

## Book Review

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Jha, Krishna and Jha, Dharendra K. 2012. *Ayodhya: The Dark Night. The Secret History of Rama's Appearance in Babri Masjid*. New Delhi: Harper Collins.

The demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on December 6, 2002 by the Hindu fundamentalists is undoubtedly a soaring wound of contemporary India, a culmination of the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in 1980s, and an embodiment of destructive communalism that has been one of the foremost political problems in India since late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was (and still is) widely believed that the birthplace of Lord Rama (Ram Janmabhoomi), one of most revered deities particularly in North India, was at the exact spot where Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty built a mosque in 16<sup>th</sup> century by destroying a temple that allegedly stood there. 1980s saw the rise of the so-called communal politics focused on the tensions between Hindus and Muslims, spearheaded by Hindu right-wing organizations, most prominently Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bharatya Janata Party. A central issue was to rebuild the temple commemorating the birthplace of Rama, which simultaneously meant the destruction of the mosque.

Much has been written about the causes of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in 1980s, its rise to popularity and its mass appeal. Similarly, much has been written on the aftermath of the destruction of the mosque – on the riots that followed, on rising communal tensions, on the widening gap between the Hindus and the Muslims, slipping once again beyond proportions in 2002 in Gujarat. Problems emanating from the Babri Masjid dispute are still very much an everyday political reality in India, periodically resulting in bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims (not to mention the fact that these are always politically motivated and orchestrated for a precisely political ends).

Writings on the Babri Masjid dispute usually concentrate on a rather short period beginning in early 1980s, when the issue became rallying point of Hindu fundamentalists, and one of the most important political problems on the national level. It may seem to some, not fully aware of the depth of the problem, that everything indeed began in 1980s, as if the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute, even if it was there, was somewhat less important, or without a complex history. That is not the case. One thing is certain – the “mosque and temple” dispute is entirely a modern political phenomenon, dating back to the early days of independent India. Krishna Jha and Dharendra K. Jha’s book concentrates

precisely on the early history of the dispute – the crucial events that took place in 1949. The authors are Delhi-based journalists, and *Ayodhya: The Dark Night* does not pretend to be an academic book. However, their in-depth research on the events that took place on the night of December 22, 1949, involving interviews with surviving participants, on the complex history leading to it, and its aftermath sheds light on the intricate political climate in India at that time, and reveals the calculated, entirely politically-motivated and exploitative nature of the so-called “appearance” of Rama in Babri Masjid. “Appearance” is the right word to use, because it was claimed then, and it is believed by many to this day, that Rama himself claimed the mosque by appearing in it in a form of an idol, which indeed appeared inside the mosque on the night of December 22 in 1949. Once the idol was there, a divine manifestation, there was no way back. The idol, of course, was placed there – a fact that led to a massive political upheaval and mobilization along the communal lines. The authors reveal that the idol was placed inside the mosque by Abhiram Das, an ascetic residing in Ayodhya, and belonging to a Vaishnavi Ramanandi sect. The latter is the central character of the book. The authors trace Abhiram Das’s story from the humble beginnings, to his position as an influential vairagi in Ayodhya, one of the holiest cities in India, and home to many important temples. Abhiram Das was by no means the mastermind of the plan to place the idol of Rama in the mosque – the authors situate him as a pawn at the center of a conspiracy to challenge the fragile secular architecture of newly independent India.

India became independent in 1947 not without bloodshed – the partition of the country into India and Pakistan led to mass exodus – Muslims were fleeing into what became Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs – into a new India. Roughly about one million people lost their lives due to communal rioting and mass killings, which are very well documented in the academe. The roots to the tensions between Hindus and Muslims can be traced to colonial policies imposed by the British throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century – contrary to the Hindu fundamentalist (and also colonial) narratives of eternal and irreconcilable differences between the two religious communities. Hindu fundamentalists viewed Muslims as intruders, occupants responsible for the decline of Hindu culture and political power, a fact that simplified British colonial efforts in the subcontinent back in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the communal tensions grew and spread, and became a central problem leading to the decision to partition colonial India into two countries. Six months after the independence, in early 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by an RSS member Nathuram Godse. Less than two years later, Lord Rama “manifested” himself inside a mosque, igniting the tensions once again. The authors of the book contextualize and historicize this problem very well, making it only a part of a larger picture of communal tensions, and persistent exploitations of these tensions for political ends by Hindu fundamentalist political organizations. This was true back in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this is true today. Although Abhiram Das at the time when he planted the idol of Rama inside the mosque was cheered as a lone hero

who took initiative, he only played a part in a much larger political game between secularists and fundamentalists. A game that was to decide the architecture of a newly-independent India – whether India was to become a multicultural society for all who live in its territory, or was it to become the homeland of the Hindus. Hindu fundamentalism (or, Hindu nationalism as it is often called) is uncompromising in this regard – India was, is and will be Hindu first and foremost.

With the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by an RSS member the fundamentalists suffered a massive blow, had to stay on the political margins for several years, and to change their strategies. The Ayodhya affair became an event that could be used to mobilize the Hindus, and bring All-Hindu Mahasabha, the chief fundamentalist political party of that time, to political prominence. The authors devote a large part of the book to untangle these political complexities exposing not only a conspiracy of the fundamentalists, but also the inability of the Congress itself to make a unified stand against this. The authors claim that Gandhi's assassination was investigated, but the actual conversion of the mosque into a temple few years later was not. Fundamentalists had sympathizers in the Congress, and although Congress's leader and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was by far the most powerful political leader of the time both within the party and outside it, his secularist ideology was not unchallenged, most prominently by Vallabhbhai Patel, another Congress stalwart and formerly one of the closets people to Gandhi.

The authors trace this history, but this is not the book's prime concern. This is also part of a very well documented political history of the late colonial and early postcolonial India. The main question the authors are posing may seem a humble one – what has actually happened on the night of December 22, 1949, and why nothing was done about it afterwards. Though Hindu Mahasabha did announce that Rama himself claimed his birthplace, everyone knew that it was Abhiram Das who planted the idol. What happened afterwards was a complex bureaucratic process solidifying a status quo. United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh) was at that time the main battleground of secularists and Hindu fundamentalists, and partly due to the political configuration of India (it is a federation, where states have relative autonomy), partly due to confusion and lack of political determination of the central government in Delhi, nothing was done to solve the issue. Local politicians, both members of Hindu Mahasabha and their sympathizers made everything possible to prevent any action by the central government against the events of December 22. Soon after, in early 1950s Jawaharlal Nehru and his secularist ideology emerged as a dominant political force in India. Hindu Mahasabha did not manage to utilize Ram Janmabhoomi as an important political factor, and whatever happened in Ayodhya on that night slowly sank into a relative obscurity as an unsolved matter. Naively it was thought that communalism was breathing its last with the rise of Nehruvian secularist and developmentalist ideologies. This was all to change three decades later, and for the worse. The idol of Rama stood inside the mosque for over four decades: the problem and the potential source for communal strife was simply lying dormant. In 1980s Hindu fundamentalists

managed to achieve what they failed to do in late 1940s. And the mosque was demolished in 1992 with an intension to build a temple. The latter was never constructed, and now only a small makeshift tent housing Rama's idol exists in the middle of a cordoned area patrolled by the army, and Ayodhya to a large extent resembles a claustrophobic place suspended in history.

Krishna Jha and Dharendra K. Jha's book is beautifully written; it is timely and uncovers the crucial events of 1949 to greatest details. It uncovers the conspiracy, discloses the incapacitated Congress, and shows a handful of people who stood firmly against communalism, but sadly, with little effect. This important book may be one of many written on Ayodhya's significance in contemporary India's politics, but its focus is not so much on grand political narratives, but on one night when all has changed. Their book may be on the past, but the past the authors are writing of is not gone – it is very much an Indian present.

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