writings by Hindu nationalist ideologues to put them in a bad light, certainly are); at any rate, quoting from primary sources is a decent form of scholarship. Incidentally, that the "Mughals" (meaning the Islamic invaders in general) were "only" interested in religious domination is a caricature misrepresenting Mr. Goel's stated views; his point merely is that the religious motive provides an exhaustive and well-attested explanation for the observed fact of Islamic temple-demolishing campaigns.

Bhatt also claims that Goel "provides 'evidence' that the Black Stone in the Ka'ba at Mecca (the most sacred site for Muslims) was originally a shrine to the Hindu God Shiva". [15] In reality, Goel explicitly denies just that claim. He discusses a long-standing Hindu tradition to this effect, as well as testimonies of the mutual visits to each other's temples by Pagan-Arab and Hindu traders and of the (well-founded) Muslim belief in a connection between Arab and Hindu polytheism, to the extent that the first Muslim invaders took great risks to reach and demolish the Somnath temple (Gujarat), in which they believed the Arab deities had taken refuge after the islamization of Arabia. At any rate, the presiding deity of the Ka'ba, Hubal, was a male moon-god just like Shiva, and polytheists have always identified their own gods with roughly corresponding deities in other pantheons. [16] Goel explains how he always "dismissed" this belief as an invention of crank historians, until he ran into some new evidence, and even then he reserves his judgment: "But in the course of the present study this author has run into some facts

which force him to revise his judgment. He is not prepared to say that the Ka'ba was a Shiva temple. He, however, cannot resist the conclusion that it was a hallowed place of Hindu pilgrimage.”^[17]

Bhatt describes Goel's book as “a fairly typical RSS-Hindu-nationalist text”.^[18] I challenge him to produce a similar text by a declared RSS man. Anyone familiar with the Hindu nationalist movement knows that (and knows why) the RSS scrupulously avoids this type of critical study of Islam as a doctrine. Since at least the Emergency (1975-77, when RSS activists were jailed and developed friendly relations with jailed activists of the Jamaat-i-Islami), the RSS is wooing the Muslim community; its political ally, the BJP, is courting the Muslim voters and showing off its fast-increasing number of Muslim election candidates. Even when criticizing specified Muslim politicians or Islamic militants, the RSS and its allies firmly refuse to turn this into a criticism of Islam as such; rather, they will denounce their Muslim target as “straying from the true message of Islam, which is a religion of peace and tolerance”.

In the very book which Bhatt claims to be criticizing, Goel has taken the RSS-BJP leaders to task for precisely this pro-Islamic attitude: “Hindu leaders have endorsed the Muslim propagandists in proclaiming that Islam does not permit the construction of mosques at sites occupied earlier by other people's places of worship. One wonders whether this kowtowing to Islam is prompted by ignorance, or cowardice, or calculation, or a combination of them all. The Islam of which Hindu leaders are talking exists neither in the Quran nor in the Sunnah of the prophet.”^[19] On other occasions as well, Goel has sternly criticized the RSS and BJP for their policy of eschewing all serious discussion of Islamic doctrine.^[20] His book *Time for Stock-Taking* is the single most incisive critique of the RSS available; unlike the stereotyped and sloganeering tirades by Marxists like Chetan Bhatt, it is based on first-hand knowledge, including the testimonies by a number of disappointed RSS volunteers. In spite of this, political “scientists” like Bhatt can disregard all the evidence and label Goel as an RSS man.

“Disregarding the evidence” is indeed the name of the game. Critics of the Hindu historians' case on Ayodhya have so far never looked their opponents in the eye, smugly settling for a labelling number, excelling in demonizing terminology ad hominem rather than in a factual analysis ad rem. It is historiographical nonsense to discuss the phenomenon of Islamic iconoclasm, in Ayodhya or elsewhere, without addressing the question of its motivation -- always an important aspect in any history of human behaviour. Yet, that is precisely what a whole establishment of Indian historians have done in suppressing the very mention (or in the case of Bhatt, at least the true contents) of Sita Ram Goel's book.

The BMAC historians

The only (partial) exception to the solid front of scholarly disregard for the pro-temple argument is the official statement by the scholars mandated by the Babri Masjid Action Committee half-way through the government-sponsored scholars' debate.^[21] The story behind this is that the BMAC officials, no historians themselves, had shown up at the first meeting in December 1990, at which bundles of evidence would be exchanged, with nothing but a pile of photocopies of newspaper articles and book excerpts stating opinions on the Ayodhya dispute, but no historical evidence (the only solid material included pertained to the fairly uncontroversial judicial history of the site since 1857). My

reading is that they had been misled into an unwarranted self-confidence by the assurance propagated by certain media-savvy academics that the pro-temple case was completely baseless and fraudulent. To their surprise, they were confronted with a genuine presentation of evidence by the pro-temple party, represented by Prof. Harsh Narain, Prof. B.P. Sinha, Dr. S.P. Gupta, Dr. B.R. Grover, and Mr. A.K. Chatterji (none of them formally associated with the Vishva Hindu Parishad except for Gupta).

In desperation, the BMAC representatives approached Prof. Irfan Habib of the Indian Council of Historical Research asking him to save them. Habib collected a team of genuine historians for them, led by Prof. R.S. Sharma. We will refer to these employees of the BMAC as “the BMAC team”, for it is in that capacity that they have participated in the debate, notwithstanding their initial attempt to be recognized as “independent historians” (as the BMAC negotiators have continued to call their own employees). Now that, in spite of minimum coverage in the English-language Indian press, the impression was out that the VHP-mandated team of historians was winning the debate, the BMAC team had little choice but to address the pro-temple argumentation.

On 24 January 1991, when they were expected to present their case, Sharma and his team failed to show up and unilaterally broke off the talks. One could see the unilateral walk-out from the negotiations by the BMAC team as an admission of defeat. But the day before, the four BMAC historians, in their first meeting (chaired by a government representative) with the VHP team, had said that they needed six weeks to study the evidence,-- a remarkable position for people who had led 40 colleagues into signing a public statement on the absolute non-existence of any evidence, just a few days before. However, it must be admitted that they did make their homework as promised. A few months later they presented an argumentation under the title Historians' Report to the Nation, which remained their central argument when the talks briefly resumed in October 1992. Then too, they broke off the talks, viz. in (arguably justified) protest against the VHP's announcement that, disregarding the ongoing negotiations, it would stage a demonstration in Ayodhya on December 6, the occasion when the Babri Masjid was demolished.

In the BMAC team's Report, the salient point is that the BMAC scholars exclusively attempted to refute (a part of) the pro-temple argumentation but made no attempt whatsoever to present any original evidence of their own. In effect, they pretended to sit in judgment on evidence presented to them by supplicants, when in reality they themselves were one of the contending parties in the arena, expected to present their own evidence. Unfortunately, to keep both parties to the rules of a debate and to evaluate the evidence objectively, a genuinely neutral judge would have been needed, and of course, it seemed that there was no neutral judge available in India.

Arguments from silence

The central line of argument in the BMAC team's Report is that until the late 18th century, no literary source mentions a temple or a temple demolition at the site. Arguments from silence are always the weakest type of argument. The absence of testimony in a particular source may simply mean that the author was unaware of an event even though the event did take place; or it can mean that the author had no intention of providing the kind of information which we are looking for, either deliberately or simply because he had a different project in mind when writing that particular text.

Thus, poet Tulsidas, author of the main devotional work on Rama in Hindi, the Râmcharitmânas, is often cited as remaining silent regarding the alleged temple demolition. But this proves little, when you keep in mind that in his day (ca. 1600 AD) the construction of the Babri Masjid at the site (1528 AD according to the inscription on the mosque itself) was a long-accomplished fact, and that the same Tulsidas doesn't mention any of the numerous temple demolitions even in his own Varanasi. As a rewriter of ancient traditions, Tulsidas was just not a reporter on recent events at all; he does not even mention his own most famous contemporary, the enlightened Emperor Akbar.

But in this case, there is an even more decisive argument against reliance on arguments from silence: each argument from silence against the temple is equally valid as an argument from silence against every possible alternative scenario, for none of the texts cited mentions any non-temple entity at the site.

One frequently mentioned argument from silence is simply disingenuous: the absence of any reference to Ayodhya in Babar's memoirs. As Babar himself relates, the pages for the period when he may have stayed in Ayodhya were blown away during a storm. If those missing pages listed Babar's activities day by day and failed to mention his stay in Ayodhya, then that would constitute a serious argument from silence; but since those pages are missing, there is not even an argument from silence in Babar's memoirs.

A British concoction ?

But if there had never been a temple demolition, why did a tradition come into being asserting just that? Usually, this anomaly is explained by means of an ad hoc hypothesis, viz. that the temple demolition scenario was invented by the British as part of their policy of "divide and rule". Even pro-temple authors like K.R. Malkani, editor-in-chief of the party paper BJP Today, have conceded an important role to this British "divide and rule" policy, which in my view is a figment of the imagination.

Admittedly, at the institutional level the British did follow a policy of "divide and rule": communal recruitment quota and separate electorates for Muslims were obviously meant to isolate the Muslims from the national movement. In their conquest of India, the British had also used one community against another, e.g. they took help from the Sikhs, hereditary enemies of the Moghul Empire, to suppress the so-called Mutiny of 1857, which was a predominantly Muslim revolt aimed at restoring the Moghul Empire. However, in this process, they used existing antagonisms between communities and had no need of inventing new ones.

Moreover, it is simply not true at all that the British encouraged inter-religious rioting, nor that they exploited (let alone created) the kind of emotive issues (such as temple demolitions) which led to street fighting rather than to purely political disunity. Once the British-Indian Empire was securely established, the British rulers sought to establish communal peace, and did so with remarkable success. The period between 1858 and 1920, at the height of British power, saw the lowest incidence of Hindu-Muslim violence since the Ghori invasion of 1192. When Hindu-Muslim riots started on a large scale in 1922, it was due to the failure of the ill-conceived Khilafat agitation started by the (Muslim and Congress Hindu) Indians themselves.

At any rate, not one of the proponents of the British concoction scenario has discovered even the faintest evidence for it in the copious colonial records. Remark, moreover, that this scenario implies a number of highly unlikely presuppositions. Thus, it imputes a great deal of stupidity to the wily Britons: it has them concoct a temple demolition scenario when so many factual, well-attested temple demolitions had marked India's landscape, often in the form of temple remains being visibly incorporated in mosques built over them. In Ayodhya itself, several Rama temples were destroyed by Aurangzeb (Treta-ka-Thakur and Swargadwar), a fact which even the official polemicists against the Ram Janmabhoomi have not dared to deny; if the British had wanted to poke up anti-Muslim feelings among the Hindus of Ayodhya by means of temple demolition narratives, they had no need at all to go through the trouble of concocting one.

Further, this scenario credits the guardians of Hindu tradition with an uncharacteristic open-mindedness. All through the past centuries, Hindu Pandits have refused to listen to European scholars who claimed that the Sanskrit language had been brought from South Russia during the so-called Aryan Invasion, even though this Aryan Invasion Theory is taught in every schoolbook of history in India. These Pandits have consistently turned a deaf ear to European theories about Indian chronology, Sanskrit etymology or Aryan-Dravidian relations. They won't even allow non-Hindus into Hindu temples. Yet, we are asked to believe that a few British agents could infiltrate the local traditions and make these same Pandits swallow and then propagate a newly invented story about the birthplace of one of their greatest gods.

The British concoction hypothesis is conclusively refuted by several pre-British testimonies of (at least the belief in) the temple demolition scenario. The best-known and clearest testimony is certainly the one by the Austrian Jesuit Tieffenthaler, who wrote in 1768: "Emperor Aurangzebe got demolished the fortress called Ramcot, and erected on the same place a Mahometan temple with three cupolas. Other believe that it was constructed by Babor."^[22] One could speculate, along with R.S. Sharma and his BMAC team of historians, that the tradition which Tieffenthaler recorded, was a concoction from the early 18th century (still "in its initial phase of creation")^[23], but it cannot, at any rate, have been a British concoction.

To their credit, R.S. Sharma and his team are the only ones in the no-temple camp to have abandoned the British concoction hypothesis, at least implicitly. But they fail to give the elements which could lend substance to a pre-British concoction hypothesis: no who, no how, no why.

A closer look at the argument from silence

While Sharma c.s. leave undiscussed several pre-British testimonies which the VHP-mandated team had brought as evidence, they do mention a few other sources of this type nonetheless. In each case, they claim it as an argument from silence: the source fails to mention the pre-existence or the demolition of a temple at the site. But each of these Ayodhya-related passages cited is very brief and fails to mention other buildings in Ayodhya, and none of the texts cited purports to be a history of temple demolitions, so that the non-mention of a birthplace temple is quite in keeping with the project of the texts concerned, and not a telling omission.

Thus, Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, completed in AD 1598. Sharma c.s. note that it includes Ayodhya among the foremost places of pilgrimage, calling it "one of the holiest places of antiquity" and "the residence of Ramchandra", and mentioning the celebration of Ram Navami (Rama's birth festival) there. The BMAC historians comment: "Clearly, the tradition till then did not confine Rama's place of birth to the existing town of Ayodhya, let alone the site occupied by the Baburi Masjid." [24]

But this is hardly incompatible with a tradition concerning a specific birthplace. Till today, people can say: "I'm from Scotland", or: "I was born in Edinburgh", rather than to tell you in exactly which house they were born. When filling out forms, people still write the name of the town behind the entry "place of birth", and not the full address of the building; yet in doing so, they are not denying that they were born in that specific building. You really have to be a university professor to come up with the brilliant idea that when people mention a town as their place of birth, they are implying that they have no notion of having been born in one specific house.

Anyone familiar with the lore of Hindu devotional tradition would find it strange that Hindus would come on pilgrimage to Ayodhya as Rama's city and not let that Rama association come alive in an enactment of Rama's career with the designation of specific sites as the theatres of specific scenes in Rama's life. That, for example, is why another temple in Ayodhya was associated with Rama's death: the Swargadwar, "gate to heaven". Even if Rama were a purely fictional character, the religious imagination would have created that kind of landscape, and in the Bhakti period, i.e. from well before the start of the second Christian millennium, it was the done thing to adorn such religiously meaningful sites with temples.

Sharma c.s. assume that the identification of the demolished building as a "fortress" (Ramkot, "Rama's fortress") refutes the assumption that it was a temple; but Hindu "idol-worshippers" consider a temple as the house of the deity, in the case of a warrior-deity as his fortress. The whole idea of idol-worship is to make a deity come alive, realistically: the idol is washed and clothed and fed, and of course it lives in a house appropriate to its character and epic career.

On balance

So, in spite of sometimes painstaking attempts to neutralize the evidence presented by the temple party, the proponents of the non- temple hypothesis have failed to produce any positive evidence for a non-temple scenario. This observation raises a few questions. First of all: why is there an Ayodhya debate in the first place? Normally, scholars only take time from their busy schedules to reopen a settled affair when new evidence has surfaced which throws a new light on the matter. In this case, no such new evidence has ever been presented. It is most conspicuous by its absence in the opening shot of the debate, the JNU historians' pamphlet *The Political Abuse of History* (Delhi 1989). Had there not been the purely political motives which drove some to declare the Ayodhya debate opened, we would still have been with the consensus of 1989"

Secondly: what is the score if each one of the attempted refutations of the items of pro-temple evidence proves correct? In that case, the pro-temple evidence is reduced to zero, but that would still make it exactly as voluminous as the evidence for every possible non-temple scenario, which to date is non-existent. Even if all the trouble taken

by the pro-temple scholars had been in vain, their evidence would still be equal in magnitude to the evidence offered by their opponents, whose endeavour has been purely negative. Anyone weighing the actual evidence presented by both sides would have to infer that the balance of evidence, while not yet definitive, is strongly on the pro-temple side.

Tampering with the evidence

Before concluding, we want to register a remark on a minor but quite significant chapter in the exchange of evidence: the VHP- mandated scholars have, in their argumentation, pointed out no less than four attempts where scholars belonging to the anti-temple party have tried to conceal or destroy documentary evidence. Those are of course cases where the attempt failed because it was noticed in time, but the question must be asked how many similar attempts have succeeded. At any rate, there has not been any attempt from the anti-temple side to counter or even deny these four specific allegations, nor have they been able to point out any similar attempt by the pro-temple party to tamper with the record.

With one possible exception: immediately after the announcement of the discovery, in the post-demolition debris on 6-7 December 1992, of Hindu sculptures and an inscription explicitly supporting the temple thesis, seventy academics issued a statement alleging that this evidence had been stolen from museums and planted there. Well, who knows. But in the six years since then, this archaeological material has been in the custody of politicians openly hostile to the Hindu Revivalist movement (such as Human Resources Minister Arjun Singh, 1991-96), who would gladly have made the material available for inspection by scholars capable of proving the allegation. So far, however, the attack against the professional integrity of the scholars who presented these findings (grouped in the Historians' Forum chaired by Prof. K.S. Lal) remains unsubstantiated; unless proven, the allegation is a case of defamation.

The politics behind the debate

The political equation behind all this intrigue is rarely understood by non-Indians. Thus, it requires quite a historical excursus to explain why declared Marxists like Irfan Habib, R.S. Sharma and Romila Thapar are making common cause with Islamic fundamentalism in its struggle against Hindu heathenism.^[25] Leaving aside the larger framework of the alliances and power equations in India's political arena, we may for now draw attention to a significant asymmetry in the political backgrounds of the pro- and anti-temple parties.

Reducing the "belief" in the pre-existence of a Hindu temple at the site to a political agenda is, apart from being a case of the "genetic fallacy", also counterfactual. Among those who uphold the temple thesis, you find scholars who did not support the movement for replacing the mosque structure with temple architecture, and who explicitly distanced themselves from the Vishva Hindu Parishad's campaign, e.g. Prof. A.R. Khan and archaeologist Dr. Ram Nath. By contrast, I am not aware of anyone in the anti-temple party who supported the right of Hindus to build a temple at the site: every one of them explicitly subscribes to the position that Hindu attempts to reclaim this Hindu sacred site should be thwarted.

Of course, the opponents of the replacement of the Babar mosque (already back in use as a Hindu temple since 1949) with new temple architecture could have taken that political stand without dragging in the historical question, e.g.: "The fact that a Hindu temple stood at the site still does not give Hindus the right to claim it back"; and some of them have indeed fallen back on that position when they saw they were losing the debate on the historical evidence. But in 1989-91, the field seemed ripe for the more aggressive position, which was to deny the Hindu history of the site altogether; nobody had expected that the VHP would be capable (and in effect, it was not capable, but it found some independent scholars who were capable) of collecting and presenting the available as well as some newly-found evidence for the temple.

The VHP-mandated scholars, for their part, have not been aggressive enough to take the struggle into the enemy half of the field by focusing public attention on the quality of the evidence presented by the BMAC-mandated scholars and their allies in academe and the media. That is why the latter have gotten away with creating the false impression, at least among those unacquainted with the actual contents of the debate, that the pro-temple case is weak and fraudulent while, purely by implication, their own case must be unassailable.

The role of foreign scholars

It is not reassuring to watch the ease with which foreign scholars have absorbed or adopted the non-temple thesis from their Indian colleagues (whom they assume to be neutral observers) even without being shown any positive evidence. In academic circles in the West, my own restating the status quaestionis in terms of actual evidence has only earned me hateful labels and laughter, and this from big professors at big universities whose prestige is based on the widespread belief that scholarship goes by hard evidence, not politically fashionable opinions. Never has any of them offered hard evidence for the newly dominant view, or even just shown a little familiarity with the contents of the debate.

Until 1989, there was a consensus about the existence of a medieval Hindu temple and its destruction by Islamic iconoclasm, as laid down in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1989 edition, entry Ayodhya): "Rama's birthplace is marked by a mosque erected by the Moghul emperor Babur in 1528 on the site of an earlier temple." Western scholars who did primary research, notably the Dutch scholars Hans Bakker and Peter van der Veer, found nothing which gave reason to question that consensus. Had they cared to follow the debate in India, they would have looked in vain for the presentation by the no-temple party of any historical or archaeological fact which is radically incompatible with (and thereby constitutes a refutation of) that consensus view.

A painful example of a scholar intimidated into conformity by the demonization of the temple thesis can be witnessed in this climbdown by Peter van der Veer, who had at first accepted the pre-existence of the Ayodhya temple on the basis of the local tradition: "While Bakker and I could naively accept local tradition, this cannot be done any longer."^[26] In fact, the local oral history was confirmed by other types of evidence as presented by B.B. Lal, S.P. Gupta, Harsh Narain et al., but none of these are known to Van der Veer (as per his own text and bibliography) because his only source turns out to be S. Gopal's *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, which conceals the pro-temple evidence. More importantly, Van der Veer and Bakker are attacked nominatim in S. Gopal's book

[27], which falsely associates them with the Hindu fundamentalist bad guys all while diverting attention from the historical evidence, which it spurns as “pointless”.^[28] Being associated with Hindu fundamentalism is about the worst defamation one can inflict on an Indologist, and this is the sole reason for Van der Veer’s change of heart. At any rate, he offers no historical evidence at all which could justify his retreat from the well-established consensus.

Conclusion

Future historians will include the no-temple argument of the 1990s as a remarkable case study in their surveys of academic fraud and politicized scholarship. With academic, institutional and media power, a new consensus has been manufactured denying the well-established history of temple demolition by Islamic iconoclasm to the Babri Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi site; at least among people with prestige and influence but no first-hand knowledge of the issue. But the facts will remain the facts, and their ongoing suppression is bound to give way.

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References:

- [1] On the archaeological aspect, see *Ayodhya Archaeology after Demolition* by Prof. D. Mandal, Delhi 1993, and *Archaeology of Babri Masjid*, Genuine Publ., Delhi 1994, by Mrs. Surinder Kaur and Mr. Sher Singh, amateurs with whom other anti-temple authors like Sushil Srivastava have refused to be associated; and on the pro-temple side, *The Baburi Masjid of Ayodhya* by R. Nath, Jaipur 1991.
- [2] E.g. S. Guhan in Jitendra Bajaj, ed.: *Ayodhya and the Future India*, Madras 1993, p.89.
- [3] R.S. Sharma et al.: *Historians’ Report to the Nation*, People’s Publ., Delhi 1991. To my knowledge, the argumentation offered by the BMAC office-bearers themselves during the first round of the talks, in December 1990, was never published.
- [4] S. Gopal, Romila Thapar, K.N. Panikkar, Bipan Chandra et al.: , JNU 1989; and S. Gopal, ed.: *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, 2nd ed., Penguin 1992.
- [5] A.A. Engineer: *Babri Masjid Ramjanmabhoomi Controvercy*, Ajanta, Delhi 1990, and *Politics of Confrontation*, idem 1992.
- [6] E.g. Harsh Narain: *The Ayodhya Temple-Mosque Dispute*, Penman, Delhi 1993, and S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples, What Happened to Them*, vol.2, *The Islamic Evidence*, Voice of India, Delhi 1991.
- [7] Available in two editions: *The Great Ram Janmabhoomi Evidence*, VHP, Delhi 1991, and *History vs. Casuistry*, Voice of India, Delhi 1991.

[8] Gyanendra Pandey: *Hindus and Others* (Viking/Penguin 1993), p.9-10; "New Hindu History of Ayodha", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18-6-1994; "The New Hindu History", in J. McGuire, P. Reeves & H. Brasted: *Politics of Violence* (Sage Publ., Thousands Oaks, Colorado 1996), p.143-158.

[9] This first volume includes articles by Harsh Narain, Ram Swarup, Jai Dubashi and Arun Shourie, apart from the main body by Goel himself. In appendix, it also reproduces a list of Hindu temples demolished in Bangladesh in autumn 1989, prepared by the Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council of Bangladesh, as if to prove that Islamic iconoclasm is not ancient history.

[10] In a review in the *Calcutta Telegraph* (ca. 30-1-1991), Manini Chatterjee of the Communist Party (Marxist) calls *Hindu Temples*, vol.1, (along with my own book *Ram Janmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid*) a "very bad book", but fails to even attempt a refutation.

[11] S.R. Goel: , vol.2, p.266-267 of the first edition, the one which Chetan Bhatt uses; there is a much-expanded second edition (1994).

[12] C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity*, p.169.

[13] C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity*, p.175.

[14] C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity*, p.278.

[15] C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity*, p.278.

[16] E.g. in his *De Bello Gallico*, Julius Caesar identified the Celtic gods with the Roman gods familiar to his readers. Likewise, a Muslim commentator of the Quran (Md. Faruq Khan: *Qur'ân Majîd in Hindi*, Rampur 1976, p.242, quoted by Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.2, p.364) identifies the Arab goddesses Al-Lât, Al-Manât and Al-Uzza typologically with Hindu goddesses like Saraswati and Lakshmi.

[17] S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.2 (1st ed.), p.429.

[18] C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity*, p.278.

[19] S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.2 (1st ed.), p.ii.

[20] See S.R. Goel, ed.: *Time for Stocktaking: Whither Sangh Parivar?*, Voice of India, Delhi 1997.

[21] R.S. Sharma et al.: *Historians Report to the Nation*, cf. supra, largely copied in Pradeep Nayak: *The Politics of the Ayodhya Dispute*, Commonwealth, Del

[22] Quoted by R.S. Sharma et al.: *Historians' Report*, p.19, italicizing the words "the fortress".

[23] R.S. Sharma et al.: *Historians' Report*, p.20.

[24] R.S. Sharma et al.: Historians' Report, p.16.

[25] Thapar and Sharma are quoted as representatives of Indian Marxism in Tom Bottomore's History of Marxist Thought, Oxford 1988, entry "Hinduism"; Habib has subtitled his latest book Towards a Marxist Perspective.

[26] P. van der Veer: Religious Nationalism, p.161. Reference is to his book Gods on Earth, and to Hans Bakker's book Ayodhya

[27] S. Gopal: Anatomy of a Confrontation, p.30.

[28] S. Gopal, ed.: Anatomy of a Confrontation, p.20.