

VHP's yatra politics

The onus will be on the BJP should anything go awry in Gujarat polls

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THE VHP's righteous indignation at the Election Commission's direction to the Gujarat government to disallow the proposed Vijay Yatra is plainly bizarre. It is a religious, not political, organisation, its leading lights protest. And the EC has no business to ban a 'religious yatra'. Big brother BJP chimes in with its support on cue, invoking the people's democratic right and liberty to speak and to reach the people. Any restraint is not a positive thing, pronounces the BJP president, paving the way for the VHP's defiance of the EC order. These protestations ring false for several reasons. For one, the VHP is no benign religious-cultural organisation. Its leadership regularly spews venom against the country's minorities, contributing to the vicious communal polarisation that led to the Gujarat conflagration. It has targeted the leader of the country's main Opposition party in the most vile terms; and demanded the dismantling of the PMO. The 'Vijay Yatra' that the EC has now ruled out was a clearly political initiative — from Godhra to Akshardham, on the eve of crucial elections in Gujarat, picking up the campaign of hate from where Narendra Modi had to leave it, having been subdued by the model code of conduct. Only the most naive or the hopelessly uninitiated in Indian politics will believe that the VHP does not have

politics, sectarian politics, on its mind.

As for the EC's jurisdiction, it is surely the most restrictive reading of its powers that will ask it to close its eyes to everything other than the activities of organisations that are formally registered as political parties. It is the EC's onerous responsibility to conduct free and fair polls and it is well within its rights to take serious note of the activities of an organisation that threatens to pose hurdles in that task. There have been enough forewarnings, and then some, that the VHP poses such a threat in Gujarat in the run up to the December 12 elections. Its leaders have carried on with their inflammatory rhetoric, endangering the hesitant calm that set in after the carnage. It is not entirely coincidental that communal violence still continues to rear its head in Gujarat.

The EC issued its directive after its full three-member team returned from a tour of the state, and after deliberating upon a report sent by the state administration that 'unequivocally' warned that a law and order problem could arise because of the VHP's yatra. In the last instance, as the party in government at the Centre, the onus is on the BJP to ensure that the VHP respects the EC's order. By supporting the VHP's recalcitrance, as it has, the BJP has put itself squarely in the line of fire, should anything go awry in the forthcoming elections in Gujarat.

Christian council demands repeal of Tamil Nadu ordinance

Religion & Prison

The Global Council of Indian Christians has demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversions Ordinance, issued recently.

The Council's national convener, Sajan K. George, said it was in violation of religious freedom and aimed at targeting Christians engaged in poverty alleviation. "We are intrigued and alarmed by the hurriedly promulgated ordinance and constrained to believe that the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa, succumbed to the Parivar script at the cost of Dravidian ideals. Ms. Jayalalitha should instead immediately address the rampant untouchability offences as pointed out in the study by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes."

In a press release, he said the study revealed Tamil Nadu's failure in giving Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes access to drinking water in common water sources in villages and to temples, tea stalls, saloons, laundry services and social ceremonies. He claimed the State had also not been able to remove discrimination regarding seating in the village sabha and also

those regarding education, health, housing and cremation/burial grounds.

Mr. George said the Constitution guaranteed a secular, democratic government and protection of religious freedom for all citizens. "However, tension between Hindus and Christians will continue to pose a serious threat to the concept of secularism, democracy and plural polity with the promulgation of the ordinance and its scope for partisan implementation against Christians."

Mr. George said Tamil Nadu was the "Dravidian soul of India" and it, along with other States, remained secular, choosing to accept a multi-religious society for the welfare of its people and for peaceful co-existence in a welfare state. The ordinance undermined the great ideals and dreams of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar) and C.N. Annadurai, founding fathers of the Dravidian renaissance movement.

It was also in violation of Article 25 of the Constitution, the foundation on which the secular Indian democratic republic is formed. The Article guaranteed the Right to Freedom of Conscience and Religion. As to

the significance of this fundamental right, in Article 12(2) the Constitution declares as void "any law made in contravention of this clause to the extent of devolution". In open contravention of this, laws were being made to abridge freedom of religion.

Mr. George said the ordinance stipulated conditions that were authoritarian and inconsistent with the ethos of a civil society. Involving the district administration/police in the process of a person's desire to change his faith was "ridiculous" and very often, the mentor involved in the conversion and the new seeker were brutalised in the villages. "The ordinance is arbitrary and aimed at curtailing the freedom of the Christian minority and also undermining Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others in public or private, to manifest religious belief in teaching, practice and observance. We appeal to the Tamil Nadu Government to immediately withdraw the ordinance."

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2002

UNWARRANTED MOVE

*Religion of
Priest*

IN CLAMPING A ban on the so-called “forcible” (religious) conversions, the Jayalalithaa Government in Tamil Nadu has taken a leaf straight out of the Sangh Parivar’s viciously sectarian agenda and has, in a sense, ‘outranked’ even the BJP’s own regimes that have stopped short of enacting such a regressive and patently anti-minority legislation with serious Constitutional implications for a citizen’s fundamental right to personal freedoms affecting profession, practice and propagation of religion (Article 25). Put aside the unseemly hurry reflected in resorting to the ordinance route in spite of the fact that the Assembly is due to meet in less than three weeks. Politically, the new law is of a piece with several of Ms. Jayalalithaa’s recent initiatives that strongly suggest a clear pattern and a definite purpose — which is to ingratiate herself with the BJP leadership by espousing causes that are so dear to its heart ideologically or are likely to subserve its electoral interests. Witness, for instance, the way the AIADMK supremo resurrected the issue of the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi’s ‘Italian origin’ and launched into a totally unprovoked attack on her.

The Government has set the Ordinance in the context of “several reports of such (forcible) conversions”, although the immediate provocation appears to be the controversy about a Madurai episode just over a month ago. On the face of it, the stated objective of the new law — namely to prevent religious conversion by “use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means” — may sound innocuous and even eminently desirable. After all, such methods militate against and, in a way, make a mockery of the individual’s right to freedom of conscience. But the catch lies in such critical questions as: what really constitutes force or allurement? Who is to determine whether in a given case fraudulent means have been employed? Forget for the moment the difficulties inherent in defining such terms with legalistic precision. The mere fact that whoever converts

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“by himself” or whoever takes part in conversions “as religious priest” has been enjoined (under the Ordinance) to intimate the “local magistrate” within a time-limit easily lends itself to intimidation, harassment and even persecution especially where the converts happen to be from the socially oppressed and economically disadvantaged sections, as is often the case. Nothing could be a greater travesty of justice and an affront to basic democratic rights than to let the minions of the law or of the bureaucracy have the role of an arbiter, so to say, in the matter of an individual’s right to freedom of religion.

Again, given the sort of ambiguity that marks the definition of ‘allurements’ and ‘force’, the apprehensions voiced by the minority religious bodies, chiefly those from the Christian community, about the new law sounding a virtual death knell even to genuine activity of ministering to the poor, the sick and the illiterate — areas where the missionaries have a long and enviable record — cannot be dismissed as ill-founded or misplaced. In fact, Tamil Nadu’s move has to be seen in the larger political context of the bogey of ‘forcible conversions’ being raised off and on by the Hindutva forces whenever it suited their sectarian agenda, as for example when churches and missionaries came under attack in Gujarat or elsewhere and, more strikingly, when the Australian missionary, Graham Staines, was killed in Orissa (1999). For his part, the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, himself had at one stage hinted that there was a “conversion motive” behind the community service of Christian missionaries, even while he called for a “national debate” in what clearly amounted to an insensitive attempt to deflect the focus from the hate campaign the Hindutva outfits had been running systematically against the minorities. That the Jayalalithaa regime should have chosen to beat the anti-minority record of the BJP Governments by its legislation against ‘forcible conversion’ is clearly a slur on Tamil Nadu’s liberal traditions.

VHP attacks Lyngdoh over Christian tag

Statesman News Service

LUCKNOW, Sept. 15. — On the eve of the J&K elections, the Chief Election Commissioner, Mr JM Lyngdoh, was under attack from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad because of his Christian tag.

The VHP general secretary, Mr Pravin Togadia, today said the CEC's lecture at Mussourie in the wake of the Dang incident in Gujarat was more "like that of a missionary rather than an IAS officer". While talking to newsmen here today Mr Togadia emphasised the initial "J" for "James" in the CEC's name to point out that he was a Christian.

In reply to a question, the VHP leader said that because of the EC's decision, the Gujarat elections were postponed and the time gap had proved beneficial for the chief minister. "Mr Narendra Modi is getting massive support from the people in his campaign", Mr Togadia said, adding that after the completion of the polls the Gujarat government should felicitate the CEC for his decision.



Mr JM Lyngdoh at a press meet in New Delhi on Sunday. — AFP

He said the elections in Gujarat would be a turning point in Indian politics. "Initially it would end terrorism in the state and later on in India", Mr Togadia said. "In the first phase the response to Godhra would be felt in Gandhinagar and later on in Delhi and then in Pakistan," he said. The present situation in the state had arisen because of the Godhra killings, he said.

He gave a mythological analogy to the situation. "The present situation in Gujarat couldn't be analysed in isolation of the Godhra killings, in the same

way as the killings in Mahabharata without Draupadi's insult and also in Ramayana without Sita's abduction," he said.

At the Godhra railway station, innocent Hindus were killed and in Gujarat, innocent Muslims were killed. "Why Godhra happened has to be discussed. There has to be a proper analysis to stop Godhra-type incidents. Attempts have to be made to stop a repeat of Godhra", he said.

He announced that a "yatra" of sadhus would be organised in Gujarat in October. "It was not to help any political party but only for the upliftment of Hindus. We don't work for any party's victory or defeat," he said.

The VHP leader said the organisation's highest decision-making body would be meeting here on 28 September to take into account the High Court's proposal of removing the idol of Ram Lala in Ayodhya.

He announced a long drawn programme all over the country as a part of campaign for the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya.

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THE STATESMAN

SC lifts saffron cloud over new school syllabus

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Rejecting allegations that the Centre was trying to saffronise school education, the supreme court on Thursday upheld the National Curriculum Framework for Secondary Education-2002 (NCFSE), clearing the way for the Vajpayee government to introduce its new syllabus.

"We have not found anything in the syllabus which is against the constitution," a bench comprising Justice M.B. Shah, Justice D.M. Dharmadhikari and Justice H.K. Sema said. By a 2:1 majority, the bench held that non-consultation with the Central Advisory Board for Education (CABE) while framing the NCFSE could not be held as a ground to declare the national syllabus framed by the NCERT as unconstitutional.

Although Justice Sema agreed with the opinion of the other two judges, he had reservations about their views with regard to CABE. He said that although the CABE was a non-statutory body, the fact that it had played an important role in the framing of educational syllabus since 1935 could not

THE JUDGEMENT

- Curriculum change not an attempt to saffronise education
- Not consulting advisory board is no ground for setting aside curriculum
- Teaching the essence of all religions is not the same as imparting religious instruction
- Study of religion is not prohibited by the Indian constitution

be overlooked. Hence, he said, there must be a consensus on an important policy decision in education like NCFSE-2002 and that CABE's role in building a consensus between various states and the Centre could not be undermined.

Referring to the allegations of saffronisation of education, the bench said, "Education in religions has to be differentiated from religion education imparted in minority educational institutions." Terming the right to know about religions a fundamental right of students, the court maintained that the constitution had not prohibited the study of religion. "Any interpretation of Article 28 to deprive students of education in religions will be a violation of their fundamental right," it said, adding that education in religions could be imparted even in state-funded and semi-aided schools.

The court explained that studying religions was "necessary under the prevailing circumstances in the country and for its unity and integrity". Referring to the increase in communalisation in the country, the bench said, "The post-Partition era has been vitiated by communal violence, impeding the growth of the nation. And it is of prime importance to educate children in such a manner that they understand about all religions."



M.M. Joshi "The SC has vindicated our stand. The allegations (of saffronising education) hurled on us were politically motivated, mischievous or made out of ignorance"

"Those who went to the SC had no concern for the education of the children and did not care whether the children got their textbooks or not. Today, there is already a loss of three months...they should find ways and means to compensate the loss"

Cong., NCP condemn 'gaurav rath yatra'

By Our Special Correspondent

*Religious
Procession*

NEW DELHI, SEPT. 9. A day after 'Gaurav rath yatra' began in right earnest in Gujarat, the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party today were one in criticising this campaign of the Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi.

For both parties, Mr. Modi's diatribe at the launching of the 'yatra' confirmed their worst fears that it was aimed at dividing the people on communal lines and spreading hatred to reap political gains.

Briefing mediapersons here today, the Congress spokesman, S. Jaipal Reddy, said the 'wile intentions' of Mr. Modi had been confirmed. The 'yatra' was an attempt to divert the Gujarat people's attention from the BJP's 'stinking mis-rule' over the past decade, he said and sought to make political point of the fact that the party had been defeated in all recent elections and by-elections in the State save the Rajkot bypoll where Mr. Modi was voted in.

Given the fact that the Congress has also been accused of playing the majority card with the recent programme of the Pradesh Congress Committee president, Shankarsinh Waghela, the party made an effort to show itself as different without referring to the programme at Bhathiji Temple in Phagwel.

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"The BJP represents confrontation while the Congress represents conciliation. They represent conflict, we reflect development. They reflect hatred, we stand for goodwill and amity."

About the "good" turnout at the 'yatra' despite Mr. Waghela's call to the Kshatriyas of the area to boycott it, Mr. Reddy's counter was that most of those present had come from outside and there was practically no response from the locality. As for Mr. Modi's attack on the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, the Congress position was that it was yet another 'diversionary tactic'.

The NCP general secretary, Tariq Anwar, in a statement called the 'yatra' a 'kalank yatra'. According to him, the kind of provocative mannerism, abusive language and uncultured approach Mr. Modi used in his speech was a clear indication that it was aimed at spreading hatred and not "political education" as was being made out by the BJP.

Though the Congress and the NCP spoke in one voice today, the former was guarded in its response to the latter's offer to jointly fight the Gujarat Assembly elections.

Responding to questions, Mr. Reddy said: "It will be our sincere attempt to see that the anti-BJP vote is not divided. The mechanics of the process will have to be worked out by the Gujarat PCC."

FIRST ROUND TO VAGHELA <

Religious activities

Modi's yatra put off again

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Statesman News Service

GANDHINAGAR/NEW DELHI, Sept. 1. — Opting for discretion in the face of confrontation with the Congress, Mr Narendra Modi today postponed his *Gaurav yatra*, scheduled for Tuesday. The *yatra* will now begin on Saturday.

The twice postponed *Gaurav yatra* (the first one was to have been in July, but was called off on the Prime Minister's advice) was becoming increasingly controversial.

The state Congress president, Mr Shankersinh Vaghela, was to hoist a *dhwaj* (flag) at the Bhatiji Maharaj temple at Phagvel, the starting point of the *yatra*. Mr Vaghela's programme would have coincided with Mr Modi's. This gave rise to security concerns.

The BJP had declared that at least one lakh party workers would be present at the start of the *yatra*, according to the party's state president, Mr Rajendrasinh Rana. The Congress had planned *bhajan* and *kirtan* (prayers) all through Monday night to be followed by hoisting of the flag by Mr Vaghela on Tuesday.

The Bhatiji Sena, consisting of Kshatriyas — the caste to which Mr Vaghela belongs — had threatened not to allow Mr Modi to enter the temple premises.

The BJP was to have held a press conference this afternoon. It was cancelled and in the evening the party informed news agencies and local newspapers by fax that the *yatra* had been postponed. The fax stated that the decision to postpone the *yatra* had been taken in the "interest of the people of Gujarat". It added that several religious leaders, including the Jain Acharya Gnanpragyaji,

whom Mrs Sonia Gandhi met on her last trip to Gujarat and who is leading the Ahimsa *yatra*, along with Pramukhswami Maharaj of Swaminaryan temple and Sant Rameshwar Dass of the Jagannath Temple of Ahmedabad, had appealed to the two political parties not to hold their programme.

Mr Vaghela, who is an MP from Kapadvanj under which Phagvel falls, had refused to call off his programme. He said he was an invitee and thus had no right to call off the function.

When Mr Vaghela took over as state Congress president, the slogan raised was "*dekho, dekho kaun ayea, Modi ka baap ayea*". With the BJP rescheduling the *Gaurav yatra* in the face of Mr Vaghela's machinations, the first round has definitely gone to the "BJP rebel" now state Congress president.

The BJP general secretary, Mr Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, told The Statesman that the move was to checkmate the Congress and expose it before the people. "If Mr Vaghela is so serious about his own procession he should go ahead. If he too decides to postpone it, the Congress will be exposed before the people that it is not serious about the *yatra* but is merely interested in disturbing the peace." Mr Naqvi stressed that there would be no further postponement and the *yatra* will go ahead as per the new schedule.

Judicial panel visits Godhra: A judicial commission, comprising Mr Justice GT Nanavati and Mr Justice KG Shah, visited several places in Godhra to probe the train carnage, PTI adds. The commission visited the spot where the Sabarmati Express was stopped and inspected coach No. S-6 that was set ablaze. It also talked to the station superintendent and other officials.

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Modi poll call for 'safe' Gujarat

OUR BUREAU

ALL IN FIVE MONTHS: FROM CARNAGE TO KILLINGS TO CASH-IN TIME

July 19: Narendra Modi today took the first step towards leading the BJP into its most important state election in a decade since the Uttar Pradesh poll after the Babri Masjid demolition by recommending dissolution of the Gujarat Assembly this evening.

Governor S.S. Bhandari accepted the recommendation and the resignation of the chief minister and his government, but asked Modi to continue till alternative arrangements are made.

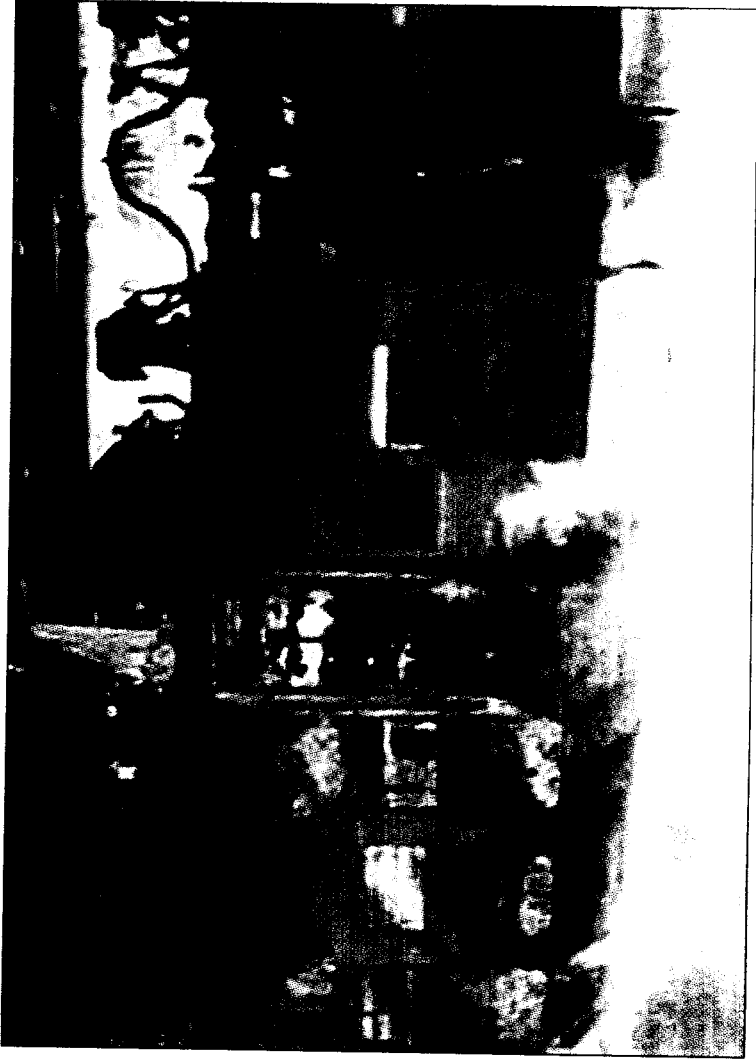
The move capped a series of developments signalling the ruling BJP's intention to opt for early polls in the hope of riding a perceived wind in its favour following the Godhra carnage four and a half months ago and the subsequent riots.

First, the relief camps that had sprouted during the riots to shelter Muslims were wound up and then K.P.S. Gill, sent by the Centre as security adviser to the chief minister, left after the peaceful rath yatra last week.

Stray violence erupted again today when one person was killed near Ahmedabad after police opened fire on two clashing communities.

The state Cabinet met for the evening, adopting a "unanimous" resolution recommending dissolution of the Assembly. Modi told reporters his party would request the Election Commission to hold early polls and claimed there were precedents. He will lead the party into the election, promising a "modern, safe and prosperous Gujarat".

Party sources said Modi would like the elections to be timed with Jammu and Kashmir's, scheduled for September. Justifying his decision, Modi said since he took over as chief



(Left to right) The blazing Sabarmati Express at Godhra on February 27, a man prays for his life during the Ahmedabad riots and chief minister Narendra Modi at a recent rally. (Pictures by AFP and Reuters)



minister last October and especially after the Godhra carnage, some people had launched a malicious campaign against him, seeking his removal and causing instability.

In a letter to the people, Modi said: "We cannot allow free play to those who trade with death in a border state like Gujarat. We must think about the safety of Gujarat and Gujaratis."

Asked if he was apprehensive of the impact newly-appointed Gujarat Congress president Shankersinh Vaghela might have, Modi said: "Good sense seems to have prevailed on Congress president Sonia Gandhi who has made BJP's past (Vaghela was in the BJP earlier) Con-

gress party's present. But the people are going to reject BJP's past and accept only its present."

A party insider, however, said Modi was "quite nervous" yesterday after Vaghela was given a rousing reception on his arrival in Ahmedabad to take charge. He was so wary that he consulted the high command before going ahead with his much-awaited plan to recommend dissolution of the House, though he already had its authority to do so at a time of his choosing.

Delhi reportedly gave Modi the green signal this morning, after which he convened the Cabinet meeting at 4.30 pm.

The decision to announce the dissolution on a Friday was pos-

sibly influenced by the fact that Parliament would be closed for the next two days, not giving the Opposition an immediate chance to create trouble.

The BJP and the Centre are trying to force the Election Commission's hand to call an early election by using a constitutional loophole, but the panel indicated that it was not in favour of the move irrespective of whether the Assembly had been prematurely dissolved or not.

BJP sources contested the poll panel's right to assess Gujarat's law and order. They said: "According to practice, it is only up to the state government to interpret such factors and the Election Commission goes by the sta-

te machinery's interpretation. How else can the Election Commission form an assessment, on the basis of news reports?"

Virtually throwing down the gauntlet at the panel, these sources said: "If its members feel the condition is not proper, let them come up with a definition of what is proper and what is not."

Shortly before the Gujarat Cabinet met, BJP general secretary Arun Jaitley, a close friend of Modi, called on chief election commissioner J.M. Lyngdoh to discuss the possibility of holding polls by October. Lyngdoh is believed to have told Jaitley the poll panel would make its own assessment before taking a view.

A full bench of the poll panel is expected to meet tomorrow. Quoting a constitutional provision, BJP and government sources said if a legislature, which has not held a single sitting for six consecutive months, is dissolved, elections would have to be held at the earliest so that a new Assembly comes into being before the six-month period is over.

The Gujarat Assembly has not met since April 2. A dissolution in July would, therefore, mean elections would have to be held within six months from April 2 and not from the date on which it was dissolved. A new legislature will then have to be in place by October 2.

The BJP is looking at three scenarios:

- The Election Commission will accept the state government's recommendation and hold polls in October.
 - Hold them on schedule in February, in which case Gujarat will be brought under Central rule.
 - Find a "mid-way" and have elections in November or December.
- Endorsing the constitutional provision, constitutional lawyer K.K. Venugopal said the poll panel could take an independent view of factors like whether the ground reality suits a premature poll and whether electoral rolls will have to be revised.
- "The Election Commission need not go strictly by what the Constitution provides and hold elections immediately. In that case, the state would have to be brought under Article 356 and elections would have to be called after six months," he added.
- A delegation of prominent citizens led by former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral was informed by the commission that the "determination of the date of the elections and the conduct of the polls are the prerogative of the Election Commission which appears inclined to wait until it was satisfied that the right conditions prevail".
- The delegation was also told the rolls would be revised before the elections were notified.
- Text of Modi letter, Page 8

We are watching!

Religion & Politics Why Jagannath Yatra causes anxiety

The Government of Gujarat are on notice. The Jagannath Yatra is held on a fixed day in Puri and also elsewhere where a Jagannath temple exists as in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. However, Chief Minister Narendra Modi wanted a yatra all his own in addition, which could only have been for political purposes although laced with religious overtones. Fortunately better sense prevailed and Modi's political yatra, to be flagged off by LK Advani was cancelled after consultations between the prime minister and his deputy. The maharaj of the Jagannath temple in Ahmedabad, Rameshwar Das tried his best. He showed sound good sense in suggesting that as the date falls on a Friday, the route of the Jagannath Yatra would be changed so as to avoid going through minority areas for obvious reasons; for reasons just as obvious this was stoutly resisted by the local unit of the VHP which, to no one's surprise, had other fish to fry. The maharaj then arranged to shorten the procession of trucks to half, no doubt to get it over and done with quickly. This too was opposed by the VHP, which has arranged to add its own trucks to the procession to lengthen it; an intrusion that will be difficult to resist, both in number of trucks and particularly as regards elements being carried. Unless it has mischief in mind why would the VHP oppose a religious head on this occasion, when they quote assorted sants and sadhus in season and out when it suits them as in the fraudulent Ayodhya movement?

The Jagannath Yatra is rooted in folklore. Jagannath, an avatar of Krishna, goes out with his brother and sister, to meet his followers once a year, neatly avoiding the difficulty of Dalits not being allowed inside the temple for his darshan; he would go out to meet them all. This is a charming story and deserves respect. But it does not seem to suit the purposes of the pracharak chief minister and his comrades-in-arms, the cadre of the VHP and the Bajrang Dal.

Suddenly without warning the state security adviser KPS Gill gives it as his opinion that elections should be held without delay. His reasoning is that preparing for elections in a very short-time will reduce the chances of mischief being planned. Gill is an experienced officer and his opinion is entitled to respect but it is possible on the evidence to deduce two things: 1) that the VHP and their henchmen have shown in the early months of the year that they need no time at all to prepare mischief, they are always ready for action at a moment's notice. The awesome preparation and the speed with which they came out on to the streets and all over the state will not be easily forgotten. 2) Unfortunately nothing is being done either about the rehabilitation of the victims, the filing of the FIRs which although permitted on paper, is infructuous because the victims are not allowed to return to their homes or what is left of them, unless they agree to withdraw the FIRs and the instilling of a sense of confidence among the traumatised minorities. Elections before conditions conducive to the exercise of a vote, without fear can be created is meaningless. Gill's suggestion requires critical and anxious consideration and the Election Commission is the only body competent to decide.

While the Election Commission ponder over the timing of the elections, let it be said loud and clear that if there is any violence or disturbance on the day of the Jagannath Yatra, the 12th July, we will know who to blame. There will be no need to waste time on another fruitless inquiry.

Centre halts Modi's yatra

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi\Ahmedabad: The Gujarat government called off its high-voltage 'Gaurav yatras' that were to start from July 4 following a signal from the Centre, which has taken a serious view of the adverse intelligence reports and the warning from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) against anything that might revive communal violence in the state.

The decision has delivered a serious blow to the BJP's plans to commence its campaign for the coming assembly elections. The yatra would have taken chief minister Narendra Modi through the entire state in nine phases, starting from Ambaji on July 4 and ending in Ahmedabad on August 26. Mr Modi's plan to contact at least one crore people during the yatra have now been put on hold.

The Centre has also taken a dim view of the 'Jagannath rath yatras' planned by Sangh Parivar activists. They could re-ignite the violence that has only abated, not ended, sources say.

Behind the latest development was deputy prime minister L.K. Advani's decision to keep away from the yatras. Mr Advani who, according to earlier reports, was meant to



L.K. Advani



N. Modi

flag off one of the yatras, told Times News Network on Monday that he would not be participating in the programme.

According to political observers, Mr Advani is treading cautiously after assuming greater responsibility and because of the image that goes with the number two position. He has apparently chosen to distance himself from the plans of his colleagues in his home base, especially those of his protege, chief minister Narandra Modi, whom he has defended more than once in the wake of the communal violence.

A senior BJP minister from Gujarat said he had opposed the move blessed by the state BJP and several front organisations, apprehending tension and violence. The yatra could have led to another round of violence, he said.

Gujarat BJP president Rajendrasinh Rana said the party had decided to honour the sentiments of the NHRC.

JUL 2002

Religious terrorism

A CALL for banning the VHP has now been given not by the saffron brotherhood's political opponents but by a group of religious leaders who met in Ayodhya. There had been murmurs of disquiet among them about the VHP earlier, but the latest forthright stand denotes a welcome stiffening of attitudes. The fact that the meeting, attended by both Hindus and Muslims, was presided over by the head of the Ramanand sect gives it both a representative character and weightage in terms of the religious personalities who were present. The reason for holding the meeting was the VHP's announcement that it would not abide by a court order on the Ramjanmabhoomi dispute. Fear that such provocative obduracy will engender violence clearly persuaded the religious leaders to hold the meeting, especially because nearly all of them either live in Ayodhya or are closely associated with it.

Evidently, they wouldn't like their town to become the centre of widespread disturbances as at the time of the Babri masjid's demolition. As Mahant Yugal Kishore Shastri, convener of the meeting, said, the VHP's decision will lead to "religious terror-

ism". The VHP, of course, is not so much a religious organisation as a political outfit masquerading as one. As a member of the Sangh parivar, it is playing a political game on the BJP's behalf by whipping up communal sentiments and thereby trying to consolidate the BJP's vote bank. It has been able to virtually hijack the religious plank till now and pretend to speak on behalf of the Hindus because of the political clout it enjoys with the BJP's blessings.

As a result, it can make the most outrageous comments about the minorities — both Muslims and Christians — and get away with them because it knows that it won't be called to account by the BJP. Even when the VHP and the Bajrang Dal have been directly implicated in the Gujarat riots, as by Ahmedabad's former Police Commissioner P.C. Pande, its leaders have not even been questioned, let alone arrested, by the Narendra Modi or the Vajpayee governments. Such indulgence has now emboldened the VHP to openly hurl defiance at the judiciary. The demand, therefore, for a ban on this outfit by the religious leaders of Ayodhya is entirely justified.

THE HINDUSTAN

27 JUN 2002

Congress raps VHP move on Ayodhya

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, June 24. — The Congress today criticised the VHP's decision not to honour its promise to abide by the court verdict in the Ayodhya dispute. "This again proves that the VHP is not a trustworthy outfit and its statements cannot be trusted," the Congress spokesman, Mr Anand Sharma, said.

Criticising the VHP's "diabolic move" in reportedly attempting to project the Gujarat carnage as a warning to the minority community, Mr Sharma said: "The Congress condemns this disturbing development aimed

at fomenting communal feelings and threatening the minority community."

In view of the VHP's moves on the Ayodhya dispute and also the "threatening statements against the minorities", it would be "imperative for the BJP's allies to demand a clarification from the party given its multi-linkages with various outfits of the Sangh Parivar".

Asked if he wanted a ban on the VHP, Mr Sharma said the Congress has been demanding a ban on the VHP and the Bajrang Dal much before the Gujarat incident when it was found that "these organisations had been dis-

tributing sharp-edged weapons in some states in North India",

Jharkhand delegation: A delegation of the Congress leaders from Jharkhand today met the AICC leaders urging organisational toning up in the state in order to launch "effective agitational programmes against the non-performing Babulal Marandi government". These delegates also sought a change in the leadership of the PCC.

Kanchi seer: Kanchi Sankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati arrived here today and is expected meet Muslim leaders for holding further talks on the Ram Temple issue.

THE STATESMAN

25 JUN 2002

YET ANOTHER YATRA

Modi to take his rath across Gujarat

AFTER the flames of wrath comes the rath of peace. Narendra Modi will take out a rath yatra across the riot-ravaged state to spread the message of "peace and harmony". Following in the footsteps of his mentor LK Advani who took out a Ram rath yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya to spread "awareness about Ramjanambhoomi" in 1991, Modi hopes to consolidate the Hindu vote-bank. Advani's rath yatra left killings and riots in its wake — will Modi repeat the performance? Going by his past record most definitely! Modi has shown no inclination to rub any balm on the wounds of minorities. He is responsible for the partisan role of government and its functionaries. He acted not as a responsible chief minister but as a RSS pracharak. And it is to be expected that he will behave in the same way during the rath yatra and may only ignite passions.

(The name of the programme — the Gujarat Gaurav(pride) Yatra — says it all.) Ever since Modi came in for criticism for his diabolical performance, he has tried to take shelter behind the people. Making himself synonymous with Gujarat, he has accused the media of tarnishing the image of the state. According to him none of the atrocities that the media has exposed really happened. Only the Godhra train carnage took place and the relentless pogrom against Muslims by VHP/RSS/Bajrang Dal cadres that ensued were a few sporadic incidents blown out of proportion by the English press, or so Modi would have us believe. He never put the blame where it really lay — with himself. The rath yatra spells doom for a state which has just started limping back to normal. Provocative speeches will be the order of the day — the BJP knows that they can only hold the state by polarising votes along religious lines. Instead of advocating harmony and trust, the rath yatra will widen the already huge divide between Hindus and Muslims. The minorities are insecure and vulnerable, most of whom have been worried about the annual Jagannath rath yatra to be taken out on 12 July and which has often been a source of rioting in the past. Modi's yatra will be worse.

THE STATESMAN

13 JUN 2002

U.K./ 'FAILED' REFUGEES TO BE DEPORTED

Move may trigger row with France

HD-19
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By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, MAY 31. The British Government has announced a controversial new plan to cope with illegal refugees amid fears that it could provoke a row with its European neighbours, particularly France which is the last point of entry into Britain for many asylum seekers.

The plan, which has been widely denounced as "ill-thought-out" and "unworkable", envisages deportation of "failed" asylum seekers — those whose applications have been rejected — either to their native country or to a "safe third country" through which they might have passed on their way to Britain. They would not be allowed to stay in Britain in order to appeal against the rejection of their application. While they would continue to have the right to appeal, they would be able to do it from the country to which they have been deported.

The French Ambassador in London was quick to raise his eyebrows saying there was no bilateral agreement on France accepting failed refugees from Britain, and the latter "cannot decide this" unilaterally. Other European countries were also expected to object to any at-

tempt by Britain to "dump" its burden on them. Continental Europe has consistently maintained that it is Britain's liberal asylum regime that is responsible for its attraction to refugees, and, in the absence of a uniform E.U.-wide policy, they cannot do anything about people passing through their borders to reach Britain.

Groups working for refugees said the move was in breach of international human rights norms and threatened to challenge its legality. "This is a dangerous and unworkable proposal", a spokesman for the Refugee Council said, arguing that denying failed asylum seeker the right to stay in Britain during the appeal was unjust.

The proposal was also criticised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees who said asylum seekers "must be allowed to remain in the country when they are going to have an appeal."

An official of the Immigration Advisory Service called it a "panic reaction" to the growing asylum applications. "Like all panic reactions, it is not going to work. It is being done to deflect attention from asylum figures," he said referring to a marked rise in the number of

asylum applications this year so far.

The Home Secretary, David Blunkett, who has drawn flak for his aggressive rhetoric on the issue, was unfazed arguing that Britain would not allow its asylum system to be "abused". "At present, an individual can make a wholly unfounded asylum or human rights claim (and) then stay in Britain while the appeals process occurs. This is at the taxpayers' expense and can be sometimes for months. The Government is no longer prepared to tolerate such abuse of the system. We will return these people to their country of origin as soon as we have rejected their claim," he said.

Officials were quoted as saying that once the proposals were formalised, the Government would reach agreements with other European countries making it possible for them to take back failed asylum seekers. "We are not looking for a fight, we are looking for a solution. But I have got a Bill before Parliament and I am determined to take these powers," Mr. Blunkett said.

If the proposal goes through Parliament, several thousand "failed" refugees would be repatriated every year.

THE HINDU

0 1 1000 2002

Vajpayee spares Modi, hugs Hindutva

Gujarat CM asked to seek fresh mandate

HT Correspondent
Panaji, April 12

TURED OF the secular allies' nagging demand to drop Narendra Modi, the BJP today dropped a bombshell by announcing elections in Gujarat, a decision preceded by a vitriolic anti-Muslim speech by Atal Bihari Vajpayee that would put Hindutva hawks to shame.

Earlier in the day, the beleaguered Gujarat Chief Minister had offered to quit. He said he wanted to participate in the party national executive's deliberations on Gujarat not as Chief Minister but as an ordinary member, and would abide by the executive body's verdict.

Modi's offer was announced by party president Jana Krishnamurthi at a public rally, where he hinted that an election might be the only way out in Gujarat. The Prime Minister, who took the stage after him, started off on an uncharacteristically strident note by saying it was Islamic terrorism, and not Hindu extremism, which was the real danger before India and the world. He branded Muslims as



ELECTION RUN-UP

- Jana Krishnamurthi kicks off the BJP executive meet by defending Narendra Modi
- Modi takes stage and offers to step down
- The scene shifts to a public meeting in the evening where Krishnamurthi hints at Gujarat elections and announces Modi's quit offer
- Vajpayee makes a clean break with his secular image in a vitriolic speech against Muslims
- The BJP national executive rejects Modi's offer, asks him to dissolve the Assembly and seek verdict of the people
- The party says this is the only way to settle issues in a democracy, where the people are the final arbiters

natural aggressors, saying Islam had been spread through the ages by the sword.

"We should not forget that the first incident was the torching of the train. Who set fire to the train? How did the violence start?" the Prime Minister roared and added as an afterthought, "Whatever happened

later was also condemnable."

Later in the day, the BJP's national executive rejected Modi's offer to step down and told him to dissolve the Assembly. "Go to the people and seek their verdict," the executive said in its resolution.

Brushing aside criticism that the party was trying to capti-

talise on the polarisation in Gujarat, Krishnamurthi said the conclave took the view that there is only one way to settle issues in a democracy. "The people are the ultimate arbiters, and so the people of Gujarat are the ones who can and must decide."

The election decision perhaps was prompted by the general

PMSPEAK

- Trouble brews wherever Muslims live in large numbers, because they try to spread Islam through terror and by the sword. Islamic terrorism, and not Hindu extremism, is the real danger
- The Godhra killings began the trouble. Had the first incident not taken place, Gujarat would have been spared the later violence
- Islam or Christianity didn't bring secularism to India; it existed here long before the Muslims and Christians came. Nobody tried to convert them to Hinduism. No Hindu ruler ever demolished a temple built by another king

view of Modi and other BJP leaders from Gujarat that there is overwhelming support for the party post-Godhra. The resolution, titled *Godhra and its Aftermath*, even credited the State Government with having brought the riots under control.

More reports on Page 9

Jolted TDP buys time

HT Correspondents
Hyderabad/New Delhi, April 12

A SEEMINGLY confused Telugu Desam Party tonight said it would decide its course of action in the next two days following the BJP's rejection of its demand for the removal of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi.

Party general secretary Laljan Basha said the TDP politburo and the parliamentary party are likely to discuss the issue on Sunday.

Will the TDP consider withdrawing support to the Vajpayee Government? Basha said the matter would be discussed by the politburo, but immediately added, "We have full faith in the Prime Minister." TDP leader Yerrannaidu said over the telephone from Dubai that the party stands by its resolution demanding Modi's resignation.

Cong reacts: In Guwahati, the Congress said the BJP's refusal to accept Modi's resignation was a "negative development" for Indian democracy. Congress spokesman Jaipal Reddy said that the BJP national executive was defending the "indefensible" by backing Modi.

Buddha flays PM remark on Islamic terrorism

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

KOLKATA, April 13. — The chief minister, Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, today condemned the Prime Minister's remarks on Indian Muslims and Islamic terrorism.

Without directly referring to the comments, Mr Bhattacharjee said: "What the Prime Minister said could even lead to the repetition of the Gujarat pogrom in other states. We are all living in danger with a milieu of hatred in the country."

Mr Bhattacharjee was speaking at a programme for laying the foundation stone for a new housing complex and a park at the Baishnabghata-Patuli Township. The park is to be named after Satyajit Ray.

The chief minister and the urban development minister, in their speeches, men-

tioned the growing threat of promoters and touts in the city. The chief minister said the government would not buckle under pressure or threat from promoters, suppliers and contractors in these areas where housing projects were on. "People write to me about promoters cheating on them. That is why people want the government to take up more housing projects," he said.

Earlier, urban development minister Mr Asok Bhattacharya said the pace of some housing projects had slowed down due to some local promoters and suppliers.

The chief minister asked the urban development minister to ensure that the project is completed within scheduled time. "I was doubtful about coming to a programme where work is yet to start: I said I should

be called once it is complete," he said. However, he added that he was convinced after the urban development minister assured him that KMDA projects were never delayed.

The housing complex has been named "Ashabari" by the chief minister (the other name he suggested was "Bhalobasha").

"The park, named after Satyajitbabu, should have valuable pictures of the maestro at work ... a statue or a mural of Ray should be placed in the park," the chief minister suggested. "A statue will be difficult to make ... with the number of artists dwindling..." he rued.

The twin projects stand as a model for the government's notion of urban development, it appeared from the chief minister's speech. "Urban development not only

means building places to stay in, but developing places of recreation as well," he said.

The chief minister said though the country was going through a bleak stage of industrial development, investors like L&T, Hindustan Lever, Mitsubishi had shown interest in working in the state or already had projects on in West Bengal.

Mr Bhattacharjee hinted at a brighter future along the EM Bypass — better roads, another St. Xaviers' College, plans for a permanent exhibition centre, art gallery, crafts village and so on.

Mentioning projects in Rajarhat, Dankuni and so on, the chief minister, on a lighter note, said the housing minister, Mr Gautam Deb, and Mr Asok Bhattacharya were competing on who could perform better.

SF 10
8/19

Minorities panel raps Modi govt over riots

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, April 6. — The National Commission for Minorities today said it was not satisfied with the way the Gujarat government handled the situation in the state. The commission asked the state to take confidence-building measures immediately.

The NCM chairman, Mr Justice M Shamim, summoned the chief secretary, Mr G Subba Rao, and other senior officials. "We aren't satisfied with the measures taken by the Gujarat government so far," he said.

The commission said there was still a sense of insecurity among the people. It said various confidence-building measures should be taken by the government. The police

'INSIDERS' BEHIND VILLAGE ATTACK

GANDHINAGAR, April 6. — Of the 25 people arrested in connection with the killing of six people in Abasena village of Ahmedabad district, 22 are from the village itself, police said. This has disproved the villagers' claim that the attackers were "outsiders".

At a press conference today, Swami Agnivesh said despite Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee's warning to the Modi government to immediately put an end to the riots, the situation on the ground remains the same, adds SNS from Delhi. He led a 70-member delegation to the state and termed the government's action as "state-sponsored terrorism."

A man was stabbed to death today at Visnagar in Mehsana district forcing the authorities to reimpose curfew in the town. In Ahmedabad, police fired to disperse a mob in Kalupur even as curfew continued in Gomtipur, Vatva and Sabarmati areas where four people were killed late last night. — SNS

officers who didn't protect people during the riots should be punished, the commission members said. They

favoured restoration of all religious places which were damaged during the violence. The commission,

Retiring Police
which will submit its final report next week, has recommended increasing the compensation amount from Rs 50,000 to Rs 1,00,000, shifting people in relief camps, including those in the Shah Alam camp, to safer places and posting policemen from all communities.

Meanwhile, Mrs Sonia Gandhi renewed her party's demand of removing the Gujarat chief minister. She called on BJP leaders, specially Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, to rise to the occasion and sack Mr Modi.

Speaking at a convention of the Seva Dal here, Mrs Gandhi charged Mr Vajpayee and his colleagues with ignoring the strictures passed by the NHRC against the Modi government.

Modi chokes on Atal barbs

HT Correspondent
Ahmedabad, April 4

ATL BIHARI Vajpayee tonight expressed his strongest ever displeasure at Narendra Modi's handling of Gujarat's unending cycle of communal violence as he flatly told him at a packed Press conference that the Chief Minister must follow "*raj dharam*" and make no distinction between people. He, however, discounted the possibility of removing Modi or a snap poll in the State.

With a shaken Modi sitting by his side, the Prime Minister told reporters at the end of his day-long visit to Gujarat, "My one message to the Chief Minister is that he should follow *raj dharam*. These are very meaningful words. A ruler should not make any distinction between his subjects on the basis of caste, creed and religion."

An embarrassed Modi feebly interjected, "Sir, I am doing the same." The Prime Minister shot back in third person, "I am sure Narenbhai is doing it."

Asked if the Government was planning to constitute a commission for the protection of majority rights, he retorted: "The majority needs no protection. They have the number on their side. It is only the minority which needs protection."

Earlier in the day, Vajpayee took another dig at Modi, though a more veiled one, when he pointed out that it was high time the "political leadership and officials" took immediate steps to stop the killings. "It is the responsibility of the political leadership and officials to maintain peace," he told the 8,000 Muslims gathered at the Shah Alam Roza relief camp as the Chief Minister looked on sheepishly.

Referring to yesterday's violence in rural Ahmedabad, in which six persons were burnt alive, he said: "*Main yahan lashe ginne nahi aaya hoon* (I have not come here to count corpses)," making clear his anger at the failure to rein in violence.

Beginning his speech with the recent personal loss of his elder sister, the Prime Minister established an instant rapport with his audience as he said he well understood the pain of losing

Bajrang spits fire

THE PRIME Minister's speech in Ahmedabad drew angry reactions from the Bajrang Dal. "We are not in favour of the speech the Prime Minister made," Bajrang Dal chief Hareshbhai Bhatt said. "Why is Vajpayee talking of being ashamed of facing dignitaries of foreign countries he will visit? He should be ashamed facing the Hindu community after having made a speech like this."

HTC, Ahmedabad

dear ones. Even as he condemned the Godhra incident, he made it clear that what followed was equally shameful. "Madness is no reply to madness, fire cannot be doused with fire. You are not alone in this hour of crisis, the entire country is with you. Becoming a refugee in one's own country is a painful experience."

He said India's prestige in the international community has been adversely affected by the communal violence. "With what face will I go abroad after what happened here? Some of the countries on the itinerary are Muslim states."

Soon after the speech, Vajpayee met a select delegation of about a dozen riot victims, including Nannumian Malik, who complained that BJP MLA Mayaben Kodnani and State VHP president Jaideep Patel had led the mob which set fire to his house, killing 12 members of his family.

Immediately after the speech, some among the crowd started shouting slogans like "Narendra Modi hai hai". An ugly situation was averted as the community leaders pleaded to the crowd that Vajpayee was their guest and it would not be proper to show disrespect to him.

After reaching Gujarat, Vajpayee was first taken to Godhra, where he was stunned by the sight of the torched S-6 coach of Sabarmati Express.

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THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 2002

9 Religion Party
A SALUTARY RULING
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IN EMPHATICALLY RULING out any 'activity' or puja on the acquired land in Ayodhya, the Supreme Court has, in a larger sense, struck a mighty and welcome blow for the rule of law and secular values which have come under serious threat from the majoritarian communal forces; there can be "no religious activity of any kind by anyone" on the 67 acres of land vested in the Central Government, it has held. The immediate effect of the order, albeit interim in nature, directing maintenance of status quo, pronounced by a three-judge bench, is of course that the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas (RJN)-VHP combine cannot go ahead with its March 15 ritual, by whatever name it is called — shila puja, bhoomi puja or the more recent shila daan — and whether it is 'symbolic' or on an elaborate scale. The Court has been equally authoritative in its opinion that no part of the acquired land be handed over to anyone by the Centre or permitted to be "used for any religious purpose", pending disposal of the writ petition. Thus, with the two crucial demands of the VHP not finding favour with the Judiciary at least for now, its calculated attempt to defeat the very objective of the special 1993 Ayodhya land acquisition enactment — by embarking upon the temple construction, without waiting for the court verdict on the disputed site — stands successfully thwarted.

For the Vajpayee Government, which had never really concealed where its sympathies lay, the Court's ruling is a clear and unmitigated rebuff to the blatantly majoritarian position in favour of the VHP that it had taken on the issue. In fact, the Attorney General, Soli Sorabjee's single brief appeared to be to secure the judicial nod for the March 15 event. Apart from contending that any "temporary" use, for a limited duration, of the undisputed adjacent land is not prohibited and that the direction of status quo (1994 order) pertained only to the disputed site, Mr. Sorabjee went on to spell out in detail the conditionalities and curbs the Government intended to place on the proposed ritual, not failing to invoke the majority community's "strong emotions" attached

to the proposed religious ceremony. The thrust of his case was that such a 'symbolic' limited puja on the 'undisputed' land suffered no legal infirmity and would not impair the rights of Muslims and that, therefore, there was nothing wrong in permitting it, given especially the huge emotional buildup ahead of the event. This line of argument, which amounted to virtually endorsing the chauvinist appeal of the VHP and yielding to its bullying tactics, did not find favour with the Court, which sharply reminded the Centre that it was under the Constitutional obligation to adhere to the 'status quo directive' given by it earlier. By strongly underlining the need to distance Government from religion, the Court has made clear that it intends to safeguard the spirit of secularism as enshrined in the Constitution.

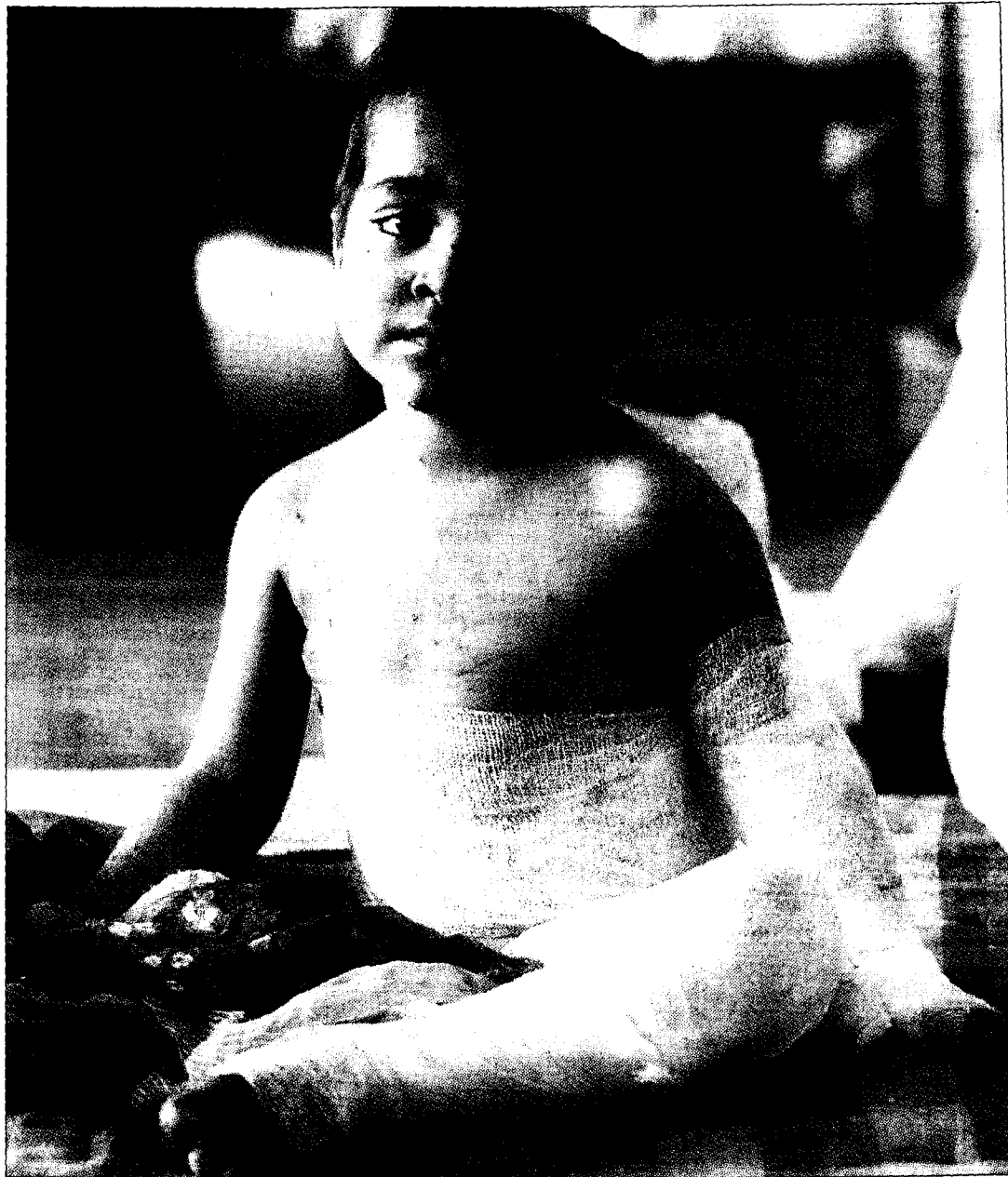
At the political level, the 'secular' constituents of the ruling NDA — and the TDP — have of course much to cheer about the Court order insisting on maintenance of the status quo. For the BJP, however, it should have come as a big blow for the reason that its calculation of neutralising the strong reservations of the NDA allies by securing the stamp of judicial approval for the VHP's March 15 puja has gone awry. In fact, a whole range of developments over the past two weeks — the Kanchi Sankaracharya's misconceived peace initiative, the "commitments" by the RJN and the VHP to 'abide' by the court verdict, the progressive scaling down of the puja, et al — suggested a cleverly laid out plan to convince the Court that there was nothing sinister about the VHP's move to formally launch the temple construction. Now that the Supreme Court has categorically ordered the maintenance of status quo in the Ayodhya complex, it is for the Centre and the Uttar Pradesh administration (now under its charge) to ensure that the directive is not violated by the 'Ram Sevaks', with or without the blessings of their mentors. Now, the onus is on the Vajpayee administration to ensure that the VHP, the RJN and their frenzied followers obey the Court order and abandon their incendiary campaign.

THE HINDU

14 MAR 2002

Toll crosses 300, riots spread

Petition & Protest
But Chief Minister Narendra Modi claims State limping back to normalcy



A child injured in the riots sits inside a mosque in Ahmedabad where his father took refuge.

Vinod Sharma
Ahmedabad, March 2

THE NUMBERS game does not tell the real story. Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi today flashed statistics to claim that the worst was over and the State was limping back to normalcy. Official figures say that in the last two days, 300 people have died in the riots. Unofficial sources though dispute this: they say that the real toll is well over 350. Ahmedabad was relatively calm today thanks to the strong presence of the Army. But the hatred and the killings have now spilled over to the rural areas.

Today, reports of clashes came in from the villages and smaller towns of Gujarat. In Surat, which was calm till yesterday, six people were burnt and stabbed to death. Godhra and the neighbouring areas continued to boil: ten more people died today, two of them when the police fired to separate the warring groups. To add to the Chief Minister's worries, there were reports of three British citizens of Gujarat-origin having gone missing. The Blair regime, through its High Commission in India, has brought the matter to New Delhi's notice.

However, at a press conference this evening, Modi maintained that vast areas of the State were now "peaceful with a perceptible lowering of tension". But he was quick to add that his Government had requested for the deployment of another brigade of the Army. Today, the Chief Minister con-

Day 3: Taking Stock

■ **DEATHS:** The toll went up today to 289. 47 died in police firing and the rest in rioting. The Godhra train carnage toll remains 58

■ **PROPERTY DAMAGE:** 170 homes set on fire, 265 shops, 154 kiosks and 10 buses

■ **CURFEW IN:** Ahmedabad, Baroda, Sabarkantha, Rajkot, Bharuch, Gandhinagar, Anand

■ **ARMY DEPLOYMENT:** Ahmedabad (nine columns) Baroda (three columns), Godhra (three columns) and Rajkot (two columns). State Govt has asked for more forces

■ **POLICE ACTION:** Statewide the police have fired 1,817 rounds and exploded 2,306 teargas shells to control rioting after the massacre at Godhra.

vened a meeting of parties represented in the State Assembly. Modi exhorted all sections of political opinion to shelve differences and meet the grave challenge before them.

Since last night, the police fired 1031 rounds and burst 1641 teargas shells, leaving 37 people dead in different parts of the State. Of these, 13 deaths were reported from Ahmedabad, which remains the worst-hit. This evening, trouble spilled over into adjoining Gandhinagar, and Union Home Minister LK Advani's constituency. Modi told *Hindustan Times* that Advani might be arriving here tomorrow.

Ahmedabad residents are still angry with the way the partisan police behaved. Most of them felt that the Army should have been deployed in a more tactical way. "But the Army jawans are not fa-

miliar with the local topography. Their movements are guided by the local police whose failure to protect our lives and properties necessitated calling out the troops in the first place," complained some residents of Bapunagar, State Home Minister Govardhanbhai Zadhafia's Assembly constituency.

To tighten its tenuous hold on the situation, the Modi Government has placed all private TV news channels on the watch-list after agreeing to suspend a temporary ban on Star News. "Police Commissioners and District Magistrates have powers under the Cable Television Network Regulation Act, 1995, to ban any channel," explained Additional Chief Secretary (Home) Ashok Narayan.

Related reports on Page 6

REUTERS PHOTO

Religion
100.9
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Return land, VHP tells Govt.

NEW DELHI, FEB. 23. Firing a fresh salvo on the Ram temple issue, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad on Friday asked the Vajpayee Government to return the land acquired by the Centre in Ayodhya to the Ram Janmabhoomi Trust if it wanted to remain in power.

"If they (BJP) want to remain in power, they will have to think of returning the land acquired by the Government," the VHP's international working president, Ashok Singhal, told 'Aaj Tak.'

The religious leaders had already announced their plan to launch a 'satyagraha' if the Government did not take a decision on the issue by March 15, he

said. "No Government in this country can survive by oppressing religious leaders. We have seen the fate of Mulayam Singh Yadav. Can anyone now think, like Mulayam Singh, of suppressing Hindu religious leaders?"

Mr. Singhal expressed the hope that sooner or later, the BJP would realise that it could get an absolute majority on its own if it was motivated by Hindutva.

Later, speaking to presspersons in Ayodhya, he said the VHP was ready to allow the construction of a mosque outside the 'parikrama marg' at the

temple site but would not accept it being named after Babar.

"A mosque can be built outside the 'parikrama marg' but under no circumstances will the VHP accept it being called Babri mosque."

Reiterating the VHP's resolve to start the temple construction next month, Mr. Singhal said "we will wait till March 12 for the Prime Minister to resolve the issue and will go ahead with our temple construction programme from March 15. The carved stones will be moved towards the temple site thereafter."

Opp barbs at PM statement

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Feb. 20. — Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav today urged the President to dismiss the Prime Minister for his reported statement at an election rally in Varanasi yesterday that the BJP could win elections without the support of Muslims. The Congress did not go as far as to seek Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee's resignation, but strongly criticised him. Expectedly, the BJP dismissed Mr Yadav's demand outright.

Mr Vajpayee, according to a news agency report, had castigated the Opposition parties who had been appealing to the Muslims to defeat the BJP. The reaction from the Samajwadi Party was sharp. It wrote to the Election Commission to make an inquiry into his statement in Varanasi and disenfranchise him. In the letter to Mr KR Narayanan, Mr Yadav said: "This is a dangerous statement which could further break the country. By making this statement

in a public meeting, he is guilty of violating the code of conduct of the election commission". The letter urged the President "to call for an explanation from the Prime Minister and dismiss Mr Vajpayee immediately".

The BJP reacted sharply to Mr Yadav's demand. Senior party leader, Mr JP Mathur, said it was a meaningless prejudicial exercise. There was no reaction or clarification from the PMO. Sources said what Mr Yadav was saying was an interpretation of reports about the rally. Mr Yadav was trying to give it a communal colour on the eve of the third phase of polls tomorrow, they added.

The Congress denounced the reported statement and said adopting such "tactics are unworthy of a person holding the post of the Prime Minister".

The CPI-M general secretary, Mr HS Surjeet, said: "The statement is aimed at communally dividing this country".

THE STATESMAN

Only court can resolve Ayodhya issue now: PM

Times News Network
LUCKNOW: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Saturday said his efforts to find a solution to the Ayodhya issue had failed and that the only course open now was to await the court verdict, for which two more judges would soon be appointed to the Ayodhya bench.

Mr Vajpayee, however, appeared confident that the government would avoid any confrontation with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) on the issue. He said the VHP demand for handing in the disputed land in Ayodhya had been referred to the law ministry for its opinion.

Coming out strongly in support of Mr Vajpayee, the BJP said that he had made a "statement of fact" on his failure to resolve the tangle. Referring to the statement that efforts had failed "due to the unrelenting attitude of both the parties", party president Jana Krishnamurthy said, "The Prime Minister has made a statement of fact. I would like to wait until March 12" (the deadline given by the VHP for temple construction).

Earlier, the VHP expressed surprise at Mr Vajpayee's remark that it had been "unrelenting" in its attitude on the Ayodhya issue, saying that it had announced the date during the Kumbh Mela and was only sticking to it. Regarding Mr Vajpayee's observation that the only course left to resolve the imbroglio now was to await the court verdict, VHP chief Acharya Giriraj Kishore said, "We are not a party in the court. My land does not come under the court's jurisdiction."

Taking a firm line, he said, "We will go to jail, struggle, but will try to accomplish the work" (construction of the temple in Ayodhya).

Referring to the laws of the land, he said, "The law of the land will be there" and asked "but is it only for us, and not for anybody else?"

Meanwhile, Congress president Sonia

Gandhi said the BJP and the VHP were engaged in a "friendly match" on the issue and asked Mr Vajpayee to tell the saffron forces raising the issue that the court order would be honoured. "Everyone knows that the temple issue was pending in court and its judgment would be accepted by all," she said.

She accused the BJP of raising the temple issue and terrorism only for political gains in the assembly elections. In the last ten or 12 years, whenever there had been an election, the party had raised the Ayodhya issue, she said, adding, "It forgets Ram after coming to power."

Raising the issue of terrorism, Mr Vajpayee, who was in the middle of an election campaign, accused Pakistan of sheltering terrorists. "I will not be surprised if Osama bin Laden is found hiding there," he said and demanded a "thorough search" for the fugitive terrorist.

Mr Vajpayee expressed confidence that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies would get a majority in the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh.


Commenting on the conflicting projections made by the different exit polls in UP, he said the BJP and its allies were on the "victory path". On being asked about a post-poll alliance in the event of the BJP not getting an absolute majority, he said, "We will take a decision after the results."

Alleging that "the BJP wanted to foment communal tension by talking of the temple", she asked the people not to be misguided by such elements bent upon breaking the secular fabric of the country.

She claimed the Congress was the only party which could provide a clean and efficient administration and fight the communal forces in the country.

She accused the BJP government in up of "having failed on all fronts" and that development had taken a back seat in the state

TEMPLE TANGLE



A B Vajpayee Giriraj Kishore

- ▶ Govt has failed to resolve temple issue, says PM
- ▶ Vajpayee made a statement of fact, says BJP
- ▶ VHP expresses surprise at PM's remark
- ▶ It's merely a friendly BJP-VHP match, says Sonia

No more talks, work on temple will start after March 12: VHP

Times News Network

NEW DELHI: The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) on Tuesday ruled out any further talks with the government on the Ram temple issue, saying it was determined to go ahead with its plans to start construction any time after March 12.

VHP international secretary general Pravin Togadia said the Parishad proposed to mobilise ten lakh "Ram sevaks" from all over the country when the construction was launched. 'Chalo Ayodhya yatras' from various parts of Uttar Pradesh would converge at the venue, he added.

He was addressing the press after a meeting of the VHP's governing council and the board of trustees, which wanted the government immediately to hand over to the Ramjanmabhoomi trust the 67 acres of undisputed land surrounding the site where the Babri masjid once stood.

Asked if the VHP would label the Prime Minister "anti-Hindu", Mr Togadia said they would not say so until March 12. However, he pointed out that the Prime Minister had taken some action to explore the possibility of



A file photo of the Babri masjid.

handing over the undisputed land to the Ramjanmabhoomi trust by referring the matter to the Union law minister.

"All Atal Behari Vajpayee has to do is only to give back the land which had been taken away by the Narasimha Rao government in 1993," he said, claiming that the

undisputed land could be transferred by an executive order "within one minute" and that there was no injunction of the supreme court in the matter.

Asked as to whether the VHP's plans would not endanger the BJP-led government at the Centre, Mr Togadia said they were "not bothered" whether the government stayed or fell, adding, "How can the sacrifice of one government be a big thing for the Ram bhakts?"

At their meeting with the PM on Sunday, VHP leaders had asked that legal opinion be secured before March 12 since they planned to begin construction of the temple thereafter. Mr Vajpayee refused to give any assurance and reportedly added that even if it was legally possible, the land would not be handed over unless the BJP's NDA partners as well as the opposition agreed.

RSS and govt heading for showdown

Sudesh K Verma
in New Delhi

Religion
pen
28/11

Jan. 28. — The RSS and the government are heading for a confrontation unless the former persuades the *sants* (religious leaders) to give more time to the NDA to resolve the Ayodhya tangle.

An alternative is the "resignation" of Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, as Mr LK Advani privately said the government won't like to open fire on *sants*. Both Mr Vajpayee and Mr Advani told the VHP delegation that the government couldn't allow it to start the construction of the proposed Ram temple; if the *sants* insisted, the government would have no option but to resign, RSS sources said.

They also turned down the proposal that a group of ministers be set up to look into the issue. The Union sports minister, Miss Uma Bharati, reportedly mediated on behalf of the VHP on Saturday to try to find out if the *sants* would give six more months to the government. To reciprocate it, she suggested that a group of ministers be set

up as a face saver for the VHP. Both sides rejected the proposals as the former insisted on the 12 March deadline and the government wasn't keen to send a wrong message by setting up a GoM, sources said. Mr Vajpayee wasn't ready to offer more than examination of the VHP's claim to the land which is undisputed.

During a meeting with the Prime Minister on Sunday, the *sants* argued they'd organise a peaceful programme, but the government argued that there was no guarantee that this wouldn't escalate the tension. And the BJP, which owes a lot to sadhus for its parliamentary strength, couldn't dare to fire on them, sources said.

The VHP has announced its decision to go ahead with the *puṇahuti* programme from 24 February and plans a gathering of about ten lakh people in Ayodhya by the end of the hundredth day of *puṇahuti*. The RSS, however, seems unsure if such a large crowd could be controlled.

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Vajpayee dodges sants' demand

Hemendra Singh Bartwal
New Delhi, January 27

THE VHP and Hindu sants today failed to get any assurance from A B Vajpayee on their demand for return of the undisputed land at Ayodhya to the Ram Janmabhoomi Trust for temple construction. Nor were they given any assurance that the Ayodhya dispute would be resolved by the March 12 deadline set by the sants.

Following a meeting with the Prime Minister, a delegation of Hindu seers led by VHP leader Ashok Singhal had to be content with the Government's offer that it would "examine" the legal and constitutional aspects of handing over the 67-acre plot around the disputed site, which was acquired by the Centre after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992.

After giving the sants a patient hearing, Vajpayee reportedly told them that he was bound by

TEMPLE DYNAMICS

- VHP leaders meet in Delhi to demand that the Centre hand over 67 acres of land in Ayodhya, acquired in 1993, to Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas by March 12 for construction of a Ram temple.
- During the meeting with VHP leaders, Govt says it will examine legal aspects of handing over the undisputed plots around the disputed site. PM decides that the Law Minister will examine how related court cases could be speeded to smoothen the handover.
- Ashok Singhal says if the land is not handed over by March 12, temple construction would begin anytime thereafter.

the Constitution and they must wait for a satisfactory resolution of the issue, which he was attempting. The Government would try to resolve the dispute by March 12, he promised.

Leaders of NDA parties firmly told the PM yesterday that the issue must be sorted out by constitutional means, either through a court ruling or a negotiated settlement between the parties

to the dispute.

Swami Satyamitranandgiri of Haridwar, who was part of the delegation, said L K Advani and NDA convener George Fernandes — who were present at the meeting — expressed the Government's inability to transfer the undisputed land to the Trust.

The VHP-sponsored trust proposes to begin construction of the outer perimeter of the tem-

ple complex on the land while leaving aside the small disputed portion, where a makeshift temple stands.

The PM said Union Law Minister Arun Jaitley would be asked to examine the legal and constitutional implications of any proposal to hand over the acquired land to the Trust as well as explore how the related court cases could be expedited.

After the meeting, Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas (trust) president Paramhans Ramchandra Das and Singhal announced at a rally that they would wait till the March deadline for the PM to fulfil his "promise". If nothing concrete materialised, they would launch an 'Ayodhya chalo' campaign and begin the temple construction at any auspicious date.

"I told the PM I will not talk to the Government again. The *mandir* will be built and no power on earth can stop us," Das said at the rally.