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Remembering Babri Masjid: The Politics of Image-Making

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Abstract

The object of this study is to examine the gendered politics of memory-making by engaging with the ways in which women in Ayodhya remember the Babri Masjid demolition. In doing so, this research frames these women as political beings, making and remaking their life-worlds, and not simply as "passive" survivors or witnesses of the demolition. It examines the various ways in which the violence of 1992 continues to inflect everyday life in Ayodhya after more than twenty-five years of the demolition. This research does not merely archive these memories but goes beyond to comprehend them within the current socio-political context.

Keywords: Babri Masjid, Ram Mandir, Ayodhya, demolition, memory, women

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.

—Agha Shahid Ali

Overview

Despite the pomp and grandeur of the old city Ayodhya, it was never home for me. Faizabad, a non-descript town in the periphery, was my home. Ayodhya became a part of my identity only when I moved to Delhi for graduation. People did not know Faizabad, but for obvious reasons, everyone knew Ayodhya.

Ayodhya was often in news and so whenever something about it featured on the television, I would start getting messages from friends. One such "event" was the renaming of Faizabad to Ayodhya. It did not come as a surprise, though, for Uttar Pradesh government was on a renaming spree in 2018. Mughal Sarai Junction was renamed after the right-wing ideologue Deen Dayal Upadhyay, Allahabad was renamed as Prayagraj, and Faizabad was renamed as Ayodhya. This renaming was not done to erase symbols of colonialism but to privilege one of the many available readings of a place's identity and history. The right wing perceives the entire medieval Muslim era as a dark phase and, hence, many of the places that had Muslim names or had remnants of Mughal Empire were renamed (Ahmad 2018).

History is mostly about the powerful, the one who can write. Most of the literature around Babri Masjid demolition, a major milestone in the history of this nation, revolves around the history of the massacre, role of various political parties, and the general political situation of the nation at that time. There is little that speaks to the people living in Ayodhya. As Ian Talbot points out, "In this great human event, human voices are strangely silent" (Talbot and Singh 1999: 228). Much of what has been written and documented about the demolition and its impact exists in grey literature based on anecdotal references of prominent mouthpieces of the region. There is a clear deficiency of representation of voices of the ordinary residents of Ayodhya and a clearer absence of women's voices even in the majoritarian narratives of the "historical" event.

> *Allah ta'ala ne aurat ko bhi insaan banaya hai.* (Jamil 2018: 91)

Ghazala Jamil, in her book *Muslim Women Speak*, examines how sexualised violence is often directed at women just by virtue of them being members of a minority community. She suggests that priority should be given to emancipation from such collective oppression before one gets to individual rights to freedom of movement and choice of lifestyle. This was not appreciated by some "feminists" and she was told that these arguments weaken the feminist movement and need to be forgotten for the sake of "sisterhood" (Jamil 2018). Collective oppression of minorities in a place like Ayodhya was visible in the silences of the women I spoke to. This paper is a detailed exploration of how ordinary citizens remember the demolition in their everyday lives, and I have made a deliberate choice to privilege the voices of women.

Under the aegis of memory, this research is an attempt at listening to the voices of women from various social locations in Ayodhya and bringing them to the forefront. Furthermore, this research is an act of resistance—a choice on my own part to break free from the bearings of my own identity and tread into a territory that is not "suitable" for a woman like me. This is a choice to tell the stories which need not necessarily be told, especially by an upper-caste Hindu woman, but necessarily be heard in the purposefully maintained voids of our society.

As an upper-caste Hindu, able bodied, and heterosexual young woman, born and brought up in Faizabad, it was not difficult for me to find women in Ayodhya who would want to talk to me about the day of the demolition. My first visit to Ayodhya was to the house of a Brahmin man, an acquaintance of my father. I started talking to his wife, Raama,[1] with the hope that she would agree to speak with me, and through her, I would be able to meet other women too. But instead of giving me an interview herself, Raama introduced me to her mother-in-law, Shanta, who was 80 years old but, in Raama's words, someone who remembers every detail about that day distinctly.

Through Raama and her family, I was able to visit a few more houses where I conducted interviews. Because of my social location, it was easier for me to approach Hindu women. They readily agreed to talk to me and were more expressive. The Muslim families I contacted became slightly apprehensive when I told them about the research, and that I wanted to talk about the day of the demolition. Even if they agreed, a lot of the women did not seem comfortable in the beginning. In some instances, I felt that the family only agreed to let me in because they were not able to say no to the person through whom I had approached them. These were difficult situations, but I tried spending more time with these women and talked to them about my background as well in order to build some trust. This helped in a few cases, but in others, I had to settle with silence.

Hailing from Faizabad allowed me to bond with some respondents. Discussing certain commonalities would immediately establish rapport. With Hindu women, there was also a sense of kinship in the interview where they would assume that I understood and related to what they were saying. However, the fact that I grew up in Faizabad and my parents still live there also made things

[1] All the names mentioned are changed in order to protect the identity of the respondents.

easier in Muslim households. So, while I was an "other" in terms of religion, I was still one of them when it came to the region. The ability to speak the local dialect also helped.

My identity of being a student living in Mumbai also marked me as an outsider in some cases. People often mistook me for a journalist or a media person. During my field work, I realised that my position as an insider or an outsider existed in a continuum that kept changing with individual relationships with the respondents. "The fluidity of these socially constructed distinctions meant that as a researcher I was never fully inside or outside the community" (Thapar-Björkert 1999: 44).

With most families that I got in touch with, I would first have to explain my research to the "man of the house", who could be the husband, the son, the father, or the father-in-law of the woman I wanted to interview. Oftentimes, the men tried to take over, not because they did not want the woman to talk to me but because they thought that they knew the situation better and, hence, having a discussion with them would be more beneficial for my research. The attitude of most men was patronising when they got to know that I only wanted to interview women for my research. Therefore, it was a deliberate attempt on my part to conduct interviews at places where only the respondents and I were present. I also realised that my gender had a crucial role to play in allowing me access to certain spaces, for instance, the bedroom of women, to interview them. I resonated with Butalia, who writes,

> *In order to be able to hear women's voices, I had to begin to pose different questions, to talk in different situations, and to be prepared to do that most important of things, to listen: to their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances. Women almost never spoke about themselves; indeed, they denied they had anything 'worthwhile' to say, a stance that was often corroborated by their men.* (Butalia 1998: 126)

This is something that I increasingly saw materialising in the field. Most of the women I interviewed were surprised when I told them that I wanted to interview them for my research. A few of them also said that they did not know enough about the subject, and that I should have been talking to their husbands or fathers-in-law for meaningful insights for my research.

The conditions under which an event is remembered is also an important site of investigation, as important as the conditions of the original experience itself and the role of the memory in the present (Keightley 2008). I conducted my interviews immediately after the Lok Sabha elections

2019. The results were awaited, and one could see hordes of men standing at various *chowraha*s (junctions) in the evening discussing passionately not just the exit polls but also the Ram Mandir issue. When I started my field work, everyone had already cast their votes, but the conversations about the promises made by various political parties were still on. One major promise made by the ruling government, which has also been a constant in their manifesto, was the construction of the Ram Mandir, if they come to power again. In 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) released its election manifesto that said, "BJP reiterates its stand to explore all possibilities within the framework of the constitution to facilitate the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya" (BJP 2014). In 2019 again, it said, "We reiterate our stand on Ram Mandir. We will explore all possibilities within the framework of the Constitution and all necessary efforts to facilitate the expeditious construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya" (BJP 2019).

A Brief Timeline of Events

The dispute over the land where Babri Masjid stood in Ayodhya before 1992 is as old as the idea of India itself. The events associated with it have spanned the present constitutional regime, colonial rule and the Mughal Empire (*The Hindu* 2019). According to a section of Hindus, there existed a temple on the disputed site, which was demolished by the Mughal emperor Babur to build a mosque. The mosque has been there since the Mughal era but was demolished in 1992, which hurt the sentiments of the Muslim community and they objected, saying that there exists no proprietary claim of the Hindu community over the disputed land.

In 1949, two years after India's independence, the Babri Mosque was desecrated by a group of people who broke open the lock and placed idols inside the dome (ibid). Following this a case was lodged and the mosque was locked. In 1986, the Faizabad Court ordered opening of the locks allowing Hindus to access and worship at the site. In 1987, Doordarshan, the public service broadcaster, started airing the show *Ramayana*, which kindled the collective imagination of Hindus and was crucial in organising the Ram Janmbhoomi[2] movement to build a temple at the disputed site. In September 1990, L.K. Advani, then president of the BJP, undertook a Rath Yatra[3] from Somnath Temple in Gujarat to Ayodhya, seeking to build a Ram Temple at the disputed site.

[2] Ram Janmbhoomi is the name given to the site that is considered to be the birthplace of Lord Rama by a section of the Hindu community.
[3] Rath Yatra literally means a public procession in a chariot. Here, it refers to a political and religious rally.

Thousands of people joined, and the Yatra led to communal violence not only in Ayodhya, but across India. In December 1992, 1.5 lakh people gathered again in Ayodhya following the Vishva Hindu Parishad's announcement to perform Kar Seva.[4] In a short while, the mob turned violent and the Kar Sevaks demolished the mosque in the presence of several BJP leaders, including L.K. Advani and Uma Bharti (Tanwar 2019).

In 2002, Allahabad High Court began hearing the title suit, and in September 2010, the Lucknow Bench of the High Court gave its verdict, dividing the disputed land into three parts, one for each contesting party—Nirmohi Akhara, Ram Lalla Virajman, and the Sunni Waqf Board. All three of them were unsatisfied and appealed against the High Court verdict to the Supreme Court. In April 2017, the Supreme Court also revived the trial against L.K. Advani, Uma Bharti, and others who were involved in the demolition. In August 2019, the Supreme Court began day-to-day hearing of the title case and then in November 2019, the five-judge bench unanimously paved the way for construction of a temple by giving the possession of the disputed site to the deity Ram Lalla (ibid). The Court also acknowledged that the demolition of the mosque was a violation of the rule of law, and hence it asked the state government to allot five acres of land to Sunni Waqf board at a "prominent" place in Ayodhya (*The Hindu* 2019). Less than a year after this, in September 2020, a special Central Bureau of Investigation court in Lucknow acquitted all 32 accused in the criminal case related to the demolition and said that the demolition was not pre-planned and that the accused people were actually trying to control the crowd (*Scroll* 2020).

Processes of Remembering

For how could you establish even the most obvious fact when there existed no record of it outside your own memory?
—George Orwell

Memories are not sacrosanct. People choose to remember certain things depending on their social location (Butalia 1993). As time passes, our mind modifies and manipulates certain memories in order to reduce the pain associated with them. Butalia asked Mangal Singh, a survivor of Partition, about why only women and children were killed during the Partition and how he dealt with a burden of such a horrific memory. He talked about how they wanted to "protect" their women from rape

[4] Kar Seva is one of the main teachings of Sikhism. It means selfless service of others. It is derived from Sanskrit words "kar", meaning hands or work, and "seva", meaning service.

and abduction but refused to accept the word "killed" and insisted on using "martyred". According to him, these women became martyrs to the "cause" of religion (Butalia 1997). Using the word "martyred" instead of "killed" makes it convenient for people to live with the memory of those brutal murders. It is not always about pain, though. A group of people choosing to not remember a certain detail or denying an incident that happened in the past is often deliberate and political. The sheer atrociousness of genocide pushes people towards denial, incredulity and refusal. Often, the denial is to normalise hatred or to silence and strangle the voices of a certain group of people. Even in the face of all the evidence available, there are people who still say that the gas chambers never existed (Levi 2005).

It is difficult to work with memory. By seeking testimonies of women who suffered or by asking them to recall a traumatic past, one is also making old wounds fresh again. However, it is essential to tear the veil, examine the impact of these conflicts, and listen to the experiences of those whose lives were affected by violence, for one can hardly comprehend the happenings of today without going back to what transpired in the past (Whitehead 1999). Even though oral testimony is inherent in written sources, the fixation for archived documentary sources drives away the researcher from acknowledging the enormous weight of the oral in the written sources. The rules of the written history are similar to the ones which guide oral history with one crucial distinction. The oral historian converses with the "people without history" to check the abuse of the conventional history (Deshpande 2017).

Media and Religion

In the early nineties, the Sunday morning slot was reserved for shows based on epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Through the power of the visual media, the mythical quality of these epics was given a materiality, a reality. These TV serials achieved "historical accuracy" in the popular narrative even as historians were unable to find any sources to corroborate this. In all these visual depictions, people were considered a homogenised entity—the *praja*— and the social stratifications were invisiblised. These serials managed to invent a Hindu society that had no internal contradictions and contestations (Uma 1998).

Arvind Rajagopal, in his book *Politics after Television*, examines the work of television as a socio-technical apparatus and argues that while television offered respite from the compulsions of real,

existing social relations, it also evoked feelings of closeness and reciprocity with the imaginary characters. It worked by creating new forms of associations. He argues that the institutionalised production and circulation of symbols and images transformed the boundaries of the political sphere. *Ramayana* was broadcast on a State-run television from January 1987 to September 1990. The epic consciously invented a golden age that was much ahead of modern times in warfare and statecraft. The series appealed to diverse social groups and was eventually capitalised on by the BJP to assert the ideology of Hindutva (Rajagopal 2001). Anand Patwardhan, in his documentary *Ram ke Naam* (In the Name of God) (1992), also portrays the use of visual media by right-wing Hindu organisations to gain popular support for their cause. The documentary features one scene, where a boy with jaws clenched and tearing eyes is glued to a video of the Ram temple, which enacts a miraculous appearance of Ram inside the Babri Mosque but covers up the reality of a group of people who were involved in breaking inside the mosque and establishing the idol (*Ram ke Naam* 1992).

Everyday Violence and Nationalism

Any historical event is difficult to date, for its beginning or ending is not finite. It is difficult to contain India–Pakistan partition or the Babri Masjid demolition in a time span because even after so many years, people continue to live the aftermath of it (Butalia 1993). As the years pass, violence is verbally and emotionally trivialised by minimising the significance of pain or fear and by undermining the importance and impact of the event. Violence also becomes trivial as it replays and unfolds over time (Henriksen and Bengtsson 2018).

Cultural violence refers to those aspects of culture that are used to legitimise structural violence. It makes a direct act of violence look and even feel right, for instance, murder on behalf of the country is not considered wrong (Galtung 1990). Once violence is normalised and becomes part of the everyday, it ceases to appal even those who are living it. The actual, physical experience of violence is often not the focus of survivors' accounts. Rather, they talk about the destruction of home and humanity, of hope and future, of disruption of routines and social relations of their everyday lives. People convey their experience of war by their inability to properly mourn for the dead and by talking about the separation from their family members (cited in Latif 2012).

There is significant volume of literature written about the place of women in the rhetoric of nationalism and development. Tapan Basu (1997), in his review of the work of Urvashi Butalia and Tanika Sarkar, argues that what distinguishes the Hindu Right in contemporary India is its ability to mobilise women. He posits that the assertive and active involvement of women in Hindutva initiatives has upset liberal assumptions of always representing women as victims rather than as agents of communal violence. He also points out that even if Hindutva encourages women enough to bring them out of their domestic spaces, it still is an extremely patriarchal ideology. The likes of Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara have furthered their own causes and those of their parties through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement rather than promoting the task of emancipation of women (Basu 1997).

Who Remembers, When, Whom, and How?

This paper draws upon women's recollection of the day of Babri Masjid demolition after more than twenty-five years, and the discourse of memory forms the foundation of it. Memory, as a method, was developed for and with the feminist movement and its purpose is neither to find the "truth" nor to achieve a complete construction but to investigate the process of construction that is constituted in the narratives (Haug n.d.). Memory enhances history by democratising it. It has been used to write alternative histories by uncovering the marginal accounts of a particular event. Memory work also blurs the hierarchy between the researcher and the researched for it centralises the lived experience as an important source for construction of knowledge (Keightley 2008).

Remembering is a process that goes beyond the psychology of an individual. It is informed not only by personal experience but also by everyday operations of social and cultural relationships. However, the relationship between memory and socio-cultural environment is not a one-way flow. What we remember is dictated by the conventions of the family, and the norms of the culture to which we belong; however, remembering has a social function in the present too. By remembering according to a particular convention, we are constantly reaffirming and reconstructing those conventions (ibid).

Writing this paper in first person is a deliberate decision for it made it easier for me to communicate how it was to be on the field and my personal stake undertaking this research as a resident of the universe of my research. It is also important for women to say "I" more often because it makes

their stories stronger (Haug n.d.). The absence of "I" in writing establishes distance and creates an illusion of "objectivity" (Butalia 1998). However, this paper is in no way an "objective" rendering of the demolition; it is my reading of the conversations that I had with my respondents. The way they responded was also significantly informed by my social location. Throughout this paper, I was aware that recalling and representing a past has a transactional value in the present too (Keightley 2008). For instance, the ways in which Partition is remembered has enduring repercussions on our understanding of it in the present. The demolition of Babri Masjid is also remembered and recalled in a certain way, and this paper attempts to discuss that remembrance and the kind of conventions it reaffirms on an everyday basis.

Memory explores the vernacular untidiness of lived practices of remembering that conventional historiography attempts to smooth away. It not only involves the elicitation of the past accounts but also reflects on how past is remembered today in the present (ibid). Memory is never unmediated. A lot depends on who remembers, when, whom, and how. Often people are reluctant to remember not only because of the horrific nature of the event but also because of their own complicity in the history. There is no way to know that the stories that people are telling after three decades are not rehearsed performances, perhaps tailored to suit what the interviewer wants to hear. But the point, again, is not to find the "truth". These stories, with all their problems, expand and stretch the definitions of history and manage to find a place in it (Butalia 1998).

For this study, I used the format of an oral unstructured interview wherein I started by asking people to tell me about the day of demolition and then let the conversation flow to take its own course. To establish reciprocity and minimise hierarchy, I also spoke about my own memories of living in Faizabad and the stories that I have heard of demolition. As a researcher, it was important for me to ask questions in the native language, for memories do not emerge when the appeal to them is done in a language that is not vernacular (Haug n.d.). I recorded all the interviews and made notes of my own observations and the feelings that the interviews and conversations invoked in me. I am also aware that in translating and transcribing these interviews, a lot is lost. The idea of doing this research is not just to archive memories but to go beyond it and comprehend them in the larger socio-political context.

Understanding People's Life-Worlds: A Visit to a Home

It was the afternoon of May 2019 and the temperature was soaring. I was sitting in the drawing room of Aasifa, a 50-year-old Muslim woman who had been living in Ayodhya for the last thirty years. Before I met Aasifa, I explained the reason of my visit to her father-in-law. He heard me patiently and seemed calm. After asking my whereabouts, he called Aasifa's daughter to get me some *sharbat* (refreshment drink). I politely refused, but before I could say more, he said, "*Beta chinta mat karo, mere bohot saare Hindu dost hain, vo bhi mere yahan khate peete hain*" (Don't worry, I have a lot of Hindu friends, they also eat at my place).

In subsequent visits to different houses, I realised that Hindus did not eat in Muslim households and vice versa. Raama, on my second visit to her house, proudly told me how she had never had even a bite of food in a Muslim household. She said that whenever there is an invitation from a Muslim family, her son visits them. She went on to talk about her son and how moving out of Ayodhya and living in a hostel "ruined" him. "*Uske toh bohot saare Musalmaan dost hain, sabke saath khata peeta hai vo*" (He has many Muslim friends, he eats with everyone), she said with a tone of disappointment.

However, for Aasifa's father-in-law, and for many other Muslim men I met during my field work, having Hindu friends who visited their house and shared food with them was a matter of pride. It was something that they told me repeatedly. At some points, I felt like they were mentioning it to make me feel comfortable. Amjad, a 70-year-old man who owns a small cycle repairing shop in Ayodhya, boasted about how all the big Brahmins and priests had attended his daughter's wedding when I visited his house to interview his daughter-in-law.

I had the sharbat at Aasifa's house and, after spending a few more minutes in the drawing room, I went inside. It was afternoon and Aasifa's room was dimly lit by the sunlight seeping through the window. The room had a large bed that could easily accommodate four to five people, an old television that did not seem to work, and a wooden almirah. I sat on the bed beside her. Aasifa was chuckling nervously. We started talking about our daily routines and lives. After every answer, Aasifa would look at her daughter to seek validation and to know if she has spoken anything incorrect. Her daughter was constantly encouraging her. "*Amma, theek toh bol rahi ho, batao naa kya hua tha us*

din" (Mother, you are speaking alright, tell her what happened that day), her daughter said when I asked Aasifa about the day of demolition in 1992.

Remembering the Day of Demolition

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

— James Baldwin

Asking people to revisit 6 December 1992 was extremely challenging. From whatever I had read and understood, I knew that it could bring out stories of trauma, violence, forced migration, and loss of one's people. On being asked about it, a lot of people looked at me with suspicion, wanting to know what I intended to do with this information.

Aasifa was taken aback when I asked her about what happened on the day of the demolition. Her nervous chuckles turned into a silence that bothered me, but before I could do much, she started sobbing. Her daughter held her and said, "*Hamesha amma rone lagti hain, jab bhi us din ki baat hoti hai*" (Mother always starts crying when we talk about that day). The question of who can ask certain things to who was something that I was struggling with. There was a guilt attached to my identity. As a Hindu woman, I felt that it was unfair for me to ask these questions. I apologised to them. Aasifa looked at me and said that the memory of that day still haunts her. She smiled again nervously, and said:

> *They were beating our family members. All of us were screaming for help. Everything happened in front of my eyes. I still can't talk about that day without crying. They were throwing such big stones at my house. My room was filled with stones. They threw stones at my husband too. They even threw a bomb, but it did not explode somehow. The police came very late, after all this had happened. We kept screaming for help, but no one turned up. All this started in the evening. I was going to prepare dinner. My father-in-law also got injured. A lot of people died that day and most of them were Muslims.*

Being an upper-caste Hindu, I was mostly exposed to the narrative where people talked about the delay in the construction of Ram Temple, but not about the demolition. Many Hindu women I interviewed spoke woefully about how their God did not have a home or a place to live. One of

them said, *"Hum log mahal me baithe hain aur Ram Ji tent me. Unse milne jaao toh aisa lagta hai jail me jaa rahe hain kisi se milne"* (We live in big houses while Lord Ram lives in a tent. Visiting him feels like going to a jail to meet someone).

After a few more minutes of conversation, Aasifa's daughter suggested that I should interview her aunt, Naaz, too. "She will be able to tell you about that day, without crying", she said. Aasifa nodded in affirmation and her daughter immediately got up to get her aunt.

Naaz, a 50-year-old, lean woman wearing a light-coloured kurta with a head scarf, entered the room with a wide smile. She was extremely confident. We started talking about her life before she came to Ayodhya and immediately bonded over her time in Mumbai. She shifted to Ayodhya after her wedding around thirty years ago. She said more than anything, remembering the day of demolition makes her angry.

> *A river of blood was flowing that day. They came to our house too, broke the door and burnt a lot of our belongings. I asked my in-laws to hide under the bed. Both my husband and I got injured. It was an extremely bad sight. My whole colony was burnt. It felt like a calamity when Babri Masjid was demolished, people were killing each other. They were killing Muslims brutally; we had to run for our lives without the hijab. The people who did this to us were Kar Sevaks. Some of them were from here; some came from outside. Nothing happened suddenly. It was not like the authority was unaware of anything. They knew everything. It was all planned.*

Naaz's recollection of the day of demolition and Aasifa's tears while talking about it, both made me extremely uncomfortable. I found myself a little unprepared to respond to whatever they had to say. I knew that it was not just tears and anger; there was fear, loss of dignity, baggage of a traumatic past, and a sense of violation and betrayal, not just from the State but also from the people who one might even call one's neighbour.

Resham, another respondent, talked about this betrayal. I knocked at her door, unaware of the fact that she was not informed about my arrival through the mutual friend that gave me her address. I introduced myself and told her the reason of my visit. She did not speak much though. "I don't know. My family shifted to Ayodhya after 1992" was the answer that I got for most of my questions. I did not want to probe further. It was a deliberate decision to only listen to the stories of people who choose to tell it and otherwise be okay with the silences. However, Resham admitted that she

has heard stories of demolition in the neighbourhood, and even today, whenever something happens, they leave Ayodhya and go to a relative's place. *"Hamare saare dost aur padosi bhi chale jaate hain, agar koi naa jaaye toh hum bhi naa jaaein*" (All our friends and neighbours also go. If no one leaves then we will also not leave), she said.

After Resham, I visited Zohra's house. She was born in 1992. She was quiet and did not say much about the demolition either. When I asked her about the conversations that happen around this issue; she said, "*Log kehte hain yahan Ram Mandir banega toh Musalmaan log nahi rahenge. Yahi baatein hoti hain*" (People say that if the Ram Temple gets built, Muslims will have to leave Ayodhya). Talking to Resham and Zohra helped me understand the aftermath of the demolition. The stories, the trauma, or the fear is not limited to the people who witnessed it that day. It is intergenerational and is also being passed on to the people who moved to Ayodhya after 1992. Aasifa's daughter grew up with the stories of demolition and with the awareness that recollecting that memory is painful for her mother even today. She nudged me to interview her aunt, maybe because it was important for her to show me that it's not all tears and pain, there is anger too.

Whose Reality Prevails?

Raama was my first point of contact in Ayodhya. I met a few of my respondents through her. She also introduced me to her mother-in-law, Shanta, an eighty-year-old woman who liked spending most of her time in her room. She got extremely excited when she heard about this research and agreed to talk to me immediately. Shanta lay on her bed comfortably while I sat in front of her on a chair. Her room had a single bed, a small Onida television, a temple in the corner, and a distinct smell of incense sticks. We talked about her daily routine and how her old age does not allow her to do much work. Shanta had spent all her life in Ayodhya. She said her best memories in the town were from the time when the mosque was still present.

> *On one morning in 1949, there was an announcement in Ayodhya. I was eleven years old then. The announcement was that God has appeared inside the Mosque. We got scared that riots might happen. My father asked me to close the gate of the house. We were asked to remain inside. But after some time, all the people of Ayodhya marched towards the mosque to read the Ramayana. The ceremony and the celebrations continued for the next ten days. There were two officers placed here at that time, Nayyar Sahab and Thakur Guru Dutt Singh. One of them was the district magistrate. There was a command from the Prime Minister's Office that the statue needs to be removed from the mosque immediately. But the officers refused saying that*

> *this might lead to riots. Yes, the statue appeared in the mosque on its own. No one opposed us when we went to read the Ramayana, in fact there were arrangements done. Police was there. Muslims were stopped from entering that place. From the mosque till the road, there were people all around, including kids. It was crowded.*

While she was narrating this to me, I asked her to pause and tell me the names of the officers again. It was interesting to see how even after almost sixty years of this incident, she remembered the names. Both these names also appeared in the recent Ayodhya judgment given by the Supreme Court of India. In 1949, Guru Dutt Singh was the city magistrate and K.K. Nayyar was the district magistrate. According to the judgment dated 9 November 2019, on the night of 22–3 December 1949, Hindu idols were placed inside Babri Masjid by a group of approximately sixty people. A first information report (FIR) was lodged, complaining of the installation of idols inside the inner courtyard of the disputed site. However, K.K. Nayyar opposed the direction of the state government to remove the idols, fearing a loss of life (*The Hindu* 2019). According to Guru Dutt Singh's grandson Shakti Singh, a BJP leader in Faizabad, Guru Dutt was a "*pakka Hinduvadi*" (staunch Hindutva supporter). Guru Dutt's son Guru Basant Singh, an eighty-six-year-old man, recalled vivid details while speaking to *The Quint* about the secret meetings held in his house, Ram Bhavan. The visitors included District Magistrate K.K. Nayyar, Superintendent of Police Kripal Singh and Judge Thakur Bir Singh. He said, "The city's top four administrators were adamant on executing the plan to place Ram's idols inside the Babri. Who was going to object and to what end? On the face of it, they behaved like vigilant officials, but in reality, they allowed devotees to pour in and perform kar seva" (Virk 2017).

Unlike Aasifa, Shanta was happy to recollect the day of demolition for me. She was swelling with pride when she told me that she along with her whole family was involved in Kar Seva. Before I could ask more, she went on to say how a picture of her doing Kar Seva got published in India Today.

> *One day before the demolition, around one lakh Kar Sevaks came to Ayodhya. They came from all over India and were staying on the street, in the temples, and in people's homes. It was planned that we will take a bath in the Saryu River, take a handful of sand from there, and keep it at the spot where we wanted the temple. This was meant to be a symbolic gesture. There were a lot of people. The crowd included men, women, and children. People were also shouting slogans. There were people from Bengal and Odisha saying the slogans in*

> *their own languages like "Maar ke lebo re, chor ke lebo re" (We will snatch it from you by force). These slogans brought a lot of energy and excitement. This went on till the afternoon.*

There was a constant smile on Shanta's face while talking to me about the day. She was talking about it like it was a carnival where people of all ages from all over India came together to celebrate something. There was sense of achievement, pride, of coming together. This sentiment was shared by another woman named Neharika, who grew up in Ayodhya and whose family owned a temple there. She talked about 1992 and told that as kids also they were not scared that day. "It was fun. We chanted Jai Shree Ram and got involved with the crowd", she said.

Shanta enjoyed the nostalgia while talking to me. She remembered the Kar Sevaks fondly. Apart from pride, there was also a sense of belongingness. "They were beautiful boys from Kolkata and Bombay who walked twenty kilometres and had blisters on their foot. They did not have any tools or weapons; they destroyed the mosque by their hands and nails," said Shanta.

It seemed like Shanta remembered the day in pictures for when she was telling me about it, I could visualise it too.

> *I couldn't see what happened in the afternoon, but people climbed over the mosque to destroy it. No one thought or cared about their lives. There was a lot of arrangement done. At around 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the mosque was demolished. We were watching from our roofs. When the first dome was destroyed, there was a huge balloon of dust in the sky. Then eventually they destroyed the other two domes also. All of us kept water, sugar or some other sweet at our doors for people who were coming back after destroying the mosque.*

A Brief Definition of Loss

The demolition that happened in 1992 was a violation of the law and was also condemned by the Supreme Court of India. However, it is deemed "correct" by the Hindu majority of Ayodhya. Most Hindu women, I met, justified demolition in their interviews and negated the possibility of it harming anyone.

> *Riots happened outside Ayodhya but nothing really happened here. People think that there are fights here but the truth is that we live very peacefully. The danger is outside Ayodhya, not inside. Neither are the Hindus scared of Muslims, nor are Muslims scared of Hindus. At the time of demolition rare and small incidents happened like someone's shop or a rickshaw was burnt. But nothing big happened.*

While both the examples given by Shanta, burning of a shop or a rickshaw, led to a family losing its means of livelihood and social security, in the wider narrative, it was still seen as a "small thing". The notion of losing or sacrificing small things for a bigger cause is not new. The deaths of the Muslim people were negated while the deaths of the Hindus were considered small sacrifices for a bigger religious cause. Shanta talked about how some people died while bringing down the mosque. "When the structure fell, people got buried inside it and died at the spot", said Shanta. Apart from this, she did not remember any other sort of deaths and denied the possibility of it completely.

While I was asking Shanta about the day of demolition in 1992, she said it is also important for me to know what happened in 1990.

> *Two years before the demolition, in 1990 when Mulayam Singh was the chief minister, police arrested the Kar Sevaks. The government took people in a van and I am not sure if they took them to jail. I don't know what Mulayam Singh thought of himself that he made sure that these Kar Sevaks were fired on. But he is paying for his bad deeds now. These Kar Sevaks had no weapons. They were just shouting slogans that the temple should be built. The road was filled with people, there were women too, and Mulayam Singh gave a command to shoot these people. Thousands of people got injured and two boys who came from Kolkata died, and since then that lane where they were killed is known as Shaheed Gali. Thousands of people died for the temple, but the government did all the cleaning so fast. The dead bodies were drowned in the Saryu River. The roads were all washed so that no one could know about the firing or about the death of these people. All these people died in 1990 when none of us even reached till the mosque. In 1992, no shooting happened.*

Not just Shanta, Neharika, who earlier talked about not being scared on the day of demolition, also narrated the story of 1990 to me when asked about the demolition. She said:

> *On 30 October and 2 November 1990, two Kothari brothers from Kolkata were killed in Ayodhya. Mulayam Singh was in power that time.* Goli unhone chalvayi thi *(Firing happened on his orders). A lot of people died in Naya Ghat. Alive people were drowned in Saryu. Mulayam Singh favoured Muslims.* 1992 me

> Hindu ki sarkar aayi aur phir humne chadhai ki aur hindu vijayi hua *(In 1992, the government that worked for Hindus came to power and we finally won).*

It seemed important for both these women to let me know that people of their community have sacrificed their lives for the temple. Both remembered the deaths of Kar Sevaks in 1990 while had no memory of any sort of riots in 1992. Both Shanta and Neharika said that Mulayam Singh's government favoured Muslims and now he is paying for his "bad deeds". It was interesting to see how these women remembered certain distinct details like the name of the district magistrate or the exact dates when the firing happened. Another thing to note in these interviews was the usage of the term "shaheed" by the Hindu and the Muslim communities. While Shanta talked about the street that is called Shaheed Gali because the Kar Sevaks were shot dead there, most of the Muslim women used the term to describe the demolition of the mosque. "*Masjid Shaheed hui thi 92 me"* (The mosque was martyred in 1992), was the phrase I heard in a lot of my interviews.

It is evident in the interviews that the Hindu women and the Muslim women remembered the day of demolition differently. However, homogenisation of views of a community is not possible. There were diverse views and numerous moments of rupture in those views among the Hindu women as well. While some of them said that no one died on 6 December 1992, others believed the people who died during the demolition were all Hindus. Gunjan, one of the respondents said that Kar Sevaks were mistreated by Muslims, which in turn made them angry. She also said that the police were only protecting Muslims at that time.

The oldest women I interviewed for this paper were Shanta and Ratna. Both were Brahmin and mentioned their caste at some point in time during their respective interviews. While Shanta had spent all her life in Ayodhya, Ratna moved to the town in 1992. They were of the same age but remembered the demolition differently. Ratna said:

> *At around 10 in the morning, we heard "Jai Shree Ram" and suddenly thousands of people were out on the street. I don't know how so many people reached there in the span of one night. There are some temples in Ayodhya, which have huge basements and a capacity to hide thousands of men. The police force that came from outside was only there at the prominent locations because obviously they would not know the lanes or by lanes of Ayodhya. A lot of people were shot dead including a neighbour of mine. The hospital nearby my house was*

filled with injured people. No Muslim died though. Whenever something like this happens in Ayodhya, they lock their houses and go to their relatives in other towns. They are the first to run away. There were a lot of policemen, and they were killing people. I remember there were so many dead bodies kept under the Neem tree behind my house.

Along with Ratna, most of the Hindu women I talked to during my field work said that the Muslims were not there in the town in 1992. However, the Muslim women, I interviewed, mentioned that today if something happens, they leave the town and go to their relatives' place; however, this has happened after their experience of the violence in 1992. The dominant narrative among the Hindu majority, I felt, was that the Muslims chose to run away in 1992 because it was their fault or because they were wrong. It was not about a community of people being forced to leave their homes because of fear of violence against them. This reminded me of a poem that was being shared widely on social media in the context of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The first stanza of the poem blames the Muslim community for being scared. It also portrays the dominant narrative in Ayodhya quite effectively.

Agar yahi ke ho, toh itna dar kaise?
Magar chori se ghuse ho, toh ye tumhara ghar kaise?
Agar tum aman pasand ho, toh itni gadar kaise?
Jise khud khak keh rahe ho, vo tumhara sheher kaise?

(*If you belong here, then why are you scared?*
If you have come here in the wrong way, then how is this your home?
If you like peace, then how are you so disrespectful?
You disrespect the city, then how is this your city?)

Looking Back

When I began this work, I intended to explore the many ways in which women have understood and made meaning of the demolition. In these highly polarised times, I also wanted to understand

how the seeds of communalism have been rooted in our identity since the demolition, and how its memory lingers in the everyday lives of people in the present day.

Speaking only with women was a conscious choice. From drawing rooms to the chowrahas, I have grown up seeing upper-caste men “relaxing” and having intense discussions about religion and politics. I wanted to hear women’s voices, their memory of demolition, and their opinion on the current socio-political climate in India.

Reflections on the Study

The way women respondents reacted when I asked them to remember demolition varied immensely. While some chose to stay silent and did not say a lot, a few of them talked about it for hours. Their stories had varied emotions—from excitement, belongingness, and nostalgia to fatigue, grief, and anger. In my work, I have consciously tried to frame these women as political beings, making and remaking their life-worlds and not simply as passive survivors or witnesses of the demolition.

Certain symbolisms and details the women mentioned while remembering the demolition are relevant today as well. One of the respondents talked about “Jai Shree Ram” being the “call for action” on the day of demolition and the same slogan is being used, even today, to lead the violence committed against religious minorities. The Muslim respondents who did not witness the demolition and have no memory of it also talked about the fear that their families live with even after almost three decades of demolition. The emotions of grief and anger stemmed from a feeling of betrayal towards the State, the media, and even their own neighbours, and point out the glaring persistence of injustice in shaping their lives as it is today. Women remain the disproportionate carriers of remnants of this violence, having to struggle through decades of instability, displacement, and mental and psychosocial trauma that they have had to contain among themselves as fear features a perennial presence in their lives.

The complicity of the State and media in making the Ram Mandir movement a national campaign is evident. The promise of a Ram Mandir in Ayodhya has constantly featured in the manifesto of the ruling party. Hindu respondents hailed the government for it. It can be reasonably argued that the immense value of this issue in the Hindu community and subsequent predation of it by the ruling party has helped it consolidate its majoritarian vote bank in Ayodhya. To the extent that one

of the respondents seemed miffed with their election slogan in 2019—*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*—and clearly told me that the prime minister had won the elections in the name of Hindutva and, therefore, he ought to think about serving the Hindus instead of appeasing everyone.

The Ram Mandir campaign coincided with the liberalisation and the advent of television. The Ramayana serial broadcast in the late eighties weaved a collective fantasy and the visuals made the mythological characters real. With the popularity of *Ramayana*, television inaugurated a new era in politics wherein religion was used to sanction Hindu nationalist initiatives. It led to Muslims becoming the "enemy within", and their assertion of identity was seen as a disruption.

The socio-political climate of the country has done little to better the lives of minorities in Ayodhya. By the end of my field work, the result of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections was announced; the incumbent party won and formed the government again. Thereafter, Section 370 has been abrogated in Kashmir; the Parliament has passed the CAA; and the Supreme Court paved the way for a Ram Temple in Ayodhya, with all the accused in the demolition case being acquitted.

While I have been writing about demolition, a series of events have managed to drill a hole in the secular fabric of this country. The minority community in Ayodhya not only carries a burden of a traumatic memory but also a constant hanging fear of history repeating itself. Women and children leave the town every time the conversation of Ram Mandir gets heated up, even today. There is a concurrent fear of being violated again not just by the State but also by their own neighbours. One of the respondents expressed her disappointment and said that there is no one who assures them of their safety in Ayodhya or stops them from leaving. Some of the women also admitted that that the new residents who are shifting to Ayodhya from other towns of Uttar Pradesh are all Hindus.

My Journey as a Researcher

At the beginning of my field work, I discussed this research with an upper-caste male acquaintance who called me a *vampanthi* (leftist) and said that I am just trying to complicate this issue by digging into things that are already buried. Thereafter, I stopped discussing this work with family and acquaintances in Ayodhya in order to not let others' opinions deter me from what I set out to do.

A question that I constantly struggled with during my research was: Why am I doing this? The people who have dealt with the demolition are negotiating their ways every day in Ayodhya, they have also made peace with the baggage of the memory that they are carrying. Then what is the point of pushing them to remember unpleasant memories again? However, as Butalia (1998) argues, remembering is essential, for it also begins the process of resolving and sometimes forgetting. Perhaps, it is important to let out both anger and anguish and talk about the pain in order to heal as a community.

Way Forward

Given the time frame, I could only conduct fourteen in-depth interviews wherein the religious identity of the respondents was my primary focus. In an effort to have representation from the women of both Hindu and Muslim community, the intersection of caste and class could not be taken into consideration and that limits the scope of this research tremendously.

This research lays ground for a detailed exploration of people's perception and aspirations with respect to Babri Masjid demolition, and its significance in the conception and proliferation of the idea of "Hindu Rashtra". I believe it is important to ensure that all voices are brought to the fore. However, it is critical that certain voices that have remained unheard are privileged over others to ensure that they find representation in academia and in mainstream literature. Therefore, an intensive sample selection across spatial, segmental, and sectoral dimensions is necessary going forward.

Comprehensive research on this issue is necessary so that it can sufficiently inform the general public, mainstream discourse, and discourse of policy-making and judiciary to ensure that such a history does not repeat itself and does not embed itself into the fabric of this nation.

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