

From the Godhra station: Hindu-Muslim conflicts

by [Vatsala Vedantam](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

On February 27, an express train carrying more than 2,500 passengers and running four hours late drew up at the Godhra railway station on the Gujarat-Madhya Pradesh border in Central India. It was a little after seven in the morning. Among the passengers were hundreds of Hindu pilgrims and *kar sevaks* (holy volunteers) returning from Ayodhya, a temple town on the banks of the Sarayu River in Northern India at the foot of the Himalayas. They had gone there to participate in the ongoing 100-day *yagna* (ceremonial prayers) preceding the consecration of the proposed Ram temple scheduled for March 15.

The town of Ayodhya has a special significance for Hindus. They believe it is where their god Vishnu chose to reincarnate himself as Rama. They also believe that touching its sacred ground will grant them eternal *moksha* or salvation, as it is one of the seven sacred places of pilgrimage (*moksha sthaanas*) according to Hindu scriptures.

While the men stretched their legs on the platform, a group of young people boarded the train. As it pulled out of the Godhra station on the way to the western city of Ahmedabad, it was forcibly brought to a halt near a village populated largely by Muslims. Some 500 of the local inhabitants were already assembled there, armed with swords and crowbars.

After that, hell let loose. The terrorists swooped down on a second-class carriage packed with women and sleeping children, forced open the grilled windows, and sprinkled the compartment with petrol and chemicals. Reportedly they ignited the carriage with a gasoline-soaked mattress. It took all of 60 minutes to roast alive 57 passengers.

Although it took the police five days to arrest prominent figures in the Congress Party (the main opposition party), who allegedly supervised the carnage, it took less than a few hours for the enraged citizens of Ahmedabad, Gujarat's largest city, to

seek out Ehsaan Jafri, a leading Congress politician and former member of Parliament, and set fire to his house. He and four other members of his family were dragged out and killed. Mobs of rampaging Hindus then went on to flatten more towns and villages in a spiral of retaliatory violence reminiscent of the 1947 Hindu-Muslim riots.

While self-styled religious leaders of both communities wrangled over the rightness and wrongness of the two carnages; while the country's "intellectuals" debated the propriety of mentioning "action and reaction"; while newspapers added to the mayhem with incendiary articles and reports—while all this went on, the state of Gujarat burnt itself out with arson and other forms of violence gripping 26 major towns, leaving more than 500 innocent citizens dead.

It finally took the efforts of the Kanchi Sankaracharya, a low-profile ascetic from the temple town of Kanchipuram in Southern India, to bring together influential organizations like the Muslim Personal Board and the Viswa Hindu Parishad to discuss the issues in a dispassionate mood. Swami Jayendra Saraswathi is the pontiff of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, one of the five sacred *mathas* (seats of learning) established in different parts of India by the saint-philosopher Adi Sankara more than 25 centuries ago to preserve the tenets of Hinduism. Today, each of the five reigning pontiffs, going by the title of Sankaracharya, is regarded as the religious mentor of Hindus everywhere.

After several rounds of patient negotiations with prominent Hindu and Muslim leaders, the Kanchi Sankaracharya has virtually broken the 50-year impasse over the town of Ayodhya and paved the way for an amicable solution to the Hindu-Muslim conflict there. Conferring with the representatives of the Viswa Hindu Parishad, which has spearheaded the *mandir* (temple) movement in Ayodhya, and the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, he has obtained a written pledge from the former that it will respect the verdict of the court in the matter, even if that means giving the disputed site to the Muslim community.

The Kanchi Sankaracharya has asked the Muslim Board to allow the Hindus to conduct a peaceful *bhoomi pooja* (worship of the sacred earth) in Ayodhya on March 15. He has also held meetings with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to extract a promise from the government that it will give away the surrounding "undisputed" land in Ayodhya under its control to the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas, the religious organization entrusted with the responsibility of a temple construction in that city.

The history of Ayodhya has always been troubled. Regarded as the sacred birthplace of Rama, believed to be one of the ten incarnations of the main Hindu deity, Vishnu, it is also known as the Ram Janma Bhoomi. It is an important pilgrimage center for Hindus who travel from all parts of India to worship at the 11th-century temple dedicated to the god.

Strangely, the devotees never felt perturbed by the huge dome of a mosque which has sat awkwardly atop the temple for 400 years. When the first Mughal emperor, Babar, invaded India in 1522, he is said to have razed many temples and built mosques in their place. The Rama temple in Ayodhya was one of them, where he surprisingly left the main temple intact and merely adorned it with the dome of a mosque. This unusual relic, known as the Babri Masjid, was left undisturbed by both Hindus and Muslims, who worshiped peacefully at the same site for the next three centuries of Mughal rule, until the British rulers built a wall in 1859 to separate them. The wall and the dome were partially destroyed during the Hindu-Muslim riots preceding India's independence.

It was the first Indian government, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, that declared the place of worship a disputed area and locked it. Forty years later, the government led by his grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, allowed the construction of a new Hindu temple on the same premises, a decision that sparked riots again, killing hundreds. This carnage was slight compared to the riots of 1992, when more than 2,000 followers of both faiths were killed following the total demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu zealots. India's political leaders were now viewing Ayodhya as a potential tinder box which could sway not only religious feelings but also political votes. The destruction of the Babri Masjid ignited communal hatred along anticipated lines in other parts of the country. Muslims slaughtered Hindus, who in turn massacred them. The worst-hit city was the country's commercial capital, Bombay.

The Muslim Babri Masjid Action Committee was formed to fight the Hindu-dominated Sangh Parivar. Muslim clerics clashed with Hindu revivalists. The Congress government, which was in power in 1992, transferred the case to the Supreme Court. Since litigation can drag on for years in India, this is an effective method of sweeping contentious issues under the carpet. The Viswa Hindu Parishad, which is the origin of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, gave an ultimatum to Prime Minister Vajpayee last year that it would start the temple construction in Ayodhya by March 15, 2002, if the matter was not resolved.

The BJP came to power on this very same plank. It is now caught between its political partners, the National Democratic Alliance, on the one hand, and its own parent organization on the other. It cannot afford to antagonize the NDA alliance, nor can it renege on its old promises. It is against this background that thousands of Hindu pilgrims started pouring into Ayodhya in January to start preparations for the Ram temple construction. Their leaders may be politically motivated, but they are fired with spiritual zeal. The Congress Party, its eye on future elections, is threatening a showdown in Parliament on these issues.

India is sadly in need of saner counsels. The best came from senior journalist Sultan Shahin, who appeared on national TV to announce: "Hindus and Muslims have lived in this land peacefully for 1,300 years. India is the only country which welcomed Islam with open arms. Our religion does not worship cement and bricks. So we should not mind where the mosque is located in Ayodhya."

That is the truth. While the self-styled leaders of the two communities fight over where their followers should pray, or how many acres of land should be given to each, the large majority of Hindu and Muslim citizens of India merely want to get on with their lives. Just as 800 million Hindus do not mind Muslims going to Mecca every year at state expense to offer Hajj at the Holy Prophet's birth place, I am sure India's 140 million Muslims would not object to the Hindus building a temple to pray at Rama's birthplace in Ayodhya.

The problem is with the politicians and so-called religious leaders of the two communities who stoke the fires of communalism and hatred for their own selfish gains.