

THE ROLE OF BENARES IN CONSTRUCTING POLITICAL HINDU IDENTITY

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1. *From Present to Past: an Episode to start with*

Until recently, observers and public opinion had practically abandoned all thought of Varanasi as a place of potential social unrest, and had come to consider it a peaceful community. In February 2000 this impression let down abruptly, when the city came again into the limelight with new uproars. The Mehta affair, its developments and the subsequent polemics occupied the media for the entire month.

On January 29, Deepa Mehta, the world famous Indian film-maker based in Canada, started shooting her new movie, *Water*, on the banks of the Ganga. This is supposed to be the last film of Mehta's trilogy named after the three elements, *Fire* and *Earth* being the other two. *Water* portrays the pitiful conditions of Indian widows in the 1930s, with one of the heroines forced into prostitution by the necessity to survive. The reference to the present is clear. Moreover, title and setting seem to allude to Ganga's sacred waters as a symbol of the Hindu conservatism behind the extremely low social status of widows. The movie provoked violent reactions right from the start, when Deepa Mehta received obscene, threatening phone calls, including death threats. The movie had obtained the Centre's clearance, with the Minister of Information and Broadcasting (I&B), Arun Jaitley, asking for just a few minor changes. He and, it seems, the Prime Minister, decided to ignore the overwhelming protests against the movie coming

(*) The reader may wonder why in this paper Benares is called with so many different names. The reason is because Benares has several names. The city has been and is now called with different names, according to different historical, cultural or political frames. So, if we refer to colonial Benares and the historical facts connected to the British, it is spontaneous to speak about Benares. If we refer to the classical city, to its historical and cultural background, in the broader sense, not excluding all possible contributions, from Buddhism to Islam, we may prefer to use the name Varanasi. If we talk about the vision of the brahmanical orthodoxy or the political use of Benares as a symbol, we should not forget that both orthodox brahmins and Hindutva militants prefer to call the sacred city with its Sanskrit name: Kashi.

from Sangh Parivar and BJP supporters. In spite of this, as soon as Deepa Mehta began shooting, the Uttar Pradesh government denied her permission to film in Varanasi. The day after, a mob of five hundred people tore down and burnt parts of the sets at Tulsī Ghat. The *Kashi Sanskriti Raksha Sangharsh Samiti* (KSRSS), an organisation that includes members of the Sangh Parivar, led the attack. Hooligans chanted slogans like *Tirth shan ka aapman nahi sahaga Hindustan* "India will not tolerate the insult of its holy places" (1). The other point raised by protestors is that *Water* is "a 100 per cent blue film about our widow sisters" and an "onslaught on Indian culture". According to the views of its opponents, Mehta's film is doubly blasphemous: showing the crude reality of their conditions, it offends not only Indian widows, but does so in one of the most sacred places in India. This is seen as a 'contamination' of the holy city.

As far as the political identity of the agitators is concerned, the Sangh Parivar has denied any involvement in the protest: both RSS(Rashtra Swayamsevak Sangh) and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) disassociated from the agitation. This does not mean that they had an unambiguous position. The editor of "Organiser", Seshadri Chari, declared at the same time that "film-makers, writers and other artists should not transgress the limits of what the society they are working within considers permissible", that "RSS does not believe in laying down any cultural policy" and "creativity arises out of inner convictions, which cannot be dictated by policy". These declarations contrast sharply with the admission of a senior RSS officer, according to whom "the agitation was planned by the Sangh right down of the last detail. In December, we received word from Delhi that this could be an issue which we could use" (2).

Alongside this double faced attitude of the Sangh Parivar, there were conflicting positions between Centre and State and between the BJP and other Sangh Parivar organisations. Mr Vaipayee and the I&B minister showed a permissive attitude towards the movie, and also went further. Before the incidents, Arun Jaitley met the representatives of protesting organisations and tried to mediate between the parts. After the attacks on Mehta's set, Mr Vaipayee declared that "he will not tolerate a repeat of the Varanasi-type vandalism". Later on he "had informally" conveyed to the Chief Ministers of Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal — the two states which have invited Mehta to shoot — to crack down on anyone, including Sangh bodies who overstepped the

(1) A detailed account of the Mehta affair is to be found in D. Mukerji, A. Upreti, *Water generates fire*, "The Week", February 13, 2000.

(2) S. VARADARAJAN, *Voices from Varanasi: From Water to Mandir Flows the Protest*, "The Times of India", February 13, 2000. The quotation is from the original.

norms of 'civilised conduct'" (3). On the other hand, Chief Minister Giriraj Kishore asserted that "There are many things which, even if true, should not be talked about. The film is a deliberate attempt to defame Hindu institutions. In the name of communal harmony, such films should neither be made, nor be screened" (4). Finally, the reason for denying permission to shoot is that the State government was, by its own admission, incapable of maintaining public order. The opposition was therefore between the Centre and the UP Government, between Vaipayee's and Jaitley's moderate stance and the "hawks" recommendations. An instructive example of lack of unity.

One can object that these facts have little to do with the topic of this paper, but we must also remember that the unrest provoked by Mehta's movie represents the most serious outbreak of violence in Varanasi in the last decade. All the more so those who violently opposed the shooting of the movie have openly connected the Mehta issue with another sensitive matter in their agrarian agenda, the Vishvanath Temple question. These two elements make the entire affair much more significant.

In fact, while the Mehta issue ended with the director's decision to postpone shooting, the Sangh Parivar's attitude is reflected in the intention to carry on with its policy of strengthening Hindu identity by creating and manipulating potentially conflict-raising issues.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss and test the validity of the versions of events described above. The difficult task of forecasting whether the Sangh Parivar will choose the most extreme policy is also beyond the scope of this paper. At present it is not clear whether they are just waiting for the right moment to adopt a more intolerant policy and, in that case, go so far as to repeat what was done in Ayodhya. Another possibility is that the Sangh Parivar is quite simply engaging its adversaries in a war of nerves, keeping the tension high regarding the issue of holy places. This strategy has the double purpose of intimidating the Muslim population and aggregating the Hindus. These questions are bound to remain unanswered at this stage.

Since, on the whole, attention has been concentrated on the Ayodhya issue — as the most disruptive — the role of Benares in the construction of political Hindu identity and syncretism has been underestimated. A historical overview of the evolution of this role can shed light on contemporary events.

(3) R. RAMASSEKARAN, *Water Ban Brigade at Ayodhya*, *Door*, from the Indolink Forum website, women messages, www.indolink.com, February 23, 2000, posted on February 22, 14, S. VARADARAJAN, *Voices from Varanasi...*

2. *Benares, the Sacred City of the Hindus*

There is no doubt that Varanasi's history is marked by an uninterrupted line of sacredness. An urban settlement has existed here since the 9th century BC. One of the sacred Hindu cities, Varanasi has been associated with Shaiva cults since the 6th-5th century BC. The importance of Varanasi as a place of pilgrimage is confirmed by the association with Samah, the Buddhist site less than 10 km away. Here, Buddha pronounced his first sermon. Between the last centuries BC and the first centuries AD, Varanasi was already an important centre of religious and Vedic studies. The religious and cultural importance of Kashi, or Varanasi, was not cancelled by the Muslim invasions and the subsequent destruction of Hindu monuments and temples, which were systematically reconstructed by the local Rajputs and powerful merchants. The process of demolition and construction lasted for a few centuries, strengthening, rather than weakening, the image of the sacred city. The Mughals' attempt to transform Varanasi into a Muslim city with the name of Muhammadabad did not succeed (5). With the decline of the Mughal Empire, three power groups emerged. They were represented by the local Rajput dynasty, the merchant-bankers and "mendicant traders-soldiers" usually defined as gosains (6). These groups interacted significantly. The gosains represented "a body of brokers between different social groups. They attracted veneration from the mass of the people and also had a close hand in the running of the merchant communities" (7). On the other side, the merchant-bankers were able to attract and control huge amounts of capitals, part of which could flow in the form of loans to the Raja, when he had to pay his tribute to the Nawab of Awadh. The political and economic power of these groups was deeply interrelated with "cultural patronage" (8). While in the early 18th century Benares was a "mughalizing city", in the early 19th century the three power-holding groups played a crucial role in "reinventing" a Hindu tradition which could cope with their own interests.

Since 1775, when the British took Benares over from the Nawab's control, their relationship with the Bhumiari dynasty of Be-

(5) These historical notes on Varanasi are from A. CONSOGLARO, *Madre India e la Panchajanya: in definitiva della hindu come lingua e letteratura nazionale e le università "nazionali" di Benares*. Ph.D. thesis, Pisa, May 1999, pp. 26-28.

(6) For reasons of space, we can only give a brief account of Benares' social and economic context at the end of the eighteenth century. For a much more detailed description see S. FREITAG (ed.), *Culture and Power in Benares*. Berkeley, 1992.

(7) C.A. BARRY, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1880*. Cambridge, 1983, pp. 181-184, quoted by S. FREITAG, (ed.), *Culture...* op. cit., p. 6.

(8) S. Freitag's definition, pp. 8-9.

naras Raja was characterised by several ups and downs (9). In 1910-11, the final decision to reinvest the Raja with the powers which previously had been partially withdrawn, was motivated by the Raja's capacity to keep "conservative Hinduism at Benares" on the British side (10). Already from this early stage, there was a substantial alliance between the British raj and conservative Hinduism. Maharaja Prabhu Narain Singh, who ruled from 1889 and 1931, has always been considered a precious ally of the British, because of his anti-Congress attitude (11). This situation seems to be similar to that generated at the nation-wide level in the late 1930s, when Hindu nationalism diverted its target from the British to the Muslims and the Congress (12). Going back to Benares, we have to notice that the aggregation strategy adopted by the Raja was based on the reinforcement of the Ramilla celebration, from the early 19th century. Sponsored by the Maharaja and the Hindu merchants, the festival was a symbolic representation of the Maharaja's mythical role and his identification with Shiva as "the lord of ancient holy Kashi" (13). It is difficult to agree with the interpretation according to which the festival had the main function of appealing to a wider audience, including Muslims (14). The fact that up to the late 19th century the Hindu population used to participate in Muharram (15) celebrations does not suffice to prove this interpretation. There is no doubt that the economic interest of the Muslim weavers and the Hindu merchants were deeply interconnected. There is also little doubt that the Muslim weavers represented pressure groups with a certain range of power. This does not mean that "their civic integration" (16) was balanced and fair. It is indeed a matter of fact that the Muslim population, a quarter of the total, was represented by a majority of lower class

(9) *Ibidem*, pp. 10-11.

(10) *Ibidem*, p. 11. Freitag's quotation is from India Office Library (IOL), L/PS/10/173, file 876, p. 2.

(11) A. CONSOGLARO, *Madre India...* op. cit., p. 52.

(12) Regarding this issue, see M. CASOLARI, *Hinduism's foreign tie-up in the 1930s: Archival evidence*, "Economic and Political Weekly", January 22-28, 2000, pp. 225-226.

(13) S. FREITAG, (ed.), *Culture...* op. cit., p. 12.

(14) *Ibidem*, pp. 12-14. Contrarily to what S. Freitag asserts, this was not a peculiarity of Benares. At the end of the 19th century also in Poona, Hindus used to celebrate Muharram in a climate of harmony with the Muslims. According to Stanley Wolpert's interpretation, the Ganapati festival was introduced in Poona precisely to counter Muharram. It is noteworthy that after the introduction of the Ganapati festival, the climate of peaceful participation was cancelled. For more details, see S.A. Wolpert *Tilak and Cokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India*. Berkeley, 1992, p. 69.

(15) Muharram is a ten day period of mourning in the first, homonymous month of the Muslim calendar. The festival of Muharram celebrates the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Husain who died in the battle of Karbala, which closed a quarrel concerning the correct succession to the Prophet.

(16) S. FREITAG, (ed.), *Culture...* op. cit., p. 15.

groups, among which the weavers were prominent, and a small minority of members of the old Muslim aristocracy. It is also a matter of fact, implicitly and explicitly proved by studies on the topic, that after the decadence of the Mughal Empire, the Muslim population was permanently confined to a subaltern role — a situation lasting up to the present day. It has been shown how in the pre-colonial and the early colonial period the conditions of the *julahas*, or Muslim weavers, were fluctuating. They depended on market variations and changes introduced into the economic system (17). The precarious economic conditions of the *julahas* lay behind many occasions of strife between Muslim weavers and the mercantile classes, predominantly Hindu.

In more recent times, the serious riots of October 1977 (18) demonstrate that a supposed idyllic integration between Muslim weavers and the Hindu population in Varanasi has not been realised. As normally happens on these occasions, the tensions immediately took a communal form, but from a careful analysis of the facts other elements emerged. It seems that behind the supposedly religious reasons for the riots there were economic motivations, connected precisely with the producer/dealer relationship in the silk industry. Some prominent Hindu sari dealers, who traditionally control the market, feared the rising competition of a number of Muslims who traditionally occupied the position of subaltern producers but who had become

(17) G. Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 66-108.

(18) Behind the first clash was a territorial quarrel aiming at denying the right of the Muslim weavers living in the area adjoining the Anglo-Bengali college to occupy a space in which they had lived for a long time. The wall of the college playground was broken on the side of the Muslim residential area. In this way the students had a shortcut to the school, while the weavers had extra space to spread the yarn, when the ground was free of playing children. According to a reconstruction of the facts "this situation has existed for many years. Neither the college authorities nor the students had ever objected to this informal use of the part of the field by the weavers. On 1 October 1977 a group of students from the college asserted that the weavers' yarns were taking up space for playing. The quarrel degenerated into a clash between a number of students and Muslim men. The quarrel degenerated nearby station intervened, the people from both communities had already formed mobs. The police were repulsed. The sub-inspector was beaten up and his revolver was reportedly stolen. Later in the afternoon the police came back in greater force, looted and burned various houses and beat a number of people, including women and old men. The area where the citation of Varanasi is to be found, just behind Mandanpura is an area densely populated by low class Hindus, mostly Bengalis and Ahirs. Some people from this area, probably not satisfied with what the police had done to the Muslims, mobilised again at the end of the same month, colouring violence with a religious shade. This took place on the occasion of Durga Puja, 22 October 1977. The people who wanted to build up tensions with the Muslims demanded that one of the several processions should take a new itinerary which passed through the Muslim area. The tension increased and finally the Muslims were accused of having broken one of the idols taken to the procession that normally takes place before the ceremony of immersion. For details see A. Ali ENGINEER (ed.), *Communal Riots in Post-Independence India*, Hyderabad, 1997, pp. 505-512.

dealers. The Hindu dealers wanted to "break the backbone of the rising Muslim businessmen who are mainly concentrated in the Madanpura area" (19). Hindu dealers provided some funds to organise the riots and to support the men who had to create the violence against the Muslims. Evidence that economic competition was the real reason for the riots is provided by the fact that a large number of shops, factories and properties belonging to the Muslims were looted and destroyed. It is clear that Hindu dealers aimed at confining their Muslim rivals to a subaltern role. Even today, be in most cases, the conditions of the Muslim weavers continue to be characterised by poverty, while their identity is almost invisible to an externally uninformed eye. When tourists are taken around the silk factories, nobody provides any information as to the identity of Varanasi silk weavers, who have, nevertheless, made a fundamental contribution to the economic prosperity and the cultural heritage of the town.

Certainly, compared with other Indian cities and areas, over the last ten years, Benares has been a relatively peaceful place. Excluding post-Ayodhya tensions, the last dramatic episodes of violence date back to Summer 1990, a consequence of the Jharkhand Dal government's decision to put in practice the recommendations of the Mandal Commission. In Summer 1990 the violence took a communal form and the Benares Hindu University (BHU) became the main focus in town, with bitter clashes between Hindu and Muslim students.

In the last few years the target of communal violence shifted from Muslims to Christians, in UP as well as in other parts of India. Nevertheless, if we look at the following table showing the occurrence of communalist violence towards Christians in the first semester 2000, we notice that Benares is not mentioned at all. The attacks occurred in many other centres in UP, including Agra and Mathura, but not in Benares, in spite of the presence of an important urban Christian community.

Attacks on Christians (January - May 2000)

Date	Place/State Description
1. January	Phillaur, Punjab St. Peter and Paul Church robbed
2. January	Phillaur, Punjab St. Joseph's Convent robbed
3. Jan. 3	Gajapati, Orissa 17, Dalit Christian house looted 12 killed
4. Jan. 9	Panipat, Haryana Fr. Vikas of St. Mary's Church attacked
5. Feb. 4	Raigarh, MP Hostel forced to closed down
6. Feb 20	Pudiyattuvil, Kerala Statues of Mary destroyed
7. Feb. 20	Sevil, Gujarat Protestant Church damaged

(19) *Ibidem*, p. 510.

8. March 6 Mysore, Karnataka BD threatens Bishop Roy to install Hindu statue in Churches
9. March 8 Basara, Panipat, Haryana Isa Mata Church attacked
10. March 12 Panipat, Haryana St. Mary's church attacked
11. March 12 Suryanagar, UP Media Computer Centre robbed
12. March 17 Changanacherry, Kerala St. Berchman's College Chapel desecrated, burgled
13. March 31 Agra UP, Police lock up two priests without charge
14. March 31 Bulandshahr, UP Nirmla School attacked, nun manhandled
15. March 31 Darna, Masuri, UP Fr. S. George, Christ Vihar School attacked, robbed
16. April 3 Parnaji, Goa Priest and 21 Catholics wounded by police
17. April 5 Baranoli, Bihar 5 Orson Catholics ritually kidnapped, 2 killed
18. April 6 Mathura, UP Sacred Heart School Principal Sr. Maria Pereira attacked
19. April 7 Belatam, Giridih Bihar Holy cross convent watchman shot dead
20. April 9 Benihal, Bihar Jesuit Social Centre (READ) stoned
21. April 10 Mathura Cantt. UP Fr. Joseph Dabre, St. Dominic School attacked
22. April 11 Kosikalan, Haryana
23. Fr. K.K. Thomas & maid beaten up, house looted
24. April 11 Kosikalan Haryana St. Teresa's School looted, Srs. Mary and Gloria beaten
25. April 14 Khagaria Bihar 50, Christians in Christmas prayer attacked
26. April 15 Timertpur, Bijnor UP Convent, three Catholic nuns attacked
27. April 16 Babupet, Chanda Maharashtra Convent tabernacle robbed
28. April 21 Agra, UP Bajrang Dal Attack 14 neo Christians
29. April 22 Rajabari, Assam Priest and 2 brothers seriously beaten in Church robbery
30. April 22 Rewari, Haryana Two nuns attacked but by scooter
31. May 3 Paricha Jhansi UP Chapel desecrated, nuns attacked, robbed
32. May 3 Dangs, Gujarat 13 Evangelists arrested for holding prayer
33. May 4 Panna, Bihar St. Xavier's School principal Fr. A.B. Peter SJ accused of sodomy
34. May 5 Kanaha, Gujarat 8 Protestant missionaries attacked with swords, Bibles burnt
35. May 5 Bhojpur, Bihar Mary's Statue smashed
36. May Uchhal Taluka, Gujarat Rev. Jhalam Singh attacked Church damaged
37. May Nashik, Maharashtra Protestant Shelter School for Tribal girls attacked
38. May 9 Indore, MP Fire bomb thrown at Dialogue Centre, 3 Church attacked
39. May 11 Anekal, Karnataka Anthony Selva, Jesuit student, stabbed

(Source: "The Indian Currents", 21 May, 2000)

Even though, over the last decade, Benares has not been the theatre of macroscopic communal tensions and disorders, the imposition of curfew is the normal procedure in occasion of Hindu or Muslims festivals. This detail proves that the city still suffers from a condition of latent conflict.

Another factor contributing to reducing the possibility of conflict may be the peculiar character of the Muslim tradition in Varanasi, where the mystic side of Islam, close to Hindu mysticism, has been prominent. Moreover, as we shall see in the following pages, the process of reshaping the Hindu tradition has been particularly successful in Varanasi. These elements, considered together, do not lead to the conclusion that in Benares the process of integration between Hindus

and Muslims (or other communities) has been particularly successful. On the contrary, the impression is that the hegemony of the Hindu community has been overwhelming. The overall impression is that, in Varanasi, what Savarkar wished at the end of 1930s has come about: the Muslims were reduced to a silent minority.

5. *Against the Theory of the Idyllic Coexistence*

In the 19th century, riots were a common event in Benares. A particularly violent one is recorded in October 1809. There are several accounts of the riots, which contradict each other regarding the causes, areas where the riots took place, and the numbers of casualties (20). According to the *Gazetteer* of 1929, the site of the riots was the area of the Aurangzeb mosque (known also as Ganvapi mosque). Regarding the number of casualties, the *Gazetteer* reports that several hundred people lost their lives. The other five published sources reporting on the riots (Heber, Prinsep, Miller, Mill, Byers), locate the first outbreak at the *Lat Bhairava*, but they do not agree as to the causes. Only one of these refers to the casualties: twenty Muslims killed, seventy people wounded. As far as the causes of the riots are concerned, the *Gazetteer* points to the construction of the Aurangzeb mosque; different versions: destruction of the Lat (Heber), Hindu reaction to Maharram lamentations (Prinsep) (21), an altercation between Hindus and Muslims, leading to damage to the *imambara* shrine in the same compound (Mill), and a clash between Holy and Maharram processions (Byers). Of the various contradicting accounts, the most reliable reconstruction seems to be provided by a letter sent from the local Magistrate to the government a few days after the end of the disorders (22). According to this document, on the site of the Lat Bhairava there were also a mosque and an *imambara* erected at the time of Aurangzeb. In the same compound there was also a mud structure housing a Hanuman shrine. A Brahmin wanted to convert it into a stone

(20) The contradicting versions quoted by Pandey are respectively H.R. Nevill, *Benares: A Gazetteer*, vol. XXVI, *District Gazetteers of United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, Lucknow, 1929 (compiled in 1907), pp. 207-209; R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India, from Calcutta to Bombay*, 1824-25, vol. I, London, 1828, p. 323; J. Prinsep, *Benares Illustrated*, London, 1931, 1932, 1934; J. Mill, H.H. Wilson, *The History of British India*, vol. VII, London, 1858, p. 535; W. Byers, *Recollections of North India*, London, 1848, p. 273.

(21) Maharram was in early February 1810.
 (22) IOL, Board's Collection, vol. 565 (F/4/565), no. 9093, from W.W. Bhd. Acting Magistrate, Benares, to Dowdeswell, Secretary to the Government, Judicial Department, 30 October, 1809, quoted by G. Pandey, *The Construction of the City of Benares*, op. cit., pp. 53-54.

temple in fulfilment of a vow. The Muslim weavers opposed the construction of the temple, which was, according to their perception, a violation of their holy site. Hindus and Muslims involved in the litigation agreed to wait until the end of Dasehra, on 19 October 1809, and then to submit the case to the court. On the evening of 20 October, a group of *julahas* (Muslim weavers), instead of referring to the court, gathered at the site and contaminated the Lat Bhairava. The riots started the next day. A mob of Hindus of all castes, in particular Nagais, Gosains, and Rajputs damaged the *imambara*. The tension flared up very rapidly, with more destruction, people taking up arms, and wounded and dead.

The reasons for these contradicting versions in British accounts have been clearly explained. In brief, the British sources focused on supposed Hindu/Muslim fanaticism to which they opposed the 'civilising' role of the colonial domination. They did not look into the more relevant details, which had the only fault that they were useless from the point of view of political manipulation. The versions propagated by the published sources served the purpose of British rule. What is represented as a "'tradition' of strife" between Hindus and Muslims "becomes, indeed, the justification for colonial rule" (25). In a way, one might say that the colonial discourse on communalism was part of the 'divide and rule' strategy. By describing Hindus and Muslims as naturally inclined to reciprocal intolerance, the British found justification for superimposing their own order, necessary to avoid a possible final disaster. In doing so, they contributed to foster, rather than placate, communal hatred. It can be said that they ultimately sanctioned communalism.

Coming to the point of this paper, apart from the interpretation of causes and diverging estimates of casualties and contradictions on places, what emerges unambiguously from the published and unpublished literature is that serious disturbances took place in Benares in October 1809. This contradicts the vision of Benares as a place in which the integration between Muslims and Hindus has been successful. I agree with the interpretation according to which behind the religious explanation for the 1809 riots there were economic and social reasons and that the clashes between Muslims and Hindus should rather be considered as class struggle, determined mainly by loss of power on the part of the local Bhumihar dynasty (24). Hindu hegemony was then established in Varanasi under the banner of religion.

(23) *Ibidem*, p. 45.

(24) S. PERRINS, (ed.), *Culture...* op. cit., pp. 210 and figs.

4. *University and Town across the Independence and after*

One can say that the British in one way or another helped the Hindus to strengthen their identity in opposition to the Muslim identity. They sanctioned the difference quite simply by underlining it, at the political as well as symbolic level. The first partition of Bengal in 1905 and the introduction of the separate electorate in 1909 are the most dramatic evidence of this policy at the beginning of the 20th century. When, in the 20th century, Indians began to politically organise themselves, this difference was already the ground for politically reshaping the society. Benares became one of the centres, if not the main centre, for the construction of a politicised Hindu identity. The life of the town was involved at several levels.

One of the key figures of this process was certainly Madan Mohan Malaviya (25). He was associated to the *Bhara Dharma Mahamandal* right from its foundation at Haridwar in 1881 (26). While the Maharaja of Darbhanga was the main patron of the organisation, Malaviya, at the time director of the newspaper "Hindustan" was elected *mahopadeshak*, or chief preceptor. In 1902 the association was officially registered according to the Society Registration Act, and was given a more solid structure and a Board of Directors. In 1903 the association opened a branch in Benares. The *Mahamandal* was founded in opposition to the Arya Samaj. Its goals were the promotion of religious education according to the principles of *sanatan dharm*, knowledge of the sacred texts, Sanskrit and Hindu literature, the reform of religious institutions and holy places, according to the principles of the shastras, the foundation and management of "Hindu Colleges, Schools, Libraries and publishing establishments in consonance with the objects of the Association" (27). When, in 1910, the British authorities began to consider the association as a dangerous body, one which might promote potentially seditious activities, Malaviya dissociated from the *Mahamandal* but continued to take part in its annual meetings. From 1915 the main leaders of the Mandal were Swami Gyananad (already organising secretary) and Swami Dayanand. Under their leadership the association became a very important segment of the Hindu Mahasabha, and very active in the *shuddhi* and *harijan* movement.

Madan Mohan Malaviya had been much more involved in the ac-

(25) S. CHATTERJEE, *Mahaman Parait Madan Mohan Malaviya*, Varanasi, 1936.

(26) A. CONSOLARO, *Madre India...*, in *Historical Biography*, Varanasi, 1985.

(27) A. CONSOLARO, "Short Note on the Shri Bharat Dharma Mahamandal, Benares" and Home Poll. confil. B February 1910.

(27) A. CONSOLARO, *Madre India...* op. cit., p. 71.

tivities of the *Prayag Hindu Samaj*, right from its foundation in Allahabad in 1880. This association had a more militant outlook than the Mahamandal. It promoted the improvement of Hindu society and religion and the training of Hindus to oppose and resist their enemies. As an eminent member of the movement for the promotion of Hindi as national language and the creation of Hindu educational institutions, at the end of the 19th century, Malaviya began to consider the foundation of a Hindu University (28). In 1904-05 he began to work concretely on this project. The University had to be founded in Benares, centre of Hindu culture from time immemorial. The concept of traditional Hindu culture was revised and somehow officialized. From the most important centre of traditional Hindu culture in India, Benares became the seat of the most important Hindu cultural institution at the highest level. With the foundation of the universities, the places where culture was preserved, developed and transmitted shifted from royal courts and pandits' houses to official educational institutions.

Between the second half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, almost every section of the Indian society was organising itself along political lines. Education was one of the primary aspects involved in this process. Education had to be reorganised in such a manner as to facilitate the process of identification and aggregation of the different spheres of Indian society. It was no longer sufficient to cultivate Sanskrit, Vedic and traditional Hindu studies in private circles, under the pandits' skilful supervision. The times required organised structures, that should counteract British (mainly Christian) and Muslim institutions. In Benares this transformation could carry on in uninterrupted continuity with the past. The political function of such an institution was clear. According to the initial scheme for a Hindu University (1905), the causes of the decline of the Hindu population, the majority of Indians, was the physical and moral decadence of Hindus. The main reason for this decadence was the Hindu population's abandonment of its religious principles. These principles and values had therefore to be revived. Technical subjects had to be taught, but religious subjects and indigenous languages, Sanskrit in particular, should have a prominent role in the syllabus. The theme of the decadence of the Hindus and the need to revive traditional values and reorganise Hindu society accordingly was common to the entire Hindu milieu at that time. A similar course was expounded and propagated by Tilak and from similar premises the RSS was founded in 1925.

According to the university scheme, the patrons of the Hindu University of Benares were to be recruited among Hindu aristocrats

(28) *Ibidem*, chapter 9.

and other eminent members of the Hindu society. When Malaviya began the fund raising campaign for the University, among the donors were not only rajas and maharajas (with whom Malaviya's family had some connection) and *zamindars*; the common people also provided financial support for the University. This proves that the Hindu University had already become an element of identification. The Benares Hindu University received the Government's sanction at the end of 1915, was inaugurated in February 1916, and started to function officially on the 1st April of the same year. Malaviya was Vice-Chancellor from 1919 to 1959. According to the initial scheme, the official language of the University was to be Hindi and traditional subjects were to be given prominence over Western studies. In the end, after a controversy with the British authorities, a Western curriculum was adopted with English as the official language, although Sanskrit, Hindi, philosophical, religious and traditional studies had a prominent place. Apart from syllabus, curricula, and official language, it is important to notice here that under Malaviya's direction the BHU became a workshop in the construction of political Hinduism, not only at a local level. This was due mainly to Malaviya's personal charisma and his appeal to orthodox Hindus of northern India. Regarding his views on the Hindu/Muslim relations, on one side he used to make assertions such as the following: "It is not the Hindus alone who now live in Hindustan. Hindustan is no longer exclusively their country. Just as Hindustan is the beloved birthplace of the Hindus, so it is of the Muslims too. Both these communities now live here and will always live here ... To establish real affection and brotherly love among these two communities and all the communities of India — Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi — is the greatest duty before us all" (29). Referring to the BHU, Malaviya asserted that it "would be a denominational but not a sectarian institution" (30). On the other hand, he also made continuous reference to the realisation of Hinduism, and, in his view, the Muslim problem occupied a totally subordinate position. This attitude could only lead to alienating Muslims and members of other communities. Almost all other "denominational" institutions of India had been virtually opened up to all castes and communities, but the BHU's policy of 'encouraging the uplift' (31) of the members of the community they represented had the effect of discouraging all others. This is the case.

(29) P. MALAVIYA, *Malaviyaji ke Lekh*, Delhi, 1962, quoted by G. PANDEY, *The Construction...*, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

(30) Speech in the Imperial Legislative Council on the introduction of the BHU Bill in March 1915, quoted by PANDEY, *The Construction...*, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

(31) The expression is used by Pandey, with reference to Hindus. I keep it vague, because it can refer to Muslims as well. I agree with Pandey's interpretation, according to which "The underlying logic of the different political positions adopted by Hindu and Muslim

for instance, of Moonje's Bhoonsla Military School, which formally was open to all Indians, irrespective of caste and creed. However, the educational policy of the School, with its strong sense of Hindu militancy, did not attract Muslims at all.

The foundation of the BHU was the accomplishment of Malaviya's efforts to strengthen the Hindu sense of identity and cohesiveness. The BHU thus became the public platform from which Malaviya propagated his political ideas. His was a two-pronged approach. As a prominent member of the Hindu Mahasabha, of which he was president in 1923, he could finally extend his programme of re-organising Hindu identity and society to the national level. Founding Hindu primary schools with Hindi as official language, and grass-root level Hindu organisations, as well as participation in the *shuddhi* movement, were the main lines of Malaviya's political involvement. I do not agree with the interpretation according to which "the Hindu Mahasabha was the daughter of the movement for the creation of the BHU" (32). I think it was just the opposite: the BHU was the result of the increasing sense of militancy in the Hindu segment of Indian society. Ultimately, Malaviya's project of founding a Hindu University was part of a wider project for the promotion of Hindu education, and it also attracted many other organisations and supporters in other parts of northern India. He was part of a political milieu that considered Gandhian non-violence a form of cowardice and harmful to Hindu society, because it would stigmatise the Hindus as 'weak and emasculated', according to the terminology used at that time. Like other members of Hindu organisations, including Hedgewar and Moonje, Malaviya was convinced that Hindu militancy might serve as a valid deterrent should Muslim demands become detrimental to Hindu interests. According to this view of Hindu-Muslim relations, peace between the two communities could be maintained only by showing to each other the possible destructiveness of a reciprocal attack. It was therefore necessary to delete any impression of weakness of the Hindu community (33). Certainly, Malaviya's project had a great deal in common with the RSS programme of building up the Hindu national character. Physical education and military training of BHU students took place under Malaviya's exhortations. Indeed, the BHU had a most vigorous University Training Corps (UTC) (34). Malaviya had never been a member, but he encouraged students to take part in the

politicians in northern India, however, appears to have been the same". G. PANDEV, *The Construction...*, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

(32) A. CONSOLARO, *Madre India...*, *op. cit.*, chap. 14.

(33) *Ibidem*.

(34) P. MALAVIYA, *Malaviyajī ke...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 493-496.

activities of the RSS and authorised an RSS building within the campus. The BHU branch of the RSS became very active from 1928, thanks to Malaviya's sanction and the activity of a number of volunteers (35). The BHU was thus finally absorbed in the milieu of militant Hinduism. Nevertheless, on several occasions in his public speeches Malaviya underlined the necessity to indianize military service, almost in the same terms and with the same emphasis used by B.S. Moonje (36).

Golwarkar was himself a 'creature' of the BHU, where he graduated in biology and subsequently worked as a zoology lecturer. He joined the RSS at the BHU, after a visit by Hedgewar to the University in 1931 (37).

On Malaviya's invitation, Jawaharlal Nehru also visited the BHU in November 1933. He considered "the Hindu University as the very citadel of Hindu communal thought" (38). It was not out of coincidence if in his speech he condemned communalism and criticised the activities of the Hindu Mahasabha. He labelled the organisation as reactionary and allied to other reactionary elements in India and in Britain. From the point of view of a secular observer of the 1930s, the BHU therefore presented itself as a workshop of communal ideas and policies.

The town itself had a consolidated tradition of militancy. This existed long before the political reorganisation of Hindu militancy and was represented by the tradition of the *akharas*, that in Benares took the peculiar shape of the *bharatsepan*. The *akhara* is an organisation whose members are recruited on the basis of free association. They reproduce in part the scheme of the *gurutchele* relationship in the form of guru/leader-followers/member. The range of activities covered by the *akharas* is wide, from cultural activities such as theatre, classical music and dance, to the transmission of traditional values through the reading and interpretation of religious texts. Among its activities, the most relevant is gymnastics and paramilitary exercises, including wrestling and sword and stick performances. The *akharas* activities were so peculiar to Benares that they became an integral part of the notion of *bharatsepan* or Bharatness, or being a Banarsi. With the increasing politicisation of social life and religious moments, the *akharas* and the activities they promoted became the basis of the marauding gangs involved in communal riots. It has been noted that the term

(35) A. CONSOLARO, *Madre India...*, *op. cit.*

(36) P. MALAVIYA, *Malaviyajī ke...*, *op. cit.*

(37) C. JAFFRELOT, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, New Delhi, 1996, p.

41.

(38) P. MALAVIYA, *Malaviyajī ke...*, *op. cit.*, p. 908.

banarasiya defines both Hindus and Muslims. The *akharas* life style and discipline, too, were part of the heritage of both communities (39). I do not wish to deny here that each community had its own tradition of militancy, that both communities had been engaged in fostering communal tensions or that both had their own responsibilities in communal outbreaks. However, with the progressive appropriation of the city's institutions and symbols by Hindu organisations, even the *akharas* tradition was absorbed by the Hindu political milieu. This process was completed by almost total identification of the RSS *shaktas* with the *akharas*.

The BHU played a key role in reshaping the Hindu identity of the city. Osmosis between University and town was at the basis of such process. In fact, "Benaras Hindu University served as a base for those interested in agitation in the city, hence the prominence accorded to student activists, and a recognition of collective authority assigned to Hindu scholars in the city" (40).

The strict connection between the University, the controversies affecting the town, and, less directly, the relevant issues of national politics is evident even today. With the process of modernisation undertaken by the nation from pre- to post-Independence times up to the present, the situation has not considerably changed and it is possible to trace a substantial continuity between past and present in the role of the BHU. Over the years, the BHU has acted at the same time as resonance box of political controversies at local and national levels and as a workshop for the creation of political images and discourses. It also played a crucial role in moulding part of the contemporary Hindu political class. We can examine here just two meaningful examples. One is represented by the profile and role of Kodpakkam Nimeghacharya Govindacharya. Aged 57, Govindacharya, currently general secretary of the Bharatiya Janata Party, obtained his post-graduation in mathematics from the Benares Hindu University and from Varanasi he "embarked on a political journey" (41) on joining the Sangh Parivar in 1960. Five years later he was sent to Bihar as a *pracharak* "to spread the Parivar network". He was responsible for the development of the *Akshai Bharatiya Vidvanti Parishad* in every district. After a decade of militancy and mass protest organisation, in 1988 he became political secretary to BJP president, Lal Krishna Advani. Govindacharya is reported to have created the image of Advani

as a "hard-liner, opposed to Atal Bihari Vajpayee who represented the moderate face of the party". He is considered to be the mind behind "Advani's *rath yatra* in 1991 and the subsequent demolition of Babri Masjid in December 1992". He predicted that his demolition might determine a positive electoral result for the BJP. He was right. He continues to be a "favourite" in the party, because he is considered the connecting link between the South, where he comes from, and northern India, where he grew up politically, developing an uncommon knowledge of the local political context.

The second example is represented by Kashal Kishore Mishra. Former president of the BHU teacher's association and reader at the same University, he heads the *Kashi Sanskrit Raksha Sangharsh Samiti* (KSRSS). This organisation includes members of the Sangh Parivar, and is one of a number of organisations engaged in the endless process of protecting and revitalising Hindu culture in Varanasi. Together with the VHP and the *Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust*, the KSRSS is involved in every controversy connected with the protection and correct transmission of the Hindu tradition. In Varanasi all this is connected with the preservation of what we can define as 'Benarases', that here, in the sacred city of the Hindus, becomes synonymous with 'Hinduness'. The construction and use of symbols, as well as the creation and use of the related language, is one of the main tasks of these organisations. Necessarily, they act as creators of possible misuses of symbols and terms. Among other organisations involved in the controversy, the KSRSS had a prominent role in the Deeba Mehta affair. The KSRSS not only raised its voice in criticising the movie, but some of its members joined the furious mob which destroyed Mehta's set. More recently, the KSRSS intervened in a dispute regarding some objectionable scenes in the movie *Mohabbatein*, where the famous actor Amitabh Bachchan recites the *Gayatri Mantra* with his shoes on. The *Ved Parayan Kendram*, the *Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust* and the KSRSS undertook a *prayashchit yagna* (repentance ritual) "to atone for the insult of the sacred *mantra*" (42). The 'battle' engaged by the organisations of the Sangh Parivar in defence of the bulwarks of Hinduism has changed its features and targets throughout the years, but it has not changed its intimate essence. As opposed to other parts of India, in Varanasi, the Sangh's efforts to protect and strengthen Hindu values have been realised in striking continuity between past and present.

(39) N. Kumar, *Work and Leisure in the Formation of Identity: Muslim weavers in a Hindu City*, in S. Ferraro, (ed.), *Culture and Power...* op. cit., p. 166.

(40) *Ibidem*, p. 226.

(41) K.S. NARAYANAN, *Politics of the tough visage*, "Outlook Online", Mask and Faces, February 12, 2000.

(42) Divjali releases said to its religious leaders, "Githa Abroad", December 8, 2000.

5. *Building up Hindu Identity and the Construction of Symbols and Myths: the Vishvanath Temple Issue*

"In Kashi the Ganga is known as uttaravahini because it flows from south to north. Assi is in the south of the city. From here our movement will go north. It will finish with the reconstruction of the Kashi Vishvanath Mandir" (43). The sentiment behind these words is certainly shared, in Varanasi, by a considerable number of people involved in the project of reviving Hindu symbols. They were pronounced by a RSS functionary during the protests against the shooting of Water. Assi is the area where Mehra's sets were destroyed. The threat is an ominous one: to build a temple on the site of the Gyanvapi Masjid means the demolition of another Muslim monument. The Vishvanath Mandir issue is not a new one. It goes back at least to the mid-seventeenth century. In other words, it started immediately after Aurangzeb's death in 1707. According to *The Penguin Guide to the Monuments of India* "For more than a thousand years, Vishvanatha was the principal Shiva sanctuary at Varanasi ... The reconstruction of the temple on a large scale was undertaken in 1585 ... But in less than a century the temple was dismantled at the command of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb to provide material for a new mosque that was erected nearby" (44). This volume dates the present temple 1777. According to the *India Handbook 2000* "Vishvanath Temple (1777) has been the main Shiva temple in Varanasi for over 1000 years. The original temple, destroyed in the 12th century, was replaced by a mosque. It was rebuilt in the 16th and again destroyed within a century". No reference, therefore, to Aurangzeb (45). These contrasting versions should not surprise the analyst. In fact, controversy about who destroyed the temple and why, and regarding the very existence of the temple, has accompanied this monument from its foundation up to the present. According to one of the most detailed investigations (46), carried out with scientific accuracy, apart from the dominant version according to which Aurangzeb was the 'destroyer', there are at least three variants. These variants reflect a less prevalent view as to the existence of the temple and its destruction. According to the first variant

(43) Statement made by a Varanasi RSS functionary, quoted by S. VARADARAVAN, *Voices from Varanasi*, cit.

(44) G. MICHELL, *The Penguin Guide to the Monuments of India*, vol. 1, London, 1989, p. 195.

(45) R. and R. BEAUSOCK, *India Handbook 2000*, Footprint, Bath, 1999. Robert Bradnock is Professor of Geography at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London.

(46) M. SEARLE-CHATTERJEE, *Religious Division and the Mythology of the Past*, in B.R. HERTZL, C.A. Humes (eds.), *Living Banaras. Hindu Religion in Cultural Context*, New York, 1995, pp. 152-155.

"The major ruin in the centre of the city was not that of a temple", but the remains of a building erected by Akbar. The building collapsed later on or was demolished by Aurangzeb, who was hostile to Akbar. According to second variant "The ruin is the main of a Hindu temple that was destroyed either by a Hindu, Jhar Chand, or at the command of Aurengzeb, but for reasons unconnected with religion". The reason was the contamination of the temple by "the looting, rape or murder by priests of a Hindu woman or woman" related to Aurangzeb or to one of his officials. According to the third variant "The ruin was that of a Buddhist temple destroyed in ancient times by Hindus". Nevertheless, according to several documents and inscriptions, Aurangzeb made donations to various temples and monasteries in Banaras". His *firman* (edict) at the BHU Museum instructs that "although no new temples were to be built, existing temples in Banaras were not to be damaged". Bhanagar, a qualified historian at the BHU, not only denies that Aurangzeb destroyed the temple, but also that there was a Vishvanath Temple at all in Benaras in the Middle Ages (47). Finally, "It is interesting that a Sanskrit account (*vara-kavya*) of a visit to the temples of Benaras during the reign of Aurangzeb mentions only the Advishveshvara temple near Bhindu Madhava near Panchganga Chat". The modern editor of the text supposes that the Advishveshvara Temple must have been the Vishvanath temple". In Sherring's *Benares. The Sacred City of the Hindus*, we learn that "The mosque built by the Emperor Aurangzeb on the foundation of what is commonly, though erroneously, regarded as the old or original Bisheshwar temple ..." (48). Sherring identifies the ruins around the mosque with those of a previous Buddhist complex, on the southern side of which he locates "the chief temple, which on the suppression of Buddhism, passed into the hands of the adherents of another religion, who transformed it according to their own tastes" (49). Contradicting in part what he wrote in the previous lines, he asserts that "The mosque on this side is altogether composed of the remains of an ancient temple, of large dimension and of very elaborate workmanship ... These remains are, chiefly, Hindu; and it is unquestionable that the edifice, which was destroyed in order to make way for the mosque, was an old temple of Bisheshwar". Sherring identifies the remains as "not entirely Hindu," but also Buddhist and Jaina. The mosque should therefore be an architectural concoction made of parts of remains of Buddhist, Jaina and Hindu buildings. What seems to be more likely, on the basis

(47) *Ibidem*, p. 156.

(48) Rev. M.A. SHERING, *Benares. The Sacred City*, of the Hindus in Ancient and Modern Times, 1868, (repr.), Delhi, 1996, p. 516.

(49) *Ibidem*, p. 517.

of Sherring reconstruction, is a superimposition of buildings, so common in ancient towns, where different historical and architectural periods follow one upon the other in an uninterrupted sequence. Rome and most Italian cities of ancient origin are of this kind. Sherring refers to the "Ad-Bisheshwar temple situated at a short distance from Aurangzeb's mosque". In Sherring's time the temple was commonly considered the oldest temple of this deity. Sherring states that "Only a doubtful interpretation of its name may bear out this supposition; for the temple itself, from the pinnacle to the base, has nothing ancient about it" (50). According to Sherring's reconstruction, a mosque was erected about the end of the 18th century nearby, the modern "Ad-Bisheshwar" temple. The mosque, unaccomplished, stands, Sherring suggests, on the site of the old Ad-Bisheshwar temple. The modern temple close to the mosque was reconstructed, according to Sherring's interpretation, by the Hindus to perpetuate the worship of their old god (51). The confused reconstruction proposed by Sherring does not therefore refer to the existence of any Vishvanath temple, unless we come to the conclusion that the temple at present defined the Vishvanath temple is the old Vishveshvara temple, erected on the remains of Buddhist and Jaina sites and erased by the construction of Aurangzeb's mosque, with the old Advisheshvara temple now lying under the structure of the unfinished mosque.

It is not the task of the present paper to shed light on this complicated reconstruction. It is important to note here that Sherring shared the already dominant perception, according to which "the old temple of Bisheshwar" was demolished by the emperor Aurangzeb, the "bigoted oppressor of the Hindus" (52). What until the mid-19th century was little more than an unorganised belief, commonly shared by the Hindu population of Varanasi, toward the end of the 19th century, was transformed into an increasingly politicised issue. "Over the centuries there have been many riots and court cases concerning the use of space around the mosque and the new Vishvanath temple" (53). In a similar manner to the Babri Masjid issue, the Vishvanath temple issue has played a key role in the construction of what I call the 'Hindu political mythology'. In the 20th century the Vishvanath temple issue has been finally introduced in the Hindu agitational agenda. The shrine has been regarded as one of the Hindu locations violated by supposed Muslim destructive fury. I do not want to deny here that Muslim invaders and rulers had actually destroyed a good many Hindu monu-

ments. It is nevertheless necessary that the responsibilities be ascertained according to a more 'scientifically correct' procedure. In the case of the Vishvanath temple, but also in many other similar cases, including Ayodhya, careful examination of archaeological, historical, and epigraphic sources leads at least to an unclear picture, where the responsibility of a specific Muslim ruler is far from being univocally confirmed. In most cases there are no records proving that a given temple was in use up to a certain date, after which it was destroyed. In the case of the Vishvanath temple in Varanasi, from the scientific point of view, which always has little to do with politics, we cannot even be certain about the existence of an old Vishvanath temple in town. Even in presence of incontrovertible proof of the previous existence of a more ancient building, the demolition of an ancient monument is always a shameful act, and has no justification. Superimposition of architectural structures denoting the passage of successive historical periods is a peculiarity of culturally rich countries. This is obviously not the logic of demagogic policies requiring a focusing of collective mobilisation on or against a particular target. The political narration of the destruction of Hindu temples by Muslim invaders has turned out to be, from one decade to the next, one of the most efficacious tools with which to create sympathetic attitudes toward the cause of political Hinduism. The colonial narrative played a remarkable part in contributing to the construction of this rhetoric. "By the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant strand in colonialist historiography was representing religious bigotry and conflict between people of different religious persuasions as one of the more distinctive features of Indian society, past and present" (54). Sherring's view of the 'mandir/masjid' controversy is a meaningful example. The British approach to Indian history and the official portrayal of Indian society, and the political handling of situations in like manner, contributed to the construction of the communal mentality and sentiments. By the mid-19th century, Benaras was already perceived by an external observer as a predominantly Hindu city. This view was in part created by the British and entirely sanctioned by them. Today, Benaras is collectively perceived as an entirely Hindu city.

In modern Hindu political literature, the Vishvanath temple at Varanasi — or Kashi, as preferred by the reintroduced pure Hindu terminology — figures at the top of the list of Hindu sites to be reconstructed and returned to the Hindu faith. The Vishvanath temple shares its position at the top of the list with the more famous and conflict-bearing Rama Janma Bhumi of Ayodhya, followed by the Somnath

(50) *Ibidem*, p. 318.

(51) *Ibidem*, pp. 319-20.

(52) *Ibidem*, p. 51.

(53) M. SEARLE-CHATTERJEE, *Religious Divisions...* op. cit., p. 152.

(54) G. PANDEV, *The Construction...* op. cit., p. 25.

and Mathura temples (55). Over the decades the list of controversial monuments (threatened with demolition) has lengthened to such an extent that it now comprises dozens of buildings. The list includes the Taj Mahal as well as the less famous, beautiful 15th century Kamal Maula Masjid at Dhar, Madhya Pradesh, banned to visitors as a consequence of the riots following the demolition of Ayodhya.

Also in Banaras, the entire Ayodhya issue had its own repercussions, following the High Court's decision of February 1, 1986 to unlock the gates of the mosque. While Hindutva forces spread the slogan all over India that "Ram Jannabhoomi had been liberated" (56), Muslims of every corner of the country considered this date a 'black day'. In Banaras there were riots, imposition of curfew, "Urdu posters urging Muslims to march on the site and do *jihad* (holy war, literally "ex-ertion") (57), and speeches from leaders of the fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party urging Hindus to reinsure the icon of Vishvanath in the Jan Vapi Mosque now that "the time is ripe" (58). In 1986 a case for full access to the mosque was immediately filed before a lower court and a decision to remove all restrictions was taken "with unprecedented speed, in fact, within several hours" (59). The case for allowing Hindus to worship inside the mosque had been lying at the High Court since the 19th century. It was revived in the 1950s, when only restricted rights were granted. Since 1986, the VHP mobilisation to bring bricks from all over India to build a new temple has been increasingly successful.

6. *Back to the Present*

It has been shown elsewhere that the mobilisation strategy focusing on highly evocative Hindu symbols adopted by the BJP and its political affiliates contributed to the BJP's unprecedented electoral triumph in UP in 1991 (60) and the subsequent victories in 1996, 1998, and 1999. As has been clearly pointed out elsewhere (61), the successful strategy adopted by the forces of political Hinduism is not the only reason behind the BJP's victory. The failures of the Congress and the consequent inexorable decline of the party in the 1980s is probably

(55) *Restoration of the Glory of Temples: A Historic Task*, from the VHP web site.

(56) N. MUKHARJEE, *The Demolition, India at Crossroads*, New Delhi, 1994.

(57) Author's brackets.

(58) M. SEARLE-CHATTERJEE, *Religious Division...*, op. cit., p. 156.

(59) *Ibidem*.

(60) Z. HASEN, *Communal Mobilization and Changing Majority in Uttar Pradesh*, in

D. LUDDER (ed.), *Making India Hindu. Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 81-97.

(61) *Ibidem*, in particular pp. 90-94.

the main cause of the BJP's advancement in UP (62). What is more important to note is that the Congress itself contributed to paving the way for the aggressive communal policy of the Hindutva forces and the BJP. This contribution is mainly represented by the Congress compromise with increasingly communal tendencies and sentiments within the context of UP politics in the 1980s. The "Ayodhya strategy" was originally conceived by the Congress as "a winning political gamble" (63), over which the Congress then continuously lost control. This strategy "was not specifically designed for Uttar Pradesh, but it dramatically changed the agenda of this state" (64). The case is particularly fortunate, because the country's most important and most disputed shrines — Ayodhya, Mathura, and Varanasi — are concentrated in UP. Varanasi became therefore a central piece of this strategy. If the "Ayodhya strategy" has changed the UP political agenda, it has also strongly influenced politics nationally. It was designed for this purpose. From a relatively peripheral town, far from the Lucknow/Delhi political elites, from the mid-1980s onward, Varanasi has become one of the most important elements of Hindutva's symbolic narrative. This role has determined the political significance of the city, traditionally very different from India's policy-making centres. In other words, although political cadres were and are trained elsewhere, Varanasi has played a crucial role in designing Hindutva's mobilisation in the last decade and a half. This does not mean that Varanasi has merely been for all these years a more or less mute symbol of political Hinduism. Varanasi was therefore not just part of the "save Hinduism" strategy. The Hindutva made considerable efforts to prevent divisions within Hindu society, especially after the upper/lower class tensions provoked by the Mandal Commission issue in 1990-91. The Hindutva movement turned to significant work at the grass roots level, marked by the flowering of Sangh inspired organisations operating among low castes, youths, women, and disadvantaged categories in general. The number of VHP *sevikas* in Varanasi is 7410, 5350 in Awadh, 3463 in Meerut, 13042 in Jaipur, 80848 in Tamil Nadu, 18 in Kerala, and 1067057 in Utikal, but none in Delhi. There are about 200 Sangh-inspired *sevakaryas* in Varanasi, involved in health, education, social, and economic development programmes.

Apart from the social work, which certainly contributed to consensus-building, the policy based on strong and divisive religious symbols is clearly backed by a demagogic and power oriented strategy. The question now is not if we shall fear for another demolition in

(62) *Ibidem*, pp. 84-87.

(63) *Ibidem*, p. 93.

(64) *Ibidem*, p. 91.