Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

This study will trace the theme of communalism and communal violence in the wake of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid debate and the eventual demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, with reference to selected contemporary novels in English. The texts to be critically analyzed are novels written by three contemporary writers Shashi Tharoor (Riot: A Novel), Manju Kapur (A Married Woman) and Githa Hariharan (In Times of Siege). All of these came out in the years following the Babri Masjid demolition.

Communalism has been an important theme for writers in India – a country that has often been witness to rioting, violence and bloodshed caused by communal hatred and intolerance. In the present times, too, communalism is rampant in India. Now, more than ever, it has stuck out its ugly head and is playing havoc with the peace and prosperity of the country. India’s multiple identities are a cause of much hatred between communities, and nowhere has this been made plainer than in the controversy over the Babri Masjid. There has been an endless debate over whether the disputed structure in Ayodhya, which is now no more than a rubble, is the house of Ram or Allah – an issue that has reopened the festering wounds of the Partition of 1947. The demolition of the disputed structure which until a few years ago was known as the Babri Masjid was justified by the Hindu zealots on the ground that it was the precise place where Lord Ram was born. It was claimed that the Babri Masjid was built by the Mughal invader Babar to humiliate the Hindus, and it stands as a shrine of shame to the honour and prestige of the nation. The Babri demolition came as a big jolt to the whole country. While a section of the society claimed this event had wiped away the blot on the face of the nation and termed it as ‘Shaurya Divas’ (Day of Bravery), ‘Hindu Navnirman Divas’ (Day of Hindu Resurgence) etcetera, a large section of the population felt it was a day of shame for the secular and democratic values that the country professes to espouse. It was a day on which most of the people who believed in the values emerging from India’s freedom struggle – the
values of democracy and secularism – felt that it marked a major onslaught on the principles enshrined in the Indian constitution.

Whatever be the political game-play involved in the frenzied debate over the endless quiddities of a temple-mosque controversy, hundreds of people have lost their lives and there has been a gradual process of alienation between the Hindu and the Muslim community, over the past three decades. Many events of mass violence and destruction, before and after the Babri Masjid demolition can be seen as a direct consequence of the issue and the general atmosphere of intolerance it has created. The communal riots that swept Godhra recently, are a continuation of the process of communal hatred and intolerance sparked by the Babri issue. It is evident that the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid debate has become a phenomenon, leaving an indelible mark on all aspects of life in India.

The Babri Masjid emerged as the most bitterly contested terrain ever since the Partition of the country primarily because the issue was built up by the Hindutva forces with an eye on appropriating it for contemporary politics. It is not just the symbolic significance of the Babri Masjid but also the larger mythical context of Ayodhya that provides a perfect setting for the communal drama. The controversy is more mythological than historical, and hence it is a matter more of faith than of fact. As far as the history of the event is concerned, there are many versions. These varying versions overlap at many places but the differences are striking. Since the issue stands on popular culture and not on recorded history, it becomes even more prone to manipulations and politicization. The Hindutva groups have turned the disadvantages of unspecificities and ambiguities of the legendary problem into clear advantages. Hindutva groups claim that the mosque replaced an existing Ram temple for which there has never been any tangible evidence.

As stated at the outset, the focus of this research is to trace the theme of communalism and communal violence in the wake of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict and the Babri Masjid demolition in Shashi Tharoor’s Riot: A Novel (2001), Manju Kapur’s A Married Woman (2002), and Githa Hariharan’s In Times of Siege (2003). All these novels have been written after the demolition disaster, but deal with it in different ways. The study attempts to compare and contrast the historical and political aspects of the dispute to its representation in these novels. These works borrow episodes related to the Ayodhya dispute from contemporary history and fictionalize them.
to bring out the various configurations of communalism. The contesting voices in the dispute over the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site are used to show that there are multiple ways of looking at the past. The monolithic view of history is challenged replacing it with the idea of multiple perspectives.

Contemporary history is a central concern for the postmodern novelist as the individual experience of history is seen to be different from the official versions. E.H. Carr in *What is History* (1961) challenged the notion of the fixity of facts, and defined history as “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (24).

Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1966) rhetorically asked, “a historical fact is what took place, but where did anything take place? Each episode in a revolution or a war resolves into a multiple of individual psychological movements.” He therefore, argues that historical facts are not ‘given’ facts, as it is the historian or the agent of history who “constitutes them by abstraction” (257). In other words, the constitution of historical facts is a matter of selection and point of view.

History no more remains a monolithic collection of facts and their hegemonic interpretations. According to Juliet Gardiner, the editor of *What is History Today...?* (1988), history is a big question mark which can be answered in multiple ways: political, economic, social, religious, scientific, and feminist. The past, Gardiner argues, is no more “a jigsaw which will one day be complete” (2). It is now a dialogue with the present. History, according to Lawrence Lerner, is a narrative, “a blend of observation, memory, and imagination.” Hence, “Historical reality is a special case of fiction, as speech is a special case of writing…” (12).

Hayden White views history as narrative construction or ‘stories’. He is convinced that history cannot reveal truth in the way that the natural sciences can; it will not reveal predictive or probable laws. He says that historical narratives are verbal fictions supported by philosophical theories of history that seek to validate their ‘plots’. The sequences of events they record are selected from historical data, and plot structures are
imposed upon them to transform them into a comprehensible narrative which is told as a particular kind of story. So we see that the dividing line between history and fictional narrative becomes very diffuse.

The writings of Foucault have consistently shown how so-called objective historical accounts are products of a will to power enacted through formations of knowledge within specific institutions. Further, Foucault does not assign a high status to the historian as a narrator of absolute truth. According to Foucault,

The historian effaces his proper individuality so that others may enter the stage and reclaim their own speech. He is divided against himself: forced to silence his preference and overcome his distaste, to blur his own perspective and replace it with the fiction of a universal geometry, to mimic death in order to enter the kingdom of the dead, to adopt a faceless anonymity. In this world where he has conquered his individual will, he becomes a guide to the inevitable law of a superior will. (373)

The denial of freedom of choice, and the attempt to impose homogeneity and unitariness lead to social injustice and anarchy, which finally mark the disintegration of the society and the failure of emancipatory projects. The post-modern world witnesses a splintering of history – a loss of the vision of history as one whole and continuous body.

Rushdie voices a similar opinion when he describes himself as inescapably handcuffed to history. According to Salman Rushdie, there is no single unifying version of history, but one discovers a history depending on one’s vision. History is constantly changing.

These points-of-view may well be applied to the history of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid and its various aspects, especially because of the obvious political power-game involved. Although much has been written about the controversy, it is hard to overlook the subjectivities and biases involved. It is difficult to summarize the dispute in a chronological sequence, because of various contesting versions available; selection and omission from them is likely to lead to a stilted result. Its complications notwithstanding, a brief chronology is important to put the whole issue in a historical perspective. The novels to be studied in the following chapters can be comprehended better with a knowledge of some of the available ‘facts’ and perspectives on the conflict over the Ram
Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site. It is fitting to give a short introduction to Ayodhya, where the Babri Masjid stood; had it been at some other place in India, probably, it would still be there.

To know if Ayodhya is the birthplace of Ram, it is important to know, first, whether the present day Ayodhya is the Ayodhya of the Ramayana. In a document titled “The Political Abuse of History: Babri Masjid-Rama Janmabhumi Dispute”, some eminent historians from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, discussed the issue to bring out the various aspects as seen from historical point of view. They say that the events of the story of Rama, originally written in the Rama-Katha and later rewritten by Valmiki in his Ramayana in the epic form, cannot be accepted as historically authentic on account of the fact that “this is a poem and much of it could have been fictional, including characters and places” (76). Romila Thapar opines, “The Valmiki Ramayana, in its original form, was not a ‘sacred book’ as we understand sacred books today. It was a narrative story cast in an epic mould. It was not even described as a text on dharma, nor was it generally classified as an itihasa – that which was believed to have happened in the past. It was more frequently referred to as a kavya or an adikavya, a poetic composition. Unlike sacred books, which are rarely questioned or altered (and if they are, the change is marginal), the Ramayana was refashioned time and again in order to convert it into a religious text or for other purposes” (Thapar, “Perspective” 141-42).

The Ayodhya of Ram is believed to have existed in the Treta Yuga of the Hindu calendar, that is, some thousands of years ago (Thapar, History 161). JNU historians enlist a number of arguments to debunk the claim to an ancient sacred lineage of Ayodhya as an “effort to impart to a city a specific religious sanctity which it lacked”. They say that the earliest possible settlements at the site can be dated “about the eighth century BC”, much later and far more simple than find mention in the Valmiki Ramayana. Further, even the location and nomenclature of Ayodhya are controversial: “Early Buddhist texts refer to Shravasti and Saketa, not Ayodhya, as the major cities of Koshala. Jaina texts also refer to Saketa as the capital of Koshala. There are very few references to an Ayodhya, but this said to be located on the Ganges, not on river Saryu which is the site of present day Ayodhya” (“Abuse” 77). Based on Valmiki’s Ramayana and a few other sources, another scholar contends that if Valmiki’s description of Ayodhya is correct, it must be some 13 to 14 miles south of the river Saryu in Nepal.
The traditional lack of interest in cartography in India is not helpful to solve this riddle in anyway. The town of Saketa was renamed Ayodhya by “Skanda Gupta in the late fifth century AD” who “assumed the title Vikramaditya” thus “trying to gain prestige for himself by drawing on the tradition of the Suryavamsi kings, a line to which Rama is said to have belonged” (“Abuse” 77). On the other hand, Sher Singh ascertains that the claim that Skandagupta shifted his capital to Saketa (Ayodhya) is baseless (Singh 79-80). It is only after the “seventh century” that “textual references to Ayodhya are categorical” and, “The Puranas, dating to the first millennium AD and the early second millennium AD follow the Ramayana and refer to Ayodhya as the capital of Koshala” (“Abuse” 77). In short, “If the present day Ayodhya was known as Saketa before the fifth century, then the Ayodhya of Valmiki’s Ramayana was fictional. If so, the identification of Rama janmabhumi in Ayodhya today becomes a matter of faith, not of historical evidence” (“Abuse” 78).

In the light of this discussion, and in the absence of any concrete evidence, the assertion that Ram was born precisely at that spot is a matter of faith. So, the demand that the temple should be built there operates entirely on a different level. Faith cannot be the basis of history. The facts of history alone should guide us on these issues. Resorting to faith can be a very dangerous game: and then there is the problem with politically motivated faith as in this case.

JNU historians further suggest that Ayodhya has been a spiritual centre for many religions, which grew concurrently in various forms, not of the Rama cult alone, and its rise as a major centre of Rama worship is relatively recent. The town became a significant place for all the three major religions in early India – Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. No inscription from the fifth to the eighth centuries AD or later, refer to Ayodhya as a place of worship of Rama. Secondly, “Hsuan Tsang writes of Ayodhya as a major centre of Buddhism with many monasteries and stupas and a few non-Buddhists. For Buddhists, Ayodhya is a sacred place where Buddha is believed to have stayed for some time.” Ayodhya is important for Jains too, being “the birth place of the first and fourth Jaina Tirthankaras”. In addition, the Rama cult “seems to have become popular from the thirteenth century” with the ongoing rise of the Ramanandi sect and “the composition of the Rama story in Hindi”. Up to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, even the Ramanandis did not have much prominence in Ayodhya, which was dominated by
Shaivism. Ayodhya became a center of the Rama cult only from the eighteenth century, when many Rama temples were constructed in the region (“Abuse” 78).

The Muslim conquest sets the next and most important stage in the controversy. The Babri Masjid was built in Ayodhya in 1528 during the reign of Babar, founder of the Mughal dynasty – hence, the name of the mosque. Emperor Babar’s general, Mir Baqi, is believed to have destroyed a Ram temple and built the Babri Masjid on the same spot. If there really existed a temple before the mosque was built is the core of the controversy now. The two chief protagonists in the controversy are the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the All-India Babri Masjid Action Committee (AIBMAC). Two separate issues are entangled in the controversy: is Ayodhya the birthplace of Ram, and was the mosque constructed on the ruins of a temple. The VHP depends on archeological finds, folklore, historical evidence, revenue records, and records of legal proceedings to argue that the mosque was constructed on top of an eleventh century temple marking the birthplace of Ram. But in the end, its main argument is the unanswerable logic of religion: Hindus believe the answer to both questions to be in the affirmative. The AIBMAC points to historical and other records, such as Babar’s last testament, to argue that the mosque was not built on the remains of a temple.

As historical and archeological ‘evidences’ fail to tell us anything concrete or something even remotely convincing, so do the voices of faith. Rajeev Saxena asks if there was an actual demolition of a Ram temple, how come the famous poet Tulsidas, who sang the glory of his beloved Ram during the early part of the seventeenth century, kept silent on the issue (33-4). “The Ain-i-Akbari refers to Ayodhya as ‘the residence of Ramachandra who in the treta age combined in his own person both spiritual supremacy and kingly office’. But nowhere is there any mention of the erection of the mosque by the grandfather of the author’s patron on the site of the temple of Rama” (“Abuse” 79).

On the other hand, making a pro-temple case, Koenraad Elst suggests that there has always been a consensus with regard to the presence of a temple at the site. He makes reference to the Encyclopedia Britannica (entry Ayodhya) which mentions “without a trace of hesitation that the Babri Masjid was built in forcible replacement of a temple marking Rama’s birthplace” (Elst, Evidence 147). At another place he says, “that the Babri Masjid replaced a pre-existent centre of worship is also indicated by the fact that Hindus kept returning to the place, where more indulgent Muslim rulers allowed them to
worship on a platform just outside the mosque” (Elst, After 3). This type of understanding is reflected in most of the literature produced by the VHP etc. in their memorandum to the government of India. To make his case stronger he makes mention of Prof. B.B. Lal who initiated and headed an archaeological survey of Ayodhya since 1975. Lal claimed in the RSS magazine Manthan in October 1990 to having found the pillar-bases of what may have been a temple at the site: “Findings of burnt-brick pillar bases dated to the 11th century in trenches a few metres from the disputed structure prove that a pillared building stood in alignment with, and on the same foundations system as the Babri Masjid” (Elst, Evidence 153).

Further, Elst argues:

The fact that a temple stood on the now-disputed site, which is a hilltop overlooking Ayodhya, is in perfect conformity with a world-wide practice of putting important buildings, like castles and temples, on the topographical place of honour. By contrast, the hypothesis that the Babri Masjid has been built on an empty spot presupposes an abnormal course of events, viz. that the people of the temple city of Ayodhya had left the place of honour empty. (Elst, Evidence 156)

He goes on to say that, the demolition of Hindu temples and their forcible replacement by mosques has been a very persistent behavior pattern of the Muslim conquerors. In addition, he makes use of archeological evidence – the fourteen black stone sculptured pillars in the mosque:

The fact that temple materials have been used in the Babri Masjid is not an unusual feature requiring a special explanation; on the contrary, it was fairly common practice meant as a visual display of the victory of Islam over infidelity. It was done in many mosques that have forcibly replaced temples, e.g., the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi (in which a part of the Kashi Vishvanath temple is still visible). (Elst, Evidence 157)

Ram Puniyani presents “fact” from various historians against this “myth”. He argues: “Similar pillars have also been found in a graveyard at a distance of 3/4 kms. The motifs on these suggest a date of around 9th or 10th century in some cases and 10th and 11th century in others. Thus, these do not belong to a single structure. The motifs found on the pillars are also similar to the ones at several other sites in eastern India” (Puniyani 130). In addition, he quotes from “A Historians’ Report”: “We have many instances of the transportation of building material from one place to another in pre-industrial India’
(“A Historians’ Report” 1994: 53)” (Puniyani 130). He carries forward the argument stating that the core vaishnavite symbols are not present on these and the general height of the pillars indicates that they cannot be load-bearing, but merely decorative. He presents another contention:

It should be noted that glazeware pottery has been found in the trenches above the floors associated with the brick pillar base structure, and immediately below the general floor of the Babri Masjid. This type of pottery is never used in Hindu temples and is associated more with Muslim households. This indicates that the brick-pillar structure had already fallen down and was out of use around the 13th century and the site was inhabited by Muslims. Similar glaze tiles have been found in other parts of Ayodhya where there was a Muslim population. (Puniyani 130)

According to the JNU historians, it is not always borne out by historical evidence that “Muslim rulers were invariably and naturally opposed to the sacred places of Hindus”. Instead, they suggest, “The patronage of the Muslim Nawabs was crucial for the expansion of Ayodhya as a Hindu pilgrimage centre.” It was in the eighteenth century that Ayodhya once again became a major centre of Hindu pilgrimage under the patronage of the Nawabs of Avadh, Shuja-ud-daulah and Asaf-ud-daulah. “Gifts to temples and patronage of Hindu sacred centres was an integral part of the Nawabi mode of exercise of power. The dewan of Nawab Safdarjung built and repaired several temples in Ayodhya. Safdarjung gave land to the Nirwana akhara, to build a temple on the Hanuman Hill in Ayodhya” (“Abuse” 80). Hindu revivalism which took root in Avadh consolidated its position after the British takeover of Ayodhya. At this time, the Nirmohis, a Hindu sect who had their establishment at Ram Ghat and Guptar Ghat, lay their claim over the Babri Masjid. They contended that the mosque stood on the spot of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple which was destroyed by Babar. These claims led to the violent conflict of 1853-55 (Shrivastava 43-4). Asghar Ali Engineer presents a different perspective: “The Babri Masjid-Ram Janamboomi controversy is not of recent origin. It originated, thanks to the British policy of divide and rule, in the 19th century—to be more precise, ‘it originated around 1885’” (Engineer, Communalism 74). In May 1883, the Deputy Commissioner of Faizabad refused permission to Hindus to construct a temple on the chabutara (platform) just outside on the left of the gate, following the objections raised by Muslims. In 1885, Mahant Raghubar Das filed a suit with the Sub-judge at Faizabad for permission to build
the temple and in March 1886, the permission was turned down and appeals were dismissed (Chanchreek and Prasad 77). Tensions mounted and Muslim “shaheeds” (martyrs) gathered in the fortified Babri Masjid and the Hindu counterparts thronged at the nearby Hanuman Garhi. Following a battle, Hindus took the Babri Masjid leaving some seventy-five Muslims dead (Akbar 126-34).

The temple-demolition/mosque-construction story was recorded only in the nineteenth century. In 1822 Hafizullah, an official of the Faizabad law-court claimed that “[t]he mosque founded by emperor Babur is situated at the birth-place of Ram” and then the story gets into the records such as P. Carnegy’s historical sketch of Faizabad (1870), H. R. Nevill’s Faizabad district gazetteer, and as a footnote in Mrs. A. S. Beveridge’s English translation of Babur’s memoirs (1922) (Mukhia 19). Mrs. Beveridge, who was the first to translate Babur Nama, gives the text and the translation of the verses in Persian inscribed on the two sides of the mosque door, in an appendix to the memoirs. According to the JNU historians, “The inscription only claims that one Mir Baqi, a noble of Babur, has erected the mosque. Nowhere does either of the inscriptions mention that the mosque had been erected on the site of a temple. Nor is there any reference in Babur’s memoirs to the destruction of any temple in Ayodhya.” Further, in a footnote to the translated passage she draws the inference: “‘... like the obedient follower of Muhammad he was in intolerance of another Faith, (thus he) would regard the substitution of a temple by a mosque as dutiful and worthy’...Mrs Beveridge produces no historical evidence to support her assertion that the mosque was built at the site of a temple. Indeed the general tenor of Babur’s state policy towards places of worship of other religions hardly justifies Mrs Beveridge’s inference” (“Abuse” 79). “The British often referred to the mosque in their files as the ‘Janmasthan Mosque of Ajoodhia’ and put up a notice board in front of the iron railings calling the monument, wiwad grast (disputed)” (Akbar 126-34). Thus, Puniyani opines:

The British policy was simple: they had to win the loyalty of the Indian subjects from the previous rulers. They projected themselves as liberators of the Hindus from the tyranny of Muslim rulers. They presented the whole history in a communal fashion and the myth of temple destruction came in handy. So, this basic British interpretation guides the gazettes and other writings and gradually becomes the official one and gets revived at suitable times (Puniyani 129).
The seeds for the renewal of the controversy were then sowed years later, post-Independence in 1949. The installation of the idols inside the mosque on the night of December 22, 1949 led to the attachment and closure of the building for both Muslims and Hindus by an administrative order. Contrary to the ‘Ram’s miraculous appearance’ theory, the First Information Report of the Station Officer of the Ayodhya police station dated December 23, 1949 stated that three individuals (Abdy Ram Das, Ram Shukla Das, Sudarshan Das) and some 50 to 60 people had “desecrated (napak kiya hai) the mosque by trespassing (sic) the mosque through rioting and placing idol in it. Officers-on-duty and many other people have seen it.” Later, some 5 to 6 thousand people tried to enter the mosque raising religious slogans and kirtans, who were stopped (Aggarwal and Chowdhary 17). The Hindu claim and the Muslim counterclaim to the disputed site have been sub judice at the High Court of Allahabad since 1950, weeks after Hindus had taken control of the mosque by installing the statues.

Just like the lull between 1886 and 1949 without any street or court battles, the period till 1986 passed without any major incidents. Although All India Hindu Mahasabha and Bharatiya Jana Sangh had included Ayodhya, Mathura and Kashi on their programs ever since their inception, the present-day Sangh Parivar stumbled upon the powerful symbols of Ram, Ram Janmabhoomi, and the Babri Masjid only in the late 1980s.

There has not been any clear-cut result of the Ayodhya evidence debate. The above discussion shows that there are many contesting versions presented by the pro-temple Hindu fundamentalists on the one hand, and the anti-temple secularists on the other. The secular side informed by the JNU historians concluded:

As a sacred centre the character of Ayodhya has been changing over the centuries. It has been linked to the history of many religions. Different communities have vested it with their own sacred meaning. The city cannot be claimed by any one community as its exclusive sacred preserve.

The appropriation of history is a continual process in any society. But in a multi-religious society like ours, appropriations which draw exclusively on communal identities engender endless communal conflicts. And attempts to undo the past can only have dangerous consequences.
It is appropriate, therefore, that a political solution is urgently found: ‘Rama janmabhumi-Babri Masjid’ area be demarcated and declared a national monument. (“Abuse” 80-81)

This was before the Masjid was demolished; history has already been attacked and the “dangerous consequences” have followed. So, this has lost meaning in the contemporary post-demolition scenario. Contrary to this, Koenrad Elst concludes: “The Babri Masjid was built in forcible replacement of a temple” (Elst, Evidence 184). He goes on to suggest a solution:

It is obvious that communities have a right to their sacred sites … So, it is completely evident that Hindus have a right to use and properly adorn their sacred sites, including Rama Janmabhoomi at Ayodhya. The problem with Ayodhya, the cause of all this rioting and waste of lives and political energy is not that the Hindus want to adorn their own sacred site with proper temple architecture that is the most normal thing in the world. The problem is that another party, the Islamist-Christian-Marxist combine in India, is trying to obstruct this perfectly unobjectionable project of architectural renovation. Against this near-universal consensus that all sacred sites are to be respected, Islam is taking the position that it has the right to occupy and desecrate the sacred sites of other religions. Genuine secularists must oppose and thwart this obscurantist design, and allow the normal process of Hindu architectural renovation to take its course. (Elst, Evidence 184-85)

So far, the history of the dispute in some of its various contesting versions has been discussed. All this complexity took the shape of a controversy and came to the fore only after the initiative by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad at the first “Dharma Sansad” in 1984 demanding the “liberation” of the birth place of Lord Ram. The issue which had been forgotten since 1949 resurfaced at the behest of Sri Ram Janambhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti, founded on 27 July 1984, under the leadership of mahant Avaidyanath. According
to Puniyani, this campaign was to have very serious repercussions. He quotes Jaffrelot to push his point: “Its impact derived once again from the diversity of sects represented in it since the vishnuites, shaivites, and tantrists who have a long history of violent competition were peacefully gathered under the banner of a goddess not worshipped by any of them: Bharat Mata, Mother India” (qtd. in Puniyani 123).

A series of events to catch public attention and make it a national issue followed. The Samiti launched a procession that set off from Sitamarhi in Bihar on 25 September 1984, with the mission of liberating the temple in Ayodhya. The march reached Ayodhya on 7 October 1984; it carried the idols of Ram and Sita in a large truck and the main slogan of the march was Bharat Mata Ki Jai (Puniyani 122). A 130-kilometre-long march was then started on October 8, 1984 from Ayodhya to Lucknow, the state capital. The yatra (march) participants reached Lucknow on October 14, organized public meeting, and called on the Chief Minister “to fulfill the long outstanding demand of the Hindus.” The next day ‘Sri Rama Janaki Ratha’ (Ram-Sita chariot) began to tour the major Uttar Pradesh towns so as to mobilize public opinion and to administer ‘Janmasthan mukti pledge’ to the public. Although the Ratha reached Delhi on October 31 in order to join the ‘Hindu Convention’ on November 2, Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s assassination forced the cancellation of the program. (Engineer, Controversy 228-30).

The movement for the construction of a temple at Ayodhya to replace the Babri Masjid, initiated by the VHP, brought about a qualitative change. It touched a sympathetic chord in the mind of the Hindus, even in areas where worship of Ram was not popular. This was possible because Ayodhya was imbued with symbolic meaning, both about the self as well as the ‘other’. Politicians of both communities saw political profit in promoting religious militancy that mobilized entire communities behind them. Few Indian Muslims knew of the existence of the Babri Masjid in 1980; few were unaware of it by 1990. In the decade, the mosque had been elevated into a symbol of Muslim identity, Muslim security, and Indian secularism. The Muslims argued, correctly, that the structure had not been used as a mosque because Muslims had not been permitted to use it. An astonishing number of Indians of all religions believe that the religious intolerance and militancy is provoked and exploited by politicians for personal and party gains.
The sanctity attributed to Ayodhya not only underlined its ‘Hinduness’ but also made the construction of the ‘Muslim-Other’ easier. The alleged destruction of the temple by Babur was not just a desecration of an ordinary place of worship but a grave assault on Hindu faith itself. Ayodhya was projected as a symbol of that assault which injured the feelings of the Hindus. By referring to the Muslims as *babur ke santan* (children of Babur), the Muslim community as a whole was held responsible for acting against the Hindu faith. The Babri Masjid was thus embedded in Hindu consciousness as a symbol of Muslim aggression against the Hindus and their religion. It also represented the collective humiliation of Hindus which remained unmitigated for centuries. Ayodhya, therefore, became a site for constructing Hindu solidarity and avenging the Muslim wrong. The effective communication of this dual meaning enabled the *Hindutva* to advance (Panikkar, *Social Scientist* 67).

As the Shah Bano controversy was raging across India in late 1985, the District and Sessions Judge of Faizabad, K. M. Pandey, ordered on February 1, 1986 to open the locks of the mosque. Syed Shahabuddin, a Member of Parliament, took the lead in organizing a Muslim agitation in protest. At the forefront also in demanding a ban on *The Satanic Verses*, he was to become a favourite target of the Hindutva backlash. The Babri Masjid Action Committee under his leadership received a lot of flak when it supposedly issued a call for the boycott of the Republic Day in 1987. He denied having given such a call but irreparable damage was done. The agitation coming close on the heels of the Shah Bano controversy, played right into the hands of VHP efforts to communalize Indian politics. Having appeased Muslim fundamentalism on the Shah Bano case by introducing the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) bill, and by banning the book by Salman Rushdie, Rajiv Gandhi responded in like manner to the rising tide of Hindu anger. He played the Hindu card by opening the doors of the Babri Masjid for worship at the Ram shrine in 1986, for presumed electoral gains. N. Ram contends that the assurances given to the Hindu communalists before the court decision and the failure to appeal against the order revealed the collusive hand of Rajiv’s government (*Frontline* 23). This manipulative politics came in handy for the fundamentalists of both communities who were waiting for a pretext to take their politics to a higher pitch.

Koenraad Elst calls Rajiv Gandhi a secularist and “a modern man ready to deal with the matter pragmatically” and praises his role in the affair at the time: “Whatever
maybe said about and against Rajiv Gandhi, he had the calibre and cool secular distance from religious passions to see such a policy through” (Elst, *Finale* 56). He gives him credit for averting riots through this policy.

The strategy of mobilization employed by the Sangh Parivar was to clarify and communicate the symbolic meaning of Ayodhya through a series of public interventions. The dual meaning of Ayodhya – a symbol of Hindu identity and Muslim atrocity – became socially visible through these interventions; more importantly, participation in them facilitated their internalization as well, just as salt satyagraha had made nationalism intelligible to the common man. It was this intelligibility which made Ayodhya a powerful mobilizing force (Panikkar, *Social Scientist* 67). The Sangh Parivar’s “National Thinkers Conferences” organized in various places across the country in 1987, and the BJP’s Palampur resolution of June 1989 consolidated the Ayodhya movement. The most critical stage of the conflict, however, was the build-up to the 1989 elections which witnessed the preparation and mobilization to demolish the mosque and build a Ram temple with consecrated bricks brought from all over India and other countries (Udayakumar 14). As N. Ram points out, just a few days before the 1989 general elections, the desperate Rajiv Gandhi regime allowed the VHP to perform *shilanyas* (laying foundation stone) for the Ram temple on November 9, 1989 on disputed land which was temporarily declared to be undisputed. Indeed, Rajiv Gandhi performed shilanyas himself near Ayodhya at the start of the 1989 election campaign. This action boosted the VHP-BJP-RSS combine to advance its Ramjanmabhumi campaign through changes of regime (Frontline 23).

The Ram Sila Poojan performed from 30 September to 6 November 1989 was a turning point for the Hindutva movement. It confirmed the assumption that Ayodhya could serve as a powerful symbol for Hindu communal mobilization, “a channel through which the slumbering pride of being a Hindu could be invoked” (*Times of India*, 10 Oct. 1989). The unprecedented response the VHP received was as much due to religious appeal as its organizational ability. The message of the pooja, planned in every village—5,00,028 in number—was intended to reach every Hindu whose active involvement with the movement was to be sought through a “token minimum offering of Rs. 1.25” (*Organizer*, 8 Oct. 1989). Ashok Singhal had expected about 250 million people to
participate in it. Writing in Organizer, the BJP mouthpiece, B. K. Kelkar clarified the purpose of the pooja:

Firstly, it is a mass contact and mobilization programme which emotionally involves and integrates the Hindu society to a national cause. It is a programme which connects every individual to the national memorial of Shri Ram. In a way, it is a memorial which will be built by mass participation brick by brick. Thirdly, the dharmacharyas of all the sects of Hinduism have come together on a common platform and are actively participating in mass mobilization of Hindus. (“Frankly Speaking” 8 Oct. 1989)

The Ram Sita Poojan consisted of two distinct phases. First was the consecration and worship of bricks, inscribed with the name of Ram. For organizing the consecration, the entire country was divided into Upakhandas, Khandas and Prakhandas. An Upakhanda covered 2000 people, a Khanda which consisted of five Upakhandas had a population of 10,000 and ten Khandas made up a Prakhanda of 100,000 people (New Age. 8 Oct. 1989). The cadres of Sangh Parivar taking charge of this structure, the VHP was able to make the pooja a national event. According the Indian Express, the pooja was actually held 3, 50,000 places (11 Oct. 1989)

The poojas were followed by Mahayagnas in every Prakhanda which in effect was a site for propaganda—prachar and pradarshini according to Nanaji Bhagwat, the All India convenor of Sila Poojan. Apart from exhibitions, meetings were held at yagnasthals for women, youth and sants. The booklets, leaflets and posters in these pradarshinis were intended either to arouse hostility to the Muslims or to underline the unity and militancy of the Hindus. A common refrain of the propaganda was that the Hindus have fought 76 battles to recover the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in which they have lost three lakh lives (Organizer. 8 Oct. 1989)

Once the consecration was over, the bricks were wrapped in saffron cloths and displayed in a temple or a public place. They now became ‘idols’ of worship and aroused considerable religious frenzy. Women, who were quite prominent in the pooja, danced and sang bhajans. The refrain of one of the bhajans was, “Saugandh Ram ki khate hain/Hum mandir wahin banayenge (We swear by Ram, we will build the temple there)” (Indian Express. 2 Nov. 1989)
The second phase of the pooja was procession in which Ram silas were carried around in different localities for eventual transmission to Ayodhya. The procession was an important part of the strategy of mobilization. It implied a transition in participation from religious to a public space, ensuring thus an open commitment to the cause. The greater visibility of processions could also transmit the message to a larger audience (Panikkar, Social Scientist 69).

The sense of insecurity among the Muslims was an alarming consequence of the pooja. More dangerous, however, was the subterranean tension it created between the Hindus and Muslims throughout the country (National Herald, 5 Oct., 1989). Large scale riots followed. But to the Sangh Parivar, it opened the road. The November 22-24, 1989 general elections witnessed the worst ever communal violence in independent India’s electoral history and took a massive toll of 800 lives in the Hindi belt. V. P. Singh became the Prime Minister with the support of the BJP who had 88 seats in the new Parliament. The V. P. Singh regime ushered in the judicial process by establishing a special bench on January 8, 1990, pleading for a ban on construction till the title of the disputed site could be decided and site plan approved. The Special Court called upon the UP government to clarify the status of the site. A Hindu priest filed a writ petition seeking relief to permit construction of the temple on the spot of *shilanyas* performed on November 9, 1989. Having been directed to file a counter-affidavit by the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court, the central government maintained that no construction could be allowed unless all the civil suits pending before the special bench of the High Court were decided (Spotlight 82).

Meanwhile, the VHP’s program of Hinduisation and anti-Muslim propaganda continued unabated even after the Sila Poojan. The posters, stickers, and audio-video tapes that the VHP produced aplenty besieged homes and marketplaces with the Ayodhya message. They prepared the ground for a more intense mobilization undertaken by the BJP president, Lal Krishna Advani, through a Rathyatra from Somnath to Ayodhya. The Rath Yatra which began at Somnath on 25 September 1991, was scheduled to end at Ayodhya on 30 October after traversing 10,000 km through seven states—Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh—apart from the national capital. The Yatra—“Advani’s road show”, as The Times of India
described it—covered 300 km daily and Advani on an average addressed six public meetings a day (25 September and 14 October 1990).

The choice of Somnath as the starting point of the Yatra had a powerful symbolic value, made evident by repeated references to it as the target of Muslim tyranny against the Hindus (The Tribune, 8 October 1990). According to Panikkar, “The intention was to contextualize Ayodhya in the historical lineage of Muslim aggression and then seek legitimacy for Mandir movement by drawing a parallel” by linking Somnath with Ayodhya. The Rath Yatra became a symbol of the Hindu resolve to reclaim the temple at Ayodhya as they did at Somnath. “In communicating these meanings, either by word or by deed, the Rath Yatra left nothing to chance” (Panikkar, Social Scientist 69).

Advani set off on his 36-day-long Dharma Yuddha, as the Yatra was described by the Sangh Parivar, on 25 September, according to the Organizer, amidst tumultuous scenes of “frenzied religious sentiments and militant national fervor” (14 October 1990). The Rath Yatra was preceded by a sustained ideological propaganda through print and visual media to implant the image of an angry Ram in popular mind. In contrast to his traditional tranquil, compassionate and benevolent image, the posters and books circulated by the Sangh Parivar depicted Ram riding a Rath and “pulling his bow string, the arrow poised to annihilate”. In some pictures, he was even carrying a trishul, a sword, and an axe. Gyanendra Pandey opines that the suggestion inherent in this transformation is quite clear: “Rama is responding to the specific moment, the loss of the Janmabhoomi and involved in a fight to retain it” (qtd. in Panikkar, Social Scientist 70).

Just before the Yatra, the volunteers of the Bajrang Dal and the VHP, specially trained for the purpose, undertook an intense campaign to disseminate the Ayodhya message. They splashed the Yatra route with saffron, pasted posters of the proposed mandir and circulated handbills about the treachery of Muslims. In the public meetings which followed this initial groundwork, the VHP demagogues deploring the impotence the Hindus had shown in the past, extolled them to be aggressive at least now. Thus in each locality the Rath Yatra entered into a surcharged atmosphere of Hindu militancy and hatred against Muslims (Telegraph, 14 October 1990).

The conduct of the Yatra and the content of Advani’s speeches contributed to the heightening of this atmosphere. An unmistakable aim of Advani’s speeches was to
“infuse a sense of shame and humiliation among the people for Hindu society’s alleged failure to protect its shrine from desecration by Muslim conquerors. Once the seeds of shame are implanted, it may not be too difficult to foment anger and the desire for revenge” (The Tribune, 8 October 1990). To that end Advani pictured the Ayodhya issue “a controversy between Ram and Babur” (Indian Express, 17 September 1990) and the construction of the temple an assertion of national pride. No Hindu, he averred, would live in peace unless the mandir at Ayodhya is completed (Times of India, 11 October, 1990). Ayodhya thus became a site for reenacting the mythical fight, with Babur and his descendents replacing Ravana and his troops.

The justification of Advani to embark upon his journey to arouse the national spirit, despite the repeated pleas from almost all parts of the country, was that it would act as a unifying rather than a divisive force. The actual experience proved otherwise; Advani’s Rath Yatra turned out to be “a chariot of fire” (The Tribune, 8 October 1990). From the very beginning, the Yatra created tension between Hindus and Muslims, even in localities far removed from its route (Sunday Observer, 14 October and The Tribune, 12 October 1990). Between 1 September and 20 November, 116 communal riots occurred in which 564 people died. There were communal riots all over India as a result of religious hatred generated by the Rath Yatra. Advani and his cohorts were arrested in Bihar on 23 October, but the Yatra ensured an unprecedented mobilization of Hindus, with their religious passion aroused against the Muslims (Panikkar, Social Scientist 72). After the arrest of Advani, the BJP withdrew its support to government and V. P. Singh ministry fell on November 9.

Chandra Shekhar, who was in power from November 1990 to early March 1991, made a breakthrough of bringing both the VHP and the AIBMAC to the negotiation table. They met first on December 1, 1990, presented the “evidence” of their sides to the Indian government on December 23, obtained copies of the “evidence” of the other side from the government, and met again on January 10, 1991. In that meeting, they decided to set up four committees of experts nominated by both parties to examine the historical and archaeological evidence and revenue and legal records collected as evidence.

The VHP released the summary of “evidence” to the public, turned down the demand of the other side for more time to study and evaluate the “evidence”. Koenraad Elst calls it “strange” that “people who had just led 42 academics in signing a petition
confirming once and for all that there was no evidence whatsoever for a temple” had no studied the evidence yet (Elst, Finale 6). He further takes the AIBMAMC team to task:

At the meeting scheduled for 25 January 1991, they simply didn’t show up anymore. In a booklet issued months later, pompously called a historians report to the nation, they tried to save face by nibbling at the evidential value of a few of the numerous documents presented by their opponents (and of course, historical evidence is rarely absolute), but failed to offer even one piece of evidence for any alternative scenario” (Elst, Finale 7)

He blames the government for connivance with the AIBMAMC team:

When more temple remains were found in 1992, a cry went up among the Marxist academics that the sculptures had been stolen from museums and planted at the site. The central government (Congress) had the pieces locked away. During the scholars’ debate in 1990-91, the VHP-mandated team had discovered no less than 4 documents on which references to the “birthplace temple” had been altered or removed, or which had been removed from public access (and those were only the ones where the foul play was discovered; who knows how many times the tampering succeeded?). (Elst, Finale 7)

Amidst all this blame game between the two conflicting sides, the Sangh Parivar carried on its strategy of mobilization, which marked a departure from the norms essential for the functioning of the democratic polity and society. Panikkar suggests that each mobilization program of the Sangh Parivar was “mob oriented, creating deindividualised, irrational and violent participants,” and that “a decision was thus pressed through force”. In addition, he opines:

Another trait which underlined the Hindu mobilization was the emphasis on the irrational. By invoking faith as the only criterion for locating the temple site, the Hindutva not only tried to dismiss facts and evidence as inconsequential but also distanced itself from the rational. The principal thrust of the movement was fostering idolatory, which the religious reformers of the nineteenth century had rejected as irrational and inconsistent with scriptural prescriptions. (Panikkar, Social Scientist 74)

The Babri Masjid controversy flared up dangerously in July 1992 when the Uttar Pradesh state government showed great reluctance to stop the kar seva at Ayodhya. On
July 21, the sant samaj rejected a proposal from Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao to suspend the ongoing kar seva for construction of the temple and enter into a dialogue with the central government. The following day the VHP asked the kar sevaks to ignore the Supreme Court’s commentaries on the dispute. As far as the VHP and the sant samaj were concerned, the dispute was beyond the competence of any court to decide. The BJP government of the state refused to countenance the use of force against the kar sevaks and prepared instead for central government intervention to enforce the court’s order (Thakur 656).

The ultimate stage of the conflict was Narasimha Rao government’s inaction even after the virtual announcement of the Hindu communalists of their demolition plan in late October 1992. As N. Ram puts it:

If there is one ‘theory’ that this devotee of drift has contributed to national political life, it is non-secular rule of not opposing ‘Hindu religious sentiment’ under any circumstances and of avoiding ‘confrontation’ with the saffron gentry and their lay allies. (“Hindutva’s Challenge” 25)

On December 6, 1992, stunned citizens of India watched as television showed crowds of young men using crowbars, pickaxes, trishuls (tridents), hammers, shovels, and even bamboo sticks to attack and bring down the three domes of the 464-year-old Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. This mosque, a center of controversy in Indian politics for years, was demolished in a mere five hours by fierce and determined assaults of the foot soldiers of militant Hinduism. Bewildered viewers expected the central government to act and seize control of the situation, but it took forty hours before Rapid Action Force commandos moved in and took over the site—in 40 minutes. By this time, the kar sevaks had not only pounded the Masjid to rubble, but also built a makeshift Ram temple in its place. Their well coordinated effort involved clearing out the rubble and constructing a concrete platform, complete with a canopy and crude concrete steps and implanted with the Ram lalla images. An eight-foot brick wall was built around the “temple” to protect it (Parikh 673).

According to the then Prime Minister Narsimha Rao’s statement on Ayodhya, which he was not allowed to make in Parliament, about 70,000 kar sevaks had assembled at the Ram Katha Kunj for the public meeting and 500 sadhus and sants at the foundation
terrace for the pooja. Between 11:45 and 11:50 a.m., some 150 kar sevaks managed to break the cordon on the terrace and pelted stones at the police. About 1,000 kar sevaks broke into the Babri Masjid and some 80 of them managed to climb on the domes of the mosque and started demolishing them. In the meantime, they had damaged the outer boundary wall. At around 12:20 p.m., about 25,000 kar sevaks had gathered in the complex and by 2:40 p.m. a crowd of 75,000 was surrounding the structure of whom many were engaged in demolition (Chanchreek and Prasad 103).

As news of the demolition of the mosque spread and sparked riots around the country, the central government was urged by its own party leaders as well as others to act quickly. Its response took the form of imposition of President’s rule in Uttar Pradesh and dissolution of the state assembly. Three other BJP-controlled state governments were dismissed. In addition, the government showed commitment to rebuild the mosque in Ayodhya. Cases were registered against L.K. Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi, and Uma Bharti of the BJP, Ashok Singhal and Vishnu Hari Dalmia of the VHP, and Vinay Katiyar of the Bajrang Dal. They were all arrested and remanded to judicial custody. In an elusive statement on December 8, Advani retorted:

[W]hen an old structure which ceased to be a mosque over 50 years back is pulled down by a group of people exasperated by the tardiness of the judicial process, and the obtuseness and myopia of the executive, they are reviled by the president, the vice president and political parties as betrayers of the nation, destroyers of the constitution and what not! …I wish to caution government against this approach. Their pronouncements against kar sevaks are only strengthening the movement. (Chanchreek and Prasad 250)

The arrest of leaders like Advani and Joshi took place with fanfare, including a press conference. “The arrest also changed the mood in the BJP from embarrassment to defiance. While many had anticipated the arrests of Uma Bharati, Singhal, and Katiyar (called the ‘lunatic fringe’ for their extremism), they did not expect the arrest of the leader of opposition (Advani) while the Parliament was in session” (Parikh 674-5). The dismissal of the three other BJP state governments was perceived as arbitrary and seemed more reminiscent of the old Congress practice of dismissing non-Congress governments. Critics argued that Narsimha Rao had acted too little before and too much after the event (Ghimire and Pathak 68-70).
The fallout from the events in Ayodhya was significant. More than a thousand persons died and nearly two thousand were injured in the ensuing riots around the country, and the majority of the Muslim population was further alienated from the system. Muslims were the main victims of violence, not only in Ayodhya but in other cities as well, and it became clear that the authorities had failed to provide adequate protection for them. Apart from the Babri mosque, the kar sevaks attacked and destroyed thirty other smaller mosques in Ayodhya. They also burnt the homes of 400 Muslim families in the city, looted their shops, desecrated their graves, and physically assaulted the men (Mukerji 38-39; Ramaseshan 1, 4).

There were repercussions in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where angry mobs burned and destroyed temples in retaliation. Internationally, India’s reputation received a severe blow, and the adverse publicity raised concern about the effect on foreign investments and the economic liberalization program. The greatest impact of the December events, however, was on domestic politics.

Meanwhile, on January 2, 1993, the district administration of Ayodhya lifted the ban and permitted Hindus to worship at the Ram shrine on the site of the demolished mosque. The BJP was in a win-win situation. The government’s decision to rebuild the mosque, announced in the first flush of post-demolition guilt, went to the dogs. So, the Congress, along with its brand of secularism, lost political points with the Muslims while the BJP won plaudits from Hindus. For several months, Rao had pressured the BJP politically and legally to desist from starting construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya. In November 1992, he had received unanimous support from the National Integration Council for checking the BJP’s actions, and he tried to isolate the party politically and restrict its moves through legal means. The supreme court of India held a special hearing at which it voiced a concern that “If lakhs of people gather in Ayodhya on December 6, no force can prevent them from doing what they want” (Murthy 28). The Uttar Pradesh government had to give some guarantees, and it provided two sets of assurances. First, as long as the dispute over 2.77 acres of land adjacent to the mosque was not settled, there would be no construction, temporary or permanent, of the Ram temple; and second, the state government was committed to “safeguard and protect the disputed structure in Ayodhya.” These guarantees symbolized success, briefly, for Rao because the BJP was
now legally bound to protect the Babri Masjid and could only engage in symbolic kar
seva on the scheduled day, December 6. Obviously, he was too credulous.

Manju Parikh suggests an “informal alliance” between the Congress and the BJP,
as the reason behind any precautionary measure from the government before the
demolition. “The pattern of voting in parliament in the pre-December 1992 period shows
a trend of BJP support for the congress.” She hints at a mutual understanding—what she
calls “marriage of convenience between the parties” (678).

The convoluted nature of the dispute can also be seen to reflect in the court
proceedings of this case. The government headed by P V Narsimha Rao ordered for a
probe into the demolition. The Liberhan Commission was constituted on December 16,
1992 by an order of the Indian Union Home ministry following the demolition of the
Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December and the riots in Ayodhya city. The commission
was expected to submit its report in three months.

The commission was assigned the task of making an enquiry with respect to the
following matters:

(1) The sequence of events leading to, and all the facts and circumstances relating to
the occurrences in the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid complex at Ayodhya on
December 6, 1992 involving the destruction of the structure.

(2) The role played by the Chief-Minister, members of the Council of Ministers,
officials of the government of Uttar-Pradesh and by the individuals, concerned
organizations and agencies in, or in connection with, the destruction of the
structure.

(3) The deficiencies in security measures and other arrangements as prescribed or
operated in practice by government of UP which might have contributed to the
events that took place in the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid complex, Ayodhya
town and Faizabad on 6.12.92.

(4) The sequence of events leading to, and all the facts and circumstances relating to,
the assault on media persons at Ayodhya on 6.12.92, and

(5) Any other matters related to the subject of enquiry.
The Liberhan Commission is the longest running one-man panel. The case is still *sub judice*. The Commission has been given its 48th extension which expires on March 31, 2009. The expenditure on the case has been more than Rs.7.2 crores, so far. Even after more than 16 years of probe, the commission has been unable to submit its report. This may be because of impenetrability of questions of belief, opinion or political wisdom, and complications in pronouncing upon questions of history, archaeology, and mythology. Besides, a cabinet cannot “shift the responsibility to the courts for matters for which the government is too weak, too timid or too confused to decide for itself” (Palkhivala 9). Evidently, the judiciary cannot compensate for the inadequacies of government or the failure of the political process.

Here, it is worth its while to present “a view from Pakistan” in reaction to the destruction at Ayodhya; Mahmood Monshipouri opines:

The Ayodhya incident and its implications cannot be divorced from the legacy of mutual misperceptions, the culture of distrust, and the self-fulfilling prophecies that have governed and largely shaped the historic and contemporary antagonistic character of the Indo-Pakistani relationship. There is now a growing feeling among Pakistanis that the Ayodhya attack was a widely supported civil reaction and that the Indian government is unable to curb such outbursts of Hindu militancy. (712-13)

He discusses the common fear experienced by Pakistanis because of the free reign of communalist forces in India. He looks back in time, weighing the past in terms of the present, and concludes:

The Ayodhya episode and its aftermath reconfirmed the validity of “two-nation theory,” as advocated by Mohammed Ali Jinnah at the time of partition, and the view of a large number of Pakistanis that India has never been a secular state. Hence, the argument that the destruction of the Babri mosque and the expressed intent of the Hindu extremists to build a temple to Ram on this site is a well-orchestrated move by the BJP and its supporters to finish off India’s pseudo-secularism. (713)

He doubts government support to the secularists, and says that, “The Rao government is implicated in these events” which is reflected in its “incisiveness in preventing the rampage.” Further, on the same page, he claims that the government’s being easy on the fundamentalists, shows that “attacking the religious places of a minority people, though not directly sponsored by the state, is an acceptable method of resolving interethnic
disputes” (713). He concludes by saying that there is “pessimism about the prospects of further improvement in relations between the two nations” (721).

A scholar from India held the same opinion: “If Muslims are not permitted to integrate into the national mainstream, then a major new terrorist movement will feed on the sense of deprivation of the country’s largest minority” (Thakur 661). He seems to have foreseen and predicted it correctly. The current scenario is a reflection of such fears coming true. India is indeed fighting with terrorism in its mammoth proportions.

The dispute which is still awaiting an end has its seeds in the Hindu fundamentalist desire to rewrite history and to undo the wrongs of the past, literally and figuratively. The emphasis is on rewriting a ‘national history’ by wiping out the imperial versions, and thus, asserting the glory of an essentially Hindu past. History is mixed with mythical beliefs and served to the masses on the platter of nationalism. For the youth initiated into Hindu chauvinism, Ram is not only a favourite deity but also a communal rendering of Indian ‘national history’. Having been brainwashed by the rhetoric of ‘heroic heritage’ of the past and the ‘pathetic situation’ of the present, the ‘Hindu’ youth are made to feel intensely the need for shunning ‘impotence’ and weakness’. They are presented with a clear enemy and a visible symbol to destroy and establish their ‘pride and hegemony’. The preamble of the constitution of the RSS establishes that the organization was created, among other things, “to make Hindus realize the greatness of their past,” and “to bring about an all-round regeneration of the Hindu samaj” (Mishra 207). Savarkar himself has clarified: “Hindutva is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as it is sometimes taken to be by being confused with the other conjugate term Hinduism, but a history in full” (qtd. in Raghavan, 597).

History, myths and narrativity are integral parts of the holistic scheme of a people’s past memories and present identity. Myths do create a particular discursive space for changes in the knowledge of the past, and this discursiveness gains a divine ordination when religious symbols and sensibilities are added to it. A semiotic analysis with emphasis on the narrative structure will lead us to concur with Iqbal Ansari that the (religion-tainted) communal perceptions of history have got entrenched in the collective
psyche of many Indians as myths and symbols, and that this “mythic-psychic-folklorish” operant of the average Indian mind transforms the ordinary events and incidents in the social and cultural life affecting Hindu-Muslim relations in hue and shape. This operant makes it possible for some politicians and bigoted religious leaders to manipulate and mislead people (Ansari, 173).

India, as a matter of fact, is a context-sensitive society and people perceive “much of their behavior against a background of social, religious, and historicolegendary contexts.” The texts here are deliberately ‘framed’ by authors—“that is, placed within contexts that provide the listener/reader with clues for interpreting its message” (Lutgendorf 23). After all, as scholars agree, historical interpretation is a product of contemporary ideology, which encourages the adoption of certain attitudes and theories about the past. Contemporary ideologies, historian’s predilections, his choice of events, nature of his choice, his subjectivity, and his narrativity are all mutually inter-connected variables that give rise to the contemporary myth, often called the ‘national history.’ When a mythological story itself becomes the focal point of this contemporary myth, we witness an inverted project of history writing. The Ramayana, a popular Indian epic which employs metanarrative strategies, is an important text to delineate this connection between the popular mythological version and Hindu communal rendition of Indian ‘national history.’

The Hindu communal forces’ invocation of Ram and Ramayana along the lines of Eurocentered taxonomies facilitates not just the evocation of monolithic Hinduism and homogeneous ‘Hindu’ samaj but also the eradication of the Other, Islam and Muslims. This composition of the inner cosmos makes sure that the ‘pure old glory’ of Hinduism prevails and the ‘polluting and invading’ Islam becomes simply non-existent. Such tales “continue to mould existence for their assenting possessors” and initiate a process of acculturation in which the legatees absorb the possessors’ legacy, viz. their ‘historical knowledge and consciousness’ (Trompf 625). In order to entrench this ‘historical knowledge and consciousness’ in people’s minds, Hindutva groups employ many ingenious schemes and designs.
The communal drama has become only more dramatic and passionate over the years. What has happened in recent times in Orissa, and then in parts of Karnataka, threatens to be unleashed again in tribal districts of Gujarat, is a new low in Indian political life. The attacks on Christian families, the vandalism of their places of worship, the destruction of homes and livelihoods, and the horrific rapes, mutilations and burning alive that have been reported, have nothing to do with religious beliefs – neither those of the victims nor of their attackers. They are instead part of a contemptible political project whose closest equivalent can in fact be found in the “Indian Mujahidin” bomb blasts in Delhi, Jaipur, and Ahmedabad, which were set to go off in hospitals, marketplaces and playgrounds. Both actions are anti-national; both aim to divide the country by polarising people along their religious identities; and both hope to profit politically from such polarization. The terror attacks on Mumbai are an alarming indication of the growing resentment and intolerance amongst religions, which has now taken the shape of terrorism. Toleration has taken a back seat in a society fighting with the forces of fundamentalism, obscurantism, and terrorism.

India is becoming a playground for the intolerant. *Jodhaa Akbar* cannot be screened in Rajasthan because some Rajputs have taken umbrage at the heroine’s name. Sania Mirza has court cases slapped against her for resting her foot too close to a national flag; Richard Gere for resting his lips too close to Shilpa Shetty’s. Viking Penguin has been served a legal notice because Jaishree Misra’s historical novel on the Rani of Jhansi actually treats her as a human being. M F Husain, is living in exile because he fears harassment if he returns to his own country – at an age where he should be able to live with love and honour in his homeland. An exhibition in Chennai on Aurangzeb is shut down after protests by Muslims claiming it misrepresents the mediaeval emperor. Taslima Nasrin, a persecuted author to whom India had given asylum, has now fled the country, her peace of mind and health broken by the relentless hounding of fundamentalist Muslims and the craveness of both the West Bengal and Indian governments. Then, there is a controversy over the Ram Setu. The list seems to be endless and ever-growing.

The saga of bigotry and narrow-mindedness has continued ever since the Babri episode, with fundamentalists having proved their might in demolishing not only the disputed structure, but also the tradition of mutual co-existence and pluralism that the
nation prided on. The issue of communalism and violence taken up in this project is significant because it is a contemporary problem facing the country.

The Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid debate has invited the attention of the academia in a big way and has set the critical thinking process rolling. Many social and political scientists have analyzed the issue with all its complex and multifarious features. It has been used as a background for literary writings in all genres, in not only India but elsewhere too. The Bangladeshi novelist Taslima Nasrin has foregrounded this issue in her novel Laija (Shame). Laija depicts the aftermath of the demolition as observed in Muslim-dominated Bangladesh where temples were burnt and Hindus were killed and tortured to pay them back in the same coin. The mood of the novel is dark, pointing to the seriousness of the issue and its far-reaching effects. Rukmini Bhaya Nayar has also dealt with the issue in The Ayodhya Cantos: Poems. It is a rich tapestry which binds the churning world of history and mythology to dole out a grand allegory. This collection of poems is important for its political re-appropriation of myth and history from those who have used them to serve their own ends. The ancient and the imaginary are brought to bear upon what is contemporary, real and very relevant. The then Prime-Minister of India, P.V. Narsimha Rao has written a book titled Ayodhya 6 December, 1992 in which he attempts his side of the story about what led to the Babri Masjid demolition. The book was published posthumously as desired by Rao. His account might be too late in the day to be of any political value – the purpose of the information provided by the BJP earlier having been achieved already in some elections.

Many other books have been written on the issue of communalism fostering in India ever since the Ayodhya imbroglio. David Davidhar has captured the post-demolition Bombay riots in his The Solitude of Emperors. The protagonist, a journalist and a secular Indian, is rendered a spectator to the 1992-93 riots and sinks into a grey world which is finally dispelled with the help of a therapist and a regime of antidepressants. He is packed off to an estate in the southern India, tucked away somewhere in the Nilgiris, to recover and also track down a story unfolding in a structure there called the tower of god—which is, again, turning out to be a religious flashpoint, this time between Hindus and Christians. Recent in the line of events of communal frenzy – the Godhra riots, have also been captured in contemporary Indian literature in English. Rajkamal Jha’s Fireproof depicts the state of Gujarat burning, racked by the worst
religious violence in India since Partition. It is the story of a middle-class man coming to
terms with life and his son, born during the riots, grotesquely deformed, as if traumatized
even in the security of the womb by the violence outside. Sujit Saraf, in his novel The
Peacock Throne, provides a worm’s eye-view of the political machinations surrounding
India’s communal riots over the past twenty-odd years. The novel takes at its starting
point the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, and the subsequent slaughter of
members of the Sikh community by angry Hindus in the city of Delhi. Told from the
viewpoint of a tea-seller’s minimum agency, it encompasses the major political
upheavals, including the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992.

This study is an attempt to study the critical ideas of contemporary authors
reflected in the selected novels. Shashi Tharoor (Riot), Manju Kapur (A Married
Woman), and Githa Hariharan (In Times of Siege) have been talked about on various
accounts, but not much attention has been paid to the aspect which the present study has
undertaken, that is, the way they handle the Ayodhya issue in their works. Critical
commentary in the form of research on these novels from the point of view taken up in
this project is scarce. In the absence of any critical and theoretical framework, this study
is limited to a close reading of the texts.

The works chosen for study are significant because they offer issues of
contemporary relevance. The significance lies also in the fact that Shashi Tharoor is a
diplomat, and so, his word on the issue carries more weight. He has been constantly
discussing his views on the growing communalization of the Indian society in his fiction
and non-fiction works. His columns in national dailies present his consternation at the
fundamentalist and sectarian tendencies in the country. In Riot, he has reiterated his belief
in the plurality that India offers, and his concern over the use of a ‘monolithic’ history as
a weapon.

Manju Kapur has been noticed for her works mainly from a feminist angle.
A Married Woman has attracted attention more for its treatment of a same-sex
relationship, than for Ayodhya issue that is woven in its narrative. This project analyses
the novel from a fresh perspective to bring out the writer’s views on the issue of
communalism.
In *Times of Siege* offers Githa Hariharan’s insights on fundamentalism as a key feature of the contemporary society. The fresh perspective of a woman writer on a political issue certainly gains importance in the contemporary scenario of narrowing gender divisions as more women writers come to the fore in India.

The chapter on Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot* takes up the Ram Sita Poojan program of 1989 to knit his narrative. He fictionalizes this episode and weaves it with the murder mystery of a twenty-four-year-old American volunteer, Priscilla Hart, in India. Tharoor tries to suggest a number of solutions to the mystery of Priscilla murder, questioning the ‘knowability of truth’. Each character in *Riot* attempts to reach for the truth behind the killing of Priscilla, who is consumed by the contradictions of a violent moment in India’s contemporary history. Tharoor has experimented with narratology in the novel. In keeping with the abiding mystery of the plot, the entire novel travels through the eyes and voices of various characters, flitting between news clippings, personal letters, scrapbook notes, interviews, conversations – doing away with the omniscient narrator. Each distinct section, contributes to the narrative by presenting a new perspective. Tharoor emphasizes multiplicity of perspectives to bring to light the dispute over ownership of history and attempts to uncover the truth behind a certain event. Tharoor propagates the idea that there is never really one history, just different perspectives on the past.

The next chapter is based on Kapur’s *A Married Woman*. It attempts to highlight that a macro event such as the Ayodhya imbroglio affects the individual on a micro level. The novel shows the repercussions of tension and violence accompanying the Babri Masjid dispute on different characters. The same event evokes different responses from various characters depending on how they are affected by it. As communal riots take away the life of ten members of a theatre group headed by Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a historian and social activist, in a barbaric manner, the peace-loving secularists raise a voice of protest. The life of those related with Aijaz in one way or the other, undergoes a tremendous turmoil. The demolition of the mosque seems too small in the face of the disruption caused in the lives of the characters. The chapter examines the writer’s attempt to show that such incidents of mindless mob action become hot items of debate for politicians and activists, who try to exploit the genuine feelings of people like Astha, the protagonist. The characters in the novel become the author’s mouthpieces presenting her
views, sharing her knowledge of the issue, while emphasizing that there are different interpretations of a single event.

The next chapter examines Githa Hariharan’s *In Times of Siege* to show deterioration in socio-political circumstances after the Babri Masjid demolition. There could never be the same mood of rational tolerance and peaceful co-existence in India, once the final blow to the disputed structure was struck. The novel presents the story of a historian caught in the web of history. Hariharan presents how the powerful and the dominant join forces with fanatic fundamentalists to challenge a given version of history. The study examines the idea that there is no history which can be called true and authentic, as depicted in the novel. Hariharan’s text shows that not only history, but also the process of writing history and the authenticity of the historian can come under doubt if the record of the past by the historian is not in sync with its implications on the sectarian forces in the present, and does not match the fundamentalists’ perspective. A lesson on the twelfth-century poet-reformer Basava, written by Shiv, a professor of history at an Open University, enrages the fundamentalists. An organization called Itihas Suraksha Manch blames Shiv of distorting history and undermining the sainthood of Basava, and in the process hurting the feelings of Hindus. The controversy takes an ugly shape and expands to include the reverberations of the Ayodhya dispute. The chapter examines how the academia is caught in the trap of political game-play on religion exploiting the sentiments of the masses. The demolition of Basava’s Hall of Fame finds a parallel in the Babri Masjid demolition and the climate of hatred, intolerance and unmindful mob violence it encouraged.

The concluding chapter sums up the points raised in the earlier chapters. An attempt is made to critically compare and contrast the various strategies used by these authors. Ultimately, the study underscores the hypothesis that there is no single, unidimensional truth. Reality or history is multifaceted and offers a different face to each onlooker, no single one being more authentic than the other. Each has its own validity and truth.