

Gujarat made 2002 the year of Hindutva

Religious
position
9-12

The colour saffron

31/12

"Freedom is an easily spoken word
But facts are stubborn things."
— John Cornford, "Full Moon at
Tierz"

RUDRANGSHU MUKHERJEE

ish. It is the manifestation of this variety which is under threat from the monism of the sangh parivar. One of the measures of a civilized society is how it treats its minorities. It is this that is under threat from the activities of the sangh parivar.

Even those who dislike all that the Bharatiya Janata Party stands for and all those who sail under the saffron flag, will be compelled to admit that the year 2002 has been the year of saffron.

The keynote of the year was struck with the pogrom in Gujarat in February-March, although the official discourse on the matter and conventional wisdom on it insist on using the bizarre euphemism "communal riot" to describe the events. The year ended with what can only be described as a popular endorsement of the violence: the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi returned triumphantly to power with a thumping majority. A substantial population (nearly 40 per cent) voted against the BJP but this was not enough to dispel the impression that the people of Gujarat had no reservations against Modi and the violence with which his government was implicated earlier in the year.

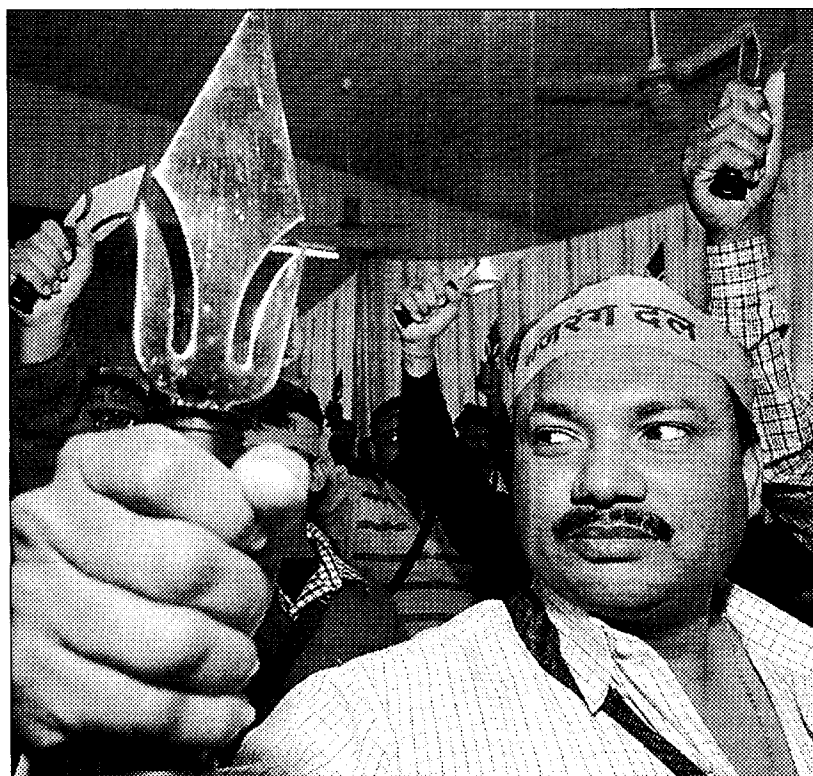
It is said that during the revolt of 1857, the very name Cawnpore incited the bloodlust of the British troops as it reminded them of the massacres carried out there by the Indians. Cawnpore became the metaphor for revenge and the British killed indiscriminately in North India. The name Godhra performed the same function for the Hindu population of Gujarat. It provoked them to perpetrate acts of terror and murder against Muslims.

What happened in Godhra is still not known and given the opacity of Indian political life it probably never will be known. A bogie of a train was burnt by an incensed mob, and people inside were roasted alive. The unanswered questions about the incident continue to dance on the dead bodies. Why only that particular bogie? How did the mob gather in the short time the train was at the station? Who pulled the chain to make the train stop? Where did the inflammable material come from? What about the forensic report which said that the inflammable material was actually inside the compartment? Why the sudden act of violence against the *kar sevaks*? What caused it? There are no answers to these questions. But this did not take away the edge from the avenging zeal of the *sangh parivar*.

The consequences of the event have thus somewhat overshadowed the event itself. Godhra was Gujarat's Reichstag fire. Students of the history of Nazi Germany know that on February 27, 1933, Marinus van der Lubbe, a Dutch ex-communist, set the Reichstag on fire as an individual act of protest against the injustice done to the working class. The entire

Nazi leadership deliberately read it as the product of a well-planned communist conspiracy. Violence and repression were let loose and in their wake came elections which put Hitler in power with 44 per cent of the vote. An individual's act was deliberately projected as the manifestation of a political conspiracy and violence unleashed against a political group. In Gujarat, a mob's action, coincidentally on Febru-

and the consequent demonization of Islam are marked. This feeds into the easy stereotypes peddled by the sangh parivar and often unquestioningly accepted by even educated members of the majority community. The other is internal to India. The heady mix of Hindutva, Hindu self-aggrandizement and aggressive nationalism — the three constitutive elements of the sangh parivar's message — touches a



Tridents are stubborn things

ary 27, the date of the Reichstag fire, was used as the pretext to kill and plunder members of a community. In both cases, election victories resulted. In both cases, a political party orchestrated the violence and the government stood by and in some cases even participated. The analogy is frightening.

The fear was aggravated by assertions from the leadership of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad that Gujarat was an experiment which could be repeated in other parts of India. The BJP has not gone to this extent, but it is clear that influential leaders and the rank and file see Gujarat as a kind of model. There is also the widespread recognition within the BJP, *pace* whatever Atal Bihari Vajpayee says, that *Hindutva* and the sentiments associated with it constitute their electoral winning ticket.

The articulation of such feelings has to be seen in two separate contexts. One is the external context in which the global rise of Islamic terrorism

subterranean chord in the new-rich and middle-class Hindu mind, in India and in the Hindu diaspora. The emotional and political presence of *Hindutva* thus cannot be wished away.

The instrumentalities of *Hindutva* are quite evident: mobilization along religious lines, violence against minorities and a thrust towards making India into a Hindu *rashtra*. The implications of these are equally clear. They involve a complete redefinition of the Indian republic. It means the end of secularism and perhaps even the end of democratic and liberal values in society. Radicals of a particular persuasion might argue that these so-called values have, in any case, been non-existent in India so they cannot come to an end. The point is to understand that Indian democracy, for all its fragility, and Indian society, for all its shortcomings, have space for various kinds of opinions, lifestyles and practices. This space has allowed forms of extremism, colour saffron and colour red, to flour-

It can be argued that in modern Indian political life, there have always existed certain extremist elements but eventually the working of the system has tamed them. Witness Jawaharlal Nehru, fire-eating socialist in the Thirties, the voice of the moderate establishment as prime minister. Witness Jyoti Basu and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), destroyers of public property and purveyors of revolution in the Sixties, the voice of law and order and masters of the art of electioneering in government — revolution no longer even a blip on their computer screens. Similarly, the argument runs, the sangh parivar, over time, will be tamed by the system and appropriated by the mainstream. A corollary of the argument says that just as when the CPI(M) turned to parliamentarism, a disgruntled and disillusioned group turned to armed revolution, the cornerstone of communism, similarly, the BJP's turn to governance and economic reforms under Vajpayee has created disaffection. Modi represents this disillusionment and the emphasis on *Hindutva*, a repackaging of the BJP's principal identity kit. Narendra Modi, this argument would say, is the BJP's Charu Mazumdar. As misdirected, as destructive, and as irrelevant.

Unstated in the above argument is the prescription that the sangh parivar, especially its political wing, should be accommodated within the political system. This is the only viable mode of containing it. Ostracism and confrontation can only aggravate the problem. The argument makes a distinction between Vajpayee and Modi. This distinction between governance and *Hindutva* may not be tenable since within the BJP there are persons like Arun Jaitley who appeared to be committed to governance and not ideology but are now some of the strongest advocates of Modi and his line. The line of accommodation was tried by none other than Franz von Papen, the leader of the Centre Party *vis à vis* the Nazis. One knows the consequences. Can India take the risk?

This will be the moot question for 2003 and may remain so for some more time. In its resolution, the secular, rational and liberal voices will perhaps have the least say. Already, the VHP has announced that its next target will be the secularists. The upholders of reason, secularism and liberal values have already been relegated to the status of the tiger, India's most endangered species. Here we stand, for we know no other.

Secular parties must strongly contest BJP's claim about nationalism and terrorism

Fight Hindutva head-on

BY PRAFUL BIDWAI

IT IS an utter and unmitigated disgrace and a setback to Indian democracy that Narendra Modi has returned to power in Gujarat after presiding over India's worst-ever State-sponsored pogrom of a religious minority. Modi reaped a rich harvest of hatred in a state that has in many ways been uniquely communalised for a decade or more, and where poisonous Hindutva has penetrated into the deepest interstices of civil society.

Nothing other than such penetration can explain why the BJP's vote rose by six percentage-points despite its abysmal governance — which turned India's fastest-growing state into a maladministered economic laggard and a cesspool of social backwardness, and despite the jungle law and barbarism that have prevailed in Gujarat since February 27.

However, as the tremors from Gujarat subside, it is becoming apparent that Modi's victory was neither as spectacular and comprehensive as it first seemed, nor solely/mainly the result of Hindutva's appeal. The BJP's greatest gains were in north and central Gujarat, the regions worst affected by the post-Godhra violence.

The Congress's 51 seats and the JD(U)'s two seats seem puny vis-à-vis the BJP's 126 (out of 182). But the anti-BJP parties came within striking distance of victory in 40 other constituencies, with their combined vote exceeding the BJP's. Had the Congress won, say, two-thirds of these, it would have bagged a respectable 80 seats, against the BJP's 95.

A far greater source of Modi's victory lay in the secular opposition's failure to take on the BJP on its 'strong' points, not just 'weak' ones related to development, collapsing public services and corruption. The Congress ran an energetic campaign on these but adopted a soft-Hindutva line and totally dodged the issues of communalism, its menace to the citizen and constitutional democracy, and of Modi & Co's culpability for the post-Godhra pogrom.

Crucially, the Congress left the field wholly uncontested as the BJP equated Hindutva with nationalism and made thoroughly dishonest claims about the efficacy of its militant 'counter-terrorism' strategy. Thus, Modi's rantings about 'Miyam Musharraf', which ludicrously accused Indian Muslims of colluding with the Pakistani State, went completely unchallenged.

The Congress allowed Modi to indulge in rabid hate-speech about "Muslim treachery" and Gujarat's *asmita* (self-esteem) in avenging



UNITE: Sonia Gandhi with opposition MPs protesting against the Gujarat killings

this — with insensate violence. Shankarsinh Vaghela, who repeatedly stressed that he has "no ideological differences with the RSS", had no answer to the calumny. The BJP's core-campaign combined xenophobic Hindutva with slander of Muslims and 'foreigners' (Sonia Gandhi), vitriolic jingoism and a Nazi-style cult of authority.

The single greatest lesson from Gujarat is that the BJP cannot be successfully combated through 'conventional' approaches focusing on governance, caste equations or anti-incumbency alone. In today's circumstances — defined by the spread of toxic nationalism, a culture of intense intolerance, and Islamophobia, especially in the post-9/11 period, there has to be a strong ideological-political campaign against Hindutva in all its variants, from Vajpayee-Advani to Modi-Togadia.

Unless the secular parties approach the coming slew of state elections with this lesson clearly inscribed into their strategy, they may squander away the advantages they enjoy over the BJP in these states. None of these is even remotely communalised in relation to Gujarat, with its history of consolidation of rigid caste divides over two centuries; absence of social reform along with persistent upper-caste dominance; rapid growth and industrialisation without modernisation of attitudes, values and institutions; recent rise of backward-looking sectarian religious cults; 20-year long campaigns of violence targeting Dalits and Muslims; and not the least, the ultra-conservative influence of North American NRIs (of whom Gujarat has the highest proportion, among all states).

In Gujarat, Hindutva serves as an ideological weapon for upper-class, upper-caste interests, to be used in an especially coercive way against democratic power-sharing urges from below. This is hardly true

of Himachal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh or Delhi (although the Congress is vulnerable, especially in Rajasthan, for governance and drought-related issues).

The BJP must be soundly defeated in the state elections. At the national level, it must be politically unhinged. An adequate challenge to it needs five campaign planks, besides seat-sharing and coordination between all secular parties.

■ The BJP's core ideology of Hindutva must be ruthlessly exposed as divisive, extremist, deeply illiberal and incompatible with India's composite culture, its rich pluralism, and the constitutional values of democracy, secularism and universal citizenship. It is vital to remind the public that the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha played no role in the freedom movement — their main enemy being Muslims, not colonialism. It is the Hindutva ideologues who founded the two-nation theory.

■ Despite its tub-thumping 'proactive' rhetoric, the BJP-NDA's strategy to prevent, counter and contain terrorism has proved completely bankrupt. Not only was India bled to the extent of Rs 10,000 crore — four times the central health budget — during the pointless 10-month long mobilisation of 700,000 troops in a caricature of Rambo-style militarism; some of the worst terrorist attacks (e.g. Akshardham) have taken place during the build-up, and more generally, during the NDA rule.

Hardliners in India and Pakistan feed on, and have developed a stake in, one another.

Indiscriminate State coercion or repression — e.g. Kashmir or Ansal Plaza — targets innocent citizens and inflames the social pathologies underlying terrorism, besides mocking at the Constitution and the State's legitimacy. 'Proactive, beat-them-kill-them' sloganeering is no strategy. As none other than former RAW official B. Raman argues, this

government has "trivialised counter-terrorism".

■ The secular parties must frontally attack the BJP's portrayal of Islam as inherently anti-assimilationist and intolerant, and its demonisation of Indian Muslims as a *jehadi* Fifth Column. The Indian Muslims' total rejection of *jehad* is remarkable, exemplary, indeed unique. As Raman says, "not a single Indian Muslim — not even from J&K" — ever joined Afghanistan's US-sponsored *mujahideen* in the Eighties, Bin Laden's International Islamic Front in the Nineties or Al-Qaeda/Taliban more recently.

To malign Muslims as anti-Indian and set them loyalty-tests reflects the meanest, narrowest possible mindset, one incapable of tolerance, appreciation of pluralism, syncretism and democratic decency.

■ The BJP's Gujarat electoral victory must be legally challenged in constituencies where it blatantly used religion to gather votes — a manifest malpractice. Secular parties and citizens must move meticulously drafted election petitions. The outstanding *Crime Against Humanity* report of the Concerned Citizens' Commission on Gujarat should serve as the backdrop of an anti-BJP chargesheet.

■ Finally, the secular parties must show they are not afraid of applying the law to prevent and punish communal hate-mongering and inflammatory demagoguery of the kind Modi, Ritambhara and Togadia specialise in. No civilised society can permit hate-speech. If Trent Lott had to quit his US Senate post for making racist remarks about segregation in the Forties, Togadia should spend several years in jail under our penal code.

In forging such a strategy, the Congress must necessarily play a leading role. That is admittedly a tall order. Since December 15, the Congress has shown itself floundering and confused in analysing the Gujarat debacle. It must humbly accept that it needs not just ruthless self-introspection, but also external help — just as it did in mobilising voters in Gujarat.

Sonia Gandhi will do well to hold a series of serious, structured consultations and discussions between key Congressmen, and Left-liberal political leaders, academics, intellectuals and anti-communal NGOs and activists. The aggressive Hindutva challenge is too big to be countered by tired practitioners of manipulative politics, 'middle-path' issue-fudging approaches or soft-Hindutva strategies.

Too much is at stake — not least the future of democratic India as one of the world's most plural, multi-cultural, multi-religious societies.

VHP rakes up Ram temple issue again

By Neena Vyas

NEW DELHI, DEC. 20. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad today declared its intention to rake up the Ram temple issue once again. A warning was issued that after a "dharam sansad" on February 22 and 23, 2003 in Delhi, an announcement would be made for starting construction of the temple "anytime in the next 18 months".

If the VHP keeps to this schedule, it would mean that the issue would be taken up in a big way in the run-up to the Lok Sabha election to be held by September-October 2004.

Over the last 10 years since the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the VHP has announced such dates several times, most notably before every election in Uttar Pradesh and around the time of the Lok Sabha elections.

This time, the 'sadhus' said today, they would not meet the Prime Minister. "We have no plan to meet the Prime Minister before or after the 'dharam sansad'. If he wants to meet us, let him come," Ramchandra Paramhans, leading light of the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas controlled by the VHP, said. "I am not a toy for political parties to play with," he added, denying that he and other 'sadhus' had been exploited by the Bharatiya Janata Party.

VHP leaders and leading lights among the 'sadhus' in their trust, the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas, were present at a press conference here today. From the VHP, the line-up included Ashok Singhal, Giriraj Kishore and Vishnu Hari Dalmia. Also present were the former BJP MP from Gorakhpur, Avaidyanath, and the current

BJP MP from Varanasi, Shankar Prasad Jaiswal. Mahant Avaidyanath lamented that despite having an overwhelming majority of Hindus in Parliament the Ram temple issue had not been resolved. He said that an "andolan" (movement) would be

Dara Singh's mother honoured

NEW DELHI, DEC. 20. In an apparent endorsement of Dara Singh, prime accused in the killing of the Australian missionary, Graham Staines, and his two children, the VHP president, Vishnu Hari Dalmia, honoured his mother and gave her Rs. 25,000 at a function here on Wednesday.

Raj Rani, mother of Singh who is behind bars after surrendering to police, his brother Arvind Kumar, and Mukesh Jain, president of the Dharmarakshak Shri Dara Sena, were honoured at a function organised to celebrate the birthday of the former MP and VHP leader, B.L. Sharma 'Prem'. — PTI

started to decide the issue. The aim was to get rid of the "symbols of slavery".

Ramchandra Paramhans said that all that was needed to get rid of terrorism was to "demolish" the mosques in Varanasi and Mathura and to rebuild temples that existed there before the Mughal period.

He said: "my patience is running out. Anytime during the next 18 months, I will begin construction of the Ram temple (with or without the Vajpayee Government's help, with or without a court order).

Hindutva lesson for poll pundits

Pramit Pal Chaudhuri
New Delhi, December 15

IT REALLY depended on how much weight you gave Hindutva, say various pollsters who tried to predict the results of the Gujarat Assembly elections.

If you concluded that communal issues, as opposed to caste or just governance, would win the day, your forecast was more or less right and you gave the BJP over 120 seats. If you didn't, you were like Prem Chand Palety of the Centre for Forecasting and Research, licking your wounds.

His opinion poll for *Outlook* magazine was the only one which had awarded victory to the Congress by 20 to 30 seats. Palety said, "I believed that Hindutva would not last as a poll issue, that caste and class equations and governance issues would take over." He awarded most of the 24 per cent "indecisive" voters his pollsters came up with to the Congress. "I presume all these were tak-



en by the Hindutva hate wave," he said.

Perhaps because their polls because were taken later, pollsters like Yogendra Yadav and K Ahluwalia had less uncertain votes and had no doubts that the BJP was going to take the swing votes.

Yadav, whose poll for *Frontline*/NDTV forecast 120 seats for the BJP, said, "Though ours was a small survey, we got it more or less right. We concluded the BJP would lead by 15 to 20 per cent. And the post-poll figures were 10 to 11 per cent." Pale-

ty believes there was a direct correlation between the influence of the riots and the success of the BJP, even claiming that the BJP's better-than-expected results in Saurashtra were a consequence of communal polarisation. He was harder put to explain why the BJP flopped in south Gujarat.

Ahluwalia's ORG-MARG polls for *India Today* were curious because their first poll proved more accurate than the later one. Ahluwalia has said that he had pared down the BJP's tally in the second forecast because he had expected a stronger anti-incumbency factor. However, this anti-incumbency sentiment was not reflected in the figures.

But unlike Palety, ORG-MARG gave the bulk of the undecided voters to the BJP. This was not only because of communal polarisation, but also because of the view that the BJP Government's successes in water provision would blunt the normal "throw them all out" mood.

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

We lost out to Hindutva: Cong.

By Javed M. Ansari

Release from 40/1 19/12

NEW DELHI, DEC. 15. The Congress has blamed the Bharatiya Janata Party's "Hindutva" campaign for its defeat in the elections to the Gujarat Assembly. The AICC general secretary in-charge of the State, Kamal Nath, said today that his party had been "done in" by the "intensity of the Hindutva wave."

Neither the party leadership in the State nor those in charge of the election campaign at the AICC had fathomed the depth of the "Hindutva" fervour or the post-Godhra religious polarisation. "They also spread the canard that there would be a Muslim backlash if the BJP won," Mr. Nath told mediapersons. The AICC headquarters bore a deserted look and most of the leaders appeared stunned and surprised by the extent of the BJP's victory.

Senior leaders cited cold statistics to drive home the point that the post-Godhra events had polarised the polity in Gujarat on communal lines. The Congress had lost 52 of the 65 seats in the riot-hit areas, and failed to win a single seat within a 100-mile radius of Godhra. The extent of polarisation, as also the manner in which it overcame all other considerations, including caste, was borne out by the results from central Gujarat, the epicentre of the post-Godhra riots. The BJP won 42 of the 50 seats from the area.

The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, chose not to react publicly. She asked the State leaders to furnish a report on the debacle. She is likely to confer with the Gujarat Congress chief, Shankarsinh Waghela, Amarsinh Choudhary and Mr. Nath tomorrow. Though Mr. Waghela has reportedly offered to resign, it is unlikely that Ms. Gandhi will accept his resignation.

CAMPAIGN ENDS AMID FEAR, FATWAS

Gujarat split on poll eve

11/12
Statesman News Service 571

NEW DELHI, Dec. 10. — The high voltage Gujarat campaign ended this evening with a fresh controversy brewing. Muslim organisations' unofficial *fatwas* asking Muslims to vote only for the Congress were countered by the VHP issuing front page advertisements in leading Gujarati newspapers telling Hindus to back the BJP. The state goes to the polls on Thursday.

With the BJP plea to the Election Commission to take action against the Muslim organisations issuing fatwas, the Gujarat chief electoral officer has been asked to verify the reports. But the EC maintained it hasn't received any complaint from the BJP as yet.

Reports from Ahmedabad recently quoted the BJP national treasurer and in-charge of Gujarat, Mr Ramdass Aggarwal, as saying, "If the EC can take suo motu action against Hindu organisations, prevent or stop their programmes and even get their leaders arrested in the name of misuse of religion, we expect similar action against Muslim outfits issuing fatwas favouring a particular political party."

Religious Fatwa
An advertisement by the VHP in two leading regional dailies — *Gujarat Samachar* and *Sandesh* — has become the topic of debate in political circles. The VHP carried a letter from an Ulema council in the advertisements and asked Hindus to "decisively think about their security" and asked them to vote 100 per cent.

The advertisement claimed the letter was a fatwa that asked Muslims "to vote 100 per cent and in favour of the Congress even if some of the Congress candidates had objectionable roles in the post-Godhra riots."

The chief minister, Mr Narendra Modi, has been using the fatwa issue in his campaign, repeatedly asking to "respond" to it. He has appealed for a 100 per cent turnout if voters wanted to be safe and secure.

The Congress has come out strongly against the VHP's tactic to issue an appeal on the basis of religious lines. It expressed fears of some "sangh parivar outfits trying to instigate violence" on the polling day. The party spokesman, Mr Satyabrata Chaturvedi, alleged that these outfits "sensing a surge in favour of the Congress, are already working towards" creating unrest.

More reports on page 4

Modi's Hindutva vs Vaghela's soft saffron

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 Publisher of *Safar*

SUJAN DUTTA

Ahmedabad, Dec. 9: An eight-column front-page spread in the leading Gujarati newspaper, *Gujarat Samachar*, today is divided into a six-column picture of the crowd in Mehsana on Sunday and a two-column one of Sonia Gandhi, fist raised, *pallu* over the head.

The report below the pictures is headlined "Where is the promise to make Gujarat free of hunger, fear and corruption?" The headline, also in eight columns, is a quote from her speech. The Congress president was poking fun at the BJP, which went to the last Assembly polls promising to rid Gujarat of these demons.

Even six months ago, some of the Gujarati newspapers

were seen to be one-sided. The Editors' Guild in its report castigated two leading Gujarati newspapers for their anti-Muslim and pro-Sangh stories that were said to have fuelled the fire during the post-Godhra riots.

Narendra Modi's gamble with the Hindutva card will be tested in the polls next week, but it has not worked with *Gujarat Samachar*, the state's largest-selling newspaper, which is said to have a circulation of 9 lakh.

From being uncritical of the Sangh earlier to being critical of Modi in the run-up to the polls — as the readers of the paper now find it — the point the *Gujarat Samachar* makes is that it is possible in Gujarat today to be pro-Hindutva and yet be anti-Modi.

That is also the rationale behind Shantersinh Vaghela's soft saffron card.

Till last week, political and social activists, who have gathered here from different parts of the country to campaign against the Modi regime, were finding it difficult to get newspaper hawkers who would distribute their handbills along with the morning dailies.

The hawkers had been advised by VHP activists to carry only their political literature.

"The newsagent used to refuse flatly," says Father Cedric Prakash, from whose Centre for Human Rights, Justice and Peace many of these activists now operate. "But since the last two days, the hawkers have been willing to distribute our leaflets."

Says Shabnam Hashmi, who has come here from Delhi: "We have distributed 50 lakh leaflets so far from 50 nodal points across the state."

Hashmi and Father Cedric point to the changing stance of the *Gujarat Samachar* and the cooperation of the hawkers to stretch their point farther — there is an anti-Modi sentiment.

On CG Road in the heart of Ahmedabad, Rahul Solanki, who runs a cybercafe, says he will vote for the BJP because he knows the candidate personally. His house is in Ellis Bridge constituency, where Modi has defeated former Cabinet colleague Haren Pandya a ticket. The BJP candidate is a Pandya friend, Bhavin Seth.

"I cannot say what will hap-

pen in the rest of the state," says Rahul. "But I run this cybercafe where so many people come to e-mail and surf and stay in touch with people abroad. I think the image of Gujarat has taken a beating. I don't know if the BJP will win. Two months ago, I would have said 'most definitely'. But now I'm not so sure. Yes, we are all horrified by Godhra and Modiji really makes us cry, but there are so many things involved in these elections. Besides, I do not think that if you are a Hindu you will necessarily be a BJP supporter."

Rahul is 26 years, old and moderately prosperous. He says many of his friends had defended the Sangh parivar during the violence in Ahmedabad, but not all them will vote for the BJP. "It's been a little bad

for business."

Soft saffron at work? In the state BJP headquarters at Khanpur, Yaval Vyas, a chartered accountant and resident intellectual, says: "Narendra Modi is Amitabh Bachchan and Sahim Javed rolled into one when he speaks of Godhra. He is moved himself and he can make people cry. His appeal is emotional."

Asked if emotions translate into votes for the BJP, Vyas admits: "That is one thing that no one can measure. That is just what we are hoping will happen. It happened for the Congress in 1984 after Indira Gandhi was killed. We are hoping that Gujarat will be for us 1984 in reverse."

He is aware of what Vaghela is trying to do.

Modi brand

Toxic for the nation

9-11
Religion
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More hangs in the balance in the Gujarat elections than just the fate of a single Indian state; it is arguably of even greater national importance than the recently concluded Kashmir elections. If Modi wins, it will be proved, at least to the BJP's satisfaction, that the strategy of ignoring bread-and-butter developmental issues and polarising the electorate by resort to communal terror works at the hustings, it follows that the party will resort to the same tactics in other states. Venkaiah Naidu has already given notice of this — according to the party president, in case of a BJP win in Gujarat the “Modi approach” will be tried in other states. Arun Jaitley packages the same message in deceptively bland corporatese — he speaks of Modi as a “brand”, which means that if Modi succeeds in the Gujarat “market” the brand will be extended to other states. The central BJP leadership has not had much success in restraining Modi even when it wanted to, as was evident when Modi dragged his feet and eventually had his way over denying a party ticket to dissident Haren Pandya. Meanwhile his *gaurav yatra* continued in which the central prop for inciting hatred against minorities was a replica of the burning train at Godhra. While this is undertaken under the rubric of “nationalism”, launching pogroms and terrorising Muslims and other minorities everywhere is going to be disastrous for the nation, yet it will look irresistibly attractive to a BJP desperate to win back at least some of the 14 Congress ruled states as well as in the Lok Sabha elections scheduled in 2004.

New Delhi was able to fend off international opprobrium over the Gujarat pogroms by arguing that it was confined to a single state and did not spread to the rest of the country; that argument will no longer be valid. The Al Qaeda, meanwhile, is knocking at India's doorstep — they have safe havens in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and have declared support for the *jihad* in Kashmir. If Indian Muslims are brutalised on a large scale, some must be expected to become willing recruits. Blowing up a few temples or other soft targets presents no great difficulty for the Al Qaeda — it has handled tougher operations and Indian security forces can't be everywhere. If the country breaks down in sectarian strife, that would delight Pakistani mischief-makers, as Pakistan is now under scrutiny as a hotbed of religious terror, and the same or worse on a much wider scale through the sub-continent would deflect the attention it is receiving. Besides, if it can be shown that Muslims are not safe in India, it would strengthen the separatist campaign in Muslim-majority Kashmir. Diplomatically speaking, Islamabad would hit New Delhi for a six. Given the relentlessly divisive campaign that Modi has run, and the short-sighted conclusions likely to be drawn from a Modi victory, the best gift Gujarat's electorate can give to the nation is to show him the door.

Conversion message to Jaya

M.R. VENKATESH

Chennai, Dec. 6: Two rounds of conversions unfolded here today to send a message to the Jayalalithaa government that a controversial new law will not succeed when people want to leave Hinduism on their own and fight caste oppression.

The promised thousands did not make it to the event, christened 'mass conversion mela', but the organisers — blamed the low turnout on a police cordon thrown overnight on roads leading to the venue on the outskirts of the city.

Instead of the scheduled 5,000, 50 Dalits embraced Buddhism and 30 Christianity. The organisers — the All-India Confederation of Scheduled Castes/Tribes Organisations — said the symbolic gesture was intended at proving that the new state law against "forcible" conversions would not slow the rate of switchover from Hinduism.

Supporters of conversions said the huge police presence and the extraordinary effort to block the roads lent credence to char-

ges that the state government was bent on targeting even voluntary change of faith.

Alan Hobson, who came from the UK representing a human rights organisation, said the "underlying reason" for the law was to curb all conversions. "If the government was serious, it could have sent observers today to the venue to see if the conversions were voluntary or forced," he said.

The organisers had kept at least 500 stamp papers ready at the venue to facilitate the converts to inform the government as is required under the new law.

The conversion to Christianity was termed a "liberation to casteless faiths that met the aspirations for self-respect and freedom". The mela also resolved to take "open conversions" to the villages.

The event, coinciding with the Babri Masjid demolition anniversary and the death anniversary of Babasaheb B.R. Ambedkar, kept the police on their toes.

The police did not let the organisers erect a shamiana in front of the church where the conversions were held. The pan-

dal workers and their contractor were picked up last night. But the police denied having made any arrest.

Shreds of thatched leaves were strewn on the ground under a large unfinished portion in the roof today. "This is a private place and we are not required to inform the police; rather they have trespassed," said the confederation's chief, Udit Raj. He alleged that vehicles and buses carrying hundreds of Dalits from different parts of Tamil Nadu were stopped at various places.

It looked more like a preaching session than a conversion ceremony till a small group of Dalits trooped in from the nearby districts in the afternoon.

The potential converts raised hands to let know their preferred religion — Christianity or Buddhism.

In a symbolic initiation ceremony, the Archbishop of the Immanuel Church washed the feet of a Dalit man and woman and asked them to chant a prayer with him before baptism. "There is no high or low," he said.

Babri anniversary passes peacefully

New Delhi
6 DECEMBER

AMIDST unprecedented security in the backdrop of apprehensions, the 10th anniversary of Babri masjid demolition on Friday passed off by and large peacefully across the country as thousands of armed security personnel patrolled communally-sensitive places, especially in Ayodhya and Gujarat.

Stones were hurled at buses during a bandh called by a Muslim outfit in Hyderabad and police arrested 250 people when pro and anti-demolition political parties and other groups took out processions defying prohibitory orders in different parts of the country. No violence was reported from Ayodhya, the tinderbox town where demolition of the 16th century mosque on December 6, 1992 set off communal riots across the country leaving nearly 2,000 people dead, as the place was wrapped in a tight security cover.

"Everything is normal," Faizabad district SSP Prashant Kumar said. Police swung into action to remove provocative posters at some places in Uttar Pradesh. Security was also beefed up in mosques in the temple town. The movement of vehicles was banned near Ramjanambhoomi complex in Ayodhya, Krishna Janambhoomi in Mathura and Vishwanath temple-Gyanvyapi mosque in Varanasi and hundreds of paramilitary and Rapid Action Force personnel stood guard following intelligence inputs about the possibility of terrorist attacks on shrines in these places.

In Varanasi, more than 200 activists of Congress, Samajwadi Party, Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal marched through the streets espousing contrasting causes.

In Hyderabad, youths stoned buses during a bandh called by Majlis Bachao Tahrik, which has some pockets of influence in the old city, to protest the demolition of Babri mosque. Rapid Action Force and Andhra Pradesh Special Police guarded places of worship and key installations in the



REWIND: Bajrang Dal members observe the 10th anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Chandigarh on Friday. — Reuters

city that witnessed a bomb blast near a Sai Baba temple recently.

At least 21 Shiv Sainiks were arrested in Patna and an equal number of them rounded up in Jamshedpur when they took out a "victory" procession. By contrast, the Left parties observed the occasion as a "black" day. In New Delhi, workers of Shiv Sena, Samajwadi Party, CPI-ML (new

democracy) and Babri Masjid Reconstruction Committee activists staged sit-in demonstrations.

While the Sena, a key ally in the ruling NDA coalition, accused the Vajpayee government of "backtracking" on the issue of Ram temple construction, BMRC demanded that all cases related to the dispute should be referred to the Supreme Court.

Only 80 Dalits defy Jaya's ban order

Christian News Service

CHENNAI, Dec. 6. — Eighty Dalits converted to Christianity and Buddhism here today in defiance of the TN government's legislation banning religious conversions by force, allurements or fraud.

The ceremony turned out to be a flop. The organisers, All-India SC/ST Confederation, claimed that 3,000 Dalits from Tamil Nadu would convert to their preferred religions. But only 80 showed up, sneaking through the tight police cordon in Selayur in suburban Chennai. The organisers alleged that police tried to prevent Dalits from attending the ceremony by intimidation and arresting some of them.

The Dalits' initiation into Christianity and Buddhism took place at the New Testament Church at Selayur. A priest washed the feet of the 30 Dalits desiring to convert to

Christianity and three Buddhist mantras were read out to a group of 50 men and women embracing Buddhism.

After the ceremony, held amidst an unfinished pandal littered with dried palm leaves and watched by a small gathering of Christians and several mediapersons, the new converts said: "We won't worship Hindu gods. We will neither enter Hindu temples nor observe their festivals."

The national chairman of the All-India SC/ST Confederation, Later, Mr Udit Raj, said: "Now, they are no longer in the caste system." He alleged: "The Jayalalitha's government's legislation denies freedom to an individual to choose his or her own religion. The law



Miss Jayalalitha

her husband, Mr Mohan Raj, said: "The government tried to prevent us from coming to this venue. We are rich and educated, but we were insulted and not allowed to enter temples. Why should we continue to be Hindus? We will go where we are accepted and treated well."

Murugan, a dalit from a village in north Tamil Nadu, converted to Christianity today. He said: "We (Dalits) were are being treated

reflects a nexus between Miss Jayalalitha, the Kanchipuram Mutt Seer and Sangh Parivar. It's obvious that no one can be forced to convert. It is a voluntary decision."

Mrs Vanasundari Mohan Raj, who converted to Buddhism along with

her husband, Mr Mohan Raj, said: "The government tried to prevent us from coming to this venue. We are rich and educated, but we were insulted and not allowed to enter temples. Why should we continue to be Hindus? We will go where we are accepted and treated well."

badly and considered as untouchables by the upper castes. We are given tea in coconut shells because people from other castes do not want to drink from the same cups that we use. We have to fold our arms when we pass another caste member. We cannot wear shoes or shirts. How can we lead such a life? If the government wants to prevent us from converting, then what is it doing to rid untouchability and other social evils?"

Blaming police for the poor turnout, Mr Sam Paul of the SC/ST Confederation said: "Our workers were taken into custody without any reason. Police have been threatening us not to hold these ceremony. They kept coming here from last night to intimidate us and our telephone lines are being tapped. Police stopped the vehicles carrying the Dalits at various points and didn't allow them to enter the venue."

19/11
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2002

POLITICS BY YATRA

Return from 110-110

THE CARETAKER NARENDRA Modi regime in Gujarat has, through a series of appropriate administrative measures, honoured the Election Commission's directive that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's communally inflammatory 'yatra' from Godhra, planned for November 17, should not be allowed to take place. With the State already in election mode, the Government would have been in serious trouble, had it chosen to be indifferent to the EC's fiat or faltered in enforcing the ban. Although the position taken by the BJP's central leadership — as evidenced by the comments of its head, M. Venkaiah Naidu, and spokesperson, Arun Jaitley, expressing strong disapproval of the poll panel's intervention — sent an ominous signal, the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee's statement stoutly defending the EC's order helped put the issue in perspective by emphasising that nothing should be done to "inflame passions" or disturb peace in the name of exercising one's democratic right of reaching out to the people by way of poll campaign. In the event, between themselves, a ruling establishment that was quite alive to the dangers of any misadventure of perceived defiance of the Election Commission and a Sangh Parivar outfit that fully appreciated the compulsions of the BJP (as a party in government) have enacted the farce of an 'aborted yatra'. After all, the VHP's sole concern is to boost, not harm, the poll prospects of the BJP, given especially the party's critical stakes in the contest. Note for instance the VHP leaders' special interest in seeing that their arrest did not provoke a violent backlash and also their calculated attempt to absolve the Modi regime, throwing the entire blame for the ban on "Congress-backed Lyngdoh (the Chief Election Commissioner)". Incidentally, the Gujarat show and the one put up in Ayodhya earlier this year, which had quite a few striking similarities both in their build-ups and denouements, are in a way demonstrative of the Sangh Parivar's cleverly crafted strategy to achieve its ideological goal. If anything, the mu-

tual complementarity between the VHP and the BJP stands out more sharply in Gujarat and this is because of the presence of Mr. Modi, their new-found icon.

True, the controversial 'yatra' from Godhra has been thwarted, thanks to the EC's determined intervention. In real terms, however, it will amount to precious little by way of providing a guarantee against any incendiary communal campaign. The VHP itself has proclaimed its resolve to carry the 'message' (it intended to convey through the banned 'yatra') across the State by other methods of mobilisation — public meetings, rallies, etc. — and to stage a big show on December 6, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Babri Masjid demolition, a 'victory rally' of sorts. Whether it is the VHP leaders or the BJP's Mr. Modi, the leitmotif of their campaign has invariably been the Godhra carnage, the grisly episode being cynically used to generate hatred against the minority community. Now, on his part, Mr. Vajpayee has chosen to speak against making 'Godhra' or its traumatic fallout an election issue in Gujarat and for a focus, instead, on concerns related to development and governance — a proposition that is indeed unexceptionable. But the point is that his own party at the State level and an influential section of its leadership at the central level appeared inexorably set on a Godhra-centred campaign to consolidate the 'majority community vote'. In fact, the first stone for such a divisive strategy was laid several months ago in Goa — and with the blessing of Mr. Vajpayee himself — when the party's national executive decided to back Mr. Modi to the hilt and signalled a return to the aggressive majoritarian line. Given this context and the fact that Mr. Modi had been allowed to get away with his so-called gaurav yatras across the State spewing venom on the minority community, the Prime Minister's counsel, wholesome in itself, seems a concession to propriety and form that is not to be acted upon seriously.

THE HINDU

19 NOV 2002

India can never be a Hindu state: Advani

11/19/02
Times News Network

New Delhi: Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani on Monday endorsed Atal Behari Vajpayee's stand that governance and not Godhra should be the election issue in next month's poll in Gujarat.

Replying to a day-long debate on an opposition-sponsored adjournment motion in the Lok Sabha on the Gujarat situation, Mr Advani said he agreed with the PM's recent statement that political parties should refrain from extracting political mileage from the Godhra incident and the subsequent violence. The BJP and others should see that the Gujarat elections were free, fair and peaceful and that good governance and the security of the minorities were the key poll issues, he added.

Mr Advani went on to state for good measure that contrary to the commonly-held belief, there were no differences between him and Mr Vajpayee and they had always worked together and would continue to do so in future.

The motion, moved by the CPM's Subodh Rai, was defeated by a voice vote.

Mr Advani's reply was deliberately kept brief as he refused to go into all the issues raised by the opposition on the plea that Monday's debate was uncalled for. According to him, the Gujarat situation had earlier been discussed on several occasions and nothing untoward had happened in the state to warrant another debate. This was especially so, he said, since elections had already been announced and any reference to the communal violence would only reopen old wounds.

Stating that the violence had been condemned by everybody and that he himself had described it as a "blot on the government", he said that by raking up the issue repeatedly, the opposition was not being fair to the country. Worldwide, the impression had gained ground that Muslims were not safe where Hindus were in the majority.

This, according to Mr Advani, was absolutely incorrect as India could never be converted into a Hindu state and was deeply committed to secularism which had been spelt out clearly in the constitution. Indian citizens, he declared, would never condone communal violence and neither would they tolerate pseudo-secularism.

Earlier, Pravin Rashtrapal (Congress) took the BJP head-on by castigating Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi and VHP leader Pravin Togadia for picking on Chief Election Commissioner J.M. Lyngdoh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi because both were Christians. "If it is true that the CEC is taking orders

Six hurt in VHP protest

Times News Network

Ahmedabad: At least six persons, including two police officials, sustained serious burn injuries on Monday when VHP workers burnt an effigy of Chief Election Commissioner J.M. Lyngdoh near Ghogha gate police chowky in Bhavnagar district. The VHP was protesting the CEC's ban on the VHP's controversial yatra.

The policemen, including a DSP, were injured when fire-crackers packed inside the effigy exploded. Twelve VHP activists were arrested for the incident.

from the Vatican and 10, Janpath, it is a serious matter. Is the PM no longer functioning? The government owes an explanation to us on this," he said amidst laughter from the opposition benches.

In a strong defence of Ms Sonia Gandhi, he said, "I am an educated man and an MP and therefore cannot use the words used by Mr Togadia to describe Sonia Gandhi in this House. But I want to tell him he has no right to abuse the leader of the opposition. If Mr Modi can go and touch the feet of Sardar Patel's granddaughter-in-law, who is a young woman, let him also learn to respect Indira Gandhi's daughter-in-law."

Pointing out the difference between previous incidents of communal violence in Gujarat and the one that followed Godhra, Mr Rashtrapal said, "What was disturbing this time was the connivance of the administration and the police in the communal violence. That is why our faith is shaken." He pointed out that when Mr Modi referred to Gen Pervez Musharraf as "Mian Musharraf", he was clearly hitting out at Muslims in general.

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VHP changes tactics after yatra is stopped

TIMES NEWS NETWORK AND AGENCIES

Ahmedabad: The Gujarat administration on Sunday foiled the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's attempt to take out its controversial yatra defying an Election Commission ban by arresting VHP leaders Pravin Togadia and Acharya Dharmendra along with about 300 activists in Ahmedabad and Godhra.

Following the arrest of its leaders, the VHP decided to change its tactics. "The yatra will now take the shape of public meetings and rallies in different parts of Gujarat," VHP senior vice-president Acharya Giriraj Kishore said in New Delhi.

Refusing to criticise the Narendra Modi government for Sunday's developments, he said, "The state government was under compulsion due to the Chief Election Commissioner's directives. We don't want to oppose it and hinder the Hindutva forces."

Mr Togadia, who was released after spending about four hours in detention, later told newsmen that the VHP would "remove all those chief ministers and Prime Ministers who object to the formation of a Hindu rashtra". He made it clear that the VHP did not require political leaders who did not toe its line of Hindutva and "created obstacles" in the formation of its "Hindu rashtra".

However, he denied there was any move by the Sangh Parivar to engineer a change in the BJP leadership at the Centre. "The VHP is not interested in internal politics, but only

in a Hindu rashtra," he said when his attention was drawn to reports of a joint effort being made by sections of the Sangh Parivar and the BJP to change the Prime Minister.

Earlier in the day, addressing VHP workers after puja at the Somnath temple, Mr Togadia referred to the hard anti-terror stances of George W. Bush, Ariel Sharon and Vladimir Putin and made an oblique reference to the PM, saying, "We don't want powerless leaders."

Mr Togadia said the day of polling in Gujarat, December 12, was also his birthday and asked for a gift. "I ask for a gift from the people of Gujarat..to give a government that will establish a Hindu rashtra," he said.

Mr Togadia and Acharya Dharmendra were arrested as they were about to set off for Godhra after performing the puja at the Somnath temple. Also arrested were Mr Togadia's wife and daughter.

Tension was palpable since morning in and around the temple. The temple premises were dotted with banners that said "Godhra no jawab, Aaje Gandhinagar, Kaale Dilli and Pachhi Islamabad" (The answer to Godhra—today Gandhinagar, tomorrow Delhi and then Islamabad). The agenda of establishing the supremacy of the Hindutva forces was set with a pledge to "dissolve Pakistan".

Acharya Dharmendra said, "It is a proof of our good behaviour that Ramzan is on, the Quran is being preached in the mosques and namaaz is being offered everywhere, in peace."

● No wave in Gujarat, Page 7

Lyngdoh has a political agenda: VHP

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Ahmedabad: Unleashing a blistering attack on Chief Election Commissioner J.M. Lyngdoh for disallowing the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's proposed 'vijay yatra', Pravin Togadia, the parishad's international general secretary, on Thursday accused the CEC of following a political agenda.

He told a crowded press conference here that the yatra would go ahead as scheduled from Godhra on November 17 since it had been granted permission by the Godhra administration, but it would not display replicas of the burning Sabarmati Express coach.

Mr Togadia attacked Mr Lyngdoh for conceding the Congress party's demand and said, "He has taken the decision on the basis of newspaper reports and overstepped his brief. He has banned a yatra that has not been given final shape and which had never been announced formally by the VHP." Claiming that banning a religious procession did not come under the purview of the Election Commission, Mr Togadia added, "It can only be equated with hanging an unborn child."

Defying the EC's directive, Mr Togadia said it was the VHP's 'adhikar' to take out the yatra. "Neither has this right been given to us in donation nor can it be snatched away by some evil person," he said and maintained that the VHP was not a political party to be bound by the EC's decision. He clarified that the rath would not have any replicas of the ill-fated Sabarmati Express S-6 coach.

In his hour-long press conference, Mr Togadia alleged that Mr Lyngdoh personally wanted to lead the election results in a definite direction. "At the Congress party's conclave at Mount Abu, Sonia

Permission for yatra withdrawn

Ahmedabad: The Gujarat government on Thursday refused permission to the VHP to take out its proposed November 17 yatra. On instructions from the Election Commission, Panchmahals district collector Manoj Agarwal overturned the permission given by the sub-divisional magistrate of Godhra from where the yatra is to begin.

"Yesterday, the SDM granted the permission but today we received instructions from the EC and the earlier order now stands null and void," Mr Agarwal said. PTI

Gandhi behaved like a super-CM of 15 states while Lyngdoh has been acting like the Congress president," he said.

"Lyngdoh cannot terrorise Gujarat's bureaucracy in this fascist manner," said Mr Togadia, adding that the CEC was trying to impose his will on the people of Gujarat.

"The yatra has been banned by the EC not for what we are going to do but because we are a Hindu organisation. We are not going to tolerate this 'badtameeji' (misbehaviour)," he fumed.

Meanwhile, in New Delhi, the BJP strongly defended the right of the VHP to launch a 'vijay yatra' to commemorate the demolition of the Babri masjid a decade ago and castigated the CEC for banning it.

Party president Venkaiah Naidu said, "The EC's decision to stop the yatra can at best be described as inappropriate. In a democracy, people must have the right and liberty to speech and movement and the right to reach out to the people."

Divided House clears Jaya conversion ban

OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

Chennai, Oct. 31: Tamil Nadu today became the fourth Indian state to adopt an anti-conversion law after a heated three-hour debate in the Assembly that saw even Mahatma Gandhi's words make a brief appearance.

The Jayalalithaa government succeeded in passing the Bill after the Congress, the DMK, the PMK and the Left parties pressed for a division, though a voice vote had clearly favoured the ruling ADMK.

At one stage several DMK members virtually besieged the Speaker's podium. After the division, Speaker K. Kalimuthu declared the Bill passed with 140 legislators voting for it and 73 against in the 234-member House.

Nobody stood neutral, but several MLAs left the House before the vote. Among them was dissident Tamil Maanila Congress legislator Kumaradoss, who made a fervent plea that the chief minister should somehow "defer the Bill" as the Ordinance it sought to replace was not acceptable to the minorities. However, another rebel TMC MLA, Eashwaran, voted for the Bill. The BJP fully supported it.

Jayalalithaa asserted that the legislation neither targeted any particular religion nor was it new to the country. She said Orissa and Madhya Pradesh had enacted similar laws in 1968, followed by Arunachal Pradesh in 1978. The Supreme Court, she added, had also upheld the constitutional validity of the Orissa and the Madhya Pradesh legislations in the Stanislaus-versus-Madhya Pradesh case.

Jayalalithaa agreed with Congress legislature party lead-

er S.R. Balasubramoniyam that neither Madhya Pradesh nor Orissa was under Congress rule when such laws were passed, but shot back asking why subsequent Congress governments had not repealed them.

The ADMK chief rejected the Opposition's charge that the state had come up with the law to "please" the BJP and the Sangh. She said that in 1985, the Justice Venugopal Commission, appointed by the MGR regime to probe the communal clashes in Kanyakumari in 1982, had attributed it mainly to "forcible religious conversion".

The commission had also recommended the enactment of a law to ban forcible religious conversions along the lines of the other three states and the government of the day had accepted it, Jayalalithaa said. But chief minister M.G. Ramachandran died before such a law could be enacted.

BJP support

Hyderabad, Oct. 31: The BJP today backed Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalithaa on the issue of banning conversions and said the same will be endorsed in states ruled by the party, reports our special correspondent.

Addressing party delegates at the party's state council here, BJP president Venkaiah Naidu showered praise on the ADMK chief.

Describing the Tamil Nadu chief minister's move as "bold", Naidu said such an Ordinance was the need of the hour. It would enforce a secular discipline in the country, the BJP chief said.

This was refuted by Balasubramoniyam, who said MGR had desisted from bringing a law to ban forcible conversions as the commission had also recommended a ban on drills conducted by the RSS, another factor that contributed to communal clashes.

Jayalalithaa countered by saying that religious fundamentalists and subversive forces were trying to create tension in the state under the guise of conversions and that existing provisions of the penal code did not provide for banning them. Hence the need for a separate law.

She revealed that in 1997, in the wake of mass conversions in Ramanathapuram district, the United Front regime at the Centre had asked the Karunanidhi government what steps it had taken to curb such conversions.

The Central coalition that included the DMK and the TMC, which has since merged with the Congress, had even pointed to the Madhya Pradesh law, Jayalalithaa said.

Jayalalithaa tried to assure the minorities and Dalits. She said the new law should protect the Dalits and vulnerable sections from "exploitation" and stop religion from being brought to the market place.

The ADMK chief, however, preserved her best shot for the last. "Conversions are harmful to India. If I had power and could legislate, I should certainly stop all proselytising," she said, quoting from Mahatma Gandhi. "It is this view the Tamil Nadu law seeks to embody," she added.

On the Marina beach here, the Sankaracharya of Kanchi, Jayendra Saraswathi, addressed a rally to explain the meaning and contents of the law and allay the fears of the minorities.

VHP to go ahead despite ban

Statesman News Service

GANDHINAGAR, Nov. 14. — The state government today refused permission to the VHP to take out its proposed yatra on 17 November, but the latter vowed to defy the Election Commission ban saying it was its fundamental right.

On instructions from the commission, the Godhra district collector, Mr Manoj Agarwal, cancelled the permission given by the SDM to Dr Pravin Togadia and Acharya Dharmendra for the Hindupat Padshahi Yatra.

Unfazed by the decision, VHP international general secretary Dr Togadia said: "Wait till tomorrow. Let us get the papers first."

The state government also asked the concerned officers of Godhra to ensure that the CEC's directive is adhered to. Without stating if the

earlier permission given to Dr Togadia and Acharya Dharmendra by the district collector is being withdrawn, the chief secretary, Mr G Subbarao, said: "We are bound by law."

Dr Togadia said the VHP would go ahead with the yatra as scheduled. A judicial option was also open to the Sangh Parivar outfit. "The EC will have to state what the Gujarat home secretary has said in his report."

The EC's directive to the state has unwittingly put the BJP and VHP on the path of confrontation. Not many are expecting the government to clamp down on VHP leaders, but an honourable compromise seems distant. Many are expecting voluntary arrests at Godhra on Sunday in protest against the ban on the yatra.

Dr Togadia said the CEC seemed to be heading a third party, other than the BJP and Congress, in Gu-

jarat. "He has an agenda of his own." He added that since the VHP is not a political party, it is not bound by the CEC's directives.

Poll observers: The EC will send 90 poll observers to Gujarat, adds SNS from Delhi. In all, 22 special observers will reach by Saturday. Another 42 general observers and 26 observers to monitor expenditure will be sent on 23 November.

BJP slur: The BJP today said the ban on the proposed yatra was "wholly inappropriate".

The BJP's central election committee, which was to meet on Saturday to finalise ticket distribution in Gujarat, will meet on Monday after the state party unit made a request, Mr Arun Jaitley said.

More reports on page 4
Editorial: 'Nasty' campaign,
page 8

Poll panel, VHP head for yatra collision

OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

*Religious
Panel*

19/11

New Delhi, Nov. 13: Living up to its record and risking a showdown with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Election Commission today asked the Gujarat government to ban the Sangh parivar affiliate's yatra scheduled to start from Godhra on Sunday.

The VHP greeted the order with fury and a threat to defy the proposed ban, singling out chief election commissioner J.M. Lyngdoh for a vitriolic attack though the directive was issued jointly by the three-member panel.

"Lyngdoh's actions show his anti-Hindu bias," said VHP senior vice-president Acharya Giriraj Kishore, dodging the commission's announcement that its decision was based on a state government report that feared a breakdown of law and order if the yatra was held in the prevailing charged atmosphere.

The BJP-ruled, riot-ravaged

state is scheduled to go to polls in December. Several persons who had met the poll panel in Ahmedabad expressed fears that the VHP had lined up the yatra to pick up from where chief minister Narendra Modi's Gaurav Yatra left off and keep the communal cauldron boiling.

Termining the directive "an infringement of our fundamental right", Kishore said: "As of now, we have decided to defy the ban order and court arrest." He added that senior VHP leaders were meeting in Ahmedabad to take a final decision.

Asked about the Gujarat government's report which prompted the commission to make the move, he said the report was "influenced" by Lyngdoh.

In its order, the commission noted that the "proposed yatra would involve the use of replicas of S-6 coach of the Sabarmati Ex-

press that was burnt down by miscreants on February 27 in Godhra."

It also said there was the "likelihood of communally provocative and intemperate speeches being made during the yatra".

The commission also asked the state government to take preventive and punitive action against individuals and organisations indulging in "communally incendiary and provocative speeches" that may hinder conduct of free and fair polls in the state on December 12.

Fresh from a two-day tour of Gujarat, the three-member commission today met and viewed with "utmost concern" the report of the state administration that "there is every likelihood of communal tensions and passions getting exacerbated" by the VHP's plan.

"In fact, the state administration has unequivocally stated that the possibilities of law and order situation arising in the wake of the proposed yatra cannot be ruled out," the commission said. "In view of the above, the proposed VHP yatra should not be allowed to take place."

"The commission would, in fact, go so far as to state that any activity which may aggravate existing differences or create mutual hatred, disharmony, ill-will or cause tension between different castes and communities, religious or linguistic, will not only vitiate the election process and tarnish the fair democratic traditions of the country, but will also seriously jeopardise the law and order situation conducive for the conduct of free and fair elections in the state," it added.

The BJP, which was vocal in its criticism when the commission had refused to call early elections in Gujarat, was muted today. The party said it would comment after studying the order.

QUOTE

The proposed VHP yatra should not be allowed to take place

THE EC

14 NOV 2002

Conversion Ordinance: Jaya invites opponents for talks

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
CHENNAI, OCTOBER 18

TAMIL Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa has invited the the Anti-Conversion Ordinance Protest Committee for a discussion on the implications of the state government's recent Ordinance banning "forcible" conversions.

"The CM's invitation was conveyed through PWD Minister Panneerselvam and we have been asked to give a list of members who would take part," Protest Committee chairman Bishop Peter Fernando said at a news conference today.

"When we meet the CM, we will appeal to her to withdraw the Ordinance," he said, but stressed that the agitations would continue.

Detailing the agitation plan, he said that the members of the committee would stage a state-wide protest on October 19. The committee will also organise a hunger strike and a conference on October 24 here when the Assembly session is scheduled to commence.

Political leaders, including DMK chief Karunanidhi, DPI general secretary R. Thirumavalavan, Congress leaders G.K. Vasan, E.V.K.S. Elangovan, PMK founder Ramadoss and Left leaders A.K. Bardhan and Sankaraiah will participate in the conference, he said.

He said that there was no change in their earlier plan to close all schools run by minorities in the state on October 24.

Speaking at the press meet, All

India Christian Council president Dr Joseph D'Souza said that a nation-wide protest would be held in all major cities on Saturday against the Ordinance.

"It's (the Ordinance) a piece legislative violence against minorities and a reflection of the hatred politics practised by Hindutva forces," he said. Muslim and Dalit leaders, present at the meet, also condemned the Ordinance.

The Movement for People's Unity (MPU) also demanded immediate withdrawal of the Ordinance today. "It is an attempt to divert the people's attention from their burning problems and to vitiate the communal atmosphere in furtherance of vested political interests," it said in a statement here.

19 OCT 2002

Pro-Pak. Muslims can leave: Thackeray

By Mahesh Vijapurkar

MUMBAI, OCT. 15. The Shiv Sena chief, Bal Thackeray, today asked Hindus to start calling India "Hindurashtra" for which "you need no one's permission." Only, "our religion is to be honoured here" and then "we will look after other religions."

Objecting to any possible withdrawal of troops from the Indo-Pakistan border, he said it was bad enough with militants crossing over, despite the presence of the forces and imagine "what would happen if that hurdle too was removed".

To him, withdrawing the armed forces from the border was a "foolish" idea and he had sent an emissary to meet the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, to ask "what is happening? I want to know why and what is happening." Mr. Thackeray did not name the emissary.

At a well-attended annual Dassera public meeting, Mr. Thackeray said that if Muslims had respect only for the Pakistani flag, then "they can leave this country." In the United Kingdom, they were told that the host country's laws had to be honoured.

The security cover for Mr. Thackeray was unprecedented; he spoke from behind a bullet-proof shield which, he complained, was cramping his style. He spoke of his willingness to

"wipe out" trouble-making Muslims. What was needed, he said, was tackling militants, such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba, who kept coming in and others who worked under the cover and assistance of the Pakistani ISI. First, "kick the four crore Bangladeshi Muslims out" and then the country would be secure.

'Hindus should form suicide squads'

Earlier in his party's mouth piece, *Saamana*, Mr. Thackeray said terrorism could best be countered only if Hindus also had suicide squads "like them". People had to conduct themselves "like men."

A country of a billion people, he said, in his front page message, should not be helpless. And when one looks at the Government, it is found that it is equally helpless.

So, instead of waiting for someone else to do something for us, "are we going to do something by ourselves or not" he asked? "They" have suicide squads but "do we have suicide squads of Hindus". If such squads existed, then the headstrong terrorists could be taken head-on, Mr. Thackeray said.

He took a swipe at New Delhi as well and asked what was the point of saying repeatedly that 'we cannot tolerate terrorism against us anymore'? What after that, he wanted to know.

The politics of stones and shilas

By Supriya RoyChowdhury *Religion & Politics*

10-10 2/3
What is far more critical is to recognise the anchoring of state-sponsored communalism in Gujarat in a highly arrogant and unashamed fundamentalist political discourse being promoted and patronised by the ruling BJP.

THE STATE has a unique position amongst all social associations in possessing legitimate control over instruments of violence and in its authority to use coercion over citizens. Obviously, the *sine qua non* of democratic states is in the legal and institutional constraints that define their overall authority to use coercion. The actual control which states have over instruments of violence, however, has the potential to trap states and citizens in undefined situations. In other words, the legitimate access to instruments of violence places state agencies in situations of enormous power over citizens in terms of their use, misuse or lack of use of these instruments in specific situations where legal/institutional constraints may cease to function.

Thus, it is not the law or institutions alone which can meaningfully define the state's complex relationship with the citizenry in this matter. The anchoring of state agencies in a political culture which underwrites the use of violence with some kind of moral reasoning is in fact the only insurance against misuse of coercion by states. Political morality of course is an amorphous concept. In this particular context, however, the underpinning of morality is relatively simple, in terms of the fundamental responsibility, and indeed the *raison d'être* of the state, to protect the lives of citizens.

From this perspective, the recent communal carnage in Gujarat challenges not only the legitimacy of the BJP Government of Gujarat, but raises more fundamental questions over our entire system of governance. Beyond the horrifying events of killing of one community by another, it was revealed over and over again by the media that the police turned a blind eye to the riots. The complicity of Governments in communal killings is not new in India. As we have been reminded again and again in the past few weeks, on similar occasions, particularly in 1984 in Delhi and in 1992

in Mumbai, the relevant Governments of the time had ignored the killings of Sikhs and Muslims by Hindus. Therefore, from this perspective, Gujarat is hardly unique.

The events of the past (1984 and 1992) from our scarred history have been quoted in two senses. First, BJP spokespersons have repeatedly invoked past riots and Government negligence. Thus, history is being used not only to create a broad framework for justifying the present, but also, within that framework, to make the present look like part of a continuing logic of events. Second, observers have invoked these events to register their cynicism towards the governance and party system as a whole, stating that the BJP cannot be singled out as sinner because other political parties have behaved similarly before. This cynicism has zeroed in on our party system, and on the inevitability of power being used as an instrument of communalism, regardless of the party's ideological colour.

The spirit of cynicism expressed by a broad section of the citizenry, although distinct from the BJP's spirit of defiance, is not fundamentally different in terms of their reading of history. This reading is trapped in the interpretation of state-sponsored communalism as an inevitable and unavoidable part of our political life. Thus, whether it is justification or cynicism, once we accept the inevitability of state-sponsored communalism, we close our minds forever to the imagining of a political renewal sans communalism.

Unrealistic as such an imagination may be at this moment in time, it is only that which can keep us going as

a political collective.

More importantly perhaps, there is an urgent need to not collapse all instances of communal carnage into a single category. The scale of violence in Gujarat may have been more, or less, than the scale of violence against Sikhs in 1984 or against Muslims in 1992, and in each case the Governments in question may have played a greater or lesser role of shame. The question of scale is indeed critical. What is far more critical is to recognise the anchoring of state-sponsored communalism in Gujarat in a highly arrogant and unashamed fundamentalist political discourse being promoted and patronised by the ruling BJP. And it is here that we have to recognise that the most recent debate and the events over Ayodhya indeed mark a break in our political culture. It is now for the first time that we have sants striding unabashedly on the political stage, it is now for the first time that the head of a religious math is being called upon to broker a political agreement. Religious personages have become a new group of political actors. No longer in the backstage, they have suddenly assumed legitimate political roles.

In democracies, religious figures may make an occasional statement of political import. But what right have they to make or shape decisions? In the highly charged atmosphere in which it is being debated whether or not a puja will be performed on which piece of land, this simple question has slipped out of our collective consciousness: do they have a right to be there? Who has given them the mandate to make decisions, on behalf of whom? And in this medley, then, has come about the greatest

threat to our democratic fabric, the quiet induction of religious personnel into the formal arena of political decisions.

It is not only this which is a flagrant abuse of the spirit of a democracy. In the last few days we have seen, both on the part of the BJP and the sants whom it patronises (or is patronised by?), a more skilful manipulation of the political discourse than has occurred in so many years of the BJP's advent into national politics. As the central debate has zeroed in on stones and shilas, the inhuman atrocities perpetrated on Muslims in Gujarat have receded from the nation's attention. Nothing could have been more convenient for the BJP both at the Centre and in Gujarat. But even more critical it is to recognise that the noise over pujas, stones and shilas is designed not only to distract attention from Gujarat, but to consolidate a religio-political discourse which can ideologically anchor the carnage in Gujarat. As the sants have moved to centre stage, and have adopted a rhetoric of moral defiance, this must surely be a more powerful support for Hindu communalists in Gujarat than even Mr. Modi's Government could have provided them with.

Beyond the realm of discourse we must recognise of course the reality of state power. Thus, it is within Mr. Advani's power to offer a public defence of the Gujarat Government. It is as Prime Minister that Mr. Vajpayee can acknowledge that the carnage at Gujarat is a national black mark, and at the same time, in response to the Supreme Court decision, voice his recent statement that a symbolic puja would not have disturbed the status quo. It is as the ruling party that the BJP can set up heads of a religious order as their legitimate political interlocutors. This hypocrisy, coupled with the control over state power, spells for all of us, potentially, what it has spelt for thousands of riot victims in Gujarat, the use of state-sponsored violence, propelled by religious frenzy and backed by sound calculations of majoritarian political power.

'TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION TO BEGIN THIS YEAR'

We will take land by force, says Mahant

HP-1
18/3
AYODHYA, MARCH 17. The Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas president, Ramchandra Das Paramhans, today said that construction of the Ram temple here would "start this year and was expected to be completed within the next five years".

"I am satisfied with the peaceful conduct of the 'shila daan' ceremony on March 15 and my efforts to build a Ram temple would continue," the Mahant said here.

He expressed the hope that the Government would hand over the acquired land to the Ram Janmabhoomi Trust and claimed that there was no problem in doing so. When asked what he would do if it was not handed over to the Trust, he said he would take the land "by force".

"It is our property. We are not

trying to grab the land of others. The land should be given to the Nyas."

Asked whether he was satisfied with the efforts of the Prime Minister, A.B. Vajpayee, to resolve the dispute, he said it could be resolved amicably if the Government made "sincere efforts". However, he said he had no idea how Mr. Vajpayee would go about settling the matter, given his "compulsions".

"The Prime Minister is already under pressure from his allies on this issue," he said.

The Mahant added that he was prepared to speak to Muslims to resolve the matter. "I have no problem in talking to 'samajhdhar' (wise) Muslims to settle the matter," he said. "Every Muslim knows that it is the birthplace of Lord Ram."

He said he had spoken to the Home Minister, L.K. Advani, who had assured him that the restrictions in Ayodhya would be lifted within the next two-three days. Mr. Advani had also said that he would take up the matter of restoration of train services to Faizabad and Ayodhya.

Singhal on hunger strike

Meanwhile, the VHP international working president, Ashok Singhal, began a hunger strike at Karsevakpuram to press his demand for security to the 'Ram sevaks' visiting Ayodhya to participate in the 'Purnahuti yagna'.

"The hunger strike will continue till the Centre gives a guarantee that the 'Ram sevaks' coming to Ayodhya to take part in the 'yagna' would be provid-

ed security and their safe return ensured," Mr. Singhal said in a statement here. He also asked the State Government to restore normality in Ayodhya.

The senior State Government official, Navneet Sehgal, who mediated between the Government and Mahant Ramchandra Das Paramhans during the 'shila daan' on March 15, today called on Mr. Singhal and had a closed-door meeting for about half-an-hour. However, he declined to divulge the details of the talks.

The VHP vice-president, Acharya Giriraj Kishore, told presspersons at Karsevakpuram that the programme for temple construction would be decided

VHP leaders to chalk out strategy

AYODHYA, MARCH 17. Top leaders of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad will meet here within days to chalk out the strategy for the Ram temple movement following the March 15 'shila daan' at Digambar akhara.

"The leaders will meet here in next three-four days to draw the future plans for the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya," parishad vice-president, Acharya Giriraj Kishore, told newsmen here today. — UNI

THE HINDU

18 MAR 2002

Act-II in Ayodhya

In the end, it took the Supreme Court of India to call the bluff of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a task that fell entirely in the domain of the political establishment. In the event, the dreaded day of March 15 turned out to be all sound effects and little more, at least in Ayodhya, though violence was reported in Hyderabad, where three Muslim schoolchildren were stabbed. Back in Ayodhya, Mahant Ramchandra Paramhans magnanimously went back on his promise to take his own life, and the rest, needless to say, was non-history. As easily as it had caused tensions to escalate, the VHP climbed down, enabling the threatened shila puja to be shifted to a spot far away from the acquired site. Of course, there was the mandatory slogan-shouting, but even that was more for the spectacular assemblage of television cameras. This unremarkable finale is undoubtedly the biggest message of the past month's unedifying drama around the Ram mandir. Just how does the tame climax in Ayodhya square with the volley and thunder of the VHP's renewed temple agitation? The answer is quite simple. The VHP, like any such body that draws its sustenance from bluster and bravado, is essentially a bully. And a bully will typically threaten only so long as he is not challenged. In this case, the VHP was aided by a government that was in part sympathetic to its cause and in part without the moral fibre required to take tough decisions. However, when the same government cracked the whip, even if forced to do so by the Supreme Court, the VHP fell in line swiftly enough.

The problem really arises from the fact that there is a thin line separating the VHP, the RSS and the BJP. The BJP shares its membership with the VHP, RSS and indeed even the Bajrang Dal. This expectedly creates a conflict of divergent interests. As long as the BJP was in the opposition, this was not a problem. Quite the opposite, in fact, with the BJP and its affiliates jointly taking their battle to the streets. What happened on December 6, 1992 will illustrate this point. Back then, the BJP held office in Lucknow, and yet willingly sacrificed it so as to use the Ram mandir issue and electorally benefit at the Centre. Towards this end, then chief minister Kalyan Singh knowingly flouted the law. It is a tribute to the pluralist traditions of this country that in the end the BJP had to shelve this divisive agenda to be able to form a government. Today, as part of the National Democratic Alliance government at the Centre, the BJP is bound, both morally and in terms of the mandate of the electorate, not to revive the issue. And yet, as we have seen in recent months, old loyalties are not easily forsaken. Indeed, if Ayodhya has returned to centrestage after a deceptive spell on the backburner, it is in no small measure due to complicity between the VHP and the BJP, with the latter showing an open interest in exploiting the issue during the UP elections. For all that, the law has prevailed, in letter and in spirit, courtesy the Supreme Court. The real test now is to ensure that the enforced peace of Ayodhya extends to the rest of the country and that there are no more Godhras.

16 MAR 2002

THE TIMES OF INDIA

VHP blinks, opts for symbolic puja

But leaders are ready to court
arrest if thwarted, says Singhal

By Srawan Shukla
Times News Network

AYODHYA: The Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas reiterated on Tuesday, a day before the supreme court takes up the petitions on Ayodhya, that they would go ahead with their puja at the undisputed site but said they would now carry out only a 'symbolic shila daan' (donating a carved stone) on March 15 instead of the bhoomi puja programme.

However, VHP working president Ashok Singhal and trust chairman Mahant Ramchandra Paramhans Das, who addressed a joint press conference here, differed on the nature of the puja, with the trust chairman saying it would not be symbolic.

"We will not go there in a big procession, but the puja will be performed according to the Vedas and the shastras and will not be symbolic. And if anyone has any objection, he is free to arrest us," Mahant Das said.

According to the new programme, Mahant Das is to lead about 2,000 Ram sevaks to the undisputed site and donate a carved stone to the statutory receiver at the makeshift temple of Ram Lalla after a 'symbolic puja'.

Mr Singhal said they were awaiting the court's order and that they hoped to get a favourable verdict. "But if we are not allowed to perform the symbolic 'shila daan', they are free to arrest us or we will court arrest," he said, adding that it would not be in the interest of the government to arrest seers while

they were performing their religious duties.

Accusing the Prime Minister of playing into the hands of the administration, Mr Singhal said Atal Behari Vajpayee was under tremendous pressure from all sides. He said the Prime Minister was unable to take a decision on the Ayodhya impasse as he had four compulsions to contend with.

First, the opposition was unnecessarily making a hue and cry on the issue when it was nearing a solution. Second, there was pressure from the NDA allies, and third, there was pressure also from the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board. He blamed the bureaucrats for not only "misguiding"

Mr Vajpayee, but also for the confusion that had led to the trouble in Ayodhya and outside it. In this context, he mentioned how the administration

had disobeyed the order of Union minister of state for home I.D. Swami on the relaxation of security arrangements in Ayodhya.

"All obstacles that are coming in the way of the temple's construction are politically motivated," Mr Singhal said. He added that the VHP was still hopeful of a solution to the dispute. "The supreme court's verdict tomorrow (Wednesday) should help the Prime Minister to come to some conclusion," he said.

Although the proposals made by Kanchi seer Jayendra Saraswati had fallen through due to the stand taken by the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, all was not lost, he said.

SINGHAL'S SIGNALS

- ▶ Only 'symbolic shila daan' will take place on March 15
- ▶ VHP, trust differ on nature of puja
- ▶ Leaders threaten to court arrest
- ▶ Singhal hopeful of consensus to settle dispute

THE TIMES OF INDIA

1. 11. 2002

Chairman of the Ram Janambhoomi Nyas Ramchandra Paramhans (centre) conducts a puja at the workshop, which is producing pillars for the proposed Ram Temple in Ayodhya, on Monday.

UP govt gets cold feet on arresting Singhal, allows him into Ayodhya

Times News Network

LUCKNOW: VHP working president Ashok Singhal on Monday charged Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee with discrediting the Kanchi seer's compromise formula by approaching the supreme court with the VHP's March 15 programme.

He said the court was nowhere in the picture when Kanchi Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati was mediating in the issue. "I am surprised at the Prime Minister's decision since no mention of the apex court had been made at any point during the negotiations."

He was talking to mediapersons at Lucknow airport on his arrival from New Delhi. The state government appeared to have been in two minds about arresting Mr Singhal although an arrest warrant against him was ready. District magistrate Jeevesh Nandan and

SSP B.B. Bakshi were at the airport 15 minutes before Mr Singhal's flight landed, but did not arrest the VHP working president fearing countrywide consequences.

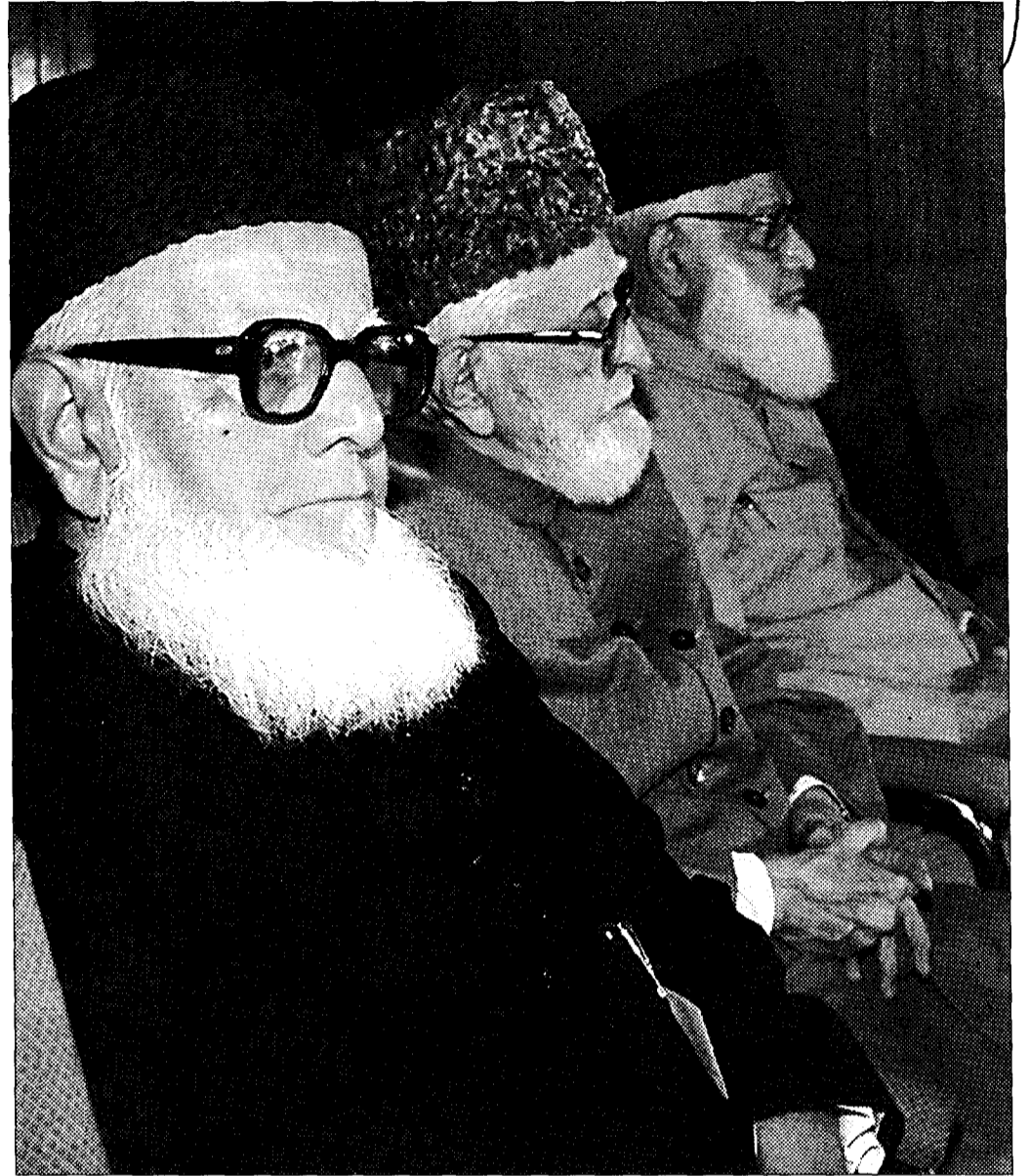
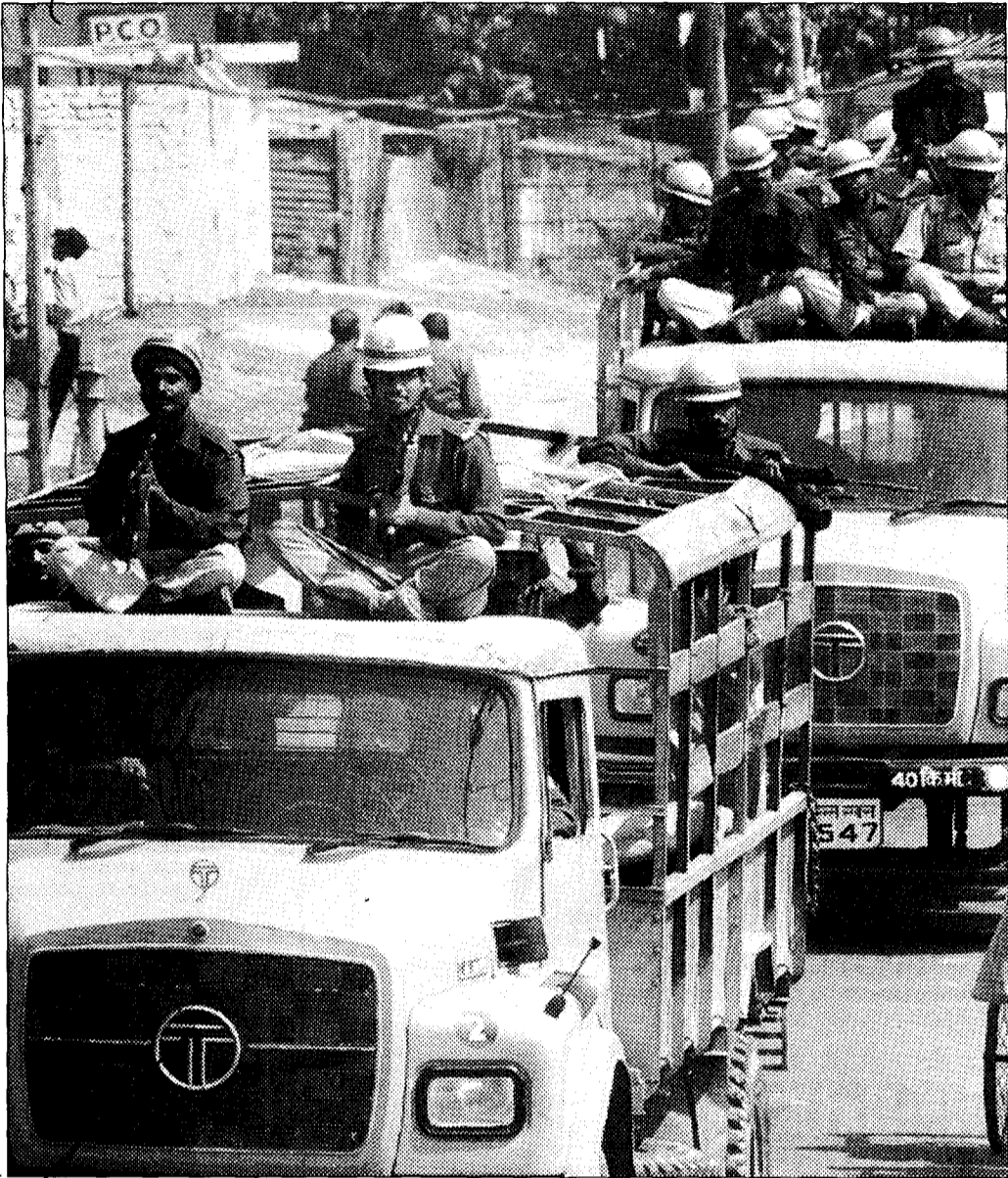
"Kya desh ki fiza kharab karni hain? (Do they want to vitiate the atmosphere in the country?)" Mr Singhal said when asked about the possibility of his arrest. This statement could have led the district administration to beat a hasty retreat. The authorities then took Mr Singhal's convoy to Raj Bhavan.

Governor Vishnu Kant Shastri, who held talks with Mr Singhal for more than an hour-and-a-half, tried to persuade the VHP leader to shelve his Ayodhya programme. The governor finally bowed to an adamant Mr Singhal and allowed him to proceed to the temple town. The arrest warrant against Mr Singhal, which had been signed at about 12.30 p.m., was withdrawn at 1.45 p.m.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

12 March 2002

Stung sadhus threaten direct action



CRPF personnel stage a flag march in Ayodhya as Muslim leaders prepare for a meeting in New Delhi to discuss the compromise formula. (AFP)

FROMANAND SOONDAS

Lucknow, March 10: The silent sadhus have decided to come up-front. Having so far allowed the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) to handle the Ayodhya situation, they are now planning to take "direct action".

Ramchandra Das Paramhans, chairman of the Ramjanmabhoomi Trust and president of the Mandir Nirman Samiti, today announced that there wouldn't be a "mere symbolic puja" on March 15 as agreed to by the VHP. "Puja hoga to dhoom dhaam se, baaje gaaje ke saath (the puja will be held with full pomp and gaiety)," he said.

He also declared that pillars would be transported to the dis-

puted site, marking the start of temple construction.

As a first step to shifting into top gear, the sadhus will tomorrow lead *kar sevaks* in a demonstration to the disputed site at 10.30 am.

Paramhans said he was fed up with the "failed backroom politics" pursued by the VHP. "Every one is a liar; the Prime Minister lied to us; even Union minister I.D. Swami, who came here and met us to assure that restrictions on the movement of pilgrims and Ram *bhaktis* would be eased, took us for a ride," he fumed.

Sadhus in Ayodhya have been pushed into a corner by the administration and they are very angry. Knowing that their

"anger", at almost everybody — the Centre, the VHP, the Governor and the All India Muslim Personal Law Board — could spell trouble, top administration officials are devising ways to neutralise their efforts to perform a puja at the disputed site on March 15.

Governor Vishnukant Shastri, who said he had given a written order to the administration to allow pilgrims easier access to Ayodhya, was quick to add that security could not be relaxed at any cost. "I will visit Ayodhya if the need arises. The situation out there is not normal," he said.

The administration, fearing a direct confrontation between sadhus and *kar sevaks* on the one hand and police forces on the

other, has already got cracking. Twenty companies of the CRPF and PAC today held a flag march in Ayodhya.

Security has been stepped up more than ever before. Jails in 18 districts have been alerted and asked to be ready for any eventuality. Hospitals in and around Faizabad have been told to keep adequate staff on stand-by. Schools and colleges will remain closed till March 15.

Trains expected to resume services will not halt in the twin cities of Ayodhya and Faizabad at least till March 15. Despite Swami's assurances to the sadhus, the administration is unwilling to relent. "Nothing about easing restrictions or resumption of train and vehicular serv-

ices has come to us in writing," commissioner (Faizabad range) A.K. Gupta said.

The administration is also mulling over ways to keep senior VHP leaders away from Ayodhya and banning their entry to the temple town. ADG (law and order) A.K. Mitra said this was for their own good.

"We have intercepted messages pointing to a plan by suicide squads to target a prominent Ram temple in Ayodhya and attack *kar sevaks* at Karsevakpura. Security has been beefed up for these reasons also," he said.

With senior Muslim leaders rejecting the Kanchi seer's proposals to allow a symbolic puja in the undisputed area, the VHP has again toughened its stand.

"There will definitely be a puja on March 15," VHP international secretary Pravin Todagia said.

The VHP will hold a meeting on March 14 to take stock of the rapidly changing situation and chart out a new strategy. But the administration is bent on not allowing the leaders to meet.

Gujarat yatris

About 1,000 Ram *sevaks* and Bajrang Dal activists will leave Ahmedabad on March 12 by the Sabarmati Express to take part in the symbolic puja. VHP state unit general secretary Dilipbhai Trivedi and Dal's Gujarat chief Ranchodbhai Bharwad said in a joint statement the Ram *sevaks* would be headed by senior VHP leader Hareshbha Bhatt.

VHP firm on March 15 puja

Times News Network
and Agencies

NEW DELHI: Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) general secretary Praveen Togadia on Sunday declared that the outfit would go ahead with the symbolic bhoomi puja near the disputed site in Ayodhya on March 15. He was reacting to the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board's decision to reject the proposal of Kanchi Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswathi on holding the puja at the site.

Asked if the VHP would respect the verdict of the apex court, which is scheduled to hear two petitions against the proposed puja, Mr Togadia remarked, "How can we say that the supreme court will not protect the fundamental right of the Hindu society to perform puja at

the undisputed site?" When questioned about the outfit's plans if the verdict went against it, he said, "We have the democratic right to agitate peacefully as per the rights given by the Constitution."

Dismissing the board's rejection of the Kanchi seer's proposal, Mr Togadia said, "No minority community organisation has any right over the undisputed land in Ayodhya. There is no suit or case in court over the undisputed land. Minority community organisations are trying to whip up sentiments by interfering in the matter."

According to him, only two parties were involved in the issue—the government and the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas.

Meanwhile, nyas chairman Mahant Ramchandra Paramhans Das declared on Sunday that he

was under no obligation to honour the VHP's undertaking to abide by the court order on the temple issue. Stating that he had not given any such undertaking, Mahant Das said, "There is no question of the trust and Ram sevaks following the court verdict if it goes against the temple's construction."

Significantly, VHP working president Ashok Singhal had given the undertaking to the Centre as managing trustee of the trust.

"Kaisa court, kaisa faisla. Faisla to ho chuka hain Ram mandir banane ka (What court, what verdict? The decision has already been taken to construct a Ram temple)," Mahant Das, who is also the chairman of the Mandir Nirman Samiti, said in a telephonic interview.

COURT:

9 minutes
103 SC-10
(Continued from page 1)

positive change in the
VHP's stand on the dis-
puted site".

Babari panel stand: All
India Babari Masjid Action
Committee today said it
would oppose any move to
perform the puja on 15
March at the disputed site.

Babari leader held: The
All India Babari Masjid
Rebuilding Committee toni-
ght alleged that its presi-
dent, Mohammad Yunus
Siddiqui, has been detained
by police ahead of its Delhi-
to-Ayodhya 'Rath Yatra'.

THE STATESMAN

10 MAR 2002

Vajpayee puts puja ball in apex court

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, March 9

ATUL BIHARI Vajpayee today said the Government would abide by the March 13 directive of the Supreme Court on VHP's proposed bhoomi puja near the disputed site in Ayodhya on March 15.

In the first official comment after efforts began in earnest to hammer out a solution to the temple dispute, the Prime Minister said this to a delegation of the All India Organisation of Imams.

The apex court will hear two petitions seeking contempt of court proceedings against the VHP leadership for violating status quo in Ayodhya.

Vajpayee told the delegation of Imams that the issue "is now on a road to resolution" as a conducive atmosphere has been created because of two factors — the VHP's commitment to honour the court verdict on the disputed site and the mediatory role played by the Kanchi Shankaracharya that has helped the resumption of dialogue between the two communities.

Terming the change in VHP's stand on the issue as a "big development", Vajpayee urged the Muslim community to appreciate its significance. "Earlier, they said they did not recognise the role of the judiciary in this dispute. Now they have changed their position. This has created a positive atmosphere."

Congress demand

THE CONGRESS on Saturday strongly opposed any move to allow the proposed bhoomi puja and demanded that the Centre must maintain status quo in the complex until the final court verdict. "Any attempt to perform a symbolic puja on the acquired land would be illegal," party spokesman S Jaipal Reddy said. He pointed out that though the Centre is the custodian of the land, anything done on it without the court's permission would amount to disturbance of status quo, contempt of court and contravention of law.

HTC, New Delhi

The Prime Minister said there are two ways to resolve the dispute. "Either we sit down and hammer out a solution through talks or go to court and knock its door. The issue that we cannot resolve should be entrusted to the court and its verdict adhered to. Whether we like it or not, we have to abide by the court verdict."

Observing that "all will have to abide by the verdict", Vajpayee said: "If the court says one does not have the right to perform the puja or the place is such that it cannot be touched, then a new episode will begin. But if the court says that it is only a question of one day and the puja can be performed, then efforts to resolve the issue will have to be continued."

The leader of the Imam's delegation, Maulana Jameel Ahmed Ilyasi, told reporters after the hour-long meeting: "We hope the VHP will remain true to its word and not betray again as it has done in the past. We urge the Government to take necessary measures to enable the court to deliver its verdict in the shortest possible time."

Ilyasi said, "Whatever the Supreme Court decides will be acceptable to us also." He will meet the Kanchi Shankaracharya again when he arrives here on March 14.

The Government's side was represented by Civil Aviation Minister Syed Shah Nawaz Hussain, Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office Vijay Goel, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister Brajesh Mishra, and PMO Officer on Special Duty Sudheendra Kulkarni.

Apart from Imams of various mosques, the intellectuals who met Vajpayee included journalist Saeed Naqvi, historian Mushirul Hasan, former Cabinet Secretary Zafar Saifullah, Parliamentary Affairs Secretary Mohammad-ur-Rehman and Prof Mohammed Amin of Delhi University.

Meanwhile, restrictions imposed in Ayodhya in the wake of the bhoomi puja remains in force with continued suspension of train services, despite an announcement by Union Minister of State for Home ID Swami that the curbs would be lifted from today. No trains arrived in Ayodhya till afternoon.

Related reports on Page 9

Confusion over Army posting in temple town

HT Correspondents
Lucknow/New Delhi, March 9

THE HAZE over Ayodhya thickened today with the Defence Minister declaring that the UP Government has sought Army deployment and the Governor debunking the claim.

"This morning, we got a written request from the UP Government for troop deployment in Faizabad," George Fernandes said at the Naval Foundation's seminar on Indian security today. A decision, he said, would be taken in view of the massive commitment of troops on the border and stressed that there would be no troop pull-back from the border.

Governor Vishnu Kant Shastri, meanwhile, said the UP Government only asked the Centre to put the Army on alert and had not sought its deployment in Ayodhya. Addressing his first Press conference after the imposition of President's rule, he said the request of Army alert had been communicated to the Defence Ministry yesterday.

He said efforts were on to maintain peace in Ayodhya and minimise problems faced by the local people because of the heavy security arrangement. Both the Union and the State Governments were aware of their responsibility of maintaining law and order, he added.

For the first time, Fernandes admitted the riots in Gujarat had forced the Army to re-deploy some formations on the border. "We airlifted some of our troops deployed on the International Border in circumstances known to the entire world," he said. He had resisted pressure to withdraw more troops from the Kutch border for deployment in law and order duties, he added.

Seer talk may stall deal

Anil Anand
New Delhi, March 9

THE PREMATURE disclosure of the Centre's decision to permit the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas to perform a symbolic bhoomi puja at Ayodhya on March 15 has drawn hostile reactions from the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB). The chances are that the Muslim body, whose consent is crucial to the success of the Kanchi Shankaracharya's initiative to defuse the Ayodhya crisis, might harden its position at its meeting slated for Sunday.

This was indicated after a core group of the AIMPLB met here today to discuss the agenda for Sunday's meeting. In its view, the Shankaracharya's public pronouncements have created the impression that Muslims have accepted the new formula as a *fait accompli*.

AIMPLB sources called the Shankaracharya's disclosures a "breach of trust" and pointed out that his public comments ran counter to an understanding that nothing would be disclosed till the AIMPLB had formulated its response. In the face of intense pressure from the Muslim community, the AIMPLB has decided to keep all options open.

It has clarified that all it had agreed upon was to consider the VHP plan. But what has happened



Kanchi seer Jayendra Saraswati at the Chennai airport on Friday.

subsequently is improper. The status quo at Ayodhya has to be maintained pending a court decision, the sources said, adding: "We have also decided to become a party to a petition before the Supreme Court seeking contempt proceedings against former UP Chief Minister Rajnath Singh and VHP leader Ashok Singhal."

AIMPLB functionaries strongly felt that all those involved in working out a formula have undermined Muslim sentiments. "In trying to impose their decisions on us, they have sent a strong signal that they are determined to go ahead with their plan," an AIM-

PLB member said. This, he claimed, was the sentiment ahead of Sunday's meeting. The AIMPLB has also taken a serious view of Minister of State for Home ID Swami's remarks at Ayodhya on Friday that a symbolic kar seva would be permitted on March 15.

Swami had no authority to make such a commitment because the Centre was only a receiver of the land surrounding the disputed site, AIMPLB convenor Qasim Rasool Ilyas said.

Several other Muslim bodies have also criticised the Centre's decision to lift curbs on entry of kar sevaks into Ayodhya.

0 MAR 2002

HINDUSTAN TM

Symbolic puja in Ayodhya on 15 March: Kanchi seer

Statesman News Service

CHENNAI, March 8. — The Shankaracharya of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam, Sri Jayendra Saraswathi, who put forward a peace proposal to bring about a solution to the Ayodhya issue, today said an agreement was in sight.

A symbolic *bhoomi puja* will be performed at the undisputed land belonging to Ram Janambhoomi trust on 15 March, which is the deadline set by the VHP for the commencement of the construction of the Ram temple.

The VHP has been demanding that more than 47 acres of land belonging to the trust out of the 67 acres acquired by the Centre as per the court order be handed over to it to enable it to go ahead with the temple construction.

Speaking to reporters at Chennai airport on his return from New Delhi where he had held talks with the Centre and the VHP and Muslim

leaders, the Shankaracharya said some of the Muslim groups had agreed to give a no-objection letter for handing over the undisputed land to the trust on 10 March and other groups on 13 March.

PM calls off tour

March 8. — On a day when Pakistan invited the home minister, Mr LK Advani, to Islamabad for discussions, the Prime Minister, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, had to call off his proposed trip to Singapore and Cambodia, a month before it was scheduled to happen, because Intelligence reports said his presence was crucial to maintain peace in the country.

The PM's trip was tentatively scheduled for 7 April. — SNS

Details on page 6

Masjid, stood until its demolition on 6 December, 1992. He was hopeful that the construction of Ram temple at the undisputed land would begin on 2 June.

Seer signals 'calm' puja with one brick

FROM M.R. VENKATESH

Chennai, March 8: The Sankaracharya of Kanchi, Jayendra Saraswathi, said today a symbolic, "one-brick" *bhoomi puja* would be conducted in a corner of the undisputed land at Ayodhya on March 15 and hinted at a consensus between Muslim and Hindu organisations.

He said a "no-objection" from some minority organisations was expected on March 10. Some other representative bodies are expected to do so by March 13, he added.

"Permission" was expected "any time" from the Centre and the Uttar Pradesh government, besides the Ayodhya municipality, to perform the puja "with one brick, in a calm and unostentatious manner", the seer said at Chennai airport.

Hence, the puja would take place on March 15 as planned on the land that is outside the purview of the law suit and for which full compensation had been paid to the erstwhile owners, the Sankaracharya said on arrival from Ahmedabad on a chartered flight.

The seer said this was one critical aspect of the three-point formula hammered out after consultations with representatives of Hindu and Muslim organisations.

The next step will be to commence, by June 2, the handing over to the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas, the undisputed land acquired for building a Ram temple. This will be done after consultations with representatives of both religions and all parties.

The third strand towards resolving the deadlock was that status quo would be

maintained until the courts decided on the ownership of the disputed site where the demolished masjid stood. Representatives of both religions have agreed to accept the court's verdict terming the formula a "significant step forward" in ensuring harmony among the groups.

A conducive climate has been created to ward off a "tense, crisis-ridden and dangerous situation" over the Ayodhya issue, as a result of his hectic parleys in Delhi with representatives of Hindus and the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, the seer claimed.

Everyone should take forward the efforts to resolve the dispute "unitedly", he emphasised. "This is our desire," he said, adding it is time for "patience and restraint".

The media, too, has a responsibility in this regard, the seer said. If the media

highlighted only the positive aspects, "half the problems will be over", he added. "One hundred per cent, we want a united Hindu-Muslim effort to resolve this issue," the seer said.

The Sankaracharya said there were only three parties to the dispute — the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas, important Muslim organisations and the government. Coordination among these parties alone will ensure a substantial movement towards clinching the issue, he added.

Expressing concern at the turmoil in Gujarat after a visit to the state yesterday, the seer said normality was fast returning to riot-hit areas. The need of the hour is "unity and peace" and people should "live as human beings and not turn into animals".

"That was the crux of my message in helping to restore calm in Gujarat."

Temple work from March 15: VHP

HT Correspondent
Ayodhya, February 10

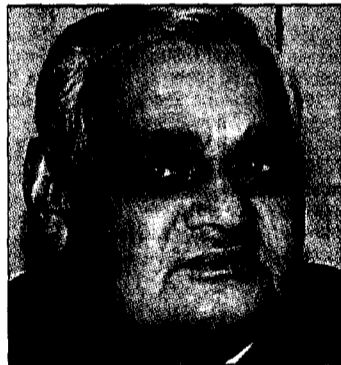
THE VHP today announced that the construction of the Ram temple would begin on March 15.

"We shall not wait for long. The construction process will begin on March 15 with the shifting of carved stone pillars from the VHP workshop to the temple site," Mahant Ram Chandra Paramhans said at Karsewakpuram.

Paramhans said preparations were on for the construction and that the work would begin on an auspicious day in March, after consultation with astrologers. "But we shall not do anything till March 12, the deadline set by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee for removal of legal hurdles," he said.

"We can't wait for an indefinite period as the Hindus have patiently waited since last 50 years," VHP president Ashok Singhal said.

The BJP today said the VHP



Atal Bihari Vajpayee

would not be allowed to cross the "limits of law" in construction of the temple. "Let them go ahead. We will see whether their action violates any law," BJP president Kushabhau Thakre said. He said the BJP election manifesto has already clarified the party's stand on the temple issue. There was no change in the BJP's stand.

On BJP president Jana Krishnamurthi's statement that the Ayodhya issue was not on the party's agenda till 2004, Singhal said: "We are opposed to the NDA on this issue because it has failed to safeguard the interests of Hindus in the country. The VHP was not a blind follower of the BJP or any other political party."

Singhal said the VHP will not wait for the Law Ministry's legal opinion on the issue and will go ahead with the announced programmes. The PM has sought Law Minister Arun Jaitley's advice on the issue.

The VHP leader said Sections six and seven of Ayodhya Land Acquisition Act, 1993, say the Government will be the trustee receiver of acquired land with absolute rights. There was no legal hurdle for transfer of land by the Government. He said Section seven deals with the rights of passage to the allottee of the land. There was no Supreme Court order to maintain status quo in the acquired land in Ayodhya.

Singhal said Hindus have the right to worship and meaningful darshan at the makeshift temple in accordance with the orders of Allahabad High Court.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

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11 FEB 2002

Party forced Buddha to retract remark, says Jana

Kolkata
8 FEBRUARY

BJP PRESIDENT Jana Krishnamurthy said on Friday that it was "most unfortunate" the way the CPI(M) had 'pressured' the West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee to retract his statement on crackdown on unaffiliated madrasas in the state. Krishnamurthy told a press conference here that the chief minister had made his comments on certain madrasas and he did not condemn all madrasas in the state.

"But so much pressure was brought on him by his party that the chief minister had to withdraw his statement. This is most unfortunate in a democracy," he said.

Even Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had asked madrasas in his country to get registered and stated that madrasas should not be used to carry out terrorist activities.

The BJP chief said that a responsible chief minister of an important state like West Bengal was made to take back his statement although he had made those comments on the basis of certain

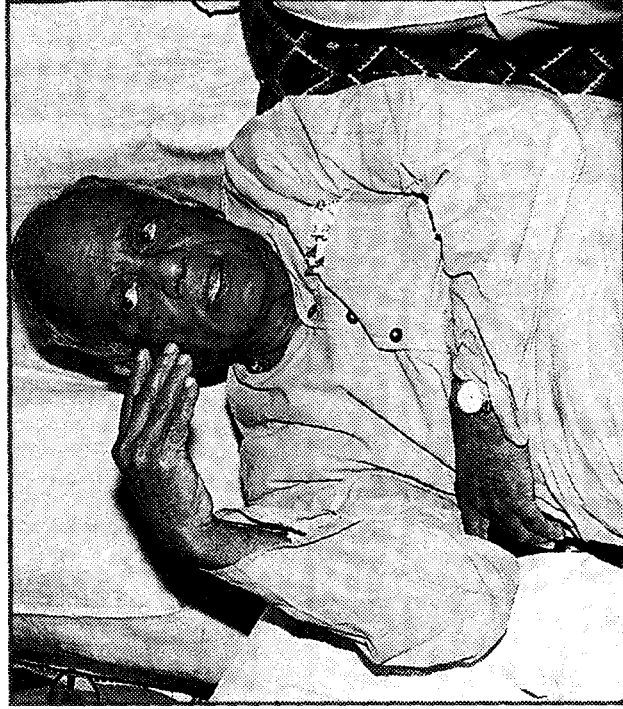
Or written by R. Mitra

in anti-national activities in the state, Krishnamurthy said "our's is a federal setup and there is constitutional obligations. Every state is cooperating with the Centre. Even West Bengal will not hesitate to take action when called upon."

When pointed out that Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee, whose party is an ally of NDA, had opposed Bhattacharjee on the crackdown on unaffiliated madrasas, Krishnamurthy said that she was free to make her comments. It was for the people of the state to judge. The BJP president said the West Bengal chief minister had stated that some madrasas in bordering areas were not playing their role they are supposed to.

"What is wrong in it? we have to remain vigilant when the attitude of Pakistan is not changed. Pakistani president has reiterated that those crossing over to Kashmir and indulging in terrorist activities were freedom fighters," he said.

Krishnamurthy also appealed to the Congress and other Opposition parties to remain united at this hour and not allow electoral gains to cloud their vision. — PTI



SAFFRON RHETORIC: BJP president Jana Krishnamurthy at a press meet in the city on Friday. — Mona Chowdhury

reports. He said that whether it was a communist, Congress or BJP rule, nothing should be allowed against the interest of the country. There should be agreement among all parties on this issue.

Asked about the Centre's actions against madrasas involved

Buddha says he won't learn politics from BJP

Kolkata
8 FEBRUARY

WEST BENGAL chief minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee on Friday

reacted sharply to BJP president Jana Krishnamurthy's remarks that he was made to retract his statement on the crackdown on unaffiliated madrasas in the state following pressures from his party. "Shall I learn politics from BJP," Bhattacharjee retorted when asked to comment on Krishnamurthy's statement. The CM was leaving for Delhi to attend the CPI(M) politburo meeting.

CPI(M) politburo member and ruling left front chairman Biman Bose who was with him, said Bhattacharjee had not backtracked on



his stand on the madrasas. "The CM has not backtracked on his stand on madrasas and there is no controversy about it," he said. Krishnamurthy said it was unfortunate that the CM was made to retract his statement following pressures from his party.

Meanwhile, the all-India Minority Forum has expressed fear that West Bengal's ruling CPI(M)'s form vigilant groups against terrorist activities in the state would create 'unnecessary misunderstandings' and hamper public order.

"The government should take every step to stop terrorist activities. But bringing in party cadre for the job would create unnecessary misunderstandings. It will also hamper public order," forum president Idris Ali said here. — PTI

BJP manifesto shelves temple

Handwritten notes: "I believe in the temple" and "H-2 3/2" are written over the title.

Lucknow, February 2

THE BJP today stood by the NDA agenda on the Ayodhya issue, favouring a solution through dialogue among the parties concerned or a speedy court settlement acceptable to all.

The party's poll manifesto released for Uttar Pradesh promised a Poto-type law for the State and steps to identify illegal Bangladeshi migrants for deportation.

It also pledged to bring the Chief Minister under the Lok Ayukt's purview. State BJP chief Kalraj Mishra said Ayodhya remained a cultural issue connected with the beliefs of the people, but added that the BJP would strive to resolve the issue through dialogue or a court verdict acceptable to all.

Among other salient features of the manifesto were stern measures against those giving shelter to anti-nationals, providing employment to 1.5 lakh youths over the next three years and bringing transparency in as-

pects of the Government's functioning.

It also promised to make declaration of income and property mandatory for all elected representatives within nine days of their election and complete transparency in Government decisions where it involves public money.

It also pledged to revamp police training and provide the force with modern equipment, construct 10 lakh rural houses over the next five years and lay a road network connecting all villages with populations of 500 and above by 2007.

Insurance cover for agricultural equipment and animals, distribution of free books for girl students up to class VIII, a special stress on information and technology and cleansing the Ganga, Yamuna and Gomti were some of the other promises made in the manifesto.

Misra said the BJP believed in providing security to all sections of society irrespective of religion and caste.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

100 2007

Temple card won't sell ^{2/2}

THE CONTORTIONS in the Sangh parivar over the temple issue show how some of its members have been caught in their own trap. For instance, having exploited the emotive subject to boost its electoral prospect, the BJP is now having to focus on dousing the fire it had lit by even threatening the VHP with "legal consequences" if it stuck to its March 12 deadline on constructing the temple. The irony in this backtracking is obvious. It is the same VHP which had started championing the cause of the temple from the mid-Eighties, a campaign which the BJP joined in 1989. Now, more than a decade later, the BJP wants the matter to be postponed till the end of the Vajpayee government's present term.

For the hotheads in the VHP, however, the need to fit their programme to the BJP's political requirements is obviously a disheartening prospect. It isn't easy to finetune a subject like this by whipping up religious fervour and then advising restraint. Hence, the vituperative comments made against the prime minister by the VHP's leaders after Mr Vajpayee tried to mollify them by referring the matter to the law ministry. However, it is the abusive nature of the comments which seems to have belatedly forced the BJP to toughen its stance against the VHP.

Earlier, it had been more indulgent towards it to the extent of not hauling up Ashok Singhal and others for barging into the makeshift temple in Ayodhya. ^{HTG} *Religion & Power*

But even if the vitriolic tone of the speeches made the BJP reiterate its decision to stick to the NDA's agenda, it was a position it would have had to take anyway. The reason is that cynicism, and not devotion, has always guided the BJP. It played the temple card to counter V.P. Singh's Mandal card, but had no hesitation in shelving it to lure opportunistic politicians to its side after Mr Vajpayee's first abortive bid for office in 1996. Now, the BJP wants to continue to keep the issue on the back-burner in order to retain its slender hold on power. These expedient tactics mean, however, that the fanatics in the *parivar* have to constantly take two steps forward and one step back. Their aim obviously is to keep the traditional supporters of the BJP in tow, but their frequent assertions and retractions can make a mockery of their strident claims about building the temple to assert Hindu 'pride'. The simple fact is that the temple card has lost its utility for the BJP. It can neither play it nor discard it. But as the saffron politicians play their games, those in the RSS and the VHP have to contend with the messy fallout from the BJP's expediency.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

- 2 FEB 2002

BJP shelves Ram till 2004

FROM OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Jan. 31: Thirteen years after it yoked itself to the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, the BJP today closed the Ayodhya chapter — at least till the Vajpayee government's term ends in 2004.

The party also warned the VHP, which has set March 12 as the deadline for beginning construction of the temple, of "legal consequences" if it did not obey the court's verdict.

BJP president K. Jana Krishnamurthi said the party is no longer bound by the Palampur resolution passed at a national executive in June 1989, when it officially associated itself with the Ram temple movement for

the first time.

The VHP had launched the agitation in 1985, but the BJP joined it four years later once it became aware of its enormous emotive potential.

"Whatever might have been the stand of the BJP on earlier occasions, the party is now bound by the NDA agenda and it is left with no choice but to respect the court's verdict or a negotiated settlement," he said.

The BJP's tough stand — dictated primarily by the expediency of keeping a coalition government together — appeared to have the desired effect on the VHP, which had recently toughened its stand on the issue.

The Sangh outfit's chief, Ashok Singhal, said they would

continue talking to the Vajpayee government till March 12 — the deadline set by the sants for finding a "solution" to the dispute. Two days ago, VHP general secretary Praveen Togadia had ruled out any further dialogue.

Singhal today said Togadia had made the statement without the knowledge and consent of the organisation. In a further indication of a softening of the VHP's stance, Singhal said he understood the Prime Minister's "compulsions".

"Atalji has his own compulsions because he heads a coalition. He could not have done better than this with all these compulsions," he said.

Krishnamurthi said the Palampur resolution was adopt-

ed in the "context of the situation existing then".

"Thereafter many developments have taken place. On December 6, 1992, the dilapidated structure that went by the name of the Babri Masjid fell down and the matter is pending before a commission.... As a responsible government, the NDA is bound by the Constitution, rule of law, and its own NDA agenda," he stressed.

But he kept options open for the future. Asked if the BJP would resurrect the issue after 2004, he said: "Whether it will come back depends on whether we can persuade our NDA allies to accept our viewpoint or whether they persuade us not to stick to it. I can't say anything right now."

THE TELEGRAPH

1 FEB 2002

VHP begins yatra through UP

Ram rath rolls before polls

FROM ANAND SOONDAS AND
RADHIKA RAMASESHAN

Ayodhya/New Delhi, Jan. 20:
It's time for the rath to roll
again.

Thousands of sadhus and kar sevaks today gathered for a *dharam sabha* at the Ram Katha Park in Ayodhya and pledged to build a temple at the disputed site. A *chetavani* (warning) rathyatra will begin tomorrow.

Senior leaders, including BJP members, and akhara heads claimed that the yatra would stop only "if the Indian army marched to Pakistan".

The yatra is expected to reach Delhi on January 27 after travelling through poll-bound Uttar Pradesh. The Centre has decided to keep quiet so long as the yatra is peaceful.

Government sources said: "As long as the VHP leaders keep their cadre in check and ensure they do not create a law and order problem, there is no need to take action."

The sources said VHP president Ashok Singhal had met Atal Bihari Vajpayee before the Prime Minister went to Kathmandu.

At that meeting, Vajpayee told Singhal that on no account must law and order be disrupted in the run-up to the polls.

Asked what the touchstone of a law and order breakdown would be, the sources said: "Obviously communal riots."

Reacting to Vajpayee's plea to reconsider the rathyatra plan, Singhal said: "*Atal humara saath rahain na rahain, humara faisla atal rahega* (Whether Atal is with us or not, our decision remains steadfast)."

Singhal added that the VHP would "look into it" if the Prime Minister offered them something "concrete".

Praveen Togadia, the VHP international secretary, went a step further and said it was time for Vajpayee to prove his nationalism by allowing the temple to be built at the disputed site.

Far from distancing themselves from the VHP, BJP members, including its Faizabad MP, Vinay Katiyar, and its Ayodhya MLA, Laloo Singh, who is also a minister in the Rajnath Singh government in Uttar Pradesh, participated in today's sant yatra.

BJP sources reacted positively to the yatra, saying it helped

create a pro-temple ambience which went in the BJP's favour, "there was nothing wrong". It was also felt that with the BJP desperately in need of cadre support for the polls, it would be counterproductive to antagonise the VHP.

Togadia said the Ram mandir would be as much a symbol of Hindu regeneration as it would be a testimony against terrorism. "Because it was Babar, the biggest jihadi, who had destroyed the earlier temple in the first place," he said.

Saying only an area of 80 feet by 40 feet was disputed, Singhal asked: "Why can't the government give us the rest of the surrounding land so that we can start constructing the Ram mandir? What is keeping the government from doing it? Anyway, the aim of the yatra will soon be realised."

An elaborate rath has been built for the yatra, complete with a man dressed as Hanuman to drive it. Around 100 caravans will begin the journey at 9 am from here tomorrow and head for Lucknow. The yatra will pick its way through Kanpur, Etawah, Aligarh and Agra, before culminating in Delhi.

THE TELEGRAPH

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